An examination of children and young people’s views on the impact of their participation in decision-making
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The authors of this report are: **Shirley Martin** (Primary Investigator), **Catherine Forde**, **Audrey Dunn Galvin** and **Angela O’Connell** of University College, Cork.

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Dr. Shirley Martin
Primary Investigator
University College Cork
About the authors

Dr. Shirley Martin lectures in the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, and is the Primary Investigator for this research project. Her research interests are in the area of the well-being of children and the focus of her research relates to key areas of children’s lives, such as early years care and education, educational disadvantage and participatory research with children and young people. She is a research associate of the Institute for Social Sciences in the Twenty First Century (ISS21).

Dr. Catherine Forde lectures in the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork. Her research interests and publications are in the areas of community development, children and young people’s participation, State-civil society relations, and teaching, learning and research. Catherine co-edited the book *Youth and Community Work in Ireland: Critical Perspectives* (Blackhall Publishing, Dublin, 2009). She is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Working for Change: The Irish Journal of Community Work*. She is a research associate of the Institute for Social Sciences in the Twenty First Century (ISS21).

Dr. Audrey Dunn Galvin is a lecturer in the School of Applied Psychology in University College Cork. Having obtained an MA in Applied Psychology in UCC, Audrey undertook a PhD in the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health on developmental trajectories in food allergy. She is also a registered psychologist and biostatistician.

Dr. Angela O’Connell is an independent research consultant and trainer. At the time of writing, she is working as a researcher in the Centre for Child Law, Faculty of Law, UCC. She worked as a consultant for over 10 years in the community and voluntary sector, specialising in socio-economic disadvantage and child and youth issues. She was research assistant for Phase 1 of this project, from March 2011 until May 2012.

Aifric O Gráda has a Social Science background, completing undergraduate and postgraduate studies in University College Cork. She recently coordinated the *Through the Glass Ceiling* project in UCC, funded under the Equality for Women Measure (Department of Justice and Equality and the European Social Fund) and is the National Project Coordinator of the European GENOVATE project, 2013-2016. She was research assistant for Phase 2 of this project, from January to February 2013.
Executive Summary
This research project – *Young People as Social Actors: An examination of young people’s perspectives on the impact of participation in DCYA initiatives* – commenced in January 2011 and was completed in March 2013. The main aim of the study was to explore the experiences of, and outcomes for, children and young people who have participated in the child and youth participation initiatives held by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) over the previous 10 years.

Although the area of child and youth participation is now well established, there remains a paucity of research on what are the impacts of participation, including the extent to which the impact of taking part is beneficial to the young people themselves. The study encompassed a holistic overview of the impact of participation underpinned by Ackermann *et al’s* (2003) four distinct realms of impact – personal, familial, communal and institutional.

Using a participatory research approach, the project set out to develop a research model that would take account of children and young people’s voices, be informed by consultation with the DCYA and be grounded in the national and international literature. Participatory research methods treat young people as experts and agents in their own lives and allow for reflexivity in the research process. In addition to the inclusion of young people in the project’s Steering Group, an important part of the study has been the training of young people as researchers, involved in data collection and data analysis for the project. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed in the data collection for the study; these methods included surveys of past and present youth participants, interviews and focus groups. Young researchers were involved in administering the survey of present participants of Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg, facilitating a number of focus groups and interviewing key decision-makers. In total, 300 young people were involved in this study as respondents and youth researchers. In addition, 28 adults working in the area of child and youth participation were interviewed for the research.

**Child and youth participation in Ireland**

Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) imply a right to the necessary information about options that exist and the consequences of such options so that children can make informed decisions. In the General Comment on Article 12, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) provides detailed guidance on how the right of children to be heard should be ensured. It states:

‘Achieving meaningful opportunities for the implementation of Article 12 will necessitate dismantling the legal, political, economic, social and cultural barriers that currently impede children’s opportunity to be heard and their access to participation in all matters affecting them. It requires a preparedness to challenge assumptions about children’s capacities, and to encourage the development of environments in which children can build and demonstrate capacities.’

In addition, Article 15 of the Convention states that children have the right to create and join associations and to assemble peacefully. Both imply opportunities to express political opinions, engage in political processes and participate in decision-making.

Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in September 1992 and since then the Irish State has made a number of commitments to give credence to the voice of the child and to include children’s views in policy-making processes. In line with Article 12 of the Convention, the Irish Government committed itself to promoting the participation of children and young people in civic society. A key policy strategy aimed at meeting these commitments is the National Children’s Strategy, 2000–2010. The strategy makes an explicit and central commitment to include the voice of the child, and Goal 1, in particular, states that ‘Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in
‘accordance with their age and maturity’. Since 2000, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA, formally the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs/OMCYA) has established a number of participatory initiatives to support the implementation of this goal through children and young people’s participation. These initiatives include:

› Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils);
› Dáil na nÓg (National Youth Parliament);
› Comhairle na nÓg National Executive (formerly the Dáil na nÓg Council);
› the DCYA Children and Young People’s Forum;
› Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team;
› national consultations.

These recent policy initiatives reflect a more nuanced understanding of children as meaning-makers and active social beings and there is some evidence of a growing consensus in Irish society about the right of children to participate and to be heard. The present study is primarily concerned with the two initiatives that have involved the largest number of children and young people, i.e. Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg. Three case studies of smaller participative initiatives are also presented – the Children and Young People’s Forum, the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ consultation (2010) and the ‘Teenage mental health’ consultation (2008).

Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg are the two principal national participatory structures for young people aged between 12 and 18 years, and operate under the DCYA through the 34 Local Authorities throughout the country. Comhairlí na nÓg (youth councils) were established in 2002 as part of the National Children’s Strategy (2000) with the aim of providing a forum for children and young people to discuss local and national issues of relevance to them. Delegates from Comhairle na nÓg are elected to represent their local area at the Dáil na nÓg (National Youth Parliament) event each year. In addition, each Comhairle na nÓg elects a delegate for the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive. Key priority areas include:

(i) the creation of formal and sustained links with adult decision-makers;
(ii) ensuring that the membership profile of the Comhairlí is representative of all age groups between the ages of 12 and 18;
(iii) the inclusion of ‘seldom-heard’ young people.

Findings

Positive personal impacts for child and youth participants

The research findings of the present study indicate that the children and young people involved in the DCYA participation initiatives experience a range of positive impacts in areas of personal development, social development, skills development and career direction.

At a general level, youth participants rated personal skills development as being the area most positively impacted by their participation, followed by improved confidence, social skills and development of their social networks.

Personal development was supported through improved personal confidence, with three-quarters of the youth participants reporting a positive impact on self-esteem.

Social development, such as making new friends and finding it easier to speak to other young people, was also an area where participation activities were seen as having very positive personal impacts. Participants also commented on the friendships they developed with a more diverse range of people than their normal social circle. Specific skills developed include the

1 ‘Seldom heard’ young people is a term used to describe young people who tend not to have many opportunities to have their voices heard, including young people with disabilities, from an economically disadvantaged or culturally different background, young people in care, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) young people, as well as those from more rural backgrounds and ethnic minorities (McEvoy, 2011, p. 13).
development of public speaking skills, leadership skills and group facilitation skills. Over two-thirds of the youth participants reported that their participation had a positive impact on their educational and personal aspirations, and some mentioned aspirations to pursue careers in areas such as youth work or Government and politics. Over 95% of the youth participants who participated in this research would recommend membership of Comhairle na nÓg to other young people.

Impacts of participation at community level
A major impact of the work of Comhairle na nÓg is that it is now often considered the main contact point for any consultation with children and young people by Local Authorities in Ireland. When looking at the impact of participation on their local communities, youth participants identified the two most positive areas as:

(i) their ability to bring ideas and problems from young people in their community to their Comhairle na nÓg meetings;
(ii) the increased awareness of children and young people’s issues in the young person’s own community.

The increased awareness of young people’s issues could be viewed as raising the status of children and young people within their own communities. Adult participants also felt that there is a growing awareness of the work of the Comhairlí in most communities and that this is having an impact on the recognition of the valuable role of children and young people in the community. In assessing actual change in communities, however, almost half of youth respondents indicated that they see positive changes to their community due to their work in Comhairle na nÓg. Some of the most common areas for change addressed by local Comhairlí relate to youth spaces and facilities within their communities. Work on improving youth facilities is a common theme for many of those interviewed in this research: young people are concerned with creating additional youth spaces, both physical spaces and spaces of influence, within their communities.

In addition, the principles of social inclusion and equality that are common across Comhairle na nÓg suggest significant impacts for local communities through specific activities, but also a more socially aware or civic consciousness. The strong social justice, equality and social inclusion themes in many of the projects are reflected in projects that involve raising awareness of discrimination against young people; anti-bullying campaigns and homophobic bullying work; mental health awareness; children’s rights; and cross-border work. Many of the youth participants in the research are interested in social change and working for the rights of others, and some of the young people identified themselves as advocates for other groups of young people.

Impact on institutions and decision-making in Irish society
Evidence in this study indicates that the participation spaces created by the DCYA respect children and young people as community members and value them as citizens in their own right. In particular, youth participants were very positive about (1) being listened to by other youth members; (2) being able to bring ideas and problems from young people in their area to Comhairle na nÓg; and (3) being respected and listened to by adults they came in contact with through their participation activities.

One of the most positive impacts of the DCYA participation initiatives is that children and young people are given access to decision-makers in a number of local and national forums. Three-quarters of current participants felt that they have the opportunity through Comhairle na nÓg to meet and talk to people in power, such as journalists, members of Local Authorities and business representatives. In particular, it was noted that participation in the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive allows young people access to national decision-makers.
of the Children and Young People’s Forum also asserted that their position on a national participation initiative allows them to have a voice on behalf of other young people; they refer to the Forum as offering an opportunity to ‘shape your country’. In particular, the Forum members cited the mental health TV advertisement, ‘The boy with the hoodie’ (which won the Taoiseach’s Public Service Excellence Award) and the recent recreational policies such as Teenspace – National Youth Recreation Policy for Young People (2007) as having an impact on young people in general.

Laura Lundy’s model (2007) for implementing Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child comprises four interlinked strands: space (to express views); voice (facilitated to express views); audience (to be listened to); and influence (to have views appropriately acted upon). The child and youth participation spaces created by the DCYA may be viewed as attempting to create these four conditions. While youth participants are very positive about their experience of voice, space and audience, the fourth strand – influence – is an area that both adult and youth participants agree needs further work and support.

While there is a growing commitment to children and youth participation in many aspects of public policy and local governance in Ireland, the youth participants in this research identified policy change as the area on which their participation activities have the least impact. Some adult and youth participants expressed the desire for legislative change to give young people more power in decision-making and more formal guidelines and directives from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, requiring the Local Authorities to consult children and young people on a wider range of policy implementation.

This tension continues in assessments of the impact of the Dáil na nÓg structure. Youth participants were generally very positive about the work of Dáil na nÓg, particularly in relation to the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg in bringing about change; its work on issues relevant to young people in Ireland; and its representation of a wide range of young people in Ireland. However, despite those achievements, current youth participants were less positive about the Government taking Dáil na nÓg seriously. However, beyond Dáil na nÓg, there is evidence that one of the most significant impacts of the DCYA child and youth participation initiatives is an emerging change in attitudes towards child and youth participation among decision-makers.

While it is acknowledged that this change can be slow, there has been a noticeable shift towards the inclusion of children and young people’s views in some decision-making processes. A particular factor in this cultural shift is the work of adult facilitators or participation ‘champions’ in pushing the participation agenda. For example, the involvement of young people on Strategic Policy Committees has meant that decision-makers who would normally have little contact with children and young people are now working with them in a formal setting. Children and young people are now being given opportunities to be directly heard in forums where their needs are discussed, places where their voices would traditionally have been excluded. It is also notable that other Government departments and Government services are seeking advice and support from the DCYA Participation Unit on consulting with children and young people. Most of the adult participants felt that having a dedicated adult Participation Officer or Comhairle Coordinator is a key ingredient for a successful participation initiative. Recent structural changes to a number of DCYA participation initiatives were highlighted by adult participants as improving the outcomes of child and youth participation. These include the introduction of Steering Committees in each Comhairle na nÓg; the introduction of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund and the additional funding and support which has become available through this initiative; and the role of the national Participation Officers in supporting youth participation initiatives. Current youth participants were twice as likely as the past youth participants to be positive about the level of support they received for the projects they worked on; this might reflect the increased availability in supports since the introduction of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund in 2008. These changes could be viewed as institutional changes in child and youth participation, which are moving the participation agenda forward.
Pathways to participation: Representation and representativeness

Representation and representativeness are difficult issues in children and young people’s participation. Over three-quarters of past and present members indicated that they consider Comhairle na nÓg to be broadly representative of young people in Ireland, while most participants expressed satisfaction that Dáil na nÓg acts as a representative voice of young people. However, qualitative data from this study’s survey and interviews with young people reveal that these responses are quite nuanced. Significant numbers of respondents indicated that they understand representation as having a voice, being heard and making a difference, rather than necessarily about representativeness. Schools are often the primary site of information about, and pathway into, participation initiatives and their role as gatekeepers to initial involvement in participation initiatives was highlighted by almost all of the adult participants and many of the youth participants in this study. The relationship with schools is viewed as very important in accessing young people, particularly in the initial recruitment of children and young people to attend Comhairle na nÓg AGMs. Relationships with the school are often dependent on individual goodwill, with some Comhairle Coordinators indicating ambiguity about who in the school they should be contacting. While student councils in schools are also viewed as a key site for recruitment of children and young people for participation initiatives, many of the adult participants were critical of the school authorities in only putting forward members of the student council for attendance at the Comhairle na nÓg AGMs, thereby narrowing the youth voice by confining selection of youth participants to young people who are already active in participation initiatives. This ‘narrow’ pool is particularly important in addressing the representativeness of youth participants. The ongoing challenge for Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg is to balance the recruitment of these young people with others who may have fewer opportunities to participate and may lack the confidence to put themselves forward.

It is clear from the findings of this study that Comhairle na nÓg Coordinators are aware of the importance of involving seldom-heard young people and have been successful in recruiting them to Comhairle in significant numbers, particularly through partnerships with agencies that work with young people from a number of minority groups. Participants from these groups have made a significant contribution to the work of Comhairle and have found Comhairle to be a safe space in which they can express themselves and have a voice. The involvement of participants from both school settings and local youth clubs was identified by adult participants as contributing to a more diverse and representative grouping of children and young people in participation initiatives. The development and consolidation of relationships with agencies working with children and young people will help to develop the membership, representativeness and diversity of Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg in the future.

Public awareness and engagement with the media

The issue of public awareness of participation initiatives was mentioned by youth and adult participants. There was a consensus that greater public awareness would improve recruitment to participation initiatives and their impact. Engagement with the local and national media was identified as a key enabler to increasing awareness and impact of participation initiatives. The majority of the youth participants felt that the media see Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg as representative voices for young people in Ireland and most Comhairlí appear to have a very good relationship with their local radio stations and newspapers.
Key achievements of the national Dáil na nÓg Councils

Some extremely important achievements have been made by successive Dáil na nÓg Councils. These include:

- *Fairsay!* media campaign highlighted the negative portrayal of teenagers in the media and urged media organisations to ‘talk to teenagers’ rather than ‘talking about teenagers’ (2007-2008).
- Participated in reference panel of young people involved in developing the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention’s *Youth Mental Health advertisement*, called ‘The boy with the hoodie’, and awareness campaign (2008-2009).
- Influenced the Minister for Health and Children’s decision to commence the *cervical cancer vaccine programme* for 12-year-old girls (2010).
- Got a commitment that questions on sexual behaviour will be asked in the *Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey* in Ireland in future years (2010).
- Conducted the first-ever peer-led, evidence-based survey on implementation levels of SPHE and RSE among young people. The report *Life skills matter – not just points: A Survey of Implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in second-level schools*, published by the OMCYA in 2010, highlighted a very low level of implementation of RSE in Senior Cycle.
- Conducted a consultation with young people on *reform of the Junior Cycle* in partnership with the DCYA and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which was launched by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education and Skills in July 2011. Findings from the consultation are included in the NCCA Framework for reform of the Junior Cycle being implemented by the Minister for Education and Skills.
- Conducted a peer-led, evidence-based survey among 2,200 teenagers on body image in November 2011. *How We See It: Report of a survey on young people’s body image* was published by the DCYA and launched by young members of the Dáil na nÓg Council and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in October 2012.
1. Introduction
1.1 Background
In 1992, Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In doing so, it committed itself to implementing the Convention in Ireland and to safeguarding the rights of children and young people in this country. Since then, there have been a number of significant public policy developments concerning children and young people. Many of these policy developments relate to Article 12 of the Convention, which acknowledges that children and young people under the age of 18 have a right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and, in light of this, the Irish Government has made numerous commitments to give credence to the voice of the child and to include children’s views in policy-making processes. These developments include the publication of the first National Children’s Strategy (2000), which identified three specific goals:

› Goal 1: Children will have a voice in matters that affect them.
› Goal 2: Children’s lives will be better understood.
› Goal 3: Children will receive quality supports and services.

Since 2000, a number of initiatives have been undertaken under Goal 1 of the National Children’s Strategy, including:

› establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs/DCYA);
› appointment of the Ombudsman for Children (2003);
› establishment of the Children and Young People’s Forum and the national and local youth councils, Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg;
› instigation of a number of consultations on a range of issues concerning children and young people;
› establishment of the DCYA Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team in 2009;
› the appointment of the first Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in 2011.

These initiatives offer children and young people unprecedented levels of participation in and access to decision-making at local and national levels.

1.2 Introduction to the research
This research project – Young People as Social Actors: An examination of young people’s perspectives on the impact of participation in DCYA initiatives – commenced in January 2011 and data collection was completed in March 2013. The project was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) and carried out by a team of researchers from the School of Applied Social Studies and the School of Psychology, University College Cork. Matched funding was obtained from the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences, University College Cork.

The research investigated the experiences and outcomes of participation for children and young people who have been involved in participatory initiatives of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA, now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs/DCYA) since 2000. The research focused on a number of initiatives (Dáil na nÓg, Comhairle na nÓg, and the Children and Young People’s Forum) and two national consultations – ‘Voices of Children in Care’ (2010) and ‘Teenage mental health’ (2008). The research sought to explore the views and experiences of children and young people who have participated in each of these initiatives and those of the adults who worked with them. This investigation utilised a holistic model of participation that is underpinned by Ackermann et al’s (2003) four realms of impact:

› personal;
› familial;
› communal;
› institutional.
This model was adapted to take account of participants’ experiences of the impact of the DCYA initiatives in four main areas:

› personal;
› family;
› community;
› decision-making in Irish society.

The views of present and past participants of Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg were sought in order to gain an insight into the impact of these initiatives on children and young people at different stages of their experiences. In particular, the research enabled past participants to reflect on the impact that their participatory experiences have had on them as they move to adulthood and to give their retrospective account of the four realms of impact.

1.3 Research aims

The research had two primary aims:

1. To gain insight into the experiences and outcomes of participation for children and young people who are currently involved and have been involved in DCYA participation initiatives.

2. To use participatory research methods to develop a research and evaluation model that takes account of children’s and young people’s voices, is informed by consultation with the DCYA and is grounded in the national and international literature.

There were three principal research questions:

1. Does the examination of formal evaluations indicate that the aims and objectives of the participatory initiatives of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs [now the DCYA] have been achieved?

2. How have children and young people been selected for participation in these initiatives and what are the elements that precipitate or prevent their participation?

3. Drawing on the four realms of impact, what evidence is there that involvement in these participatory initiatives produces short- and long-term changes in the lives of children and young people? Specifically:

  » What are the impacts of participation at personal level? Variables included self-confidence, critical thinking skills, acquisition of leadership skills, group facilitation or public speaking, personal development, social development and civic competencies.

  » What are the impacts of participation at family level? Variables included impact on family relationships.

  » What are the impacts of participation at community level? Variables included assessment of peer solidarity and community awareness of young people’s issues.

  » What are the impacts of participation at institutional level? Variables included impact on processes and institutions of governance, decision-makers’ attitudes to child and youth participation, impact on decision-making in Irish society and implementation of better services for young people.

  » In addition to the four realms of impact, the barriers to and enablers of participation are explored. Variables included family support for participation, advertising and awareness, engagement with the media, schools and participatory spaces, support from adult facilitators and adult allies, geography, personal attributes, links between child and youth participation forums, time commitments, support for seldom-heard young people, feedback and regular evaluation, adult attitudes to young people, access to decision-makers, and institutional and structural issues.

  » A second phase of the project was commissioned by the DCYA in November 2012. This phase of the research focused on an evaluation of the Comhairle na nÓg National Showcase event, which took place in November 2012. This evaluation and the methodology employed are presented in Chapter 7 of this report.
2. Review of the International Literature on Child and Youth Participation
2.1 Introduction: Theoretical perspectives on children’s ‘voice’ and rights

This literature review examines the ways in which the idea of participation by children and young people has been theorised. It explores how the concept has evolved from a more passive interpretation where it meant ‘listening to children or allowing them to take part’ in existing structures, to calls for ‘effective, creative and meaningful participation’ which is also ethical (Willow, 2010, p. 49). Throughout history, and in some regions to this day, children, if visible at all, have been viewed as property, as potential or actual income generators, or simply as miniature adults, and their welfare has been associated with the welfare of their families or households (Hart, 1991, p. 53; Boyden and Ennew, 1997, p. 1; Jans, 2004, p. 35). T.H. Marshall characterised children as ‘potential’ citizens only (Marshall, 1950, cited in James, 2011, p. 168). In more recent times, they came to be seen also as ‘objects to be studied, being regarded as incompetent, unreliable and incomplete’ (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010, p. 175). On the basis of how children and childhood has been conceptualised, children have variously been denied individual rights, voice or independent social status. In the context of research, one author points to ‘the missing child’ (Darbyshire et al., 2005, p. 419) in research conducted on children, rather than with or for them.

The development of children and young people’s participation has come about concurrently and perhaps largely in response to developments in international standards, seeking to improve the position and safety of children and young people around the world. In light of this requirement, this current study utilises the definition of the term ‘participation’ contained in the General Comment on Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, entitled The right of the child to be heard, which states that participation is ‘widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes’ (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 5).

This chapter follows the emergence of international instruments on children’s rights, particularly on developing theories of child participation, before moving on to a review of current literature on the following aspects of children and young people’s participation: the benefits of participation; the conditions that are necessary to promote and support participation; barriers to participation; and the impacts of participation.

2.2 Parallels between the Children’s Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement

Parallels between the children’s rights movement and the women’s movement are noteworthy on issues relating to participation in policy-making and governance structures. At the most basic level, both agendas have been supported by international recognition of their identity and rights within Treaties. However, the terms of the debates are also very similar. Wyness (2006, p. 39) outlines a number of parallels between the children’s rights movement and the women’s movement and he argues that feminism has been crucial to the development of childhood studies in general:

‘... parallels have been made between the current political position of children and the status of women in the first half of the twentieth century in Western societies’.

Wyness argues that the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s drew attention to abuse and violence within the family home, which also helped to highlight the abuse that children sometimes suffered within the private sphere of the family. A significant parallel highlighted...
by Wyness is the perception that children, like women in the past, are viewed as incompetent decision-makers, not capable of acting in their own best interests and reliant on others to make decisions for them.

The potential parallels between the youth participation agenda and the women's movement have also been picked up by Edwards (1996). Examining the debate surrounding the participation of children and young people in development, he highlights a number of key parallels, including their invisibility and limited involvement in policy-making despite being their largest constituencies; the belief that others are best placed to make decisions for them; their vulnerability to be disproportionately affected by austere policies and to suffer oppression. The women's movement has allowed for the recognition that children are ‘socially productive actors in the same way that feminism grounded the idea that women are not simply passive recipients of patriarchal forces’ (Wyness, 2006, p. 41).

Edwards also suggests, however, that there are very important differences in the position of women and that of children in achieving the right to meaningfully participate and that simplistically comparing the two agendas can conceal the significant challenges in achieving youth participation that the women’s movement has overcome through the ability to act independently and individually in their own interests. Wyness (2006) also recognises this independent potential of women: while women have fronted the women’s rights movement and been in a position to advocate for themselves, their social and political status, the children’s rights movement has, with few exceptions, been fronted by adults and adult-led organisations and in this context Wyness (ibid, p. 39) argues that children ‘have few rights to self-determination and are still reliant on adults to advocate changes to this state of affairs’.

### 2.3 International instruments on children’s rights

The most important development in international recognition of children’s rights is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), which is the most highly ratified instrument in international law. The Convention sets forth a comprehensive list of substantive rights for children, along with a series of implementation measures that ratifying countries are legally bound to adopt. Of particular interest to this research is Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states:

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

Lansdown (2006, p. 3) points out that Article 12 is about children as ‘active agents’ in exercising their rights and that their active agency may be understood as ‘participation’, even though participation is not explicitly mentioned in the text of the Article. Lansdown defines participation as:

‘An ongoing process of children’s expression and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them. It requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and requires that full consideration of their views be given, taking into account the child’s age and maturity.’

Lansdown points out that Article 12 assures children that relevant legislation and policies will be put in place to ensure that they will be heard. This includes measures to enable the voices of children who experience social exclusion through disability or other forms of marginalisation.
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Children’s views must be given ‘due weight’ or consideration in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. The greater the child’s capacity, ‘the more autonomy and responsibility to take decisions for themselves they should be given’ (Lansdown, 2006, p. 24).

There are links between Article 12 and several other articles in the UNCRC. In particular, Article 12 is connected to Article 3, which specifies that all actions that concern children must be taken with their ‘best interests’ in mind. Lansdown (2006, p. 32) makes the point that the consideration of children’s views enshrined in Article 12 must be ‘an integral part of determining the child’s best interests’. Article 13 refers to the right of expression through getting and sharing information in a manner which is not damaging to children and respects the rights and freedoms of others. Linked to this, Article 17 provides children with the right to information that is important to their health and well-being, and sets out a role for the mass media to provide children with access to such information in a child-centred and culturally appropriate manner. In addition, Article 15 states that children have the right to create and join associations and to assemble peacefully. Both imply opportunities to express political opinions, engage in political processes and participate in decision-making.

In a European context, Article 3(3) of the Lisbon Treaty explicitly requires the European Union (EU) to promote the protection of the rights of the child, rights which are further enshrined in Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000). Desmet (2010) identifies child participation as one of the four key thematic priorities in children’s rights shared by the EU, the Council of Europe and the UN. (The other three areas of policy focus are violence against children, poverty and social exclusion, and a focus on vulnerable children.) For example, the 2008 Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life encourages the active participation of children and young people in local and regional democratic decisions and promotes a model of rights-based active citizenship for young people. In addition, since 2007 the Council of Europe, as part of the Stockholm Strategy, has identified child participation as a key work area. Actions in this area have included the involvement of children as advisors to the Council of Europe in a number of activities, including child-friendly justice, sexual violence and children in care. Furthermore, the Council of Europe has sought to mainstream child participation in the Council of Europe Secretariat and develop a policy on child participation.

While the ‘right’ to be heard has been heralded as a major achievement of the UNCRC, and is indeed seen as one of the fundamental values of the Convention (CRC, General Comment No. 12, p. 5), how the right itself has subsequently been construed is problematic. The ‘right to have their views given due weight in all matters’ is subject to interpretation by policy-makers in different jurisdictions, at different levels of society and at different times. It has been argued that popular phrases used to abbreviate Article 12, such as ‘voice’, can in fact have the effect of diminishing the impact of the very rights it purports to represent (Lundy, 2007, p. 927). Some critics, such as Kirby and Bryson (2002), suggest that unless participation is effective in bringing about positive change for those involved and those they represent, it can actually have a negative impact, both personally (in creating feelings of powerlessness and failure) and socially (in undermining the credibility of participation structures and damaging the status of young people in their communities).

2.4 Citizenship as participation

As discourses of children’s participation have become more mainstream, questions about the concept of children as citizens have simultaneously come to the fore (Jans, 2004, p. 27). It has been argued that children’s citizenship is limited by the fact that they bear only partial rights and responsibilities in most existing democratic societies. However, democratic citizenship as participation and involvement acknowledges that, like adults, children both influence, and are influenced by, their society in an ongoing and (inter)active way. Like adults, children need to gain experience in an ongoing way. From this perspective, children are citizens, where citizenship ‘presents itself as a dynamic and continuous learning process’ (ibid, p. 40).
Lister’s (2008) use of a feminist approach to children’s citizenship critiques approaches that hold up an adult form of citizenship as an unproblematic standard to which all other forms must aspire. In the past, these were adult, male standards, which, as a result of feminist critiques, have expanded to include women, but still exclude children and young people. Lister proposes that even where capacity is limited, citizenship is present where agency is practised, and where children and young people exercise their agency, they require respect and recognition as players in the civic arena.

Children and young people’s experiences are significant formative influences on the capacities that they develop (Kellett, 2009, pp. 46-47). This perspective recognises that the protection of children implies withholding some of the rights and responsibilities of adults, but allows for the active participation in society of young people at whatever levels they are capable of.

Thomas (2012, p. 6) explores the usefulness of Honneth’s theory of recognition to argue:
1. that children do belong to the class of morally responsible persons, are therefore rights-bearers and are entitled to respect;
2. that children are people with talents and capabilities, who contribute in a variety of ways to society and culture, and so are deserving of esteem.

However, this formulation of children’s right to respect and esteem relies on their ability to achieve a certain level of moral, mental and physical development – a level which Thomas leaves undefined and which suggests a move towards what has been called a ‘responsibilisation’ discourse where, rather than being seen as inalienable, rights are viewed as conditional (Tisdall, 2010, p. 320). This approach to rights can be particularly problematic in relation to children and young people, where judgements as to their capacities and contributions are usually dependent on the views of adults. These adults may then decide to withhold or assign rights according to their own subjective perspectives. Thomas (2012, p. 6) holds an ambiguous view about children’s status, stating that they are ‘potential, if not actual, members of a community of solidarity based on shared values and reciprocal esteem’.

2.5 Participation and representation

An issue that is closely related to democratic citizenship is representation. When we look at children and young people’s participation in a democratic society, we have to ask to what extent are they, or should they be, representative of the communities they are active within (Sinclair, 2004, p. 112). International studies have shown that youth participation is affected by issues such as ‘race’, disability, socio-economic class, education, and family and community context (Checkoway, 2010). Head (2011, p. 546) highlights the concern that:

‘The already confident young people (i.e. those who have knowledge, communication skills, and organisational navigation skills) are more likely to become involved, and that the vulnerable or hard-to-reach groups may be overlooked. There is little research on how to promote a culture of inclusion among organisations and in the community, where young people’s participation can then more meaningfully influence public decision-making.’

However, profile data are hard to come by since most projects seem to feel that it is inappropriate to monitor who takes part (Sinclair, 2004, p. 112). Representativeness raises issues such as young people sometimes being expected to speak on behalf of other young people, which Cairns and Brannen (2005, cited in Willow, 2010, p. 52) argue has inhibited both young people’s voices and their influence. As well as this, seeing young people as representative of other young people by virtue of their shared age and location can allow authorities to claim to have consulted young people after consulting just some young people, without critically considering the standpoint of the group as a whole (Cairns, 2006, pp. 224-25).
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Such a conceptualisation of consultation may also mistakenly assume that all young people can participate equally without the kinds of local and structural supports they might need to do this effectively (Sinclair, 2004, p. 112). When a partnership model is applied with children and young people, it risks creating a class of children who, in order to participate in decision-making structures, are taken away from the familiar environment of their communities and their peers and placed within pre-existing, centralised structures that may or may not reflect or address the concerns of those they leave behind (Lansdown, 2006, p. 145).

Participation structures emerging across Europe in response to Article 12 of the UNCRC are frequently based on adult democratic institutions, such as local councils or corporations, which can have the effect of inhibiting the involvement of young people who do not or will not conform to adults’ expectations of behaviour or interactions. Tisdall and Bell (2006, p. 119) argue that civil servants are firmly in control of who participates, how they participate and what they participate in, and it is they who also ultimately decide which voices will be prioritised in formulating policy.

Often, young people are selected for participation through schools. But the role of schools in selecting young people has also been problematised and their role as gatekeepers has been the focus of attention by a number of theorists. Wells (2009, pp. 32-33) explores the role played by schools in creating children and young people as a kind of class, as schools reproduce the kinds of nationalism and the types of citizens required by their particular society. As schools are the arm of the State, entrusted with reproducing conservative civic values, this results in a scenario whereby only those students who will best maintain the status quo get selected for participation. Cairns (2006, pp. 223-24) asserts that schools control participation and argues that because in most cases students have no legal right to be involved in decisions in their schools, schools are the worst equipped structures to enable young people’s meaningful participation. A recent study by Gilleece and Cosgrave (2012) on civic participation in schools in Ireland found that the home background of students influenced their participation activities and that students from homes with large numbers of books had higher levels of civic participation. Gender differences also emerged in their research and they found that boys’ civic participation was substantially lower than girls when the boys perceived that they have a low level of influence on decision-making. The authors conclude that this (1) reflects ‘the reciprocal relationship between motivation and action’ for participation and (2) highlights the need for ‘meaningful opportunities for student engagement’ (Gilleece and Cosgrave, 2012, p. 237).

In a survey of young people’s participation in political parties across Europe, Bruter and Harrison (2009) present the results of a comparative research project on the trajectories, motivations, perceptions and attitudes of young members (aged 18-25) of 13 different European political parties in Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Norway and Hungary. The project combined a mass survey of 2,919 young party members, with 507 in-depth interviews. The research found that, in line with falling membership and ageing of political parties across Europe, young people increasingly feel that they are left out of politics (Bruter and Harrison, 2009, p. 175). In contrast, Crimmens and West (2004) explore how various European countries, including the UK, Germany, Slovenia and the Netherlands, have gone beyond incorporation of the UNCRC into their legislation to foster participation by children and young people in political processes and involve them in making decisions about how to improve services provided for them. Their study builds a picture of how the voice of the child is becoming more influential in the search for more effective services, but also reflecting a fundamental change in the status of children and young people in their relationships with wider adult society.

Particular developments covered by the authors include:

- how young people are participating in the design and delivery of the former Connexions service in England and Wales;
- the experience of young British people meeting with Members of European Parliaments to discuss ‘An Agenda for Young People’;
- the struggle to establish the rights of children in State care in Scotland;
- a major youth consultation exercise in Northern Ireland;
political disenchantment and the development of ‘Learning Democracy’ in German local government;
young people researching young people’s involvement in formal politics in Amsterdam and Rotterdam;
how young people are changing the nature of their own educational experiences in Norway;
the Children’s Parliament in Slovenia;
approaches to the development of children’s rights vary from city to city in Spain;
the struggle between participation and traditional emphasis on the primacy of the family in Italian social policy.

These diverse examples of the involvement of young people in politics and policy suggest that membership of political parties or involvement in other centres of government are not the only, or even the best way for young people to exert their influence. The wider opportunities for participation are best captured in the concept of ‘governance’, but do not necessarily guarantee the achievement of meaningful participation.

2.6 Children in governance

‘Governance’ is a term used to capture the diffuse nature of decision-making, where centres of power outside of (and including) centralised government are involved in creating public policy (Tisdall and Bell, 2006). Although children and young people’s participation in decision-making has become a widely accepted concept, in the UK concerns about ‘tokenistic’ involvement of children have given rise to calls for children’s participation to result in ‘political’ change. In a study on children’s inclusion in ‘governance’ rather than ‘government’, Tisdall and Bell report that in a 2002 survey by the Carnegie UK Trust of statutory and voluntary organisations across the UK, although children were widely consulted in design and planning stages, they were rarely involved in service delivery, monitoring and evaluation (Carnegie, cited in Tisdall and Bell, 2006, pp. 105-19). A similar survey conducted in 2009 noted that little had changed in how participation workers within these organisations involved children in decision-making, although there did appear to be an improvement in their involvement in delivering services and increased opportunities for workers to receive training in participation during the intervening years (Davey et al, 2010a). In his discussion of youth participation, Head (2011, p. 545) points out that in the Australian context, consultation initiatives have represented a strong rhetorical commitment to youth participation in policy, but little empowerment in reality. In decision-making arenas, children’s participation has to compete with other agendas and, often as a result of the relative powerlessness of children, can be the first to be sacrificed when resources are limited.

2.7 Models of child and youth participation

A number of frameworks or models of participation have been developed. These include Hart’s (1992) influential model which was used in the Irish National Children’s Strategy (2000) as a framework within which to examine participation. Hart’s model has been followed by a number of other participation models, including Treseder’s Degrees of Participation (1997), Shier’s Pathways to Participation (2001), Kirby et al’s Culture of Participation (2003) and Lundy’s Model of Participation (2007).

2.7.1 Lundy’s Model of Participation

While this study takes account of all of these models, it is particularly influenced by Laura Lundy’s (2007) model of participation, which identifies a number of key factors for the effective realisation of children and young people’s participation. She suggests a model for implementing Article 12 of the UNCRC that clearly communicates the legal and human rights imperatives inherent in the entire instrument. Lundy’s model (see Figure 1) draws attention to the interdependence of Article 12 with the other Articles of the Convention, in particular Article 2 (non-discrimination), Article 3 (child’s best interests), Article 5 (right to guidance from adults), Article 13 (right to information) and Article 19 (right to be safe).
Lundy’s model comprises four interlinked strands: space (to express views); voice (facilitated to express views); audience (to be listened to); and influence (to have views appropriately acted upon). Providing all four conditions requires a nuanced understanding of Article 12’s provisions, as well as respect, inclusivity, patience, creativity and resources. It can also often entail significant organisational change, including prescribing formal channels for communicating young people’s views to those who make decisions affecting their lives (Lundy, 2007). Lundy’s model proves an excellent tool to examine the types of participation activities and initiatives developed by the DCYA in Ireland.

Figure 1: Adapted from Lundy’s Model of Participation (2007)

2.8 Motivation to participate

While the area of models of participation has been the subject of significant academic and policy attention, the affective dimensions of participation remain underexplored. Which young people participate and what motivates them has generally received little attention in the literature on participation. Although Western society operates from a presumption of children and young people’s lack of interest and inability to take part in civic and political life, Thomas (2012, p. 6) adapts Honneth’s theory of participation to analyse young people’s involvement in civic society, summarised as love (arising from relationships developed through their membership of participation groups), respect (arising from having their rights realised) and esteem (arising from solidarity with others in their groups as they worked together to bring about change). Young people in Thomas’ study reported that peer friendships and the care and love they receive from the adults who work with them were highly important to them and although they did not often mention rights explicitly, many of them talked about the importance of getting their voices heard. However, esteem appeared to be the most important element for them in participating, particularly in their pride in making changes in their local communities. Thomas argues that all three modes of recognition need to be present for meaningful participation, but that these are often also accompanied by tensions and conflict as divergent interests come into contact with each other. As with adult decision-making in a democratic process, such tensions and conflicts can serve to bring parties to a deeper understanding of each other’s position, or they can result in the collapse of the process itself, especially if, as in the case of children and young people who are politically disenfranchised, power differences are not taken into account.
Wells (2009, pp. 23-24) notes that sometimes external conditions can motivate young people’s participation. Young people have, for example, been active initiators and participants of sometimes radical or even violent political movements around the world (Jones, 2004, pp. 115-16). However, where such participation has impacted on States’ views of young people, this has sometimes conversely diluted some of the protections previously afforded to young people (Wells, 2009, p. 26). Young people’s involvement in political agitation and revolution also draws attention to the possibility that they might not always be on the ‘right’ side, but, like other vulnerable groups, can be drawn into engaging in action for their own or their family’s self-interest or as a result of susceptibility to political propaganda (ibid, p. 32). On 16th February 2012, the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon emphasized the need for governments to empower women and youth, stressing their place at the centre of recent social protest movements worldwide. He cautioned countries against ignoring their voices, which he said are critical to countries’ development, warning that if they failed to do this they risked creating a ‘lost generation’:

‘The priorities of young people should be just as prominent in our halls as they are on the streets and squares. They should be just as present in our meeting space as they are in cyberspace. Young people can be embraced as partners in shaping their societies, or they can be excluded and left to simmer in frustration and despair.’

(UN News Centre, 2012)

Education and socialisation have also been emphasized as vitally important components in preparing children for active participation in civic life; the timing of that participation is the key issue, however. Lolichen (2006, p. 21) argues that the socialisation process that children are exposed to must include practice in active citizenship if people are expected to exercise their rights to participate as ‘they develop into adulthood’. However, Hart et al (2004) argue that children and young people must be seen as actors with the capacity to engage as citizens in ‘the here and now’ and, as Lundy (2007, p. 935) points out, Article 12 of the UNCRC stipulates only that children should be able to express a view, not that their views should be mature.

Selection processes can significantly impact on who takes part in a particular project, as can access to certain skills and resources (Sinclair, 2004, p. 112). Although some participation projects specify a target group, most do not and are open to a wide range of young people. However, notable trends are that older young people and females are more likely to participate and that the minority who do get involved are not always representative of the target population (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). Checkoway (2011) asserts that the most active young people in formal participation activities tend to be those from higher socio-economic groups and with higher levels of education than the general population. Children who have few dealings with local youth organisations are also often left out of consultations (Sinclair, 2004, p. 112). Indeed, project-based models of participation can overlook non-mainstreamed forms of participation, such as local community-type involvement more common among lower socio-economic groups. As Checkoway (2011, p. 342) observes:

‘Differential participation by low-income youth does not mean that they are disengaged from democracy. On the contrary, they do participate in public affairs, but rather in activities which are more appropriate to their situation and which mainstream social scientists find difficult to document.’

Younger age groups and young people who have disabilities are frequently seen as having diminished ‘capacity’ to make informed choices and, as such, their views are not sought or are overridden by adult gatekeepers. However, Article 7(3) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) has incorporated the child’s right to be heard. The challenge of ensuring representative participants is also dependent on the supports available to achieve meaningful participation once the opportunity for involvement arises.
2.9 Support structures

Children and young people often require more than just the opportunity to participate. Regardless of whether they arrived at participation through selection, election or volunteering, additional supports may be required to enable them to take part in meaningful ways. Lundy (2007, p. 935) argues that children sometimes need help and support to form their views and that this must be provided in ways appropriate to both their ability and their age; in turn, children must be supported in expressing their views in ways of their choosing. Kirby and Bryson (2002) emphasize that effective participation requires (1) the purpose of the project to be made clear and understandable; (2) training and education for the young people needs to be provided where relevant; and (3) training and flexible support of key adult workers to equip them to meet the challenges and demands of working with broad ranges of young people on what can sometimes be difficult or frustrating issues.

Checkoway (2011) discusses the role of youth leaders and adult allies as central to successful participation. Youth leaders can be motivated by a number of factors, including personal experience of participation or the desire for personal achievement and experience to prepare them for future education or employment opportunities (ibid, p. 343):

“We also observe that some youth leaders pass through discernible developmental stages in which they become aware, gain experience, receive encouragement, grow in confidence, develop practical skills, emerge as leaders and move on to adulthood.”

Adult allies provide a mentoring and supporting role for youth participation and such adult allies identified by Checkoway (2011) include:

- personal allies, such as parents and neighbours;
- community allies, including teachers and youth workers;
- institutional allies, who include people from public life and the media.

Central to the role of successful adult allies is the importance of leadership development and education for these adults, in tandem with supports and education for young people.

2.10 Barriers to participation

The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) identifies a number of challenges to the implementation of child and youth participation programmes. The most common of these are ‘negative attitudes towards children and young people and their capacities’ (UNICEF, 2009, p. 15). UNICEF national committees in Italy, Slovakia and the UK are attempting to build national child-friendly school programmes, but have encountered institutional cynicism and concern among adults that participation will lead to anarchy or that children and young people will be taken ‘too seriously’ (ibid, p. 16). While the general idea that children should have a ‘voice’ appears to be a universally acceptable and accepted fact, in practice, such uncritical acceptance often dissipates when the reality of implementation becomes apparent, ‘especially when the effect of this is to challenge the dominant thinking, generate controversy or cost money’ (Lundy, 2007, p. 931).

Such thinking can result in ineffective and insufficient participation mechanisms for engaging with young people, which can, in turn, affect how many and which young people will participate, the quality of that participation (with a risk of participation being tokenistic) and the impacts of participation.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009), in its General Comment No. 12 on The right of the child to be heard, provides detailed guidance on how the right of children to be heard should be ensured. It states:
‘Achieving meaningful opportunities for the implementation of Article 12 will necessitate dismantling the legal, political, economic, social and cultural barriers that currently impede children’s opportunity to be heard and their access to participation in all matters affecting them. It requires a preparedness to challenge assumptions about children’s capacities, and to encourage the development of environments in which children can build and demonstrate capacities. It also requires a commitment to resources and training.’

Specific conditions that act as barriers to participation, according to Kirby and Bryson (2002, p. 5), include:
- cynicism about being listened to by adults among those who refuse to participate;
- lack of feedback following participation, meaning that young people cannot assess the impact of their input;
- structural barriers, such as time constraints, output requirements, formality, complexity and bureaucracy within the participatory project itself, as well as within organisations concerned with decision-making;
- the attitudes and communication styles of adults (including parents) can discourage as well as encourage young people’s participation.

Checkoway (2011, p. 342) discusses the concept of ‘adultism’, which undermines young people’s self-belief because it assumes that adults ‘are better than young people, and entitled to act upon them without their agreement because of their age’. This condition is attributable to media, politicians, social scientists and professional practitioners, and reinforced by marketing of safety, such as home security systems, metal detectors and closed-circuit television, which is increasingly sold to schools on the premise that young people are not to be trusted. The fear of youth by adult authorities can undermine public participation and affect the health of democracy.

2.11 Impacts of participation

Although the area of youth participation is now well established, there remains a paucity of research on what the impacts of participation are (Sinclair, 2004, p. 114; Kirby and Bryson, 2002). Despite the lack of rigorous research on impacts, findings from evaluations of individual projects have indicated a number of outcomes, including improved services, personal development, enhanced citizenship and social inclusion, but little evidence of impacts on policy and resource allocation (Sinclair, 2004, p. 115).

The literature identifies a number of key areas that can be examined when considering impacts of participation. These areas include impacts on the individual, their families and their communities, and on the institutions where the decisions are made that govern their lives. Although care must be taken to remain open to other levels of impact, these ‘four realms of impact’ (Ackermann et al., 2003, p. 18) are useful tools in assessing if involvement in participatory initiatives produces short- and long-term changes in the lives of young people.

Personal and individual impacts

There are a number of key areas where research has indicated that young people have benefited from participation. These include skills acquisition, such as learning how to make decisions, group facilitation, communication skills and team work (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). The benefits of participation by marginalised children and young people have similarly been described as resulting in their improved self-esteem and assertiveness, feelings of empowerment and access to information and skills (Prout et al., 2006; Willow, 2010; Head, 2011, p. 544). Willow (2010, p. 46) reports that benefits of participation that have been identified
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by children themselves include new friendships, knowledge, understanding, confidence and access to arenas that would previously have been inaccessible to them. There is significant evidence that the personal impacts on young people are influenced by the extent to which they feel they have actually effected change and had a positive outcome (Kirby and Bryson, 2002).

For some young people, participation has been reported to break down gender divisions and stereotypes and improve gender equity since participants are often encouraged to work in mixed-sex groups (Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Ackermann et al., 2003). In addition, participatory activities can change the attitudes and knowledge of young people in relation to issues of equality and discrimination, and in particular challenge negative attitudes towards people from other backgrounds and traditions, leading to increased acceptance, tolerance and awareness of discrimination (Ackermann et al., 2003, p. 20).

Participation ‘may prepare children for future leadership and social/political participation, and contribute to the democratisation process through the formation of young leaderships with a vision and knowledge of development’ (Ackermann et al., 2003, p. 26). Notably though, Willow (2010, p. 46) criticises the justification of children’s rights to participation on the basis of appeals to the beneficial effects on the individual, as if we would similarly argue that rights for women or people with disabilities should make them somehow ‘better’ people before we accept that they should be given those rights. She argues that the right to be heard enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC no longer needs to be justified in such terms, but is, rather, simply a ‘right’ to which children are entitled.

In relation to educational outcomes associated with participation activities, Kirby and Bryson (2002) highlight two studies that examined participation in schools and found improved exam results and attendance. However, these projects specifically relate to school-based participation rather than broader community participation. One of the studies cited by Kirby and Bryson found that young people who were participating in local government activities were not any more likely to join political parties than those who did not participate. However, Tisdall (2010) warns against the tendency to measure the success of participatory initiatives in terms of preparing young people for mainstream party politics. Instead, schools may be seen as sites of governance in themselves, where children and young people can fruitfully learn about their rights and where they can exercise their developing abilities to enter into real-life decision-making processes. This broader view sees participation as about governance, rather than government, and seeks to expand and continue youth participatory processes into other (including adult) groups, providing continuity and opportunity to take part at different stages of life and with different levels of involvement.

**Family and community level impacts**

UNICEF (2009, p. 3) states that participation by children and young people benefits the young person, their family and community. There has been limited research into the wider impact of young people’s participation in decision-making on their families, although in some countries parents have been found to have an important role in influencing whether or not the young person participates in civic life (Kirby and Bryson, 2002, p. 46). Alderson (2010, p. 89) contends that for all children, their experience of participation in decision-making begins in the ‘less-observed private world of the family’ and is shaped by their family interactions; children experience a different type of participation within the home and generally feel they have more ‘respect and choice, free time and space at home, away from the demands of formal care and education’. In the context of international development work, youth participation has been found to have a number of positive impacts, including improved family relations characterised by increased parental support – which may be attributed to the increased abilities of the children to contribute to the well-being of the household. There is also some evidence of improved parent-child relations ‘due to the better behaviour, attitudes, and self-discipline of children that are commonly attributed to their participation in particular projects or initiatives’.
In addition, in cultures where young women and girls are not encouraged, or perhaps even allowed, to socialise outside of the home, especially with boys, there have been some noted improvements in negotiating greater social freedom for girls with parents. These have been attributed to the young women’s confidence and skills gained through taking part in participation projects.

However, there is some research evidence, mainly from the majority world region, that there can be negative consequences associated with young people’s participation, such as distracting the young people from their domestic responsibilities or school work, and tensions within families where incoming values may conflict with their own. Ackermann et al (2003, p. 23) contend that ‘without simultaneous efforts by agency staff to work with family members around such values, there is a risk that child participants can come into conflict at home’.

Jans (2004) suggests that the rise of globalisation and individualism have occurred alongside a fragmentation of key institutions, such as the family, where identity and behaviour were traditionally formed. As these structures become less reliable as sources of socially prescribed attributes, individuals are forced to seek other ways to form their identities and inform their behaviour. Children are increasingly expected to ‘author their own lives’ (Beck, 1997, cited in Jans, 2004, p. 28) and one way of doing this has been by claiming agency within families.

In relation to community-level impacts, Kirby and Bryson (2002) are critical of the fact that there has been limited research examining the differences between the work of adults and young people in situations where young people effected change in their communities. Also, they highlight the fact that there is little knowledge of how the young person’s age, competencies, experiences and interests affect such issues. Ackermann et al (2003, p. 25) discuss the enhancement of adult–child relations as a positive outcome for participatory community projects, particularly as the young people develop their own interpersonal skills and engage in ongoing dialogue with adults in their community and can enjoy enhanced status within their communities.

Institutional level and societal impacts

Head (2011, p. 543) argues that ‘services, programs and policies that have direct impacts on young people … will be more effective if young people’s perspectives are engaged in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services’. He also argues that the perspectives of young people will add to service improvements and cost-efficiencies.

The Scotland Children’s Sector Forum (2011) identifies a number of benefits of the increased dialogue and relations between adults and young people related to participative activities, including ‘the enthusiasm of the converted’ where adults who start to work with children and young people are developing a more positive personal and professional attitude towards, and increased commitment to, working with young people. The adults involved increase their own knowledge and skills relating to the participation of young people and together, the children, young people and adults develop creative ways to work together, allowing for greater collaboration and for greater involvement of children and young people even at the earliest stages of decision-making. The successful use of technologies to reach larger and more diverse audiences is also noted in the report.

Cairns (2006) contends that ‘ensuring key adults listen’ is a major challenge and this raises a number of issues connected to the traditional distribution of power between adults and children. Lundy (2007, p. 939) suggests that compliance is more likely to occur by making conditions ‘uncomfortable’ for adults who do not feed back to the young people they consult. Cairns (2006) is also critical of participation structures that mimic adult democratic structures since children do not have universal suffrage and therefore cannot be representative in this format, which can actually lead to a ‘democratic deficit’.
Internationally, youth parliaments, similar to other spaces where children’s participation is officially supported, tend to be initiated by adults and due to the lack of formal political power or substantial budgets, most youth parliaments ‘largely work as lobbying groups (e.g. by providing manifestos, alongside other voluntary organizations, to try and influence subsequent decision-making)’ (Tisdall et al., 2013). Furthermore, youth parliaments tend to operate outside of the main political party model of adult parliaments and in general ‘there is an official apoliticalness expected of children and young people’s participation activities’.

Head (2011, p. 546) cautions against the development of youth participation in isolation from wider citizen engagement and participation, which might result in youth participation becoming disconnected from mainstream public policy. In a UNICEF review of child and youth participation, it was found that where children had participated in policy-making, there was a significant increase in awareness of children’s rights and an increase in the commitment to uphold children’s rights from policy-makers and government leaders (UNICEF, 2009, p. 13). Indirect benefits of youth participation on wider society include enhanced democracy and ‘providing training and experience for active citizens and leaders of the future’ (Head, 2011, p. 544), so that ‘children can come gradually to construct authentic participatory democracies’ (Hart, 1997, cited in Ackermann et al, 2003, p. 26).

2.12 Summary

This chapter examined the emergence of international instruments on children’s rights, including Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC. There was a focus on approaches to, and models of, child participation, before moving on to review current literature on the following aspects of children and young people’s participation: the benefits of participation; the conditions that are necessary to promote and support participation; barriers to participation; and the impacts of participation. The chapter considered the ways in which the idea of participation by children and young people has been theorised and explored how the concept has evolved, from a more passive interpretation to calls for effective, creative and meaningful participation. In relation to the impacts of child and youth participation, the literature review examined the available research evidence linked to the ‘four realms of impact’ of participation, as identified by Ackermann et al (2003). These areas include impacts on the individual, their families and their communities, and the institutional impact. These ‘realms of impact’ are useful tools in assessing if involvement in participatory initiatives produces short- and long-term changes in the lives of young people. While there is limited rigorous research on the impacts of child and youth participation, findings from previous evaluations indicate a number of positive outcomes, including improved services, personal development, enhanced citizenship and social inclusion.
3. Department of Children and Youth Affairs Participation Initiatives
3.1 Introduction

There is evidence of a growing consensus in Irish society about the right of children to participate and recent policy changes reflect a more nuanced understanding of children as ‘meaning-makers’ and ‘active social beings’. Partly as a result of domestic pressures, but, it is argued, largely arising from the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, after ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Irish government set about introducing a series of measures to improve children’s status in Ireland (Kilkelly, 2001, p. 310). This chapter explores these policy developments and their implications for children and young people’s participation.

3.2 Constitutional reform and children’s rights in Ireland

The ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was a historic milestone for children’s rights in Ireland. It represented a significant change in discourse in the positioning of children in Irish society. Devine et al (2004) contend that traditionally children in Ireland were viewed as the property of their parents and children had no independent rights or status. It can be argued that Catholic Social Teaching has played a central role in the construction of children’s rights and citizenship in Ireland, and the enshrinement of the principle of family autonomy in the Constitution of Ireland, Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937), has meant that the Irish State had traditionally restricted itself to a minimal level of intervention in the lives of children (ibid). The emphasis on the rights of children as subordinate to the rights of their parents has contributed to the invisibility of children in the public sphere and since the mid-1990s there have been continuous calls for a Constitutional referendum on children’s rights to address this issue (CRA, 2006; Kiersey and Hayes, 2010).

The family in Article 41.1.1 of the Constitution of Ireland is described as ‘the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law’. Article 41.1.2 explicitly commits the State to ‘protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State’. In Article 42, the State ‘acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children’.

Despite significant legislative attempts to move away from a traditionally narrow interpretation of Articles 41 and 42 (O’Mahony, 2012, p. 32), the primacy and privacy of the family since Independence has resulted in a range of now widely publicised breaches of children’s fundamental human rights. Of particular significance to the case for Constitutional change was the report of the Kilkenny Incest Investigation in 1993, which was the first major inquiry into child abuse in Ireland and initiated a national debate about child protection and children’s rights. According to Kiersey and Hayes (2010, p. 343), this was ‘the first report to note children’s rights appearing as subordinate to parents’ rights in the Irish Constitution; thus it became the first report to officially recommend Constitutional change in respect of children as rights-holders’.

In a submission to the Joint Committee to the Constitutional Amendment on Children, Barnardos (2009) lists a catalogue of reports that have highlighted in graphic terms what can happen to children who are ‘seen and not heard’. These include:

- The Kennedy Report (1969);
- Kelly – A Child is Dead (1995);
- The Madonna House Inquiry (1996);
- The West of Ireland Farmer Case (1998);
Barnardos (2009) lists other key reports that have called for Constitutional change, including:

- Task Force on Child Care (1980);
- Kilkenny Incest Investigation (1993);
- Constitution Review Group (1996);
- Commission on the Family (1998);
- All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution (2006);
- Joint Committee on Child Protection (2006);

A Constitutional referendum on children’s rights in Ireland was held in November 2012 and was approved by a majority of 57.4% of voters. The referendum requires the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) to introduce legislation that will effect changes in children’s rights in a number of areas, including adoption law, guardianship, child protection and State intervention in cases of child neglect and child abuse. In relation to listening to children, the referendum ensures that the best interests of the child will be paramount and their views must be heard by judges and given due weight according to the child’s age and maturity in matters of judicial proceedings in family law. According to Kilkelly (2012), the use of the term ‘best interests’ instead of the term ‘welfare’ will bring Irish law in line with Article 3 of the UNCRC which emphasizes acting in the best interests of the child.

While the positive outcome in the Constitutional referendum has been welcomed by children’s rights advocates and campaigners in Ireland as an important progression for children’s rights, the impact of the Constitutional change on the majority of Irish children is likely to be limited. Article 42A.1 of the Constitutional referendum states that ‘the State recognises and affirms the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children and shall, as far as practicable, by its laws protect and vindicate those rights’. However, the focus of the Constitutional change is primarily on child protection and family law, and has no impact on decision-making in areas such as health or education. According to Kilkelly (2012, p. 1), ‘the majority of children are not affected by judicial proceedings in the family law area, but every day decisions are made by administrative authorities about their health, education, housing and immigration status which will be unaffected by this provision (at least) if this amendment is passed’. Therefore, the Constitutional changes will have limited significance in relation to the implementation of Article 12 of the UNCRC and opportunities for children to be involved in decision-making in their everyday lives. The focus of the Constitutional referendum also highlights the continued focus on the protection and vulnerability of children rather than recognising children as citizens and rights-holders. Nonetheless, the Constitutional referendum has been broadly welcomed as a significant watershed in the enshrinement of children’s rights in Ireland.
Key events in children’s rights in Ireland since the ratification of the UNCRC

1993 Kilkenny Incest Investigation leads to calls for Constitutional change.
1997 Department of Health and Children established, with Junior Minister for Children.
1998 Ireland’s First Progress Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
1998 Education Act 1998, Section 27, states that students may establish a school council.
2000 National Children’s Office (NCO) established.
2003 Ombudsman for Children’s Office established to deal with complaints by and on behalf of children and to promote the rights and welfare of young people.
2005 NCO incorporated into newly established Office of the Minister for Children (OMC).
2005 Ireland’s Second Progress Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
2008 Amalgamation of children and youth, leading to OMC becoming the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA).
2009 The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse published its report, known as the Ryan Report.
2011 First-ever Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) established.
2011 Appointment of first Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.
2012 Constitutional referendum on children’s rights.

3.3 The impact of the UNCRC on children’s policy in Ireland

In addition to Constitutional reform, there have been a number of other significant developments in children’s rights in Ireland since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Ireland ratified the UNCRC in September 1992 and since then, in light of the requirements of Article 12, has made numerous commitments to give credence to the voice of the child and to include children’s views in policy-making processes. Recent policy changes reflect a more nuanced understanding of children as ‘meaning-makers’ and ‘active social beings’, and there is evidence of a growing consensus in Irish society about the right of children to participate.

The process of submitting reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has highlighted particular weaknesses in children’s policy in Ireland and provided an impetus for reform. Ireland presented its first periodic Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 1998 and the Committee’s subsequent Concluding Observations led to a number of significant changes in child policy, including the establishment of the National Children’s Office (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs), the publication of the National Children’s Strategy in 2000 and the appointment of the Ombudsman for Children in 2004 (Kiersey and Hayes, 2010). An indicator of the progress made and the growing specialisation in policy related to children and young people was that Ireland’s second Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2005 was prepared by the newly established Office of the Minister for Children (incorporating the National Children’s Office), a full ministry within the Department of Health and Children.
In its 2006 review of the implementation of the UNCRC in Ireland, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) in its Concluding Observations commended the introduction of new legislation and policy to implement the UNCRC and the measures that had been put in place to provide structure and support for promoting children’s rights, including the development of the National Children’s Strategy and the establishment of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg. However, the Committee criticised Ireland for failing to address concerns related to the child as a rights-holder and the adoption of a child rights-based approach in policy and practices. The Committee noted that a high number of the complaints received at that time by the Ombudsman for Children related to a lack of respect for the views of the child. Kiersey and Hayes (2010, p. 329) contend that the Irish Government used the UNCRC as a framework for the National Children’s Strategy and this provides evidence of the move ‘to adopt the language of rights in official texts’ related to families and children, even though the National Children’s Strategy is not actually a rights-based strategy. The Strategy does, however, make an explicit commitment to listening to children and a recent review of the implementation of the UNCRC in 12 countries found that Ireland’s National Children’s Strategy has ‘been instrumental in supporting a participation agenda across a whole range of governmental decision-making’ (Lundy et al, 2012, p. 7).

3.4 The National Children’s Strategy and the Voice of the Child

In line with Article 12 of the UNCRC, the Irish Government committed itself to promoting the participation of children and young people in civic society. A key policy strategy aimed at meeting these commitments was the National Children’s Strategy, 2000-2010, which made an explicit and central commitment to include the voice of the child and expresses a vision of:

‘An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.’

The three goals of the National Children’s Strategy were:

- Goal 1 – Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
- Goal 2 – Children’s lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.
- Goal 3 – Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

The Strategy itself was developed as an internationally innovative participatory structure of consultation and information – reaching Rung 5 on Hart’s Ladder of Participation for its level of inclusion of children’s views, according to Pinkerton (2004). Devine et al (2004, p. 266) observe that ‘one of the significant differences with previous discourse is that the NCS [National Children’s Strategy] not only recognises the centrality of children’s own needs and the support services required to actualise these needs, but also the interrelated roles of their parents, brothers and sisters, wider family circle, and friends and neighbours’.

In a recent review of the implementation of the UNCRC in 12 countries, Lundy et al (2012) found that in Ireland there has been limited progress in individual decision-making opportunities for children, such as in healthcare or family law cases, but there has been significant progress related to collective decision-making processes. The successes in collective decision-making are viewed as directly linked to the ‘clear policy imperative provided by the National Children’s Strategy, the establishment of an infrastructure to help embed participation in government decision-making, and the work of participation champions in government departments’ (ibid, p. 54).
The ‘participation goal’ of the National Children’s Strategy Sub-Programme3 under the National Development Plan, 2007-2013 (Government of Ireland, 2007) is reiterated through the funding of Dáil na nÓg (including the website), Comhairle na nÓg and the DCYA Children and Young People’s Forum. The participation of young people is also a key principle of the Youth Work Act 2001.

An independent review of the National Children’s Strategy was undertaken on behalf of the National Children’s Advisory Council at mid-term point (NCAC, 2006). The feedback identified as one of the key successes of the Strategy the establishment of a range of measures to promote participation by young people, particularly the Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg structures. The following review of participation initiatives by the DCYA provides insights into the operation and development of governmental projects and structures that aim to directly support children and young people’s participation in decision-making in Ireland.

3.5  DCYA: Promoting young people’s inclusion in decision-making

Since 2000, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) has established or consolidated eight key structures to support children and young people’s participation:

› Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils);
› Dáil na nÓg (National Youth Parliament);
› Comhairle na nÓg National Executive;
› DCYA Children and Young People’s Forum;
› Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team;
› Inclusion Programme;
› student councils;
› national consultations.

Also in operation is a Children and Young People’s Participation Partnership Committee, which brings together all key stakeholders to support and promote participation.

What follows is a summary of key participation initiatives that have been developed and implemented by the DCYA since the launch of the National Children’s Strategy in 2000.

3.5.1  Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg

Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils) and Dáil na nÓg (the National Youth Parliament) are the two principal national participatory structures for young people aged between 12 and 18 years, operating under the DCYA through the 34 Local Authorities throughout the country. Originally arising out of the Government’s commitment to the UNCRC, these structures have undergone significant development and improvements in the decade or so since their inception.

The lifecycle of Comhairle na nÓg was developed by the DCYA to illustrate the key aspects of the work programme that must be delivered in order to avail of funding from the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund. The core programme of ‘working on young people’s topics throughout the year’ forms the basis of the Comhairle na nÓg’s 2-year cycle, as illustrated in Figure 2.

3 The National Children’s Strategy Sub-Programme of the National Development Plan, with a budget of €60 million, aims to advance the goals of the National Children’s Strategy, 2000-2010. The other sub-programmes, which are indirectly relevant to participation, are: Child Welfare and Protection Sub-Programme; Youth Justice Sub-Programme; Youth Work Sub-Programme; Traveller Education Sub-Programme; DEIS and Early Education Sub-Programme; and National Childcare Investment Sub-Programme.
The lifecycle of a Comhairle na nÓg was developed on the basis that standard membership of Comhairle na nÓg is 2 years. This allows a more extended period of time for Comhairlí to work on the projects they select, projects that often require more than one year to achieve outcomes.

Dáil na nÓg is the National Youth Parliament for young people aged 12-18 years. The Dáil na nÓg Annual General Meeting (AGM) is attended by delegates elected from all 34 Local Authority areas through local Comhairlí. At the AGM, delegates select and vote on themes that they feel are important to young people and each Comhairle elects one delegate to the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive (formally the Dáil na nÓg Council). The Executive meets each month to progress work on the themes identified at the AGM and is supported in its work by the DCYA.

The role of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive is:

- to identify key areas of work from the top recommendations agreed at Dáil na nÓg;
- to conduct research into the issues identified;
- to meet with relevant Ministers, TDs, Government officials, policy-makers and other stakeholders to seek their support in making changes for young people on the issues identified;
- to feed back to their Comhairle na nÓg on the work of the National Executive;
- to represent Dáil na nÓg at conferences and other events.

3.5.2 Reviews of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg

Both Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg have been subject to ongoing evaluation. Resulting from the recommendations emerging from these evaluations, key changes have taken place over the years, perhaps the most recent of which is a change in the structure of the Dáil na nÓg Council, which is now known as the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive.

The 2005 review of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg – hereafter referred to as ‘the Murphy Report’ – was undertaken by an independent management consultant who employed a mixed methodology to examine the processes and progress of the two initiatives (NCO et al, 2005). The methods used included face-to-face and/or telephone interviews with relevant personnel from both the statutory and voluntary sectors, although young people themselves were not formally interviewed.
At the time of the Murphy Report, considerable variation in levels of development and commitment to youth participation were evident among Local Authorities, and although some were beginning to make changes necessary for the development and integration of the Comhairlís and Dáil na nÓg, the majority were reported as being slow to adapt to the demands of the Government’s commitment to actively include young people in decision-making. The report emphasized the importance of engaging the majority of the Local Authorities more with the Comhairlís and Dáil na nÓg. This would largely entail putting in place appropriate supports and adequate funding to support the implementation of ongoing programmes (in which some were already engaged) rather than focusing on one-off events to elect Dáil na nÓg delegates (as seemed to be the case with others). This would have implications for selection/election of delegates and for the preparation of issues to be brought to the Dáil na nÓg meetings, which in turn would reflect on the degree of representation that would be possible.

The Murphy Report stressed the importance for young people of seeing that their participation is meaningful by witnessing changes taking place as a result of their involvement. This would entail changes in how Community and Enterprise Development Officers view their role and their skills, with more of an emphasis in employing youth work techniques and skills to broaden the participation of young people, and in particular by the active inclusion of marginalised groups, such as younger age groups, those excluded by disabilities, hard-to-reach young people, Travellers and those from minority ethnic communities.

The Murphy Report recommended that the Local Authorities ‘youth-proof’ their structures, policies and targets by adhering to age-appropriate levels of participation and decision-making. Furthermore, it recommended the establishment of a Youth Participation Support Unit to support and monitor participation processes and structures, and to include Directors and Community and Enterprise Development Officers as well as children and young people.

In March 2009, the OMCYA established the first phase of a Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team to:

- provide support for the development of effective Comhairle na nÓg under all 34 Local Authorities, through driving implementation of actions outlined in the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group Report and future actions to be developed by a Children and Young People’s Participation Partnership Committee;
- support the operation and development of the Dáil na nÓg process;
- support other children and young people’s participation initiatives.

Two Regional Participation Project Officers were appointed to the Participation Support Team by Foróige and Youth Work Ireland to provide training and support for Comhairle na nÓg, Dáil na nÓg and other participation initiatives.

In addition, to support young people’s participation in decision-making, the Murphy Report recommended that interdepartmental coordination at Government level – primarily coordination between the then Department of the Environment and Local Government, the Department of Education and Science (Vocational Education Committees’ Youth Work Development Plans) and the National Children’s Office (National Children’s Strategy) – together with collaboration across relevant statutory and voluntary agencies was necessary in order to support and develop a youth participation agenda throughout the country. The report recommended that Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg be recognised by Government as the official consultation process for involving young people in policy formulation.

The Department of the Environment and Local Government (DELG), which oversees the Local Authorities, issues performance indicators to the Directors of Community and Enterprise which are linked to a performance pay-related component of salary and reviewed on an annual basis. One of these performance indicators relates directly to Comhairle na nÓg. The former Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs worked with the Department of the
Environment, Heritage and Local Government to amend the original performance indicator to reflect the fact that Comhairle members come from youth services and clubs as well as from schools, which supports the role of seldom-heard young people in Comhairle na nÓg. The original performance indicator regarding Comhairle na nÓg read: ‘Percentage of local schools involved in the local Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg scheme’. But following feedback on the importance of involving children and young people from a variety of contexts, including youth clubs and groups working with seldom-heard young people, the performance indicator was amended in 2009 and now reads: ‘Percentage of local schools and youth groups involved in the local Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg scheme’.

An independent audit of children and young people’s participation in the statutory and non-statutory sectors was published by the DCYA in October 2011. This audit surveyed organisations working with children and young people aged 18 years and under to assess their experiences of and views on involving children and young people in decision-making. The surveys targeted Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations that work with or on behalf of children and young people; the HSE and HSE-funded services; young people on student councils; and Student Council Liaison Teachers. The research found (1) that young people were more likely to be involved in and influence decision-making in areas directly related to them as individuals, such as healthcare and family issues, such as in HSE and HSE-funded organisations; and (2) that children and young people were more likely to influence policy and services through their involvement in specifically youth-oriented participation structures such as student councils and Comhairle na nÓg (DCYA, 2011b).

3.5.3 The Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund

In 2007, the OMCYA set up a Development Fund to support the Local Authorities in running Comhairle na nÓg. In order to apply for funding under this scheme, Comhairlí were required to meet criteria that demonstrated engagement between members of the Comhairle and key adult decision-makers and decision-making structures, in line with recommendations made in the Murphy Report of 2005.

An evaluation of the first year of the Development Fund, 2007-2008 (McEvoy, 2009a) found that many of the Comhairlí had used the funding for a diversity of projects, but probably the most positive outcome of the scheme was that it had resulted in an increase in the number of Comhairlí that could now meet on a regular and sustained basis.

The evaluation of the second year of the Development Fund, 2008-2009 (OMCYA, 2010c) showed that the grants were now being funnelled into core Comhairle programme activities identified in the evaluation of the previous year: (1) the creation of formal and sustained links with adult decision-makers and (2) ensuring that the membership profile of the Comhairle was representative of all age groups between the ages of 12 and 18, as well as including seldom-heard young people and keeping the Comhairle website up to date. The report showed improvements in the regularity of meetings and in renewed emphasis on meeting the core Comhairle objectives, but stressed that there was still a great deal of work to be done in engaging younger age groups (12-15 years) and in formalising links between young people and local decision-makers.

The second evaluation of the Development Fund, 2009-2010 (McEvoy, 2011) showed significant improvements in the running of a number of Comhairlí na nÓg, which the report attributed to the impact of this funding. The report also analysed the impact of the OMCYA’s Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team, which was established in 2009 and which provided support and training to Comhairlí during the year. In addition, the report found that most Comhairlí (94%) had established Steering Committees, which included people from key
local agencies (such as youth organisations, the HSE, the VEC, sports partnerships and non-governmental organisations) and the majority (79%) included Comhairle na nÓg members themselves. The Comhairlí rated these Steering Committees as ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’ for:

- raising awareness of and support for Comhairle na nÓg;
- access to seldom-heard young people through the organisations represented;
- providing extra facilitation and support for running Comhairle na nÓg and AGMs;
- providing links to local decision-makers;
- providing expertise on issues identified by the young people.

Some Comhairlí had established regular sessions that linked in with Local Authorities, thereby ensuring that young people’s perspectives were included in local decision-making and policies. In addition, one of the main recommendations of the previous year’s evaluation in relation to the age profile of members had by this time been largely addressed, with more members (41%) from the younger age bracket (12-15 years) now being involved. Most Comhairlí (88%) provided training for members.

Other improvements noted in the report were the frequency of meetings, with 72% of Comhairlí meeting at least monthly, and a significant representation of seldom-heard young people at AGMs. The report also noted that in all but one case, issues to be discussed at AGMs were chosen exclusively by the young people themselves.

Overall, young people were now found to be represented on decision-making bodies in just under half of all Comhairle areas, leading to 61% of Comhairlí believing they were ‘very influential’ in making changes on the issues they were working on, while 32% assessed their impact as ‘somewhat influential’. The report concluded that Comhairle na nÓg was increasingly being seen as the consultative forum for young people by decision-makers. As a result of these noted improvements, the Development Fund was continued in 2011.

### 3.5.4 The Inclusion Programme

In December 2007, the OMCYA selected seven organisations working with marginalised or hard-to-reach young people across the country to receive grants to support the involvement of these young people in youth participation structures and processes, such as Comhairle na nÓg, the Children and Young People’s Forum and any other structures or participation processes that sought to include young people’s voices. The seven selected organisations represented young people with disabilities, young Travellers, young LGBT people, young people in care and young people from economically disadvantaged areas. The organisations were Barnardos, BeLonG To, Ferns Diocesan Youth Service, Irish Association of Young People in Care (now EPIC), Inclusion Ireland (the National Association for People with an Intellectual Disability), the Irish Wheelchair Association and Pavee Point Travellers’ Centre. For some of these organisations, this initiative represented the first opportunity they had had to take part in youth participation processes.

In an evaluation of the Inclusion Programme, it was found to have been very successful in engaging these groups of young people in youth participation processes, although it was criticised as being quite ‘Dublin-centric’ and of not representing all marginalised young people, most notably those from ethnic minorities (McEvoy, 2009b). Eighty-six of the young people from the targeted groups had become involved in participation programmes at the time of the evaluation, although participation rates varied considerably between organisations. Some had just one member taking part, while others had far higher numbers, notably Ferns Diocesan Youth Service which had a total of 37 participants from four different geographical areas.

Taking part in the initiative was deemed to have had a positive impact both on the young people who participated and on the organisations they represented. As well as the personal benefits identified by the participants themselves, described as including having ‘something to do’ and ‘an opportunity to make an input into society’, the evaluator and other adults on the projects noted that among the participants there was an increased awareness of and responsibility for addressing their own issues.
One of the difficulties the report noted was the lack of a clear understanding, among organisations and the young people they served, about participation structures such as Comhairle na nÓg. This lack of clarity impeded the rate of involvement and was felt to contribute to the perception that these structures would be of no personal interest or benefit to the participants in the Inclusion Programme. There was a clear preference for a written or downloadable information pack, complete with guidelines on how to get involved, on Comhairle na nÓg, the Children and Young People’s Forum and other participation structures. The report recommended that youth-friendly information should also be included in the pack to help organisations to ‘sell’ the idea to young people.

In summary, the report recommended that the Inclusion Programme be expanded to other organisations and become integral to the OMCYA’s participation structures. It also recommended that members of the organisations in the Inclusion Programme should try to become involved at Steering Group level in structures such as Comhairle na nÓg, which would allow those structures to identify areas where their policies and practices could be made more inclusive of marginalised young people. The report stressed that without a specific drive to include marginalised young people, they would be unlikely to become involved in participatory structures at all.

3.5.5 Children and Young People’s Forum

The DCYA Children and Young People’s Forum (CYPF) was established in 2004 to act as a reference panel and advise the Department and Minister for Children and Youth Affairs on issues of concern to children and young people. In 2009, there were 35 young people on the Forum, aged 12-18, from all over the country. They were nominated to the CYPF through local Comhairlí and organisations representing seldom-heard children/young people. Under the Government’s Central Review of Expenditure (2011), the DCYA was no longer in a position to retain the CYPF and it was disbanded.

The CYPF did not have a set of formal objectives. The terms of reference for the CYPF listed its functions as:

1. The primary purpose of the Forum is to provide advice to the National Children’s Office (now Office of the Minister for Children/OMC) on its work programme within the context of the National Children’s Strategy.
2. The Forum may also provide advice to the Minister for Children on appropriate issues.
3. The Forum will nominate representatives to the National Children’s Advisory Council, (NCAC), whose purpose is to monitor the implementation of the National Children’s Strategy.

The young people at an early Forum meeting also identified some objectives. They were:

- the inclusion of children and young people from different backgrounds and circumstances;
- the inclusion of young people from all areas of the country.

In addition, they identified principles of respect, support, cooperation, fairness and equality.

The Forum held regular meetings, approximately four times a year, with sub-groups meeting in between these main meetings, and also some residential meetings. When Forum activities took place during school time, an arrangement was made between the DCYA and schools to count such activities as school time. The DCYA also provided supports such as a peer leadership programme which allowed past members who had ‘aged out’ at 18 to return as ‘buddies’ to guide new members; travel costs; liaising with parents; and maintaining contact between meetings.
The CYPF was seen as an invaluable resource by the DCYA and its members were consulted on or involved in many initiatives, including:

- the design and content of *Teenspace - National Recreation Policy for Young People* (2007);
- the development of resources for student councils (2006);
- evaluating tenders for relevant projects;
- health service provision for teenagers;
- the mid-term review of the National Children’s Strategy (2006);
- the design and content of the DCYA youth website, www.teenspace.ie;
- the development of child and youth-friendly versions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- supporting national consultations with teenagers on alcohol misuse (2007) and mental health (2008);
- a national research study on youth cafés by NUI Galway (2009);
- input into the *National Strategy for Research and Data on Children’s Lives, 2011-2016* (2011);
- consultations on the age of sexual consent (2006);
- campaign on ‘fair fares 4 teenz’;
- devising a campaign on homophobic bullying (2006).

In addition, four members of the CYPF were nominated to the National Children’s Advisory Council (NCAC), whose purpose was to monitor the implementation of the National Children’s Strategy.

The CYPF underwent two reviews, the first of which by Harper (2007) covered the period 2005-2006, its first two years of operation. Harper found that the CYPF had been successful in fulfilling its three stated functions (see above) and in meeting its goals of engaging young people from various parts of the country, including those considered ‘hard to reach’. However, local supports, provided by referral/support agencies, varied widely, with some young people reporting that they had no support or contact at local level. In relation to the running of the CYPF meetings, Harper found that the participants identified good practices in the meetings, including a well-structured agenda, small group work, relevant training, receiving direct feedback allowing them to assess the impact of their work, and a facilitated open space at the beginning of each meeting. These observations on the techniques used in the meetings imply that the participants reacted positively to some of the innovative and young person-centred strategies that were employed at the meetings. The evaluation report made a number of recommendations, including:

- more regular meetings needed to be held;
- additional staff needed to be employed on the day of each meeting;
- the membership profile needed to be considerably revised.

The second review of the CYPF, undertaken by McEvoy (2009c), covered the period 2007-2009 and reported that these recommendations had, for the most part, been successfully implemented. Some additional areas were highlighted for development, including:

- a critical review of the peer leadership programme;
- a celebration event to mark the end of individuals’ memberships;
- a publicity strategy to raise the profile of the work of the CYPF;
- a new/prospective member’s pack;
- an attendance procedure to identify inactive members.

Earlier concerns about low representation of seldom-heard young people in the CYPF were addressed by the OMYCA Inclusion Programme (see Section 3.5.4 above), which provided support and capacity-building to improve the representation of seldom-heard and younger children in the Forum. In addition, McEvoy’s (2009c) report recommended that increased direct contact with the Minister for Children would be necessary if the CYPF was to be able to monitor the implementation of the National Children’s Strategy effectively and also that the CYPF representation on the NCAC needed to become more active. In relation to the
three goals of the National Children’s Strategy, the CYPF can be said to have been successful in providing a platform where children can have a voice in matters that affect them, and, in so far as members were involved in numerous consultations and initiatives, the CYPF has clearly contributed to an increased understanding of children’s lives. The report concluded that improved access to the Minister and more active participation in the NCAC, together with improvements in local supports to enable them to more fully understand and thus more effectively voice the concerns of their peers, would enhance the role of the CYPF in meeting the three goals of the National Children’s Strategy.

The work of the Forum was initiated in different ways, some by young people in the CYPF and some by decision-makers. According to McEvoy (2009c):

‘The young people were also pivotal in the design and content of the National Recreation Policy and were instrumental in the delivery of the three recent OMCYA national consultation processes. The campaign on homophobic bullying, the process for which is in its infancy, resulted by a different means in that the Minister for Children, Mr. Barry Andrews, actually asked the CYPF to conduct some work on the issue on his behalf.’

The Harper (2007) evaluation identified the meetings with the Minister for Children in 2006 as the highlight of their participation for some of the CYPF members. This opportunity to meet with the Minister gave them direct access to a decision-maker and reflects the high level of engagement with policy-makers which the Forum members experienced. The second evaluation (McEvoy, 2009c) also highlighted the importance of the meetings with the Minister and the opportunity they afforded members of the CYPF to bring specific issues to his attention. The previous CYPF evaluations identified positive impacts on the personal development of the Forum’s participants, in particular improvements in self-confidence, giving them the self-assurance to take-up youth leader positions, such as Prefect in school or becoming youth leaders. Other personal impacts included:

- hearing and respecting other points of view;
- having their voice heard;
- representing young people from their area;
- making a difference on the projects worked on;
- experiencing a positive and respectful relationship with adults;
- working in partnership with other young people and other adults;
- learning about various issues;
- developing skills, such as making presentations, speaking in public, taking notes and facilitation.

In relation to widening the representativeness of the Forum, the young people expressed some concern about how they would link with other young people at local level. The issue of the role of past members of the CYPF was identified in the second evaluation. A CYPF Management Committee was initially developed for members over the age of 18 who would like to contribute to the meeting content and agenda, but it was not successful. The second strategy developed was a peer leadership programme in which members over the age of 18 were eligible for peer leadership training (see Case Study 1 in Chapter 5 for further discussion).

### 3.5.6 Student councils

Section 27 of the Education Act 1998 states that ‘Students of a post-primary school may establish a student council and, without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1), a board of a post-primary school shall encourage the establishment by students of a student council and shall facilitate and give all reasonable assistance to (a) students who wish to establish a student council, (b) student councils when they have been established’.
A 2005 report on student councils (Children’s Research Centre, 2005) found that they are beneficial to students and to schools, and provide students with the opportunity to develop responsibility and leadership skills and to better understand the value of citizenship. However, the report also found that members of schools’ Boards of Management had very little awareness or understanding of the student council in their school, notwithstanding the fact that they ascribed ‘consultation’ as the main purpose of student councils in general. The report indicates that most students did not have a very positive opinion of the current structure of their student council. Many students and student council members also felt that the student council had little status within the school and that its role was not clearly defined.

In order to increase and improve student councils, the OMCYA (together with the Curriculum Development Unit) funded the development in 2007 of a Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) teaching/learning resource entitled Giving Young People a Voice: Student Councils in Schools. The establishment or improvement of student councils is the main focus of the resource and it incorporates information about Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg and their potential links with student councils. A Student Council Resource Pack and Diary was also published in 2006 and has continued to be re-printed and distributed to schools every year due to demand.

3.5.7 Consultations with children and young people

Arising from Government’s commitment to involving children in decisions that affect their lives, a number of consultations with children and young people have been conducted under the auspices of the Department of Children in recent years.4 These consultations have covered topics such as the implementation of the UNCRC, well-being, healthcare, recreation, the age of consent, alcohol misuse, domestic violence, child protection, living in care, the remand system, homelessness and mental health, among other issues. These consultations have used a wide range of methods, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, art work, photography, peer research, participant observation and documentary analysis. The children in care and mental health consultations are discussed in detail in Case Studies 2 and 3 in Chapter 5.

3.6 Summary

In summarising the development of Government participatory initiatives, it is clear that since their inception at the start of the millennium, significant improvements have taken place in increasing children and young people’s impact on decision-making and affording them meaningful opportunities to participate in civic life. It is apparent, too, that recommendations emerging from ongoing evaluations have been taken on board and a number of measures put in place to address the issues highlighted. Overall, Government commitment to participation by children and young people as enshrined in the National Children’s Strategy is supported by a number of key initiatives and structures, and is subject to ongoing evaluation and modification. Issues that appear to require continuous attention include efforts to include seldom-heard young people in participation and the development, support and promotion of participation structures such as Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg. These issues are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

4. Methodology
4.1 Introduction

The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (2008) calls for sectoral policies to have a youth dimension, for the development of instruments for effective youth participation, and appropriate structures or arrangements enabling the participation of young people in the decisions and debates affecting them in local and regional affairs. In order to implement such recommendations effectively, young people’s lives need to be better understood and, crucially, by involving them in research, improve the chances of their views being used to influence policy (Kellett, 2009, p. 52; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 137).

These developments have raised significant questions about how to do research with young people – research that will be reliable, ethical and relevant, and that will itself contribute to the development of youth participation. The first part of this chapter presents a discussion of the main areas in the literature of relevance to the present study. This is followed by an overview and discussion of the methodology adopted in the study and some methodological issues are considered.

4.2 Methodologies and ethics in research with children and young people

Children are subject to intense State and public intervention and are some of the highest users of public services, yet until recently they have been officially excluded from the policy process (Tisdall and Bell, 2006, p. 103).

In large part, children’s exclusion from the policy process has been exclusion by omission. In the absence of knowledge and understanding of their lives, governments frequently overlooked them as a distinct group with diverse vulnerabilities or assimilated their concerns into the broad category of adults with whom they shared characteristics, such as race, class, economic or national status. Since the almost universal adoption of the UNCRC in 1989, governments have come under pressure to report on their progress in advancing the status of children and, as such, have found it increasingly necessary to draw upon, and in many cases to commission, research on children in order to better understand their lives (Beazley et al., 2009, p. 365). Increasingly, too, in line with the requirements in particular of Article 12 of the UNCRC, children and young people themselves have become more involved in this research. There has been a movement from a child-focused approach to a child-centred approach, which sees children as having equal rights with adults and which jointly and reflexively negotiates the research process with children (Sinclair, 2004, p. 116).

4.3 Issues when using qualitative research methods with children and young people

Involving children and young people centrally in research benefits the participants as well as the research itself (Kirby and Bryson, 2002, p. 20). Children and young people have ‘a unique “insider” perspective critical to our understanding of their worlds’ (Kellett, 2010, p. 195). They bring specific and unique qualities and characteristics to research on issues that are relevant to young people, including access to their peers, the ability to formulate more youth-appropriate questions and effectiveness in interviewing. Qualitative research which places adults’ subjectively reported experience at its centre has been the subject of numerous critiques, particularly from the positivist tradition.

Greene and Hill (2005) argue that all research relationships, not just those between adults and children, are complicated by power differentials between researcher and researched. These imbalances, together with psychological limitations such as forgetfulness, repression, denial...
and dissociation, can produce distorted accounts of experience that require further verification from outside sources. Methods for validating subjective accounts include the use of surveys, which capture useful information about numbers and trends. Using a variety of methods within a research project has, in addition, been argued to have the advantage of stimulating and maintaining participants’ interest in the research (Thomas and O’Kane, cited in Greene and Hill, 2005, p. 16).

A number of theorists assert that high levels of reflexivity on the part of the researcher are vital to avoid some of the pitfalls of researching other people’s experience, and in the case of the adult researching young people, even greater vigilance is required in order to remain aware of, and to make explicit, the less visible power imbalances between researcher and researched that exacerbate the more taken-for-granted disparities between adult and child (Komulainen, 2007; Hill, 2005, p. 63). In fact, it is the taken-for-granted nature of many adult assumptions about young people that often needs to be challenged in the research process. Firstly, adult researchers need to critique trends that replace ‘one essentialist argument (that children are incompetent) with another (that they are competent)’ (Komulainen, 2007, p. 26) and instead acknowledge that they can be simultaneously competent and vulnerable, and that we, as adults, control this positioning to a great extent. Secondly, we are challenged to question our assumption that young people are a homogeneous group and to acknowledge that differences among them, both chronologically and culturally, need to be taken into account when choosing methods to research their experiences. Thirdly, as adults, we sometimes seriously underestimate young people’s abilities, which may result in the adoption of a patronising approach. Fourthly, young people of the same age possess individual abilities and needs, and applying a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach can overlook significant differences between them (Hill, 2005, p. 63). Therefore, time and resources need to be allocated to allow for in-depth consultation and reflection from design stage and all the way through the research, analysis and/or reporting process (Sinclair, 2004, p. 113).

### 4.4 Ethical considerations in research with children and young people

Hill (2005) emphasizes the need to remain aware of differences in power and ability between children and adults, which raises particular ethical (as opposed to epistemological) issues in the research process. He summarises this framework as comprising four basic tenets:

- involvement of children in the research;
- consent and choice;
- possible harm or distress;
- privacy and confidentiality.

All four are seen as independent of the interests of the researcher, although there are frequent overlaps between legal and ethical imperatives and epistemological requirements (Hill, 2005, p. 65). Similarly, the Code of Practice on Research Ethics, published by the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society (n.d.) at the University of Glasgow, cautions researchers to pay heed to the legal obligations inherent in the UNCRC and national legislation, as well as familiarising themselves with current discussions in the area of moral and ethical theory. Alderson and Morrow (2011) have developed codes of good practice for researchers on the issues of confidentiality and privacy in research with children and young people. Kellett (2005) acknowledges that researchers have begun to adapt adult research ethics to make them more appropriate to research with children and young people, and have considered how issues such as consent and confidentiality might have different implications for children than for adults. Kellett states that ‘it is desirable for all children to be approached about giving their consent’ (ibid, p. 33), regardless of age. Sinclair notes that the underlying power differences between children and adults require ‘every engagement with children as part of a jointly negotiated process’ (Sinclair, 2004, p. 116).
4.5 Methods for use in research with children and young people

The central epistemological concern in conducting research is, of course, what kinds of methods best address our research questions, bearing in mind our ethical commitments towards our research participants and their prior experience and abilities. For example, interviews and focus groups might be more appropriate than written narratives or questionnaires for young people with literacy or learning difficulties (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 300). It is also important that the choices we make are explained in terms of our theoretical framework and that those choices are appropriate to our target group (Jones, 2004, p. 119). In a review of the literature, Borland et al (2001) identified the main methods available for consultation as including interviews, temporary or longer term groups, interactive events, questionnaire surveys and online communication. Because of drawbacks inherent in each method, a combination of methods is seen to ‘optimise interest, representation, accuracy and confidentiality’ (ibid, Session 1, Section 5).

The benefits of piloting research methods and specific tools such as questionnaires are well documented (Powers and Tiffany, 2006). Young people need time and support for piloting their research methods (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). Marginalised young people may need to be consulted more closely at the design, planning and piloting stages in order to ensure that the chosen methods will be acceptable to them (Curtis et al, 2004, p. 173). These extra resources can, however, significantly add to the costs of the research (Borland et al, 2001, Session 1, Section 5; Curtis et al, 2004, p. 173). Jones (2004) suggests that we view young researchers as child-workers to ensure that the standards they work within comply with best practice.

4.6 Research study methodology

4.6.1 Participatory research approach

The aims of this study were to gain insight into the experiences and outcomes of participation for children and young people who are currently involved, or have been involved, in DCYA participation initiatives. The investigation encompassed a holistic overview of the impact of participation underpinned by four realms of impact – personal, familial, communal and institutional (Ackermann et al, 2003). The study set out to develop a research and evaluation model that would take account of children and young people’s voices, would be informed by consultation with the DCYA and would be grounded in the national and international literature. It used participatory research methods and a ‘with’ children approach, based on the ‘genuine engagement and active participation’ (Kellett, 2013, p. 221) of children in the research.

Using participatory research methods, young people are treated as experts and agents in their own lives, which allows for reflexivity in the research process (Kellett, 2013). Young people in this study were trained as researchers and were involved in the collection and interpretation of the data. The design of the study incorporated a number of stages that reflected the participatory nature of the research. Drawing on a participatory approach, there was interaction with all stakeholders throughout all phases of the study (data review, data analysis, model development and knowledge dissemination).

A Steering Group was established at the outset. This included three youth participants from DCYA initiatives, the research team, three members of the DCYA Participation Unit and an international advisor, Professor Kay Tisdall, Professor of Childhood Policy and Programme Director of the MSc Childhood Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Professor Tisdall has extensive international expertise and publications in the area of youth participation. Three meetings of the Steering Group were held throughout the course of the study (in March 2011, May 2012 and November 2012).
The methodology for the study was presented at the first meeting of the Steering Group on 11th March 2011 in the DCYA offices. One of the issues agreed by the Steering Group in consultation with the DCYA was that the questionnaire for current Comhairle na nÓg members would be administered by members of the Dáil na nÓg Council (now called the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive). It was also decided that the main participation initiatives that the research would focus on would be:

- Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg;
- the Children and Young People’s Forum;

4.6.2 Research methods

This section describes the stages of the research and the research methods adopted.

1. Ethical approval. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC). At the start of the study, team members applied for and obtained Garda clearance.

2. Desk-based research (international literature on participatory research, children’s participation and children’s rights). Review of formal evaluations commissioned by the DCYA.

3. Research training. A number of training sessions were provided to members of the research team and to the youth participants.

   (a) Professor Mary Kellett from the Children’s Research Centre at the Open University, Milton Keynes, provided a preliminary training day for adult researchers on methods for research with children and young people in UCC on 1st April 2011. Funding for this workshop was provided through matched project funding received from the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences, UCC.

   (b) On 14th May 2011, a training session took place with the Dáil na nÓg Council members in the DCYA offices. This session was facilitated by the UCC research team and incorporated an overview and introduction to the survey to be administered by members of the Council in their local Comhairlí. Other issues covered in the workshop included participative research methods and research ethics.

   (c) In June and October 2011, training sessions were provided on qualitative research methods to members of the Dáil na nÓg Council. This training was delivered by Professor Mary Kellett and the UCC research team. The aim of the workshops was to prepare the young people to carry out interviews and focus groups with decision-makers. The workshops covered a range of topics, including research ethics; attentive listening; interview and focus group techniques and ethics; developing interview and focus group guide questions; identifying research volunteers; and identifying key decision-makers to interview. Each young researcher was allocated a mentor from the UCC team who would remain in contact by e-mail/text.

4. Primary research (Phase 1). The primary research consisted of a survey of past and present members of Comhairle na nÓg, and interviews and focus groups with youth participants, adult personnel and key decision-makers. Members of the Dáil na nÓg Council administered the survey of present members and conducted a number of focus groups.

   (a) Step 1: Piloting of research methods. Development of the questionnaires was conducted through a process of consultation with the Steering Group, an initial focus group with Comhairle na nÓg coordinators and facilitators to identify themes for the questionnaires, and a pilot of the questionnaire with a Comhairle group. A number of changes were made to the questionnaire after the pilot.
An examination of children and young people’s views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

(b) **Step 2: Sampling.** It was decided to include half of the Comhairli in the survey. Random sampling was conducted to identify 17 of the 34 Comhairli to take part in the survey and to identify a further 17 Comhairle facilitators/coordinators for interview.

(c) **Step 3: Survey.** In May/June 2011, a questionnaire for current participants of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg was administered by Dáil Council members at the 17 randomly selected Comhairli. This questionnaire sought to highlight the various impacts of participation, including educational attainment, voting patterns and political and civic participation. The questions were drawn from the ‘four realms of impact’ model (Ackermann et al., 2003). Each selected Comhairle was sent 15 questionnaires. 173 questionnaires were completed and returned from 14 of the 17 Comhairli, which represents a 68% response rate. A questionnaire for past Comhairle na nÓg participants was developed in tandem and sent out to 150 past participants. Due to data protection issues, these questionnaires were distributed by the project researcher via the DCYA offices. A further 60 past participants were contacted through local Comhairli. A total of 64 questionnaires were completed and returned by past participants, which represents a response rate of approximately 30% of the past participants contacted.

(d) **Step 4: Focus groups.** These were conducted with past and present youth participants in DCYA initiatives and with adult personnel, using purposive sampling. In total, 8 focus groups (40 participants) were conducted. In June 2011, an exploratory focus group was conducted with Comhairle adult facilitators to identify themes for the qualitative interviews. The study’s researchers carried out a focus group with youth members of the Children and Young People’s Forum and two focus groups with members of a Comhairle na nÓg. Four of the focus groups with members of Comhairle na nÓg were facilitated by the young people who were trained as researchers. These young people were members of Dáil na nÓg who had received research training as part of the study and agreed to carry out focus groups in their local Comhairli.

(e) **Step 5: Qualitative interviews.** A number of qualitative interviews were conducted, both by the study’s research team and the young researchers, with key informants including adult personnel, decision-makers, young people participating in the DCYA initiatives (current and former participants) and key policy-makers. Questions drew on the ‘four realms of impact’ in identifying other key informants (Ackermann et al., 2003). In total, 36 interviews were conducted. Seventeen Comhairle Coordinators were randomly selected from the 34 local Comhairli for interview. Three Participation Officers and three members of the national support staff in the DCYA were interviewed by members of the research team. In addition, interviews were conducted with four members of Comhairle na nÓg; two members of the Dáil na nÓg Council; two members of the Children and Young People’s Forum; two participants in the ‘Teenage mental health’ consultation; and three key decision-makers. These respondents were selected using purposive sampling. Two of the interviews with decision-makers were conducted by young people who had received training in qualitative research methods.

(f) **Participant observation.** A member of the research team observed the first meeting of the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ group in May 2012. This group of children and young people in care was established due to the recommendations from the consultation *Listen to Our Voices! Hearing Children and Young People Living in the Care of the State* (DCYA, 2011d). A case study based on this consultation and the subsequent establishment of the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ group is provided in Chapter 5.

(g) **Step 6: Analysis.** Analysis of the questionnaires was carried out using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Interview transcripts and focus groups notes were analysed using a combination of the content and thematic
analysis methods. This involved searching the data to identify recurring patterns, which were then clustered and quantified. At the Steering Group meeting in May 2012, the Consensus Workshop Method (Technology of Participation® Group Facilitation Methods, Institute of Cultural Affairs, UK) was used to analyse aspects of the data from the surveys. The Consensus Workshop Method uses a highly structured interactive series of steps towards reaching strong consensus, in this case, to highlight areas of focus for the research report. These areas emerge from an examination of the raw findings, when participants look for existing trends and correlations, and suggest cross-references for further investigation. The major strength of this method is that it creates a real sense of ownership of decisions because it honours all ideas, insights and perspectives in the final decisions that the group makes. At this workshop, a number of themes to be discussed in the final report emerged.

(h) Ongoing consultation with young people. Throughout the project, there has been ongoing consultation with young people via meetings of the Steering Group and meetings and training sessions with members of Comhairle na nÓg, the Dáil na nÓg Council (now Comhairle na nÓg National Executive) and engagement with the young researchers.

5. Primary research (Phase 2). The second phase of data collection for the project focused on the Comhairle na nÓg Showcase and was conducted between January and February 2013. The research methods chosen for the evaluation of the Showcase included qualitative interviews with key decision-makers who attended the event, including two Senators and a member of the European Parliament; interviews with three Comhairle Coordinators; an interview with a Child and Youth Participation Officer; and an interview with a DCYA staff member involved in organising the event. The interviews with adults were conducted both over the telephone and face-to-face. Three focus groups with children and young people who attended the event as delegates were also carried out. These focus groups took place in three randomly selected local Comhairle na nÓg. A total of 35 young people participated.

In addition, on the day of the Showcase, a short survey was distributed to child and youth attendees. There were 136 responses and the results of this survey are also discussed as part of the findings (DCYA Participation Team, 2012) in Chapter 9.

4.7 Methodological issues

A number of methodological limitations and challenges arose in the research design for this project. The first challenge relates to accessing participants who had previously been involved in Comhairle na nÓg participation initiatives. Due to the local nature of the projects, there is a limited central database of past participants and participants were contacted through the DCYA and through follow-up contacts with local Comhairle na nÓg. This method of contacting past participants may have been a barrier to contacting more marginalised past participants.

As with any child-centred research project, there were some challenges related to logistical and child protection issues, particularly as young people were involved in data collection for this study. It was decided at the Steering Group meetings that there would be a limited amount of personal and sensitive information collected by the young people in the surveys and focus groups which they conducted, therefore some sensitive information (such as personal data relating to socio-economic class and ethnicity) was not collected in the large-scale surveys or youth researcher-led focus groups. Also, because the majority of the participation initiatives involved in this research are working with older teenagers, there is very limited input from younger children and younger teenagers in this study.
Young people were involved in the initial stages of data analysis, but not as the analysis progressed. It has been suggested that aiming for complete participation at all stages of the research may be unrealistic and that instead, it is often more practical to negotiate ‘pockets of participation’ (Franks, 2011) with those taking part. This approach was adopted for the present study, with the use of the Consensus Workshop. The Steering Group meetings also offered opportunities to present initial findings and discuss these with the group, which included youth participants.

4.8 Summary

The review of the literature has revealed some of the key approaches, considerations and challenges that arise in undertaking research on and with children and young people. From the start, this study identified the benefits of using a ‘with’ children approach, which is adult-led but enables the involvement of children and young people at most stages of the research process. Young people have been involved throughout this study, from planning and design through to carrying out the research and analysing the initial results. Their participation as researchers and research subjects has facilitated the achievement of an in-depth understanding of the operation of the participatory initiatives that are being explored.
5. Children and Young People’s Perspectives
Key findings from perspectives of children and young people

- Participants have different motivations for getting involved in Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg, including the desire to have a voice and to make a difference in young people’s lives.
- Young people enjoy the Comhairle meetings and feel that their ideas are listened to by adults.
- Young people gain confidence and a range of new skills from their involvement in Comhairle na nÓg.
- Comhairle na nÓg works on a range of projects concerning children and young people at local level.
- Participants in Comhairle na nÓg think that their work gives young people a voice, but most are unhappy with the impact of Comhairle on decision-making and policy-making at local level.
- A majority believes that Dáil na nÓg is effective in bringing about change.
- Members of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive benefit from participation, but suggest that there should be greater public awareness of the work of the Executive and greater communication between the Executive and the local Comhairlí na nÓg.
- Local amenities and public services are the most common areas in which the local Comhairlí work, with a particular focus on youth spaces, such as youth-friendly transport, youth cafés, youth service directories and petitioning Government agencies for more youth facilities.

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of two surveys of past and present members of Comhairle na nÓg, and focus groups and interviews with past and present participants in participatory initiatives of the DCYA. The surveys, focus groups and interviews sought information on young people’s experience of participating in Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg, the Dáil na nÓg Council, the Children and Young People’s Forum and two national consultations carried out by the DCYA. Young researchers were involved in administering the survey of present participants of Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg and in facilitating a number of focus groups.

The chapter begins by exploring participants’ reasons for joining Comhairle na nÓg and their views of the impacts of their participation on their personal lives, their families and their communities, as well as on decision-making in Irish society. It proceeds to explore participants’ attitudes towards the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg and the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive in addressing young people’s issues and bringing about change. The final part of the chapter is devoted to three case studies that address young people’s experiences of the Children and Young People’s Forum (CYFF), the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ consultation and the ‘Teenage mental health’ consultation.

5.1.1 Research sample

The research sample of young people in this study is a purposeful sample and contains both a sample of young people who participated in the two surveys (237 participants) and a smaller number who participated in focus groups (27 participants) and in-depth interviews (8 participants). A further 11 young people were observed by a member of the research team at the first meeting of the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ group. The survey of present members was administered by participants of 17 Comhairlí who distributed the questionnaire to their members. Four focus groups with young people were carried out by young researchers, while members of the research team carried out one focus group with members of the Children and Young People’s Forum. Eight in-depth interviews with young people were conducted by the research team. In total, 330 young people were involved in this study as respondents and researchers.
5.1.2 Survey of past participants
The past participant sample comprised 64 young people who were previously members of Comhairle na nÓg. Respondents were aged 16-23 years (average = 19 years). Past members of Comhairle na nÓg were involved with the organisation for 1-6 years (average = 2). 21 participants are currently enrolled in second-level education, with one participant enrolled in further education and 32 enrolled in higher education. The remaining 10 participants did not respond to this question. Females comprised 33% of the current sample and males 66%. A notably higher proportion of past female members of Comhairle na nÓg are currently pursuing higher education courses than males (60% and 37% respectively).

5.1.3 Survey of present participants
The sample of present participants who completed the questionnaire comprised 173 young people aged 11-18 years (average = 15.6 years). Of these, 56% were female (N=97), 43% were male (N=74) and 1% were transgender (N=2). 97.1% participants (N=168) were enrolled in second-level education, with the remaining participants enrolled in college or a training programme. Only 12 participants (7% of the total sample) stated that they were in employment at the time of response. 77 present participants (42%) were elected as Dáil na nÓg delegates to attend the annual Dáil na nÓg event. 20 of the respondents were members of the national Dáil na nÓg Council (now referred to as the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive). Of these, 65% were female (N=13) and 35% were male (N=7), with an average age of 17 years. All current Dáil na nÓg Council members sampled are currently enrolled in second-level education.

5.2 Reasons for joining Comhairle na nÓg
When the past participants were asked why they became involved with Comhairle na nÓg, four main reasons emerged. The most common reason given for involvement in Comhairle na nÓg was the desire to have a voice, to be heard and to make a difference. Over one-third of respondents (38%) identified this as the main reason for their involvement. In relation to this theme, respondents wished to ‘voice my opinions and see what other people have to say’, ‘[it is] important for those who don’t have a vote to still be heard’ and a ‘chance to speak out for people my age’. Respondents felt that exercising their opinions was ‘a chance to make a difference’ and ‘to help bring change to the lives of young people including myself in my area and in Ireland’. Respondents also drew on personal experience to inform their expectations of involvement: they ‘wanted to make a difference mainly with regards to bullying’ and ‘learning about my local area ... wanted to see could it change’. Some of the respondents specifically mentioned an interest in children and young people’s rights as a motivator for involvement: ‘very interested and passionate about young people’, ‘interest in children’s rights’, ‘interested in issues that concern young people’. It is clear that some young people were motivated to participate because of their desire to advocate on behalf of other young people on particular issues, such as bullying and LGBT rights.

Less than one-quarter of present participants (24%) indicated that the ‘desire to have a voice’ was a motivation for participation. Participants spoke about the opportunity that their participation gave them to ‘have a voice’ and the ‘ability to make decisions and changes that affect young people’. Related to this theme, other young people were interested in being involved so that they could represent young people in their area and play a role in their local community:

‘I’d heard about it in my community and felt it would be a good way to meet new people and to discuss issues regarding young people in my area.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Present Participant, Survey]
‘I took it as an opportunity for my voice to be heard, to represent young people and help to make a change. It made me feel like an important citizen and that I now finally have a role in my community.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Present Participant, Survey]

The second most common motivation for past and present (30%) participants to join Comhairle na nÓg was for personal enjoyment and the social aspects of the organisation (30%). For example, ‘meet[ing] like-minded people’, ‘meeting people my own age from all over Ireland’ and finding the process ‘interesting [and] fun’ are representative of responses. For example, one participant commented that joining Comhairle na nÓg is a ‘good way to meet new people and to discuss issues regarding young people in my area. A friend was in it and told me to join because she thought it is the sort of thing I’d like’. Another stated that ‘it sounded fun and was something to do’.

The role of adult allies (Checkoway, 2011), or participation champions such as youth workers or teachers, in encouraging young people to become involved with Comhairle na nÓg was the strongest motivating factor for the group of present participants and was more frequently mentioned as a factor for their involvement than for the past participants (36% of present participants identified this as the most significant factor for their involvement, compared to 27% of past participants). Schools appear to play a key role in determining who participates. In a smaller number of cases, the participants first heard about Comhairle na nÓg from youth workers. Many of the past and current participants came to be involved in Comhairle na nÓg because of their prior involvement in their school’s student council. A participant stated that ‘the school wanted a representative on Comhairle and I was on the student council so I was picked (wasn’t told what Comhairle was about)’ and another stated that ‘I was on the student council and we all decided to go’. A number of participants mentioned being nominated by the school for attendance at the Comhairle na nÓg AGM, but not being clear why they were nominated. In other cases, the students heard about the AGM through their CSPE (Civic, Social and Political Education) teacher or their Career Guidance teacher:

‘In my school, it’s based around the Student Council Liaison Teacher, so she picks her star council members, which I personally feel is a bit biased because, just because I’m one of her star pupils, star council members, doesn’t necessarily mean that I’m the best member there for the job. In other schools, it’s all the good students again, who go to the AGM. They never enquire, are people more interested, are there people who have a key interest in this kind of decision-making, and this process, and politics, and youth organisations’. [Dáil na nÓg Council member, Interview]

Respondents also spoke positively of initial encounters with Comhairle na nÓg leading to longer term involvement: ‘I decided to go to the Comhairle day … found it interesting’ and ‘we went to the AGM with our school and it looked like fun’. Further, it can be seen from respondents’ comments that previous exposure to similar organisations increased the likelihood of participation: ‘I was really involved in Foróige and wanted to become more involved’.

The final reason for participation, mentioned by 15% of past participants and 11% of present participants, was an interest in politics and the political system. For those who gave this as a reason for participating, developing a greater understanding of political processes was important. The low level of interest in politics and the political system might indicate that the young people involved saw Dáil and Comhairle as separate from the political party system and a broader interest in politics did not appear to be a significant motivator for participation.
5.3 Participants’ experience of Comhairle na nÓg: Personal impacts

Research participants were asked to rate the impact of their involvement with Comhairle na nÓg across a number of factors related to their personal development, including confidence, self-esteem, aspirations and skills development. Almost all past and present participants responded positively to all of the areas identified and a majority of respondents found the experience ‘very positive’ for each factor identified. Skills development was identified by both groups as the area of greatest personal impact. This positive view of the personal skills developed due to participation in the various DCYA initiatives was common to both the youth and adult participants.

5.3.1 Personal impacts

The past and present participants rated learning new skills as the area most positively impacted by their participation in Comhairle na nÓg, followed by improved confidence, social skills and development of their social networks (see Tables 1 and 2). Social skills such as making new friends and finding it easier to speak to other young people were also areas where participation in Comhairle na nÓg was seen as having very positive personal impacts:

‘I made a lot of really good friends and feel way more confident now; the social activities were great.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Present Participant, Survey]

Table 1: Personal impacts (Past Participants, N= 64)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Educational aspirations</th>
<th>Learned new skills</th>
<th>Personal aspirations</th>
<th>More understanding of other people’s lives</th>
<th>Social skills</th>
<th>Making contacts and building networks</th>
<th>Confidence</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>75.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Personal impacts (Present Participants, N=173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Educational aspirations</th>
<th>Learned new skills</th>
<th>Personal aspirations</th>
<th>More understanding of people’s lives</th>
<th>Question things more</th>
<th>Easier to talk to adults</th>
<th>More able to speak in a group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>5.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>73.4</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over 60% of participants in both groups viewed their participation as having a positive impact on their educational and personal aspirations.

Participants made a number of qualitative comments in connection to the personal impacts of their participation in Comhairle na nÓg. In relation to the positive impact on their skills development, they referred to specific areas such as increased personal confidence and the development of public-speaking skills. Some of the participants referred to the long-term impact of these skills on their personal development and how they have allowed them to ‘build and utilise skills that are applicable to the workforce’ (Past Participant). Another participant commented:
The skills I learned through different trainings helped my confidence and social and practical skills. I met some wonderful people and have made some life-long friends. The skills I’ve picked up have helped me in university. I am more organised and my aims are clear. If these skills were offered to all, lives would dramatically change for good.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Past Participant, Survey]

Many referred to the role of participation in making them more aware of other perspectives and listening to others. Some participants were positive about how their experiences in Comhairle na nÓg had impacted on their acceptance of diversity. One participant commented that she enjoyed ‘listening to all the different opinions of people and having my own opinion and being able to talk about it and other people listen’, while another stated that participation gave him the opportunity to mix with ‘a wide diversity of people to understand their needs’. One participant felt that her involvement would increase her empathy towards young people’s issues when she became an adult herself.

Females rated the impact on their social skills more positively than male participants. No other significant statistical differences emerged based on gender. In terms of age difference, those over 21 accorded lower impact to skills development than younger participants. No differences were found based on length of time involved in Comhairle na nÓg (see Appendices 3 and 4 for statistical output).

Past participants were asked to identify the impacts of their participation experiences on their current attitudes in such areas as their attitude to voting, involvement in politics, career and education (see Table 3).

Table 3: Impact of Comhairle na nÓg (CNN) on current attitudes (Past Participants, N=64)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of CNN on being active in politics</th>
<th>Involved in community</th>
<th>Interest in international affairs</th>
<th>Working for people’s rights</th>
<th>Impact on your attitude to voting</th>
<th>Understanding Irish political system</th>
<th>Impact on career</th>
<th>Impact on education</th>
<th>Impact on volunteering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>86.0</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>66.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All areas identified were given positive ratings by the participants. The area where they identified their participation experience as having the most positive impact was on their understanding of the Irish political system (86% rated this as having a positive impact) and secondly on their attitude to voting (81% rated this as having a positive impact). Their participation experiences appear to have had a positive impact on their interest in international affairs, working for people’s rights and involvement in their communities. A majority of participants (63%) viewed participation in Comhairle na nÓg as having a positive impact on being active in politics, but a significant minority indicated a negative impact (11% of participants). So, while an interest in politics was not identified as a significant motivator for initial participation, it does seem that the experience of youth participation, for the majority of youth participants, positively impacts on the young person’s ongoing interest in politics. The area of lowest impact was on volunteering, but this still registered a positive response.

Present participants were asked to identify how important particular issues might be to them in the future, such as their attitude to future voting, involvement in politics, career and education (see Table 4).
Table 4: How important will these issues be in the future? (Present Participants, N=173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Voting in elections</th>
<th>Actively involved in politics</th>
<th>Involved in community</th>
<th>Working for people’s rights</th>
<th>My career is important</th>
<th>My education is important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>50.6</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The areas they identified where there might be the most positive impacts were on their careers and their education (75% and 74% respectively). However, the other areas such as voting, active involvement in politics and involvement in the community received mainly neutral and negative responses, and participants did not generally feel that these areas would be very important to them in the future. This is in contrast to the responses from the past participants who accorded high levels of importance to all of these areas (see Table 3). This may indicate that participation experiences have a positive impact on engagement in these political activities over time and eligibility to vote may increase young people’s interest in voting and the political system.

Although the differences examined did not reach statistical significance, it can be observed that females tended to give higher ratings to 5 of the 6 attitudes examined than male respondents. The exception was ‘actively involved in politics’ to which males gave a higher value for the impact of Comhairle na nÓg (see Appendix 1 for statistical output).

5.3.2 Networking with other Comhairle and Dáil members

Many of the participants referred to making friends and meeting people as initial motivators for becoming involved and reasons for enjoying their participation. In relation to their personal relationships with peers, present participants indicated that participation in Comhairle na nÓg led them to make new friends (96%). 95% of current members and 73% of former members of Comhairle na nÓg stay in contact with other members. Facebook is the most common form of contact for both groups, followed by e-mail and text. The respondents were also almost unanimously positive about finding it easier to talk to other young people because of their involvement in Comhairle na nÓg (85% responded positively). Less than half of the respondents (48%) felt that their friends were interested in the activities of Comhairle, while 31% stated that their friends had become involved. This lack of interest from their wider social circle is reflected in qualitative comments from some of the young people interviewed for this study and there seems to be a tendency among some of the participants to keep their Comhairle na nÓg activities separate from those of their wider peer group:

‘They [friends] don’t really fully understand what it is. They just kind of say, oh, you’re going to Comhairle, you can’t come out today, like, but they kind of understand that we’re trying to do better things for young people, for the city. They think it’s good, but I don’t think that they would fully think that we’d be able to actually do anything. They probably feel you’re probably just wasting your time going there.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Present Participant, Interview]

Female respondents scored making new friends and talking to young people more highly than males (see Appendix 2 for statistical output).
5.4 Impact on families

The majority of participants reported that while they were involved in Comhairle na nÓg their participation had little impact on their relationship with their families. 72% of participants reported a neutral impact and 28% reported a positive impact, while none of the participants reported a negative impact.

The majority of the participants indicate that their families are proud of their activities in Comhairle na nÓg (69% responded positively and 7% negatively), interested (61% responded positively and 15% negatively) and provided practical support for their participation activities (71% responded positively and 12% negatively). There was limited positive feedback regarding the impact of participation on the young people’s home life. Just 30% reported ‘seeing changes at home’ and 33% reported ‘being more respected at home’. However, 80% of the participants felt that their participation would have a positive impact on their attitude to family life in the future.

In relation to differences that emerge based on the age of respondents, more young respondents aged 11-14 indicated changes at home than any other age group represented in the sample. No other significant differences emerged relating to age or gender (see Appendices 1 and 2 for statistical output).

5.5 Community impact of Comhairle’s work

Participants were asked to briefly describe an issue on which their Comhairle na nÓg group had worked. A wide range of projects was detailed and may be categorised into five main areas:

- local amenities and public services (32.3%);
- physical well-being and mental health (20.9%);
- social inclusion and LGBT rights (19.5%);
- bullying (12.8%);
- drugs and alcohol (9.4%).

Local amenities and public services was the most common area on which the local Comhairlí na nÓg worked. Initiatives included rural transport projects, work on youth-friendly bus and train services, youth cafés and political speed-dating with local Councillors. Also mentioned were youth-friendly directories of local services and clubs, and petitioning Government agencies for more youth facilities.

One interview participant spoke about a project in which his Comhairle sought to bring together adult and youth perspectives on youth cafés and he emphasized the importance of dialogue between adults and young people:

‘I think that the youth spaces and facilities were highly important. We held a youth café seminar, where we invited youth cafés, organisations, from all over the county. We wanted to get the facilitators to come … as well as the members of the youth cafés. The facilitators are adults. They were children once of course, but they no longer think like a youth, they no longer think like a child … The facilitators were making their own decisions without talking to the youth.’ [Dáil na nÓg Council member, Interview]

Social inclusion projects included cross-border projects and initiatives to raise awareness of discrimination against young people by adults. Physical well-being and mental health activities included creation of a directory of mental health services for young people. Drug and alcohol projects included online drug awareness surveys and awareness-raising in local areas on the impacts of drugs and alcohol. Bullying-related projects included producing a DVD on the effects of bullying and the development of a comic book on the topic.
There is a strong social justice and social inclusion theme in all projects identified by the participants and a focus on equality for young people in all areas of public life. When asked how satisfied they were with the outcome of the project(s), respondents were overwhelmingly positive: 79% were satisfied with the outcome, 17% gave a neutral response and 4% were not satisfied. Regarding dissatisfaction with the projects, one participant commented that ‘We talked mostly about censured issues … healthy lunches and play grounds … no one cared’ and another participant stated that there was ‘no follow up on any issues we raised. I felt that there were a lot of promises made on the day that were not kept, which is a shame’.

5.5.1 Experience of participation in Comhairle na nÓg

Past participants were positive about almost all aspects of the work of Comhairle na nÓg (see Table 5). In particular, they were very positive about being listened to by other members (91% responded positively and 5% negatively), being able to bring ideas and problems from young people in their area to Comhairle na nÓg (88% responded positively and 5% negatively), being respected by adults with whom they came into contact through Comhairle na nÓg (88% responded positively and 9% negatively) and listened to by adults with whom they came into contact through Dáil na nÓg (77% responded positively and 9% negatively).

Table 5: Experience of participation in Comhairle na nÓg (CNN) (Past Participants, N=64)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Other members listened</th>
<th>CNN meets often enough</th>
<th>Meetings enjoyable</th>
<th>Team did a good job</th>
<th>CNN respected by adults</th>
<th>CNN listened to by adults</th>
<th>Info to help us arrive at decision</th>
<th>Enough support for CNN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of past participants indicated that they enjoyed the Comhairle meetings (88% responded positively) and felt that the staff team in Comhairle na nÓg did a good job (81% responded positively and 9% negatively). One participant stated that the experience ‘made young people feel like they have a more important role in society and it gave them a voice to express views on matters that interest them’.

Only 42% of respondents were positive about how often their Comhairle na nÓg meets and only 32% of respondents were positive about the level of support, including financial, they received for the projects on which they chose to work. Both of these areas relate to the potential impacts of their work in Comhairle na nÓg. One participant identified a lack of finances as potentially damaging: ‘If a representative political institution is going to function, it needs a budget which its members are free to allocate as they see fit’.

95.1% of the past participants would recommend membership of Comhairle na nÓg to other young people.

Similar to the past participants, present participants were positive about almost all aspects of their experiences in their Comhairle na nÓg (see Table 6). The participants particularly enjoyed the meetings (91% responded positively). Linked to their enjoyment of the meetings was their positive feedback on being listened to by other members (90% responded positively) and their view that the adults involved in their Comhairle na nÓg did a good job (89% responded positively).
The present participants were twice as likely as the past participants to be positive about the level of support they received for the projects on which they worked. This might reflect the increased availability in supports and funding for Comhairle na nÓg since 2008.

Similar to the past participants, present participants also expressed some dissatisfaction in the frequency of meetings. Just 39% of present participants felt that their Comhairle na nÓg meets often enough. In relation to their experiences of participation and their relationship with their schools, the majority of the present participants (71%) stated that their school was positive about their involvement in Comhairle na nÓg and just over half (53%) got time off school work for their Comhairle na nÓg commitment. No statistically significant difference was found for gender, but males tended to give higher ratings to all items except ‘meetings are enjoyable’, for which female respondents were more positive (see Appendix 3 for statistical output).

### 5.5.2 Decision-making in the community

Participants were asked to identify any potential impacts their participation in Comhairle na nÓg had on their wider community or wider society. 53% of past participants were positive about the level of regular feedback they received from the organisers of Comhairle na nÓg on their work (see Table 7). Almost one-quarter of past participants (23%) were negative about the level of feedback they received and this may have influenced how effective they felt their work was. The most positive area identified was their ability to bring ideas and problems from young people in their community to their Comhairle na nÓg meetings (88% answered positively) and secondly, the increased awareness of children and young people’s issues in the young person’s own community (67% responded positively) (see Appendix 1 for statistical output).

### Table 7: Impact of Comhairle na nÓg (CNN) in the community (Past Participants, N=64)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Organisers gave us regular feedback on our work</th>
<th>Councillors, local businesses and others tell us how we made a difference</th>
<th>Positive changes in my community resulting from our work</th>
<th>I could bring ideas and problems from young people in the area to CNN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>87.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The other two areas received less positive results. In relation to the feedback from local Councillors and local businesses on the work of Comhairle na nÓg, 39% of respondents received positive feedback from these groups, while 33% responded negatively to this question. Almost half of respondents (46%) indicated that they saw positive changes in their community due to their work in Comhairle na nÓg, but a slight majority of participants gave either a neutral or negative response to this question.
Similar to the results from the past participants, the most positive response for present participants (see Table 8) concerned their ability to bring ideas and problems from young people in their community to their Comhairle na nÓg meetings (83% responded positively). Present participants were also very positive about the feedback from Comhairle na nÓg organisers on their work (75% responded positively).

Table 8: Impact of Comhairle na nÓg (CNN) in the community (Present Participants, N=173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisers give us regular feedback on our work</th>
<th>Councillors, local businesses and others tell us how we have made a difference</th>
<th>Positive changes in my community resulting from our work</th>
<th>I can bring ideas and problems from local young people to CNN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>9.20</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other areas of impact received less positive responses from present participants. Like the results from the past participants, only 43% felt that ‘Councillors, local businesses and others tell us how we have made a difference’ and 23% responded negatively to this question. 45% of present participants indicated that they saw positive changes in their school as a result of their participation in Comhairle na nÓg. Again, similar to the results from the past participants, 44% of the present participants felt that there were positive changes in their community resulting from their work in Comhairle na nÓg.

5.5.3 Making life better for young people

The past participants indicate that Comhairle na nÓg has made a positive contribution to life for young people in Ireland in 3 of the 6 areas identified in Table 9. Most respondents perceived Comhairle na nÓg as being broadly representative of the population of young people in Ireland (83% responded positively). They were also positive about bringing issues to the media from Comhairle na nÓg meetings (61% responded positively). However, a lower percentage (47% responded positively) felt that the media consider Comhairle na nÓg to be representative of young people. Fewer respondents (40%) indicated that their work in Comhairle na nÓg affected decisions by people in power and 35% of participants responded negatively to this question. Just 23% of participants felt that there were positive changes in policy relating to young people’s lives because of the work of Comhairle na nÓg. No statistically significant differences emerged regarding age, gender or length of time involved with Comhairle na nÓg (see Appendices 1 and 2 for statistical output).

Table 9: Impact of Comhairle na nÓg (CNN) on making life better for young people in Ireland (Past Participants, N=64)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Our work affected decisions made by people in power</th>
<th>Represented the population of young people in Ireland</th>
<th>We brought issues to the media from CNN meetings</th>
<th>Media listened to CNN as representative of young people</th>
<th>CNN helped change how people think about young people</th>
<th>Positive change in policy relating to young people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The present participants perceived that Comhairle na nÓg has made a positive contribution to life for young people in Ireland in each of the areas identified in the questionnaire (see Table 10). Over three-quarters of present participants (77%) felt that they had the opportunity through Comhairle na nÓg to meet and talk to people in power, such as journalists, Local Authorities and business representatives. A focus group of young people from Cork City Comhairle also asserted that the location of the meeting in City Hall has had a positive impact on the perception of Comhairle as an important youth space.

Table 10: Impact of Comhairle na nÓg (CNN) on making life better for young people in Ireland (Present Participants, N=173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Our work affects the decisions made by people in power</th>
<th>Represents population of young people in Ireland</th>
<th>Bring issues to media from CNN meetings</th>
<th>Media listens to CNN as representative of young people</th>
<th>Meet and talk to people in power</th>
<th>People in power listen to us</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>6.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was also a very positive response from present participants to the statement about people in power listening to Comhairle na nÓg members (71% responded positively). However, participants were less positive when asked if what they say affects the decisions made by people in power (55% responded positively). Thus, while they felt listened to, they were less positive about the actual impact of their views on decisions relating to young people. One Comhairle na nÓg participant discussed the barriers she experienced in getting access to local decision-makers:

‘We have a discussion in our meetings and then [the facilitator] might say, oh, well, you know, I think we should be talking to this person, and we might invite them in, but a lot of the time they’re a bit busy or unwilling to come in.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Present Participant, Interview]

Another interview participant also discussed the problems in getting local County and City Councillors to take Comhairle na nÓg seriously:

‘If a County Councillor is looking for a vote and they think they’re turning 18, they’d be very supportive. What we do, on the other hand, they just think is a bit of fun ... to get the County Councillors at that meeting was very difficult because they’re thinking “Youth? They’re nothing to do with me”.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Present Participant, Interview]

Participants also expressed an awareness of the limitations of the impact of their work in Comhairle na nÓg. For example, participants in a focus group of young people conducted for this research expressed the desire for legislative change to give young people more power in decision-making.

An interview participant also expressed his frustration at what he perceives as the difficulties in making change happen and the dilution of youth voice:

‘There’s so much red tape there, because we’re a youth organisation, and I respect that there is red tape around everything, and there’s politics around everything, it’s the voice of youth, the feeling is there that it needs to be constantly discussed and looked at, and eventually it’s thrown out the window, or it’s quartered into what we actually wanted to do ... by the time you get to the County Manager, or whoever is in charge. I think that prevents a lot of people from attending the meetings, because they keep giving their opinion, but it gets nowhere.’ [Dáil na nÓg Council member, Interview]
Another focus group indicated that some of their projects did not fulfil the original remit and it was difficult to get projects past the ‘paper’ stage. Many of the participation activities the young people were involved in did not appear to be acted upon by decision-makers and there appears to be frustration among some participants about the lack of more concrete outcomes from their work.

5.5.4 Representativeness

Over three-quarters of participants felt that Comhairle na nÓg is broadly representative of young people in Ireland (see Tables 9 and 10):

‘I feel it’s representative because I feel that it’s, like, run by the young people and that it’s all our opinions and ideas. Whereas if it was run by, like, politicians or something, it would be what they would think is wrong for young people, rather than young people figuring out the solutions themselves.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Present Participant, Interview]

A slightly lower percentage of present participants compared to past participants were positive about their ability to bring issues to the media from Comhairle na nÓg meetings (53% responded positively). However, a much higher percentage (67% responded positively) felt that the media listened to Comhairle na nÓg as being representative of young people.

Some participants expressed their concerns that young people’s views are not taken seriously in Ireland and face discrimination based on their age:

‘People have a stereotypical idea of teenagers. They assume all teenagers drink and get on Facebook instead of study’ (Comhairle na nÓg Focus Group).

More positively, a focus group conducted by a youth researcher found that the 6 young people who were interviewed were very positive about the engagement by the Presidential candidates with young people around the country during the 2011 Presidential Election and at the Spunout.ie Presidential Youth Forum. They felt that this indicated that young people’s views are being taken seriously by decision-makers.

One of the focus groups conducted by the young researchers discussed the role that socio-economic class plays in membership of Comhairle na nÓg and highlighted the perception that it is a middle-class organisation and that schools from the more affluent part of the city tend to send delegates to the AGMs.

In relation to gender differences that emerge for these questions, females tended to see Comhairle na nÓg as more representative of young people, with males scoring higher on the opportunity to speak to those in power and being listened to by those in power. No significant differences based on the ages of participants were identified (see Appendices 3 and 4 for statistical output).

5.6 Dáil na nÓg

Participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg in bringing about change.

Past participants strongly agreed with two questions concerning the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg in bringing about change: 92% indicated that Dáil na nÓg works on issues relevant to young people in Ireland and 94% agreed that it represents a wide range of young people (see Table 11). The majority of the participants (77%) agreed that the media see Dáil na nÓg as a representative voice for young people in Ireland. The area where there was the least positive response concerns the seriousness with which people who make decisions at Government level regard Dáil na nÓg: only 44% of participants felt this was the case and one-third (33%) responded negatively to this question.
An examination of children and young people’s views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

Table 11: Effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg in bringing about change* (Past Participants, N=48)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dáil na nÓg worked on issues relevant to young people in Ireland</th>
<th>Dáil na nÓg represented a wide range of young people</th>
<th>Media saw Dáil na nÓg as a representative voice for young people</th>
<th>Taken seriously by people who made decisions at Government level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>771</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only answered by those who were elected as Dáil na nÓg delegates (N=48)

Present participants strongly agreed with all items concerning the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg in bringing about change (see Table 12) and the area of strongest agreement was that Dáil na nÓg works on issues relevant to young people (92% responded positively). However, there was slightly lower agreement with the view that Dáil na nÓg is taken seriously at Government level (68% responded positively). Present participants tended to be more positive about the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg compared to past participants.

Table 12: Effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg in bringing about change (Present Participants, N=173)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dáil na nÓg works on issues relevant to young people</th>
<th>Dáil na nÓg represents a wide range of young people</th>
<th>Media see Dáil na nÓg as a representative voice for young people</th>
<th>Taken seriously by people who make decisions at Government level</th>
<th>Dáil na nÓg relevant to my Comhairlé na nÓg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td>68.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Past participants gave positive responses to almost all items concerning the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg as an organisation (see Table 13). In particular, there was very strong agreement (88%) that the facilitators provide good guidance and take delegates’ ideas and input into account (90% agreement). Less than half of the participants (46%) were positive about the level of feedback they received.

Table 13: Effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg as an organisation (Past Participants, N=48)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I influenced the topics that were chosen to work on</th>
<th>Facilitators really took our ideas and input into account</th>
<th>Facilitators gave good guidance to us in our work</th>
<th>Feedback about how our work did or did not make a difference</th>
<th>Good training to help us with our projects</th>
<th>Good resources to put our ideas into action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>8.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral %</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Present participants who had an opportunity to act as a Dáil delegate were asked to answer questions specific to their experiences (77 participants responded). As seen in Table 14, respondents strongly agreed with all items concerning the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg as an organisation. In particular, there was very strong agreement with the statements relating to the guidance from facilitators (89% responded positively) and taking delegates’ ideas and input into account (88% agreement). These results are in agreement with recent evaluations of Dáil na nÓg. For example, feedback from delegates at the recent 2011 Dáil na nÓg, held in November 2011, found that 98% of delegates felt their discussions were well facilitated and 90% felt prepared for the event (DCYA, 2011e). Females and older participants were more likely to respond positively to all of the statements related to the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg (see Appendix 1 for statistical output).
5.6.1 Differences and similarities in youth participants’ views

The results from the survey demonstrate a considerable amount of agreement and convergence in the views of past and present participants of Comhairle na nÓg in relation to their perceptions of the impacts of their participatory experiences. There were a small number of areas where there were differences emerging in their views. One of the main areas of differences related to the organisation of the participation structures themselves. For example, the present participants were twice as likely as the past participants to be positive about the level of support they received for the projects they worked on with their local Comhairle na nÓg. Similarly, present participants tended to be more positive about the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg compared to past participants. Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg have received increased funding and support since 2008 and have been subject to ongoing evaluation and change since their inception, and this may have impacted on participants’ views of the support they received, with current participants benefiting from ongoing changes.

Other areas of disagreement between past and present participants were in relation to their attitude to voting, active involvement in politics and involvement in the community. These received mainly neutral or negative responses from present participants, who did not generally feel that these areas would be very important to them in the future. This is in contrast to the responses from the past participants, who accorded high levels of importance to all these areas. This may indicate attitudinal differences due to the ages of survey respondents and that participation experiences have a positive impact on engagement in these political activities over time as eligibility to vote may increase young people’s interest in voting and the political system. Connected to this theme, male participants from both groups were more likely to feel that their involvement in Comhairle na nÓg impacted positively on their active involvement in politics and also identified it as giving them more opportunities to speak to and be listened to by those in power. In relation to gender, there were few other statistically significant differences between participants. Females tended to give higher scores for impacts related to improved social skills than males and female respondents scored making new friends and talking to young people more highly than male respondents.

5.6.2 Comhairle na nÓg National Executive members

Twenty questionnaires were completed by the 2010-2011 Dáil na nÓg Council members. Each of the 34 Comhairle na nÓg councils elects one delegate to become a member of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive (referred to as the Dáil na nÓg Council until 2011). The National Executive meets once a month in Dublin during term time. A small number of statistically significant differences emerged between the National Executive members and the other Comhairle na nÓg participants in this research. The National Executive members were more likely to be picked for Comhairle na nÓg through their school than the other members. In relation to personal impacts, they were more likely to find it easier to talk to adults and other young people, and also more likely to have learnt new skills and question things more because of their participation experiences. In addition, they were more positive about the role and representativeness of Dáil na nÓg than the Comhairle na nÓg participants, and were statistically more likely than the other youth participants to feel that they have made a difference to their community.
The National Executive members were very positive about their experiences of participation and were particularly positive about the personal impacts resulting from their participation. They specifically referred to their increased levels of personal confidence based on their participation experiences:

‘It boosted my confidence in talking and getting to know people, public speaking, and [making] friends. Others now ask me about what issues are affecting young people and ask me for advice.’ [Dáil na nÓg Council member, Interview]

Other common areas of impact they identified were improved communication skills, public speaking, teamwork skills and the opportunity to meet new people and make friends. In addition, a small number of participants mentioned that their experience on the National Executive has influenced their future career aspirations and inspired them to seek youth work or Government positions in the future.

The second common theme that emerges for this group is the positive experience of having their voices heard and feeling that they make a difference to other young people. National Executive members have a remit to meet with relevant Ministers, TDs, Government officials, policy-makers and other stakeholders to seek their support in making changes for young people on the issues identified at the annual Dáil na nÓg. They are, therefore, in a very different position from other Comhairle na nÓg delegates in terms of access to decision-makers. Participants spoke about feeling that they ‘make a difference’ to the lives of others and that the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive has led to ‘young people’s voices finally being heard’ at local and national level.

The National Executive members identified a number of areas that could be improved to increase the impact of their work. These include increasing public awareness of the work of the National Executive, greater communication between the National Executive and the local Comhairle na nÓg and ‘more feedback from facilitators on how our work is progressing’.

One participant felt that the work of the National Executive is limited by focusing on one topic for the term rather than responding to ongoing issues presented to the National Executive by the delegates. This participant also felt that the National Executive should have more frequent contact with representatives from various Government departments to enable delegates to lobby for youth issues, such as changing the voting age to 16 years.

The 2012 Comhairle na nÓg National Executive is working on identifying mechanisms and priority areas for action to enable young people under the age of 18 to influence decision-making at Oireachtas (Dáil and Seanad) level and in the work of Local Authorities. During November 2012, the National Executive made presentations to the Joint Committee on Health and Children and the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection. These presentations outlined the work being undertaken by Comhairle na nÓg throughout the country, with a particular focus on mental health and sexual health, which are the chosen topics of many of the local Comhairleí. In 2013, the National Executive invited all TDs and Senators to an event entitled ‘Your Comhairle needs you’, at which they made a presentation on the need for greater support for the work of Comhairle na nÓg from TDs and Senators. The Ceann Comhairle attended this event and spoke of his admiration for the work of the young people. He met with a delegation from the National Executive in June 2013 and appointed a team of five TDs and Senators to work with the incoming Comhairle na nÓg National Executive to enable a more effective link between the work of Comhairle na nÓg and the work of Dáil Éireann.
5.7 Participation Case Studies

Case Study 1: Children and Young People’s Forum

The Children and Young People’s Forum (CYPF) was established in 2004 by the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC, now the DCYA) to act as a reference panel and advise the Department and the Minister on issues of concern to children and young people. In 2009, there were 35 young people on the Forum aged 12-18 years from all over the country; they were nominated to the CYPF through local Comhairli and organisations representing seldom-heard children/young people. The role of the CYPF and the previous evaluations of the CYPF are discussed in Chapter 3 of this report. A focus group of 6 CYPF members was conducted for the present study and two individual qualitative interviews were also conducted with 2 CYPF members. Participants in the focus group identified the highlights of their participation in the CYPF as being the relationships they developed with others during their time in the Forum and the opportunity to develop ideas and work on issues "for as long as they took" to be resolved.

Personal impacts
In relation to individual impacts, the focus group emphasized the development of personal relationships as a positive impact of participation in the CYPF and referred to the development of friendships with peers and with Participation Unit staff. Participants also commented on the friendships they developed with a more diverse range of people rather than their normal social circle.

In relation to personal development, participation in the CYPF was cited as enhancing participants’ confidence and increasing their social skills. Specific skills identified were life skills, public speaking and the opportunity to network. One participant explained that she was ‘more articulate’ because of the work in the Forum. Some participants also felt that their experience in the CYPF influenced their future career path, with some saying that they would now be more interested in socially meaningful and/or political work. A male interview participant discussed the practical skills he gained from participation, including note-taking, presentation skills and public speaking. This participant also felt that participation gave him the opportunity to have a voice and this experience has encouraged him to continue to expect his voice to be heard, with his new-found increased expectations of access to decision-makers and his ability to create change in society.

Family impacts
In relation to family, all of the focus group and interview participants asserted that their families were supportive of their participation in the CYPF. The supports mentioned included emotional support and practical supports, such as driving them to meetings. One participant commented that their parents’ support gave them confidence to participate: ‘It’s daunting when you first come in – you need your family to support you’. It was noted that young people in foster families found it more difficult to stay involved in the CYPF because of the multiple layers of consent required for their participation.

One participant stated that his involvement in the CYPF and in Comhairle na nÓg was due to the fact that his parents pushed him to join. In relation to the direct impact the Forum had on participants’ relationships within their own families, a number of comments were made, including ‘Your parents trust you more’, ‘I’m more respected’ and ‘I am taken more seriously’.
Community impacts

The focus group participants asserted that their position in the CYPF allowed them to have a voice on behalf of other young people and referred to the Forum as offering an opportunity to ‘shape your country’ and ‘shape your future’.

One interview participant stated that she did not discuss the work of the CYPF with her immediate peers because she felt they would not have been interested in the work because they ‘weren’t very politically active; they were just, you know, normal’. She also refers to the work of the Forum as being seen as ‘nerdy’ by other young people, contributing to the difficulty in communicating ideas to her peers. This reflects earlier concerns in the Harper (2007) evaluation of the CYPF about the need for mechanisms to allow CYPF members to explore issues at local level and to collect the views of young people at local level. However, certain aspects of the CYPF’s work were viewed by youth participants as easier to communicate to their peers, such as the mental health advert (‘The boy with the hoodie’), again emphasizing the importance of an end product for participants.

Operational issues/structure

Many of the participants were not clear about why they had been selected for the CYPF and most identified their route of access as through their participation in Comhairle na nÓg.

In relation to the CYPF, the focus group participants highlighted the fact that the Forum allowed participants time and resources to focus on particular projects and to bring these projects to a close with a definite outcome. The CYPF is unique in this respect compared to other participation projects which have more definite time limits. However, some of the focus group participants were critical of the fact that they did not always get to choose the topics on which they worked. For some of the participants, this issue of choice impacted on the perceived effectiveness of the project. For example, in relation to the Transport project, some participants felt disempowered by the process because they felt they were not listened to and that their opinions were ‘not taken seriously’; some claimed that the project resulted in outcomes that were ‘not what we wanted at all’. A male member of the CYPF during his interview was very critical of the Transport project and of the decision-makers they met during it, stating that ‘[they had their] own agenda and had already decided the plan of action and we were just a publicity stunt. It really pissed us off to be honest’. On the other hand, one of the interview participants discussed the positive impact of the Student Travel Cards for young people not in college, which were developed as an outcome of the Transport project.

The ‘Teenage mental health’ consultation was viewed as very participatory and participants felt that it was ‘our baby’ and ‘the structure gave us confidence’. The TV advertisement for the mental health consultation, together with a school play and DVD for the Homophobic Bullying campaign were all perceived as positive outcomes. Participants found it difficult to cite impacts from some of the other projects in which they were involved. One participant stated in relation to these other projects, ‘You don’t know for definite if you made a difference’. Successful impacts seem to be defined by participants as relating to a product as an outcome rather than to policy or advocacy changes.

Societal impact

Many of the CYPF participants were positive about the views of young people being listened to in participation initiatives and similar settings where young people were encouraged to share their opinions. In particular, one female interview participant discussed the role of adult advocates in facilitating young people’s participation in Irish society and in particular challenged adults who might be sceptical about giving a voice to young people:
‘Like, a young person knows what they’re talking about. When you understand that, then you would always take it into account. You’d always ... think of asking young people. But a lot of adults just forget and they forget what it was like to be a young person and they really need to know that ... because there was more work done by young people like this in youth forums, and definitely, people who work with children know how important we are.’

In relation to the specific work of the CYPF, there was a consensus among participants that it has had a wider societal impact on young people’s lives. In particular, the mental health TV advert and the national recreational policies for children and young people were highlighted as having an impact on young people in general. Also, the input into student councils was highlighted as having a direct impact: ‘We made the student council diary-notebook that the student councils would use for their notes, and the guidelines’ (Female, CYPF). Another issue mentioned by a male participant was the work of the CYPF on homophobic bullying; he viewed this work as not only having a wider societal impact, but also a personal impact on him and his experiences as a gay teenager.

An interesting point raised by the focus group participants was that their experience in the CYPF and close contact with adult decision-makers increased their respect for adults in this role and raised their awareness of the difficulties and restraints faced by adult decision-makers.

**Representativeness of the CYPF**

The issue of representativeness of the CYPF was addressed by a female CYPF member who felt the Forum could not be expected to speak on behalf of the young people of Ireland. She felt that the CYPF did contain a good representation of young people from a variety of backgrounds. However, she noted that the young people on the Forum tended to have ‘personalities where people want their voices to be heard’ and in many ways this made the members very similar, even though they were from a diverse range of backgrounds and social groups. Many of the young people in the CYPF tended to be involved in other participation initiatives, such as student councils, which place them in positions where they have their voice listened to more frequently than other young people who are not directly involved in participation initiatives. They are, in effect, what have been called ‘networked young persons’, reflecting the Brodie et al (2011, p. 42) concept of the multiplier effect of participation which ‘grows exponentially once someone becomes connected to one network’.
Case Study 2: ‘Voices of Children in Care’ consultation (2010)

Between January and December 2010, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) engaged in a consultation with children and young people living in the care of the State. The consultation sought the views of children and young people in the care of the State, in detention and in residential services for children with a disability. The aim of the consultation was threefold: (1) to seek the views of the children and young people on the issues that matter to them; (2) to explore existing mechanisms for children and young people to express their views; and (3) to make recommendations on future structures to be established for children and young people’s voices to be heard. The consultation was carried out on the recommendation of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (2009, known as the Ryan Report). A report on the consultation, Listen to Our Voices: Hearing Children and Young People Living in the Care of the State, was published by the DCYA (2011d). In May 2012, the first meeting of the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ group was held in Dublin in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Background to the consultation

The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse was established in 1999 to investigate all forms of child abuse in Irish child care institutions from 1914 onwards. The majority of the allegations investigated by the Commission related to 60 residential Industrial and Reformatory Schools operated by Catholic Church religious orders and funded and supervised by the Department of Education. In its Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, the Commission (2009, p. 463) recommended that ‘children in care should be able to communicate without fear’. In response to the Commission, the OMCYA (2009a) published an Implementation Plan, which examined current child care policies and the provision of child protection services in Ireland. The Implementation Plan examined the Commission’s 20 recommendations and grouped them into six categories, addressing the effects of past abuse; national child care policy and evaluation of its implementation; regulation and inspection; management of children’s services; voice of the child; and the national guidelines for the protection and welfare of children, Children First. The use of the term ‘voice of the child’ reflects national policy relating to child and youth participation as set out in the National Children’s Strategy (2000). According to the Second Progress Report on the Implementation Plan (DCYA, 2011c), progress since the publication of the Commission’s 2009 report has included ‘giving greater effect to the voice of the child’ and specifically cites the consultation Listen to Our Voices, conducted in 2010 with children and young people in the care of the State (DCYA, 2011d).

‘Voices of Children in Care’ consultation

Between January and July 2010, 211 children and young people aged 8-18+ took part in the consultation process, which consisted of 15 separate consultations in 6 venues around the country. Participants included children living in foster care; those in long-term, non-episodic State care; or those in detention under the Child Care Act 1991 or the Children Act 2001, as well as young people who had left the care of the State. The types of care settings included in the consultation process were:

- foster care (8-12 year-olds and 13-18 year-olds);
- residential care and special care;
- children with disabilities living in care;
- Children Detention Schools;
- St. Patrick’s Institution;
- separated children seeking asylum;
- young people who have recently left the care system.

The remit was extended to include children with disabilities who are in full- or part-time care and not necessarily in the care of the State (DCYA, 2011d, p. 47).
The consultation process was led by the DCYA, in cooperation with key stakeholders including young people living in the care of the State, the HSE, HIQA, the Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS), the Probation Service and EPIC (Empowering Young People in Care), an advocacy organisation that works for children in care and who have left care. A consultation oversight committee was also established which contained members of these groups and young people in care.

The consultation asked the child and youth participants a number of key questions:

› What are the most important issues for children and young people in care?
› What services and supports are in place for children and young people in care and, of those, what works well and what does not work well?
› What recommendations do you have on the ways that children and young people in care should have their voices heard?

Outcomes of the consultation

A number of specific recommendations emerged from the consultation and are detailed in the DCYA (2011d) report, *Listen to Our Voices! Hearing Children and Young People Living in the Care of the State*. The recommendations are categorised into three areas: hearing the voice of young people in care; system of care for young people; and system of care practices. Under the first area, ‘hearing the voice of young people in care’, the following recommendations were made:

› regular meetings should be held to enable young people in care to meet, learn from and support each other;
› an official ‘forum’ of young people in care should be established;
› a separate ‘forum’ specifically for young people seeking asylum should also be considered.

The ‘Voices of Children in Care’ group was established in response to the first of these recommendations.

There have been a number of developments with regard to the recommendations on the system of care for young people and the system of care practices. In terms of the care system, there is now information on how the care system works and on aftercare on the DCYA website. Tusla, Child and Family Agency (2014) has recently published the *Alternative Care Practice Handbook*, aimed at carers and staff who work with young people in care. A uniform system of aftercare will operate around the country. Young people will be given information at the age of 16, so that they can be ready for when they are leaving care (at 18). The Child and Family Agency has tasked EPIC with establishing an advisory group of young people who have just left care. Since 2006, EPIC has also employed an Aftercare Network Support Coordinator and two Children’s Rights and Participation Officers whose functions are to inform young people of their rights; empower young people to speak up for themselves about their concerns; listen to, support and advise young people; act as an independent advocate for young people; consult with young people to get their views and opinions on different aspects of the care system; and promote the participation of young people in all aspects of their care.

In the area of social work services, 260 new social workers have been recruited since 2010. Trainee social workers are told that spending time one-on-one with young people in care is really important. In the area of foster care, prospective foster carers must be Garda-vetted. As part of their inspection process, Tusla, Child and Family Agency will ensure that all prospective foster families commit to training on fostering. Tusla will also ensure that every young person has a care plan review and that there is an independent chairperson at every review in order to ensure that the young person has his or her say. Tusla will provide child protection and welfare services.
The ‘Voices of Children in Care’ group, which includes a number of young people who participated in the consultation, will oversee the implementation of the recommendations. All of the children and young people who took part in the consultation were invited to participate in the group and 19 expressed interest in joining.

The first meeting of the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ group took place on 12th May 2012 in the DCYA. Twelve young people participated in the meeting, which was also attended by a member of the research team from this present study. The HSE and EPIC made presentations to the meeting and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs met with the young people and answered their questions.

The young people completed an exercise in which they were asked to think about what they remembered from the day of the consultation. They were very positive about the consultation and in particular about the opportunity it gave them to meet other young people in a similar situation. They were asked to reflect on developments since the consultation. They discussed and made suggestions on developments in four areas that were prioritised in the consultation: information, social work services, foster families and care plan reviews. All expressed the view that these areas require ongoing attention and there was unanimous agreement that the changes in information, social work services and aftercare since the consultation have not been adequate. A majority agreed that further changes in the foster care system are required to ensure that foster care is the best arrangement for young people.

A second meeting of the group was held on 25th June 2012. Eleven young people attended the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to determine how the recommendation from the consultation on ‘having young people’s voices heard’ would be pursued by the group. Four possible ways of having young people’s voices heard were discussed: establishment of an official group of young people in care; meetings of children and young people in care; a telephone line for young people in care; and a mentor for young people in care. The group voted overwhelmingly in favour of the telephone line, the feasibility of which was to be explored. Gordon Jeyes, National Director of Children and Family Services for the HSE (now Chief Executive of Tusla, Child and Family Agency, since January 2014), made a presentation to the group on the proposed work of the new Child and Family Support Agency. He indicated that the Agency would support the establishment of a national group of young people in care to inform its work and that he would also be interested in exploring the possibility of establishing local groups that could feed ideas through the national group. Already since its establishment, the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ group has had the opportunity to feed into the development of a Practice Handbook for social workers (forthcoming from Tusla), outlining their experiences of what was good and what could be improved about living in care.

The group also discussed four areas concerning their experience in care: What makes a good foster carer/home? What makes a good residential home? How should young people in care be included in care plans/care plan reviews? What are your best experiences of care? The feedback from this discussion was used in the recently published Alternative Care Practice Handbook for practitioners who work with young people in care (Tusla, 2014). In June 2013, the children and young people took the decision to re-name the group TACTIC (meaning Teenagers and Children Talking in Care) and it continues to meet on a regular basis with Citizen Participation Unit officials in the DCYA to work on issues for children in care.

In October 2008, the OMCYA conducted a nationwide consultation with 277 teenagers aged 12-18 entitled What Helps and What Hurts? to inform the development of more effective HSE services and a HSE advertising and public awareness campaign on mental health aimed at teenagers. The stimulus for this consultation was an awareness of the need for more effective and targeted mental health services for young people. The views of teenagers are critical to the development of such services. Findings were published by the OMCYA (2009b) in its What Helps and What Hurts? Report on the outcome of consultations with teenagers on mental health.

Key findings from the consultation on what hurts teenagers’ mental health included:
› the negative impact on teenagers of being judged on how they look;
› the level of bullying that has become an everyday part of life, particularly in the school setting;
› school and exam pressures;
› the damage of a negative family environment;
› the lack of facilities for teenagers.

Key findings from the consultation on what helps teenagers’ mental health included:
› the importance of youth cafés or clubs;
› peer mentoring in schools;
› confidential mentors, advisors or guidance counsellors in schools.

The outcomes and recommendations from Dáil na nÓg 2008 and from the national consultation process have significantly impacted on the development of HSE mental services for young people and HSE-funded mental health initiatives. Throughout 2008 and 2009, young people from a number of organisations, including the Dáil na nÓg Council and the OMCYA Children and Young People’s Forum, worked with the HSE’s National Office for Suicide Prevention in developing an advertising campaign, based on the outcomes of the mental health consultations. This research confirmed the findings from the 2009 Report on the outcome of consultations with teenagers on mental health on the negative impact on teenagers of poor self-image, school and exam pressures, family problems, bullying and isolation.

Project outputs
During late 2008 and the first six months of 2009, concepts for the TV advertisement and awareness campaign were tested in focus groups in several forums of young people around the country, including a group of young people who had taken part in the consultations. A reference panel of 25 young people gave feedback on creative concepts and messages throughout the process of developing the TV/cinema advert and online campaign. Young people from the Dáil na nÓg Council and the OMCYA Children and Young People’s Forum were involved in this panel. The advert features a teenage boy with a hoodie, who ‘wrecks his own head’ and cannot share his feelings with anyone. Young people from the reference panel featured as extras in the advert.

The boy with the hoodie’ teen mental health TV/cinema advertisement, outdoor advertising and online campaign (www.letsomeoneknow.ie) were launched on 10th October 2009 – World Mental Health Day. Quantitative research conducted by the HSE with 505 young people found that the TV/cinema advert had an exceptionally high level of recall and awareness among teenagers (87%). (A recall/awareness rate of 49% is the Republic of Ireland norm for TV/cinema advertisements from a cross-section of industries.)
The research further indicates that the TV/cinema advertisement had the following impacts:

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

The unusually strong impact of the TV/cinema advertising campaign highlights the value of the intensive and prolonged methodology used in obtaining the views of young people and involving them in every stage of development and delivery of the campaign. The advertisement received the Taoiseach’s Public Service Excellence Award and continues to be screened on a regular basis in cinemas throughout Ireland.

In the present study, two young people (male and female) who were involved in this campaign took part in an interview with a member of the research panel. The perceived impact of their participation experience is discussed below.

**Personal impacts**

Although they were recruited to the campaign by the school, rather than by a strong interest in the issue, both interviewees emphasized the personal impact of being involved in the campaign. This impact included not only personal growth but also an increase in awareness of the issue of mental health in young people:

‘Personally it definitely changed me a lot … I learned a lot and paid more attention to things that I didn’t consider important before … it outlined for me what exactly could hurt a teenager … it definitely made me more observant of other people.’ [Male participant]

Both of the young people noted a strong growth in personal and social confidence. This confidence related to public speaking and a strong sense that they could contribute positively, and with real impact, on issues important to young people. The male interviewee spoke of the influence of his participation experience on becoming more involved in other youth participation activities in his school, including forums and assemblies on mental health. Furthermore, this perception of the importance of participation in effecting change was strong enough to change both interviewees’ potential career paths:

‘I always wanted to do journalism, but I wanted to do more print journalism. But now, maybe because of the public speaking I was involved in with this, I am definitely more interested in broadcasting now … because of doing the mental health.’ [Female participant]

**Family impacts**

In relation to the impact on family, interviewees felt strongly supported by their parents:

‘My Mum is a huge supporter. She was as much involved as I was. She was there for every announcement and every radio interview’ and ‘My Mum was delighted I was getting involved’. There was also agreement that they were making their parents and families proud through their activities with the campaign. One of the participants spoke about the influence his participation had had on his younger brother, who has now also become involved in fund-raising for a mental health charity.

**Community/societal impact**

The two young people spoke frequently about the impact the campaign had at school level. This impact was perceived at a personal level in terms of respect from their peers and also in terms of raised awareness and a changed perspective within their schools as a whole on the issue of mental health in young people.
Another issue highlighted was the lack of awareness of mental health problems in their own communities:

‘Where I come from … the men are into their farming and wouldn’t talk about a problem, while the girls are a lot less chatty than [Dubliners], you know. Like, the suicide rate is very high where I come from and there needs to be a lot more awareness.’ [Male participant]

Operational issues/structure

Both interviewees agreed that the structure of the campaign allowed them to participate fully at different levels, from choosing the topics that were discussed to involvement in the advertising campaign: ‘Everybody got to say what they wanted. It was run by us, you know, like we were making the decisions, not the adults’. They also felt strongly that asking children and young people about issues important to young people was the most appropriate way to effect change. They felt that they were taken seriously and could make decisions that had real impact:

‘… the fact that what we were saying was put in a report and that this then led to things like the TV ad and website, I think that shows that we were taken seriously.’ [Female participant]

This underscores the importance of feedback on decision-making to young people through various media, such as reports and conferences. When discussing the effectiveness of the campaign, it was suggested that ‘it could have been promoted a lot more’. There was media attention at the inception of the project, but this quickly waned from the perspective of both young people.

Representativeness

The two young people interviewed felt that the participants involved in the campaign were diverse in terms of background: ‘I know socially it was quite diverse. Like I’m into sports and others there were into music or books or whatever’ and ‘They got as many different schools and counties involved as they could’. However, both interviewees were quite critical about the ethnic diversity of the participants: ‘I can’t remember anyone being there who wasn’t Irish … Ethnically it wasn’t diverse, there weren’t different nationalities’ [Female participant].

5.8 Summary

This chapter has presented the quantitative and qualitative findings of research into young people’s experiences of Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg, the Children and Young People’s Forum and two recent consultations carried out by the DCYA. The findings reveal that the youth participants have derived considerable personal benefits from their involvement in Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg, the Children and Young People’s Forum and the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ consultation and ‘Teenage mental health’ consultation. While they agree that Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg have had a positive effect on young people’s lives, there is some dissatisfaction about the impact of these initiatives in their communities and on wider decision-making in Ireland. Similar trends may be seen in the young people’s attitudes towards the impact of the two consultations, which have evidently had strong positive personal effects on participants, but have yet to yield significant societal impacts.
6. Adult Perspectives
Key findings from perspectives of adult participants

› Adult participants felt that their involvement in child and youth participation initiatives yields significant positive personal impacts for the young people.
› Comhairle na nÓg is now considered the main contact point for any consultation with children and young people by the majority of Local Authorities in Ireland.
› There is a growing awareness of the work of Comhairle na nÓg in most communities and this is having an impact on the recognition of the valuable role of children and young people in their own communities.
› Adult participants were very positive about the impact of structural changes introduced by the DCYA to strengthen the culture of child and youth participation. These structural changes include the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund (2007), the employment of three national Child and Youth Participation Officers (2009) and the introduction of Steering Committees in each Comhairle na nÓg.
› A dedicated Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator is key to the success of participation projects.
› Networking events for adult facilitators were identified as a positive development for those working in participation.
› Schools are often the primary site of information about and recruitment into participation initiatives, and their role as gatekeepers to initial involvement in participation initiatives was highlighted by participants. The pattern of sending student council members to the AGMs may narrow the youth voice.
› Partnerships with agencies that work with seldom-heard young people have generated the participation of young people from a number of minority groups. Seldom-heard young people have made a significant contribution to the work of Comhairle and have found Comhairle to be a safe space in which they can express themselves and have a voice.
› Children and young people are given access to decision-makers in a number of local and national forums. Increasingly, Comhairle na nÓg members have actual representation on Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) or Joint Policing Committees, but many other Comhairlí have made presentations or submissions to these committees.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of interviews with adults who work with young people in Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg, the Children and Young People’s Forum, and the two national consultations— the ‘Voices of Children in Care’ consultation (2010) and the ‘Teenage mental health’ consultation (2008). The interviews and focus groups sought the views of adults on the individual and personal impacts of participation for young people, and the impacts of participation on families, communities and on society. The chapter presents these impacts and considers adults’ attitudes towards a number of related issues, including the inclusion of seldom-heard young people in participatory initiatives, the role of schools in shaping participation and the representativeness of the participatory initiatives. The chapter concludes with the findings of an interview conducted by a young researcher with a Minister in the last government.
6.1.1 Sample

In the first phase of the research, a total of 17 individual interviews were carried out with Comhairle na nÓg Coordinators and a focus group was conducted with a further 3 Coordinators. The interview sample was randomly chosen. The Comhairle na nÓg Coordinators are employed in full-time and part-time positions in each of the 34 Comhairle na nÓg projects by the Local Authorities, including the City and County Councils and the local Vocational Education Committees. Some of these positions are contracted out to external agencies such as youth organisations. The role of the Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator is a ‘driving force in the delivery of Comhairle na nÓg’ (DCYA, 2011, p. 9). The role varies from Comhairle to Comhairle, but includes: facilitating the involvement of young people in local decision-making; organising key Comhairle na nÓg events; working in partnership with the Local Authorities, DCYA and other partner organisations; recruitment of young people for Comhairle na nÓg; supporting young people to implement the Comhairle na nÓg agenda; and providing additional supports to seldom-heard young people.

Six key national support staff connected to the DCYA participation structures were interviewed. These included 3 Child and Youth Participation Officers (referred to as Participation Officers), 2 participation workers from the National Youth Council of Ireland and a staff member of the Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team in the DCYA. The DCYA Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team was established in 2009 to support the operation and development of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg and other participation initiatives. All 34 Comhairlí have been assigned 1 of the 3 Participation Officers, whose role is to support the development of the local Comhairlí and offer any necessary advice.

6.2 Individual and personal impacts of participation

The adults interviewed for the research identified a significant number of personal impacts which they felt young people experience due to their involvement in participation. These included increased self-confidence, personal development and skills (including public speaking, leadership and facilitation). They also felt that young people benefitted from the sense that they had a voice and the opportunity to represent other young people. Some of the adults stated that it took time for many of the young people to feel comfortable expressing their views to adults, particularly if they had little experience previously of being asked their opinion. Also, a growing sense of self-belief resulted from their participation experiences and this was one of the strongest themes that emerged in the interviews with the adults:

“It gives them confidence to speak up, to challenge adults … they can come up with the right way forward by consulting with their peers and adults, and then putting their issue forward and going to decision-makers and making their voices heard.”
[Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 11]

Adult participants were positive about the 2-year term for Comhairle members and some commented that personal impacts are much more visible by the second year:

“I see young people attending their first [meeting] and some of them are shy, timid and lack the confidence to put their ideas forward. Then you see them a year later and they have so much more confidence and self-belief. They know how to present an argument professionally, how to speak publicly and how to communicate with professionals like policy-makers. It builds character, self-esteem and self-belief, and gives them a maturity.”
[Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 3]
Skills such as public speaking, leadership, group facilitation and committee skills were all identified as areas of personal impact for the young people involved. Some of the respondents pointed out that the levels of improved confidence and personal skills are dependent on the young person’s experience of the participation initiative and in particular young people benefit from a more youth-led space:

‘I think if young people are supported well enough in the participative structures they are involved in, I think that inevitably given the confidence through real, proper participation where it’s not tokenistic, it’s very real, they’re influencing decisions, they’re knowing that adults can hear them, are listening to them, are taking their ideas on board, I think inevitably it would have to influence their own lives and how they would actually feel.’ [Participation Officer, Interview 1]

Like the youth participants, the adult participants identified that many of the young people have developed friendship networks and increased their social capital network through their participation. Fun and friendship were common motivating factors for joining participation initiatives, which is similar to other research findings on participation discussed in the literature review (Thomas, 2012; Willow, 2010). Peer-learning is seen as an important part of the personal development that took place in Comhairle na nÓg. Some of the adult participants felt that other young people in the community respected Comhairle na nÓg members as ‘youth leaders’. This perspective differs somewhat from that of the young people themselves, who indicated that they often seek to keep their participation experiences separate from their wider peer group and are not always clear on how to feed back outcomes from their participation projects to their wider peer community. This was also reflected in a comment by a Comhairle Coordinator (Interview 15) who felt that ‘Comhairle is not seen as a cool group; I don’t think they go around telling everyone that they are in Comhairle’.

Most of the adult participants felt that the young people develop skills critical to engaging with and negotiating bureaucracy because of the type of projects undertaken in their Comhairlé. Many pointed out that these experiences are useful for future career and educational preparation. For example, six of those interviewed mentioned that past participants of Comhairle na nÓg had gone on to study political science in university and that their choice of course had been influenced by their participation experiences. Some of the adult participants also mentioned that an interest in politics is an initial motivating factor in joining for some young people and that some have an interest in a future career in politics.

There was also a sense that participation initiatives such as Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg are suitable for some young people where other organisations might not be:

‘For some young people, Comhairle is where they feel they fit … they might not fit in a lot of the other things that are available or open to them, but they fit within Comhairle, so it is the thing that allows for their personal development.’ [Participation Officer, Interview 2]

Adult participants spoke about the particular personal benefits gained by young people who were involved in national participation initiatives such as the Dáil na nÓg Council and noted that for some young people, the journey started in Comhairle na nÓg at local level and progressed to positions on other local and national youth organisations such as local festival committees. The young people accessed a network of participation through their involvement in Comhairle na nÓg.

‘Most of those who get involved are already interested, but it’s really rewarding when you see a youth who isn’t really that interested and maybe got encouraged by the parents to go, get into the participation and want to help. Like, we had this one girl who wasn’t one of our most interested, but within 6 months she was organising charity fund-raisers and suggesting initiatives to improve the lives of her community.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 11]
Other adult participants spoke about a small number of past participants who had gone on to become Student Union presidents in their universities or held other national youth leadership positions. Participation in Comhairle na nÓg was seen as the starting point for these young people. This reflects what Brodie et al (2011) refer to as the ‘networked young person’. However, some of the adult participants expressed concerns that the young people involved in national organisations such as Dáil na nÓg experience much greater personal impacts than those involved at local level only and that there may be a hierarchy in personal outcomes for young people involved. Also, there were some concerns among a small number of participants that those involved in national organisations were dominating local-level meetings and intimidating other members who did not have the same level of confidence.

6.3 Individual and personal impacts – Seldom-heard young people

The adult participants were very positive about the personal impacts of participation on seldom-heard young people. According to McEvoy (2011), on average 21% of young people involved in Comhairle na nÓg are from seldom-heard groups. Some of the participants pointed out that participation can initially be easier for young people from middle-class backgrounds, while one stated that some of the young people participating in her project were initially intimidated by the confidence levels of two members who attended private school. However, many of the adult participants felt that participation initiatives, especially Comhairle na nÓg, create a safe space for some seldom-heard young people and in particular a safe space to discuss issues of difference and social justice. Many of the adults interviewed discussed the extensive work that is done to recruit and prepare young people from seldom-heard backgrounds for participation in Comhairle na nÓg:

‘We do go to the disability group and Travellers’ groups and say to them “If you want to get involved, send people on the day”. The work in those groups is in the preparation. I go out to the groups three or four times before they go to Comhairle, to their own groups to where they feel safe and talk them through the day.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 7]

Much of this work is done in partnership with agencies that support the participation of seldom-heard young people, including youth groups, Youth Reach and Garda Diversion Projects.

6.3.1 Traveller young people

Adult participants highlighted some of the challenges in recruiting and maintaining participation by seldom-heard young people and in particular members of the Traveller community:

‘For Traveller boys, it is kind of a macho thing and once the girls get to a certain age then shielding takes place. In the school it is one thing, but this [participation in Comhairle na nÓg] is a different thing entirely so it is quite hard to bring them into the fold.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 2]

‘I am conscious about hard-to-reach groups. Mostly we work with young Travellers and have them involved in things, but we don’t tend to get their long-term involvement in the Comhairle na nÓg Committee. It hasn’t happened. It is much harder work to get that commitment.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 8]

In relation to the participation of young people from the Traveller community, a number of issues emerged. There is often a high level of interaction between Comhairle Coordinators and Traveller support workers. The role of the Traveller support agencies is crucial in supporting the young person’s involvement and many of the adult participants interviewed have a strong working relationship with local agencies to support Traveller participation. The experiences of some of the Comhairle Coordinators is that young people from the Traveller community
tend to come initially to meetings with a lot of support, but then leave. Literacy issues were also perceived as a barrier for some members of the Traveller community. However, there were also a number of examples of very successful participation experiences for members of the Traveller community. When adult participants were asked about participation of seldom-heard young people, they tended to focus on the Traveller community:

‘Last year’s theme was social inclusion and the girl from the Traveller group stood up and said her name and said she was from the Traveller group and said “I live social inclusion” and then sat down. You wouldn’t hear a pin drop and she came in second highest in the voting … Her first couple of meetings were wobbly. She wasn’t sure of herself, but now she is coming into her own.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 7]

Another participant spoke about the experiences of a young person from the Traveller community and of how his positive experiences of participation in Comhairle na nÓg had a multiplier effect in his community:

‘One kid I have involved is a Traveller and he has been involved in Comhairle for the last few years and he headed up in his school a trip to Africa, which was a big drive and raised over €35,000. He was chairperson of the committee and two years ago he wouldn’t have been interested in doing anything. It is one of our biggest achievements that he has achieved so much … As a result of him being involved, it has had a far wider effect on his community – by getting his friends involved – whereas before they never got involved in any initiatives.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 10]

### 6.3.2 Young people with disabilities

A small number of participants spoke about trying to create the conditions for participation for young people with disabilities:

‘The Disability sector is one that we have found challenging to get. There are physical challenges, but we have always had a venue that is suitable. But there are other challenges as well – the confidence isn’t there or they don’t feel comfortable being there on day one with 100 young people and you have to be there on the big day. We do endeavour through the Steering group to have links to them. Personnel from the HSE are on the Comhairle Steering group.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 7]

One respondent described an initiative her Comhairle was involved in to support the participation of young people with disabilities through a partnership with another organisation:

‘Young people with intellectual disabilities are partnered up with a peer [based on an American model]. For a couple of years, one of our Dáil na nÓg reps was involved with a young person with an intellectual disability and we have had a number of them come along to our county-wide AGM and he was integrated so well with the committee. In between they were texting and contacting each other. It is a very small number of young people we are working with, partly because it is another charitable project which is being cut, but we would have had about 8 of those young people at our AGM and they were at a stage where they were able to participate and be able to be split up from the adult volunteers and join in activities and be spread out among all the groups.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 8]
6.3.3 Other seldom-heard young people

Participation of seldom-heard young people appears to be dependent on networks of support from other organisations and involves multi-agency work. For example, one participant mentioned the role of the VEC in providing language support to address language barriers for Eastern European young people who are interested in attending Comhairle na nÓg. A number of participants also mentioned the role of the School Completion Programme, which operates throughout the country as a key support agency in supporting seldom-heard young people and has assisted through the funding of transport and support for young people who are participating. The School Completion Programme is particularly instrumental in accessing young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The adult participants discussed the opportunity that participation can provide for some young people by offering a safe space to address issues that are important to them. One respondent described a young person who ‘was struggling with his sexuality and half-way through the year he came out to all the lads and since then has been setting up a LGBT group in the county’ (Comhairle Coordinator, Interview 15). Another respondent spoke about the safe environment in the Children and Young People’s Forum, which allows some young people to explore issues of identity within their own lives. The interviewee referred to one young person who came out to the other Forum members ‘before he did to anyone else, before anyone in his school, or in his town, because he felt safe with them, because they completely accepted him, because he saw people being accepted from all different kinds of situations’ (DCYA staff member, Interview 1). Participation spaces can provide a young person not only with a safe space, but also with an opportunity to advocate for other young people and to provide support to others.

In general, the adult participants were very enthusiastic about the role that participation initiatives have played in involving seldom-heard young people and allowing them to have a voice and engage more with the wider community. They were also positive about the impact on non-seldom-heard young people and felt that they experience an increase in empathy and respect for diversity through their experiences. However, the involvement of seldom-heard young people is dependent on the availability of networks of support for the young people and on interagency supports. There was also a concern among some participants that seldom-heard young people might not want to represent or feel that they can represent all other seldom-heard young people. Barriers for seldom-heard young people are discussed further in Chapter 8.

6.4 Family impact

Participants agreed that most parents are very proud of their children’s involvement and the majority of parents provide both emotional and practical supports to enable their children’s participation. In rural areas, children and young people are especially dependent on parents for transport and some participants pointed out that budget cuts mean that parents are being asked more frequently to bring their children to meetings and events rather than hiring buses and taxis. Other than this, parents had limited practical involvement in Comhairle activities but instead were seen as providing emotional support for their child’s participation activities:

‘Parents are so supportive and are proud of their children being involved. You see and hear the parents getting excited when their child is speaking on the radio or representing their community at meetings. It can bring children and their families closer together and give them common ground. It allows the parents to see their children as young adults rather than as kids.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 11]
Most of the young people view their participation experiences as a separate space from their family life (see Section 5.4), particularly where the young person is involved in national-level participative initiatives. However, the adult participants observed that many of the families tend to be involved in their own communities and that a young person’s interest in participation or politics often comes from their home experience.

6.5 Role of schools in shaping participation

Schools are often the primary sites of information about and recruitment into participation initiatives, and their role as gatekeepers to initial involvement in participation initiatives was highlighted by almost all of the adult participants in this study. Gatekeepers can severely limit or expand who participates (Wells, 2009; Cairns, 2006). The relationship with schools was viewed as very important in accessing young people, particularly in the initial recruitment of children and young people to attend Comhairle na nÓg AGMs, which are often the first point of contact between participation initiatives and young people. The majority of the Comhairlís select or elect their committees at their annual AGMs. As an example of such gatekeeping, some participants felt that it is difficult to access the students directly and information about often stayed with the school Secretary or Principal and was not filtered down to students.

Relationships with the school were often dependent on individual goodwill and some Comhairle Coordinators were not clear who they should be contacting in the school.

Some participants pointed out that Comhairle Coordinators who were employed in the local VECs enable a more positive relationship with the school because they are viewed as having an educational remit. School Principals tended to give the information on Comhairle to just the Transition Year Coordinators and Comhairle was consequently viewed as an initiative only suitable for Transition Year students. While Transition Year students do have more time to take part in extra-curricular activities, this restricts the age of participation to students aged 15-16, thereby shaping the profile of young people who participate. In addition, recent research has found that while 80% of Irish secondary schools do offer Transition Year programmes, smaller schools and socio-economically disadvantaged schools are less likely to offer Transition Year programmes in their schools, which might further limit opportunities for involvement in Comhairle na nÓg for some young people (Clerkin, 2012). The DCYA recommends that Comhairlís strive for a membership profile of young people aged 12-18 (McEvoy, 2011). Some of the participants indicated that schools sometimes tell students to attend the Comhairle na nÓg AGMs without giving them any information on what is required of them or about Comhairle activities.

There is also a tendency among schools to send students who are seen as high academic achievers or who are ‘model participants’ to represent the school, rather than representing the views of other young people. Some participants were critical of this selection process and felt the schools are ‘not sending a fair, broad representation of the population of young people’:

“The schools send their A students, student council or debating team, but they are the top notch. They are what the school would like to see the school as being viewed as. No matter what I say, we always get the cream of the crop, which is unfortunate as I am sure there are other kids there with opinions. I think they [schools] see it as status – if we are going on a youth council, we have to have our A students.”
[Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 7]

Student councils in schools were viewed as a key site for recruitment of young people for participation initiatives. Many of the adult participants were critical of the school authorities in only putting forward student council members for attendance at the Comhairle na nÓg AGMs. This confines selection of youth participants to young people who are already active in participation initiatives and narrows the youth voice. Also, this method of recruitment means
that local Comhairle ‘very rarely would get a seldom-heard young person in through the school’ (Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 1).

Some respondents suggested that the perceived weakness of the student council model as a participative structure within the school environment may have an impact on the perception of other youth participation initiatives by children and young people. One participant complained that some schools send students to the Comhairle na nÓg AGM in their school uniforms, which are unsuitable for some of the participative methodologies used at the AGM, such as working on the floor. Uniforms also single out these young people compared to other participants and suggest that they are representing the school instead of other young people.

The relationships that the local Comhairle na nÓg Coordinators develop with their local schools were seen as critically important in recruiting young people for participation and the dependency on the schools makes it difficult to challenge issues of power and authority within school environments. Child and youth power within schools is itself a challenging topic for youth participation to focus on. Members of the focus group of Comhairle Coordinators felt that young people in the school system are not often encouraged to question, think critically or challenge, and that there needs to be changes in the education system to prepare children and young people for participation. Some participants viewed the youth participation agenda as at odds with the school environment and the passive role of young people within educational settings. Also, a number of participants felt that there are limited mechanisms in place for members of Comhairle na nÓg to feed back to other young people on their work or to influence change within their own schools.

In relation to alternative methods of recruitment that were less dependent on student councils, participants made a number of suggestions. These included more official recognition of participation initiatives by the Department of Education and Skills, and the development of guidelines on recruitment to these initiatives. The role of the School Completion Programme was also mentioned as very positive in recruiting seldom-heard young people within the school environment. It was suggested that in order to achieve a broader representation of young people, Comhairle Coordinators need to work with a network of staff within the school, including Home School Liaison Coordinators, PE teachers, Transition Year Coordinators and the School Completion Programme Coordinators where available. It was also suggested that teachers and school support staff receive training on child and youth participation to support them. The recruitment of young people through other organisations, such as youth clubs or agencies that support seldom-heard young people, was seen as critical to providing a wider representative group of children and young people. One of the participants felt that the schools she worked with were often surprised by some of the young people nominated for Comhairle na nÓg from outside the school system since they did not seem to fit the school’s idea of a ‘model student’.

Participants were also cognisant of the pressure that schools already face on their time and resources. Some felt that it is difficult to expect schools to play a key role since they are subject to existing curricular pressures. It was also observed that many schools are very supportive of the work of Comhairle na nÓg and proud of their pupils’ participative activities. Gradually, some schools have become more supportive of Comhairle na nÓg and a number of participants mentioned school provision of transport for attendance at AGMs. There is evidence that a cultural change is slowly occurring, which may be due to a recognition from the Department of Education and Skills that time spent with Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg is regarded as ‘official’ school-time.
6.6 Impact on communities

A major impact of the work of Comhairle na nÓg is that it is now considered the main contact point for any consultation with children and young people by the majority of Local Authorities in Ireland. A participant stated that Comhairle was ‘very much now in the minds of local decision-makers … they see them as a vehicle for getting things for young people’ (Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 7). Most participants felt that the work of Comhairle na nÓg is most successful when it deals with issues that are local and relevant to the youth participants and had realistically achievable outcomes. For example, the themes of youth spaces and youth facilities are very common in the work of the Comhairlí. All of the participants felt strongly that young people should be supported in expressing their views through Comhairle na nÓg and that the agenda for the local Comhairlí is youth-led:

‘I think in identifying the issues it is very youth-led … I think it has to be their issues, and it’s about the adults trying to support them in their action plan around those issues … I think they probably need the support of the adults in terms of getting buy-in from schools and youth organisations because it’s adults talking to adults.’
[Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 6]

The Comhairle na nÓg meetings appear to be youth-led and power and responsibility related to decision-making are either completely youth-centred or shared with adults. Further, there was agreement among the adult participants that control of the Comhairle na nÓg agenda needs to be with the young people.

6.6.1 Young people’s involvement with decision-making in communities

The work of Comhairle na nÓg was seen as impacting on communities in a number of different ways. In the most recent review of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund (McEvoy, 2011), four key areas of focus emerge for the work of the local Comhairlí. These are bullying, facilities for young people, mental health and rural transport. Particular projects discussed by adult participants interviewed for this research are as follows:

› inter-generational projects, such as a DVD exploring attitudes of older and younger people towards one another;
› youth conferences, such as the ‘Say It Out Loud’ youth conference;
› influence on setting up and running youth cafés;
› Shop Local campaigns;
› presentation to HSE Children and Family Services committee (now Tusla, Child and Family Agency);
› cross-border peace projects;
› input into City and County Development Plans;
› introduction of youth travel cards;
› presentation at Social Inclusion Measures group;
› county survey on transport;
› organisation of youth festivals.

At local level, Comhairle na nÓg is now viewed as the main method of gaining the views of young people and consulting with them on a variety of issues. Young people are involved in community decision-making processes in a number of different ways. Presentations to the Local Authorities were the most common method of engaging with local decision-makers mentioned by the research participants. Other information-sharing events included Comhairlí submissions to local strategic or environmental plans, political speed-dating, development of local service directories and conferences organised by Comhairle na nÓg. According to McEvoy (2011), there is a range of policies in place in the majority of Local Authority areas
related to the activities of Comhairle na nÓg. For example, 69% of Local Authorities have identified Comhairle na nÓg as a ‘priority action’ in at least one of their Local Authority plans, including Social, Economic and Cultural Strategies, Social Inclusion Plans and Budget Plans.

A key area in which children and young people can influence policy-making at local level is to have a designated position on a decision-making body. Evaluations of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund have found increased engagement with the Strategic Policy Committees (McEvoy, 2011). At national policy level, Actions 7-9 of Teenspace – National Recreation Policy for Young People (2007) direct Local Authorities to utilise the Comhairle na nÓg to inform relevant City and County Strategies/Plans, particularly in relation to recreational facilities and community amenity programmes, and to encourage young people to participate on relevant sub-committees such as the Strategic Policy Committees.

According to McEvoy (2011) in the latest evaluation of the Comhairle Development Fund, 48% of Comhairlí have young people represented on decision-making bodies. Only Fingal, Monaghan, Sligo and Wicklow Comhairlí have actual representation on a Strategic Policy Committee or Joint Policing Committee, but many other Comhairlí have made presentations or submissions to these committees. The Fingal Comhairle is represented on two of the Council’s Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) – the Community, Recreation and Amenities SPC and the Environment SPC. There are a number of other specific examples of Comhairlí na nÓg engaging with SPCs, e.g. the South County Dublin Comhairle engages with the Arts, Culture and Libraries SPC, and the Roscommon Comhairle made a presentation to a meeting of the Housing, Social, Cultural and Community SPC. Engagement with the SPCs is also bi-directional and in some counties, the chairperson of the SPC also sits on the Comhairle na nÓg’s Steering Committee.

There seems to be a variety of experiences in the different Comhairlí regarding the levels of consultation or involvement in decision-making which young people are experiencing:

‘From a Local Authority point of view, we’re probably still at a point where consultation is new, even though it’s here since the Local Government Act 2000. It’s still something we’re grasping. So I don’t think it’s resistance – it’s lack of knowledge, lack of awareness.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 6]

Some of the respondents were critical of the value of putting young people on SPCs and other formal committees:

‘I remember being asked by the Participation Officer why we don’t put young people on the Strategic Policy Committees [SPC]. I don’t know if these people have ever been to the SPCs. You wouldn’t want to go to one yourself, never mind send them. There has to be something very specific and prepared.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 8]

‘The young person was just so bored by it, and the jargon was there. So we’re still looking for guidance, really, and for a bolt of inspiration about how we can change those structures to make them more youth-friendly. Because it hasn’t worked, by just sending one young person in, as the youth voice, it hasn’t worked.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 5]

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5 Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) are provided for in Section 48 of the Local Government Act 2001 and operate in every City and County Council. SPCs have a particular focus on policy-making and implementation. Two-thirds of the membership of each SPC is comprised of elected members and one-third of the membership is made up of ‘sectoral interests’, including representatives from the community and voluntary sector in the city/county.
There are a number of challenges that accompany committee work for young people and sitting on adult committees has been problematic. Policy-making tends to be a very structured and formal procedure and some of the participants felt that there is a need for more national guidelines on supporting youth involvement in policy development at local level. Also, some participants felt that much of what was discussed at these committees is not relevant to young people and may not always be appropriate or interesting for youth representatives. There is a danger in these situations that if the young person is not empowered to participate fully, their presence on committees is tokenistic. The focus group participants also felt that additional training is needed to allow young people to engage meaningfully in adult forums.

Some of the participants felt that there should be more formal guidelines and directives from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government requiring the Local Authorities to consult children and young people on a wider range of policy implementation. It was suggested that Local Authority staff would take the role of the local Comhairle more seriously if there were a statutory requirement to consult with them.

The attitude of adult decision-makers to youth participation was raised by almost all of the respondents. Some felt that some decision-makers are patronising towards young people and do not always take their views seriously. The focus group participants felt that some decision-makers are reluctant to engage with young people and the Comhairle Coordinators often spend a considerable part of their time breaking down barriers and persuading decision-makers to listen. Interestingly, the focus group participants also felt that many of the youth participants do not have very high expectations of being listened to by local decision-makers.

Some participants felt that their Comhairlí are more engaged with employees of the Local Authorities such as the County Manager or VEC staff rather than elected officials and that this allows young people more access to decision-makers. Focus group participants also suggested that some Local Authorities are more supportive of youth participation than others and individual relationships between Comhairle Coordinators and Local Authority staff are often crucial to the impact of youth participation structures and projects.

Another issue affecting the role that young people can have in decision-making is the impact of budget cuts and changes in City and County Councils due to the recession and staff-hiring embargos were identified as barriers to accessing local decision-makers for Comhairlí. The focus group participants felt that this current lack of resources is diluting the youth voice at local level. Another difficulty highlighted is the inactivity of Comhairle na nÓg over the summer months of June–August when some policy planning takes place. Local decision-making processes and timescales are often not youth-friendly, so involving youth participants is not always feasible. The relevance of issues to young people’s lives was also seen as important.

A recent change to the structure of Comhairle na nÓg, which was mentioned in many of the adult interviews, was the introduction of Steering Committees to advise and assist the Comhairle Coordinators. According to McEvoy (2011), 94% of Comhairlí na nÓg now have Steering Committees in place and three-quarters of these have a Comhairle na nÓg member on the Steering Committee to represent other young people. McEvoy reports that the Steering Committees help raise the profile of Comhairle na nÓg, provide links to local decision-makers, allow Comhairlí to access expertise on the issues young people identify and improve access to seldom-heard young people. According to the DCYA, membership of the Steering Committee is specific to the key organisations that exist in each area and may differ from year to year.
to year depending on the topics on which the Comhairle na nÓg participants have chosen to work and the expertise needed for these topics. However, core members of the Steering Committee should include the Comhairle Coordinator, youth members of the Comhairle na nÓg Committee, a representative from the Local Authority, youth services and a youth officer from the local VEC. The adult participants in this research were mostly positive about the introduction of the Steering Committee and most felt that it has increased the effectiveness of their Comhairle and allowed greater access to other professionals and agencies, which increased the impact of the young people’s participation activities:

'It is slow to change. I see County Councillors who still don’t get it and pat the young people on the head. But increasingly I have seen a younger generation of elected officials coming to AGMs and Steering Committees. It does have a massive impact that way; if people are on a Steering Committee and at the end of the meeting they get up and shake hands with a 14-year-old and they are surprised.' [Participation Officer, Interview 3]

Some of the participants felt that due to recent budget cuts, it is difficult to get some professionals to come to the Steering Committee meetings since they have other commitments. There is also a danger that the Steering Committee model is time-consuming for the Coordinators and can be tokenistic. However, overall, most participants felt that the Steering Committees are contributing to expanding the youth participation agenda and enabling other organisations to be more involved in Comhairle na nÓg. Policy change is slow but developing, and according to some participants there is an emerging cultural shift in the involvement of young people in local policy-making which is more noticeable than at national policy-making level.

6.6.2 Strengthening the culture of youth participation

Many of the participants spoke about the role of the DCYA participation initiatives in widening the culture of youth participation by influencing the participation culture in other children and youth organisations. The DCYA initiatives have influenced other children and youth spaces in a number of different ways. For example, the involvement of young people on SPCs and Steering Committees has meant decision-makers who would normally have little contact with children and young people are now working with them in a formal setting. Members of Comhairle na nÓg often regularly consult with young people in their schools and communities, which encourages broader participation beyond Comhairle na nÓg members themselves. Also, the role of schools and other youth organisations in the selection of young people for participation initiatives increases the awareness and dialogue around participation for other young people and adults working in these settings. Many of these organisations now do preparatory work with young people before they attend the Comhairle na nÓg AGMs, increasing awareness of participation and helping to embed the language of active participation into other youth spaces:

'I believe I have seen the impact of youth participation on youth organisations. It’s a virus, you can’t change it, and you can’t stop the workers saying “How come we get their opinions over here but not over there?” I think it [the participation agenda] has had a huge impact on youth work and youth organisations in this country'.

[Participation Officer, Interview 1]

Some of the participants spoke about the partnerships that have been developed with other children and youth organisations locally and the sharing of skills and knowledge which these relationships have facilitated. Connected to this, some participants have noted the emergence of local ‘champions’ of youth participation. Many of the participants referred to the local youth services as very youth-led and supportive of the work of the DCYA participation initiatives. Some of the Comhairle Coordinators themselves are employed through local youth organisations, such as Foróige, and this interagency model, at both national and local level, has a positive influence on further embedding the culture of youth participation across agencies.
6.6.3 Structures within participation initiatives

Respondents identified a number of issues relating to structures and organisation which, in their view, have influenced potential impacts of DCYA participatory initiatives. Almost all of the participants commented on the importance of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund in progressing the work of the Comhairlí. In particular, the increased funding has greatly expanded the activities of the individual Comhairlí as demonstrated by the evaluation reports of the Comhairle Development Fund (McEvoy, 2009a and 2011). The important role played by the recently appointed Participation Officers in supporting youth participation initiatives was mentioned by a number of the adults interviewed. It was viewed by some participants as an institutional change in child and youth participation, one which is moving the participation agenda forward. The value of networking days, facilitated by the Participation Officers, was highlighted by a number of interviewees and Comhairle Facilitators in particular were positive about the opportunity to share good practice with other facilitators. McEvoy (2011) also found that the local Comhairle Coordinators were very positive about the role of the Participation Officers and 94% rated the support they received from the Participation Officers as either ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’ to their work.

Another key national development that has influenced the work of Comhairle na nÓg is the development of a common brand and logo for all the Comhairlí. This was viewed by a number of participants as a very positive development which will strengthen the profile of the individual Comhairlí.

The key role played by the Comhairle Coordinator was discussed by many of the adult participants and there was general agreement that a dedicated coordinator is vital. The Coordinator is often the central ‘adult ally’ (Checkoway, 2011) to supporting the participation agenda for children and young people in their community. Many of the participants commented that the person holding the Coordinator position needs to have skills and experience in working with young people and that much of the work of the Comhairlí depends on personal relationships rather than formal structures.

A small number of participants felt that there is some tension between adult Comhairle Coordinators and youth participants around young people’s expectations of what they can achieve:

‘Sometimes, reading the young people’s evaluations, they say that the Comhairle leader [Coordinator] should not have so much control. But we have guidelines from the DCYA about what we can and cannot do. Young people want to cover everything and time is very limited. You have to work on an issue and have some success at the end of it. You can go back to your peers and say this is what we did, this is what we have achieved. There is a format to it.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 4]

There also appear to be some tension around the need for a clear outcome from the work of the Comhairle na nÓg and the process that might be associated with more traditional youth work. Some participants explained that there can be tension between adults and young people about focusing on one issue for a long period of time, rather than reacting to issues as they arise, such as college fees.

The members of the focus group felt that some topics which young people often choose to work on, such as homophobic bullying and mental health, are sensitive topics and not appropriate for one-off meetings. They suggested that these issues are complex and can raise personal issues that require a safe space and a skilled adult facilitator. The team-building and support work required to work on these issues was seen as taking up a lot of the meeting time. The focus group participants felt that the DCYA promotes a model of work that focuses on outcomes which are measurable, and while outputs are important, the focus group also emphasized the importance of process for the personal development of the young people involved. However, many of the youth participants in this research also emphasized the importance of having an output (a product) from their participation experience.
6.6.4 Impact on the wider community

The issue of interaction with the wider community in which participation initiatives are located was discussed. Some of the participants indicated that young people feed back to their schools and youth clubs as part of their work with Comhairle na nÓg and that they take this responsibility very seriously. The involvement of young people in research conducted at local and national level is beneficial to the wider community and helps to represent the views of young people in the wider community. Peer research is used by most of the DCYA participation initiatives. Some of the participants felt that other young people in the community respect the work of the Comhairle members, but some have unrealistic expectations of what they can do:

‘I think they probably want them to do a lot more than they are doing ... They think they should be doing everything. They try to get them to take on different issues. If something comes up, they want them to deal with it immediately. They think the Comhairle should be doing that.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 4]

The local Comhairlí na nÓg play an important role in bringing attention to youth issues within their community and raising awareness can bring about change beyond the immediate work of the Comhairle. For example, one Comhairle Coordinator explained how her Comhairle na nÓg raised awareness of homophobic bullying in its area and this led to the local youth service providing their staff with training on LGBT issues. The local youth service has now offered to set up a LGBT support group. Many of the participants mentioned the role of seldom-heard young people in bringing back information to their communities through their youth groups and in its turn the participation of seldom-heard young people allows greater access to seldom-heard communities, such as the new migrant communities and Traveller community.

The adult participants felt that there is a growing awareness of the work of the Comhairlí in most communities and this is having an impact on the recognition of the valuable role of children and young people in their communities. In particular, a number of participants cited projects that involve children and older people working together and the positive impact these projects have on relations between younger and older people living in the same community. Some felt that there needs to be additional work to improve awareness of youth participation in the wider community, such as more regular events or formal recognition from the community to recognise young people’s achievements.

6.7 Impact on decision-making in Irish society

According to many of the adult interviewees, one of the most positive impacts of the DCYA participation initiatives is that children and young people are given access to decision-makers in a number of local and national forums. In particular, it was noted that participation in the Dáil na nÓg Council allows young people access to national decision-makers. According to one respondent, one outcome of this access is the development of a more nuanced understanding of issues affecting children and young people: ‘Comhairle and other DCYA initiatives have changed the clichéd view of Irish young people and have helped to raise awareness for issues that affect youth today’ (Comhairle Coordinator, Interview 11). A number of participants felt that being based in the DCYA is beneficial because this gives young people more direct access to decision-makers. The role of the Children and Young People’s Forum was also highlighted as allowing children and young people influence national policy development.
6.7.1 National consultations

Consultation with children and young people has been an important part of the work of the DCYA. Since 2003, the DCYA has been responsible for spearheading consultations with children and young people using a variety of methodologies on a broad range of national policies, including:

- the development of the National Play Policy (2003);
- the development of the Children’s Code of Advertising (2004);
- the development of the National Recreation Policy (2005);
- the development of a national set of child well-being indicators (2005);
- the development of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship (2006);
- the development of the Irish Youth Justice Strategy (2007);
- the misuse of alcohol among young people (2007);
- teen mental health (2008) (see Case Study in Chapter 5);
- children’s views on the development of the new National Paediatric Hospital (2009);
- children in the care of the State (January – December 2010) (see Case Study in Chapter 5);
- review of the Junior Cycle in second-level schools (November 2010);
- the White Paper on Crime (November 2010);
- consultations with children and young people on the new National Children’s Strategy (March 2011);
- public consultation on ‘Improving the Lives of Children’ (2012);
- consultations with children and young people for the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in Primary Schools (October 2011);
- workshops with children and young people to develop domains and questions for the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey 2014 (2012 and 2013);
- ‘Young Voices’ consultations with young people for Ireland’s EU Presidency on social inclusion in the youth sector (January and February 2013);
- consultations with young people on the transition to third-level education (October 2013);
- ‘Young Voices’ consultations with young people as part of the EU Structured Dialogue Process on employment and training (January and February 2014).

In 2012, the DCYA held a public consultation exercise called ‘Improving the Lives of Children’ to feed into the new Children and Young People’s National Policy Framework, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (DCYA, 2014). This was a national consultation aimed at anyone interested in children and young people, and focused on four key areas of their lives: safety and security; learning and education; health and activity; and economic security.

In relation to national consultations, the review of the Junior Cycle in second-level schools (2010) was mentioned by a number of participants as an important piece of work for the young people involved and the report was viewed as having the potential to inform the future development of the Junior Cycle. In particular, they felt that the launch of the report, which was attended by two Ministers (Children and Youth Affairs, and Education and Skills), reflected the increased importance attributed to the views of young people. In October 2012, the Minister for Education and Skills announced major changes to the Junior Cycle, some of which were adopted from the consultation.

Also mentioned was the OMCYA’s (2010a) report Life skills matter – Not just points: A Survey of Implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Second-level Schools. This piece of peer research was conducted by the Dáil na nÓg Council and explored how young people experience implementation of SPHE and RSE in second-level schools. Some of the participants cited this report as having an impact at national level on an issue important to young people since it brought new information into the public domain. This project was also cited as an example of how effective the work of the Dáil na nÓg Council can be.
DCYA participation initiatives are playing a key role in allowing young people to access decision-makers in a number of forums which have traditionally excluded the voices of children and young people. An interviewee felt that senior civil servants are very enthusiastic and interested in what the young people have to say when they are invited to meet with them via Dáil na nÓg. In 2011, the Dáil na nÓg Council was asked to address two important educational conferences in Ireland where key decision-makers met. These were the annual conference of the Joint Managerial Body (JMB), which represents the interests of all voluntary secondary schools in the country, and the annual conference of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), which represents principals and deputy principals at post-primary level. This was the first time either of these conferences had invited young people to address their members. The Dáil na nÓg Council presented findings from their Life skills matter – Not just points report. An adult interviewee asserted that these conference presentations were a ‘huge opportunity and I think probably have had more impact than probably anything’ (Dáil na nÓg Facilitator, Interview 2). The presentations provided an opportunity for the views of children and young people to be directly heard in a forum where their needs are discussed but their voices often excluded. Many of the adult interviewees spoke about the young people being very positive about gaining access to decision-makers and in particular many of them viewed meeting the Minister for Children as a highlight of their participation experience.

According to Harper (2011, p. 20), ‘the Dáil na nÓg structure allows policy-makers access to groups of young people, where the young people are well informed and prepared in territory where they themselves are comfortable’. This finding is reflected in the comments of the adult participants in this study, and young people are supported in this participation initiative to contribute to adult meetings and forums in a meaningful way and to represent the views of other young people.

6.7.2 Media

According to McEvoy (2011), during 2009-2010, 84% of the Comhairlí na nÓg engaged with the media to promote their activities. The majority of the adult research participants in this study felt that the national and local media are very positive about DCYA participation initiatives and that the activities of young people in these participation initiatives help to challenge negative stereotypes of young people. Participants were particularly positive about the interest of the local media in the activities of Comhairle na nÓg and most Comhairlí appear to have a very good relationship with their local radio station and local newspapers. They agreed that the positive stories in the local media about children and young people’s participation activities have a positive impact on the image of young people in the locality. Some Comhairlí are called upon to comment on local stories which are relevant to young people and in some areas the Comhairle na nÓg is recognised by local media outlets as the representative voice of young people. One participant indicated that this can sometimes lead to tensions with the Local Authorities if young people are overly critical of local decision-makers:

‘There is one paper in the county and they are forever looking for interviews … It can be controversial sometimes and in the past we have upset the powers that be. We feel there might be a bit of censorship on some issues, like criticising issues about where facilities are located.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 10]

There were some criticisms among adult participants about the role of the national media and their negative portrayal of young people:

‘National newspapers are more interested in stories that paint young people as stereotypical, clichéd ‘hoodies’ who are under-age drinking and being a nuisance to society.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 11]
Some of the participants mentioned the positive impact of the *Fair Say!* campaign, organised by the Dáil na nÓg Council in 2007–2008. Its purpose was to challenge the negative portrayal of young people in the media. As part of this campaign, the Dáil na nÓg Council monitored media coverage of Junior Certificate celebrations at national and local level. The participants met with editors from both print and broadcast media to discuss their findings, had an article published in *The Irish Times* and addressed the Joint Committee on Communications, Energy and Natural Resources Debate in Dáil Éireann:

> “Basically, their message was "Stop talking about teenagers and talk to teenagers". Now they would all argue that they think the media have responded and that they actually do talk more to teenagers, which I think is probably true. But that’s interesting because the media are largely run by private sector individuals, companies, and so they have the opportunity to respond, and to change, more easily than huge systems such as schools and education … So, young people themselves feel that was quite a powerful campaign, which it probably was, because they got to meet face on the people who make those decisions.” [DCYA staff member, Interview 1]

One of the participants commented that some of the local media coverage can be ‘paternalistic or condescending, and journalists rarely ask the young people any in-depth questions about their work’ (Comhairle Coordinator, Interview 16).

### 6.8 Representativeness of DCYA participation initiatives

The issue of representation and the young people who get involved in the DCYA participation initiatives was discussed. The role of schools in shaping who participates and the inclusion of seldom-heard young people have already been discussed (see Sections 6.3 and 6.5 above). Other key issues to emerge in this area are the transport difficulties faced by young people from islands and isolated rural areas. Another issue that relates to the role of schools in shaping who participates is the election process itself and how this can be a barrier to some children and young people, particularly those who feel shy in putting themselves forward for Comhairle na nÓg. Related to this, some young people put themselves forward for election because they are popular, but then have little interest in participation. Creating an appropriate balance in the selection of young people for participation initiatives was something with which many of the Comhairle Coordinators were concerned. Many felt that this is an important focus of their work and the links with youth work organisations and other children and young people’s support groups were seen as central to creating a more diverse population of child and youth participants. Some of the adult interviewees felt that many of the young people they work with are very conscious of their role as representatives for the voice of other children and young people.

#### 6.8.1 Age and representation

The issue of age and representation was mentioned by a number of participants. As previously discussed, many of the participants in Comhairle na nÓg tend to be aged 15 and 16 years, despite the DCYA’s (2011) recommendation that every Comhairle na nÓg should strive for a membership profile of 12–18 years. It was also noted by a participant that officerships tend to go to older participants. Some of the adult participants indicated that it is a challenge for them to work with children in the wide age range of 12–18 and that they feel more comfortable working with children in the same age cohort. It was also noted by participants that once young people enter exam years, they are less likely to attend meetings because they are under more pressure to study. One of the participants noted that this means some young people are only able to commit to involvement in Comhairle na nÓg for one year.
6.8.2 Who gets involved in participation initiatives?

There was a strong theme emerging from the adult participant interviews that many of the young people who participate in these initiatives are often involved in other youth initiatives and tend to be confident and have a lot of family support. This is similar to the views of the young people involved in the Children and Young People’s Forum (CYPF), who felt that while the CYPF does represent young people from a variety of backgrounds, young people on the Forum tend to have ‘personalities where people want their voices to be heard’ and in many ways this makes the members very similar. A small number of participants felt that some of the young people who participate are not representative of the broader youth population because they more confident, more likely to be involved in other participation activities like student councils and more likely to come from homes where there is already a strong volunteering ethos. However, other participants felt that the most important focus is not on representativeness but on supporting child and youth participants ‘to listen to as many young people as they possibly can so that they are coming with a more balanced view’ (Participation Officer 2).

Also in relation to the CYPF, a DCYA staff member spoke about the benefits of involvement of children and young people from diverse backgrounds:

‘I think one of the most amazing benefits of that Forum [CYPF] was the fact that young people from very, very different backgrounds who would never meet one another became really close friends, and ... it was of major importance to them to be accepted, and to accept one another, and no-one ever questioned who anyone was, where they came from, what their background was. Some of them never revealed their background, and some of them revealed it when they felt safe, and some of them just wanted to be a child, or a young person, not have a label.’ [DCYA staff member, Interview 1]

A common issue mentioned by adult participants was that the children and young people involved in the DCYA participation initiatives tend to be involved in other participation initiatives, such as student councils, which does place them in positions where they have their voice listened to more frequently than other young people who are not directly involved in participation initiatives. This again reflects what Brodie et al (2011) refer to as the ‘networked young person’. Membership of Comhairle na nÓg was seen as opening doors for children and young people to participate in other activities and adult participants reported being approached by other organisations and the media to represent the voices of young people in consultations. Some of the participants spoke about the young participants as already being very civic-minded prior to their participation. Seldom-heard participants in particular were seen to benefit from the networking opportunities that participation provides:

‘They are involved in a lot of other activities so you could say they were very civic-minded. Our seldom-heard members have got involved in youth services and other groups because they have seen what is going on.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 15]

Many Comhairle na nÓg members also take on leadership in other clubs and local committees. While this is very beneficial to the young person in terms of personal impacts and allows them to play a very active role in their community and society, some participants had concerns that ‘only a certain type of young person is being elected and it doesn’t really give others a chance ... you are only hearing from one group of young people all the time’ (Comhairle Coordinator, Interview 11). There was a concern that youth voices may become concentrated on a narrow group of young people if the same children and young people are involved in multiple organisations. This may entrench inequality in child and youth participation and reinforce
an ‘insider and outsider’ divide. Some of the participants discussed the gap in participation opportunities that exist for children and young people who are not able to access participation activities through their school or youth club. This raises issues of how children and young people who are involved in schools with limited participation opportunities or are not involved in other youth organisations have their voices heard. However, one interviewee cautioned that not every young person will be interested in taking part in participation initiatives and ‘if the people are self-selecting, you’re going to get a particular type of young person who likes that type of activity’ (DCYA staff member, Interview 1).

6.8.3 Representation on national participation forums: Dáil na nÓg

A number of participants spoke about the selection of young people for participation on the Dáil na nÓg Council:

‘Some of them would be quite high achievers ... they’d be involved in lots of different things, like the European Youth Parliament and their Comhairle and the Dáil na nÓg Council. But then there are a number of people who are always quieter in the Council ... I think you do see a change over time in those people ... it’s important that they’re given the support to do that.’ [Dáil na nÓg Facilitator, Interview 1]

‘With regard to the Dáil na nÓg Council, because they’re elected through the Comhairle, I would say some years the young people have been possibly more articulate and vocal than would be average across the range of population of young people. But I would say it kind of balances out, because there’s always some who aren’t, who are quite kind of average, and then there are others who are very, very bright and very articulate and driven.’ [DCYA staff member, Interview 1]

One participant suggested that the role of other young people in selecting representatives for national forums like the Dáil na nÓg Council may lead to limited opportunities for seldom-heard or quiet young people to put themselves forward for election if they do not have the confidence to do so. However, a DCYA staff member interviewed for this study highlighted the fact that the CYPF, which is also a national participative initiative, represents children and young people from a diverse range of backgrounds and ethnicities. Another issue highlighted by participants was that sometimes members involved in national participative forums may dominate local forums like Comhairle na nÓg and can intimidate other members.
6.9 Case Study

Case Study: Young researcher’s interview with a decision-maker

In August 2012, one of the young researchers in this study interviewed a former Government Minister to get the views of a decision-maker on youth participation in Ireland. The following is an extract from the interview.

Young researcher: Are young people being listened to more than before?
Decision-maker: In terms of the civic life of the country, in terms of how youth are participating in the more serious parts of public life, Comhairle na nÓg is a good thing. It’s a relatively new concept. But it does bring young people into a forum where they can discuss how public policies are impacting on them. How they see changes that would be, they would propose, and it enables them to voice their opinions in a useful forum, voice their opinion in a structured way. In that sense, you know this idea where people aren’t valued or just not heard, I think traditionally 30, 40 years ago, there was almost an attitude, young people should be seen and not heard. Whereas nowadays, I think, the society changes, that young people have opinions, that they’re valid, that they need to be expressed. Young people can deal with a broad range of issues, not just youth-focused … Young people are far more environmentally aware than my generation, about sustainable development; they have a view of these things and certainly they can be a very strong voice.

Young researcher: How do participation initiatives benefit the children and young people involved?
Decision-maker: Basically being an opportunity to show good citizenship and getting more young people to see themselves as citizens. And that’s the most important thing in any Republic, that we have a participative citizenry, that people are involved. It’s an opportunity for young people to express their values about what they feel is important. And there’s a great need to inculcate values now. People see that young people will grow into responsible, well-adjusted citizens who have a contribution to make in their adult life, as well as in their school or during their youth.

Young researcher: Do participation initiatives make a difference to the lives of young people in general?
Decision-maker: Young people can do an awful lot of things at a practical level. And I think that rather than just being advocates for other, strictly youth issues, it should be about youth showing their awareness of other generations’ problems and how they can interact with people. And how they can be practical and be of help to people. I think that would be a very good way in which to use Comhairle na nÓg for the future, not just as I say, keeping it tied down to your own specific issues. It shows there are many young people who are just as concerned about the future of the country as about their own future. They have a sense of loyalty to the country and we should try and always promote that and give them so much opportunity, to show that it is not just some patronising gesture, that it is actually meaningful. And our younger people can, in time and in ways which can be developed and thought out, work and interact with Government at central level and at local level too. I mean, I think at local level the idea of working with Local Authorities to develop communities, to develop facilities, to develop priorities. And I think volunteering is a huge opportunity for young people.
6.10 Summary

Like the youth participants, the adults interviewed for this study indicate that involvement in these initiatives yields significant positive personal impacts for the young people, including seldom-heard young people. Adults’ attitudes towards the impact of the initiatives at community and societal level are more mixed. Youth participants in Comhairle na nÓg engage in a wide range of projects in their communities and participate in a number of forums, but the effectiveness of their participation may be hampered by adult attitudes and the rigidity of adult structures, including schools and Local Authorities. At national level, youth participants have gained unprecedented access to adult decision-makers and have engaged in a number of important initiatives and consultations. But challenges remain. These include the need for a ‘joined-up’ approach, so that the exercise of and learning from children and young people’s participation may be mainstreamed in all Government departments and permeate to institutions at local level. Progress to date includes the employment of dedicated Youth Participation Officers, but much more needs to be done.
7. Comhairle na nÓg Showcase evaluation
7.1 Introduction

One of the issues highlighted during the initial phase of this research was the problematic link between the national and local participation initiatives and the invisibility at national level of local participation initiatives. Respondents felt that Dáil na nÓg nationally does not give the local Comhairlí an opportunity to present their work and that the issues discussed at the Dáil na nÓg Council (now the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive) do not ‘filter down’ to local Comhairlí. A related issue identified by DCYA staff has been the need to raise the national profile of the work of Comhairlí na nÓg around the country. Some youth participants suggested that there needs to be greater communication between these initiatives and in particular a structure for members of national initiatives such as the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive to feed back to local structures.

Since the first phase of data collection for this project was conducted, the DCYA has developed a national event – the Comhairle na nÓg National Showcase – to highlight the work of the local Comhairlí. This event was organised in response to suggestions by young people on the need to build a national status and profile for Comhairle na nÓg. The Showcase was held on 9th November 2012 and was attended by Frances Fitzgerald, TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The Showcase will be held bi-annually. This chapter discusses this event and outlines a second phase of data collection in this study that focused on the impact of the Comhairle na nÓg Showcase on the children and young people who attended the event, on communities and on institutions and decision-makers in Irish society.

7.2 Background to the Comhairle na nÓg Showcase

The aim of the event was to showcase the activities of the 34 local Comhairlí na nÓg over the previous year in engaging with local decision-makers to improve their communities. The event addressed the perspectives of multiple stakeholders:

› Local Comhairle na nÓg Coordinators had called for a national event to focus on local activities and for opportunities for young people to network with other members of Comhairle na nÓg. This need was reflected in the increase in applications to the Development Fund to support networking opportunities.
› Dáil na nÓg in 2011 had made a number of recommendations for actions to improve Comhairle na nÓg locally and nationally, and one of them was the holding of a national showcase. Other recommendations generally seemed to focus on the overarching need to increase opportunities for members to have a voice, gain access to decision-making audiences and have an influence on matters of concern.
› The Department of Children and Youth Affairs wanted to raise the national profile of local Comhairle na nÓg activities and to provide a structure to match a 2-year cycle for Dáil na nÓg.

7.3 Structure of the event

The Comhairle na nÓg National Showcase event was attended by over 500 young people from across the country and it was the first time there was a national focus on the work of the local Comhairlíf. It was attended by a number of decision-makers and politicians, including the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD. All members of Dáil Éireann and Irish members of the European Parliament also received an invitation to attend.

The 5-hour event was structured around a number of key areas. There were opportunities throughout the day for young people to engage with decision-makers and with other Comhairle na nÓg members. During the opening ceremony, a short video showcased the work of the 34 Comhairlíf. Participants were then given time to visit the 34 individual stands displaying the work of each Comhairle. This work included initiatives such as a phone app...
giving information on positive mental health, tackling cyber-bullying, mentoring programmes in schools, positive body image campaigns, school anti-bullying weeks, combating homophobic bullying and mapping mental health services.

Attendees were also given the opportunity to participate in Topic Zones. There were four Topic Zones, which were 40-minute sessions covering discrete topics and chaired by key decision-makers. Young people raised a variety of issues and received information and advice from the adult panel and fellow-youth participants.

The four Topic Zone themes were:

- **Mental health**: hosted by decision-makers from Foróige, Headstrong, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, and the Health Service Executive.
- **Sexual health**: hosted by decision-makers from the Department of Health, Crisis Pregnancy Programme and AIDS West.
- **Youth facilities**: hosted by decision-makers from Dublin City Council, the DCYA, Wicklow VEC and Kerry Diocesan Youth Service.
- **Engaging with decision-makers and Local Authorities**: hosted by decision-makers including a member of Seanad Éireann, Director of Services of Offaly County Council, Meath County Council and two youth members of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive.

The final session of the day included inputs from three Comhairle na nÓg projects and the presentation of Certificates of Achievement to all Comhairlí by the Secretary General of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

### 7.4 Findings

#### 7.4.1 Impacts on the children and young people who attended

The benefits of participation in the Showcase event as reported by young people and as perceived by adult stakeholders and participants reflect those identified within broader DCYA participation initiatives identified throughout this report. Increased self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth were identified across the interviews and focus groups and were seen as linked to a number of factors, particularly the recognition of the work and achievements of Comhairle na nÓg on a national level. Another key factor was the youth participants’ experience of being listened to and being taken seriously by adults:

> ‘That was the sense you got – that it was youth-driven, that it was something they really are proud of, they’re proud of themselves and they were made prouder by being able to showcase it and I think the fact that decision-makers paid attention and seemed equally impressed.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 2]

The level of recognition and the opportunity for an audience with decision-makers was emphasized for the youth participants by the seniority of some of the decision-makers present. These included the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, TD; the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, TD; Jim Breslin, Secretary General of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs; and a number of national and European political figures. In most cases, the attendance of the Taoiseach was viewed positively by the young people and Comhairle Coordinators, and for some it was seen as symbolic of the increased importance of child and youth participation at national level:

> ‘It [Taoiseach’s presence] definitely added a lot of energy to the event and made them feel really great about what they were doing. It made them feel listened to.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 1]
An examination of children and young people’s views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

‘Even for the non-political ones, I think it was a feather in the cap to say “God and he came and he was speaking about it”, so y’know it just gave them that extra bit of status and I think they all need that.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 2]

The perspectives of one focus group of young people were slightly more negative. They expressed frustration at the delay to the schedule caused by the visit of the Taoiseach and disappointment that, in their view, an adult was prioritised over young people on the day. Some were sceptical about the reasons for the Taoiseach’s attendance (in particular the proximity to the vote on the Constitutional referendum on children’s rights). Most participants, however, were very positive that the Taoiseach attended the event and met with some of the youth participants.

The main skills young people gained from the Showcase were (1) representing and presenting their work and ideas; (2) gaining knowledge about policy-making and the policy/governance process; and (3) opportunities for networking with their peers. The work of the local Comhairlí was presented in a number of ways: physically through the exhibition stands, visually through the Comhairle na nÓg DVD and verbally in talking to other participants and adult decision-makers at the stands and in the Topic Zones. One of the political decision-makers noted that not only were the presentations of high quality, but that the young people were articulate in explaining the background and rationale for the various activities and approaches taken.

When talking to adults about the impact of participation for the young people, a number of them identified the learning that took place, particularly about how government/policy-making systems work. Some of the adults felt that the Showcase played an important role in underlining for young people the importance of engagement with policy-makers to make change happen. Members of the youth focus groups suggested that they had received valuable advice and insights from members of other Comhairlí within the Topic Zones.

Related to the gains of personal development was the important social aspect of the Showcase and the opportunities to interact and network with other members of Comhairle na nÓg from around the country:

‘I think the day made them feel part of something larger. They didn’t even realise until they arrived, “Oh wow, we’re part of a big thing and there’s a lot of other young people who care about the same things we do” ... I think that the networking part of it was really strong.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 2]

Seen as one of the most significant elements of the event for young people, the networking with other young people seems to have achieved two things: (1) consolidation and reinforcement of the personal development that was taking place; and (2) it also led to the enhanced membership capacity and sense of belonging to a national Comhairle na nÓg movement.

Since the Showcase, inter-Comhairle collaboration and peer engagement have been taking place and further engagement is planned. In the focus groups with youth participants, this issue was identified as an important outcome of the Showcase. Two of the Comhairlí focus groups have already begun to engage in this type of collaborative networking with Comhairle members in other counties. In all cases, plans to establish regional networks are underway and in some cases specific links with Comhairlé further afield are being examined.
7.4.2 Impacts at a community level

The Comhairle na nÓg Showcase presents an opportunity to address some of the concerns raised by participants in this research study in relation to the link between local and national initiatives. It was suggested by some youth participants that there needs to be greater communication between these initiatives and in particular a structure for members of national initiatives to feed back to local structures. The Showcase certainly seems to have responded to that need and to have served as a catalyst for a more organic national structure of local clusters working within a network.

As mentioned earlier, the impacts on individual participants at the Showcase event include the development of new skills, knowledge, networks, motivation, confidence and ideas. The enhanced capacity of Comhairle members could have a positive impact on local Comhairlí, their functioning and capacity.

The focus groups with youth participants and interviews with adults suggest that the new ideas and confidence gained by individual Comhairle members from attendance at the Showcase are already appearing to have an influence on the work of local Comhairlí. This may lead to indirect effects on local communities through enriched local activities and also potentially a greater voice for young people.

A potential weakness of the Showcase event was the low attendance of local decision-makers. Adult participants suggested that this was due to a number of factors, including budgetary and time constraints, particularly for representatives from outside Dublin. The importance of that missing link was identified by one local Comhairle Coordinator, who felt that one of the priorities for future Showcase events should be to ensure the attendance of local decision-makers.

However, despite that weakness, another Comhairle Coordinator identified that the knowledge gained by the individual youth participants would have a significant local impact: the new awareness and understanding of how things work at local level and what needs to be done at local level to achieve desired outcomes. This was also picked up by a number of the adult decision-makers who attended, in particular the repeated emphasis on local Comhairlí now needing to work to actively engage local and national decision-makers, whether that is through making submissions to decision-makers or by inviting them to events and activities. The importance of familiarity and relationship-building to facilitating engagement with decision-makers was recognised as potentially important for enabling future influence on the policy process.

7.4.3 Impact on institutions and decision-makers in Irish society

On the day of the Showcase, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs stated:

‘Comhairlí na nÓg are now a vibrant and respected forum for voice of children and young people locally. Local politicians, policy-makers and service providers know what Comhairle na nÓg can do and many have experienced the benefits of working directly with them as a consultative and participative forum.’

Minister Fitzgerald noted that work conducted in the local Comhairlí responds to issues very pertinent to children and young people, including youth mental health and bullying, and she was positive about the opportunity that the Showcase presented in allowing children and young people to ask questions directly of decision-makers. Her speech was seen as inspiring and motivating by many of the adult and youth respondents to this research.

The Showcase event enabled members of Comhairle na nÓg to gain access to national decision-makers, to raise awareness of Comhairle na nÓg and its local and national activities among decision-makers who were not already familiar with them, and to help change cultural attitudes towards children and young people’s participation. Access to national decision-makers was something traditionally only available to members of national-level participation
An examination of children and young people’s views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

initiatives like the Dáil na nÓg Council or the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive. Although all local Comhairle have a representative on the National Executive, the Showcase event provided an important bridge to the national-level decision-makers for the majority of the local Comhairle na nÓg members. This further consolidates the growing sense of being part of something national, something bigger and more powerful than the local Comhairle:

‘It links it together for them because we have a national delegate and she’s very good and she’s on every month’s agenda and she gives her feedback. But it’s still very far removed from the young people here locally.’ [Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator, Interview 1]

Interestingly, one politician interviewed felt that just the holding of the event itself and the issuing of invitations to national-level decision-makers raised awareness of Comhairle na nÓg among a broader audience. A member of the DCYA Participation Team also suggested that the Showcase had definitely played an important role in raising the level of awareness of Comhairle na nÓg among the members of the Houses of the Oireachtas. In particular, she felt this was evident to her while she was attending sessions of the Oireachtas with members of Comhairle na nÓg who were there to give presentations to two joint committees involving members of both Houses of the Oireachtas:

‘I felt the politicians weren’t just aware of them – they were giving them their place, or giving them a place, a standing within that … space. I felt that was quite a significant thing, that it wasn’t like a youth club. This is a Comhairle na nÓg. These are representatives of young people …’ [DCYA staff member]

Similarly, the adult respondents agreed that having attended the Showcase and seen what was happening at local level, they would be more likely in the future to take cognisance of Comhairle na nÓg, locally and nationally.

7.5 Discussion

The Showcase event was inspired and shaped by the recognised needs of a number of the stakeholders involved in the DCYA youth participation initiatives and could be viewed as giving a significant national spotlight to local child and youth participation initiatives. Using Lundy’s (2007) Model of Participation, we can assess the Showcase event’s achievements and impacts. As discussed in Section 2.7.1 of this report, Lundy’s model identifies a number of key factors for the effective realisation of children and young people’s participation: space (to express views); voice (facilitated to express views); audience (to be listened to); and influence (to have views appropriately acted upon).

- **Space** (to express views): The Showcase event created the space for local Comhairle to share their activities and to have structured opportunities to engage with decision-makers in a two-way process.
- **Voice** (facilitated to express views): Feedback suggests that the Topic Zones were mostly positive experiences in which young people were facilitated to express their ideas and views. Themed zones were certainly seen as an improvement on the single panel format which had featured in previous Dáil na nÓg events. The ‘voice’ of Comhairle na nÓg would also appear to have been strengthened and enhanced through increased awareness of the national Comhairle na nÓg structure.
- **Audience** (to be listened to): While the majority of engagement between adult decision-makers and the young participants appears to have happened within the Topic Zones, there were also opportunities for engagement at the individual Comhairle stands. The general level of respect and admiration expressed by decision-makers towards the Comhairle na nÓg members suggests that they were listened to and that they have something to contribute in future policy-making.
Influence (to have views appropriately acted upon): It seems clear from the feedback that while there may be no immediate and direct influence on the complex policy-making process, the Showcase event definitely suggests that indirect influence in the future can be enabled:

- by raising awareness of Comhairle na nÓg and its importance to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs;
- by introducing the activities and ideas of the 34 local Comhairlí to a range of national and European decision-makers;
- by increasing the capacity of Comhairle na nÓg members to understand and negotiate the policy and governance systems so as to achieve influence in the future.

Overall, the Showcase event seems to have been an effective response to the needs identified by all of the stakeholders concerning networking and increasing the national visibility of local child and youth participation activities. It has had significant benefits for the individual children and young people who attended in the areas of personal development, social development and skills development. Together, these impacts could be said to have enhanced the capacity of the young people as Comhairle na nÓg members both in their confidence and skills, but also in their awareness of belonging to a larger national organisation and in being inspired and motivated by networking with wider national structures and a sense of being able to achieve more because of it. This enhanced membership capacity of Comhairle na nÓg members feeds into impacts at the community level by increasing the capacity of each local Comhairle, at both the individual level and through the strengthened engagement with other Comhairlí within the national organisation. Concrete plans to collaborate with other Comhairlí and increased understanding of what is required to progress things at local level suggest that the impacts at community level will be seen in the future.

7.6 Summary

The Showcase event raised awareness and consolidated the position of Comhairle na nÓg in the policy-making imagination in many ways, but securing direct influence on policy will be part of a longer and more gradual process. All participants recognised the value of the Showcase event, both in principle and practice (the notable exception being one group whose perspective was affected by the delays caused by the unexpected attendance of the Taoiseach). It bridged the gap between the local and the national, and it made the participants feel that they are important contributors to a national movement. The speech by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs encapsulated one of the most significant achievements of the Comhairle na nÓg Showcase: it epitomised youth participation in a single high-profile event, injected momentum into Comhairle na nÓg and strengthened its capacity to achieve progress, realise change and advance the participation of children and young people in more meaningful ways in Irish society in the future.
8. Discussion of findings, Conclusions and Recommendations
8.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a discussion of the findings from the surveys, interviews and focus groups with youth participants and adult personnel in Comhairle na nÓg and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). The findings are discussed in terms of three main realms of impact that emerged in the study: personal, community and institutional. There were limited findings related to family impact from the data, but the study does reveal that the majority of participants felt that their families were proud of their participation activities. Their families provided practical support for their participation activities and the majority of participants felt that their participation would have a positive impact on their attitude to family life in the future. A number of key issues that emerged from the primary research are also discussed. These include ongoing challenges associated with achieving participation of a broad and diverse group of children and young people, children’s participation in adult spaces, and the role of adults in facilitating and supporting participation. The chapter goes on to outline the barriers and enablers to children and young people’s participation identified by respondents. It finishes with a set of recommendations for addressing and improving children and young people’s participation. These involve listening to children and young people, advertising and awareness, schools, participation spaces, supporting adult facilitators and adult allies, and supporting seldom-heard participants.

8.2 Positive personal impacts for participants

This section explores some of the personal benefits that children and young people derive from participation in DCYA participation initiatives.

8.2.1 DCYA participation spaces: Respecting the voices of children and young people

Evidence in this study indicates that the participation spaces created by the DCYA respect young people both as community members and values them as citizens in their own right. In particular, youth participants were very positive about being listened to by their peers, being able to bring ideas and problems from young people in their area to Comhairle na nÓg, and being respected and listened to by adults they came in contact with through their participation activities. The participants were also very positive about enjoying the meetings and they felt that the adults involved in the DCYA participation initiatives did a good job. Interestingly the current participants were twice as likely as the past participants to be positive about the level of support they received for the projects they worked on, which might reflect the increased availability in supports and funding for Comhairle na nÓg since 2008. A recent DCYA audit of children and young people’s participation in decision-making in Ireland found that ‘involvement of children and young people in decision-making within Student Councils, Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations was more structured’ than in other statutory organisations that work with children (DCYA, 2011b).

Evidence from the present research would indicate that the youth participants are very positive about the structured environment provided in these spaces. They enjoy their participation experience and many feel that they have fun during their activities, which enable them to feel listened to and respected. Hart et al (2004) argue that children and young people must be seen as actors with the capacity to engage as citizens in the here and now. The experiences of young people in this research would indicate that the DCYA participation initiatives with which they have engaged treat them in this way. The young person’s initial encounter with a participation initiative is seen as key to encouraging them to engage further with participation and many of the youth participants indicated that the positive experience they had at a Comhairle na nÓg AGM motivated their ongoing involvement. In a study by Thomas (2012), young people reported that peer friendships and the care and love they receive from the adults who work with them are highly important to them. These findings are similar
to the views of young people in the present research and many were very positive about the relationships they had developed with adult facilitators, particularly those young people engaged in national-level participation initiatives.

The creation of a safe space within participation initiatives for the discussion of sensitive topics was viewed as an important enabler for participation by adult participants. Many of the adult participants argue that the issues worked on in participation initiatives need to be relevant to children and young people’s lives since this leads to a more fulfilling and engaging experience for the children and young people involved. As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, Lundy’s (2007) model for implementing Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child comprises four interlinked strands: space (to express views); voice (facilitated to express views); audience (to be listened to); and influence (to have views appropriately acted upon). The child and youth participation spaces created by the DCYA may be viewed as attempting to create these four conditions and, in particular, youth participants are very positive about their experience of voice, space and audience. The final area, influence, is an area that adult and youth participants agree needs further work and support.

8.2.2 Personal development

The research findings indicate that the children and young people involved in the DCYA participation initiatives experienced positive personal development and positive impacts on their well-being as a result of their participation experiences. This positive view of the personal skills developed due to participation in the various DCYA initiatives is common to all of the youth and adult participants interviewed. Youth participants rated personal skills development as being the area most positively impacted by their participation, followed by improved confidence, social skills and development of their social networks. Specific skills developed included improved personal confidence; the development of public-speaking skills; leadership skills; group facilitation skills; and increased self-esteem, reported as an impact by three-quarters of the youth participants.

These findings are similar to the personal impacts stemming from child and youth participation reported in other participatory research (Ackermann et al., 2003; Kirby and Bryson, 2002). Youth participants in this current research report similar outcomes to Willow (2010), who found that benefits of participation identified by participants themselves include new friendships, knowledge, understanding, confidence and access to arenas that would previously have been inaccessible to them.

The adults interviewed for the research identified a significant number of personal impacts which they felt young people experienced as a result of their participation, such as increased self-confidence; personal development; skills including public speaking, leadership and facilitation; and a growing sense of self-belief. These positive outcomes could be viewed as an argument for extending participation opportunities.

8.2.3 Future attainment and orientation

Over two-thirds of the youth participants viewed their participation as having a positive impact on their educational and personal aspirations, and some mentioned pursuing future careers related to their participation experiences such as youth work or careers in government and politics. The adult participants also reported that participation activities can influence the future educational and career choices of youth participants.
8.2.4 Greater critical awareness

Kirby and Bryson (2002) assert that participation activities can help young people to increase their understanding of issues related to equality and discrimination, and can allow them to develop a greater understanding of issues such as racism and disability. In this current research, many of the youth participants developed more critical awareness through their participation activities and reported feeling more able to make changes to their own lives and question things more, and having greater understanding of the lives of others. In addition, the most common reason given for their initial involvement in Comhairle na nÓg was the desire to have a voice, to be heard and to make a difference. Youth participants were positive about the impact of their experiences on their acceptance of diversity and some participants reported feeling more empathy towards other people’s issues. Most of the adult participants also felt that the young people developed skills critical to engaging with and negotiating bureaucracy because of the type of participation projects they worked on.

8.2.5 Social skills and friendships

Social skills such as making new friends and finding it easier to speak to other young people were areas where participation activities were seen as having very positive personal impacts. Participants all agreed that their participation activities have led them to make new friends. Participants also commented on the friendships they developed with a more diverse range of people rather than their normal social circle. Like the young people, the adult participants identified that many of the young people developed friendship networks and increased their social capital network through their participation. Many of the youth participants mentioned making friends and meeting people as reasons for enjoying their participation and initial motivators for becoming involved, and the majority also reported that they have stayed in touch with other youth participants they met.

Some adult participants felt that other young people in the community respected Comhairle na nÓg members as ‘youth leaders’. This perspective differs somewhat from that of some of the young people themselves, who indicated that they often sought to keep their participation experiences separate from their wider peer group and were not always clear on how to feed back outcomes from their participation projects to their wider peer community. This reflects similar findings to those of Cockburn (2010, p. 315), in that young people who participate in a local youth parliament feel ‘a tension and a disconnection in their roles as youth parliamentarians and their “other lives” of family, friends and social lives’.

8.2.6 Youth participants involved in national organisations

Some adult participants reported that young people involved in national-level participation initiatives, like the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive and the Children and Young People’s Forum, derive greater personal impacts from their participation because of the depth and richness of their experiences. These young people often engage closely with national policy-makers and decision-makers, and are very positive about their experiences of participation. They are particularly positive about the personal impacts resulting from their participation, especially its effect on their confidence. Some participants also felt that their experiences influenced their future career path, with some saying that they would now be more interested in socially meaningful and/or political work. Other common areas of impact that they identified include improved communication skills, public speaking, teamwork skills and the opportunity to meet new people and make friends. They feel that they have a voice which is listened to by people in power. However, some of the adult participants expressed concerns that the young people involved in national organisations experience much greater personal impacts than those involved at local level only and that there may be a hierarchy in personal outcomes for young people involved.
8.3 Impacts of participation at community level

The recent audit of children and young people’s participation in Ireland found that ‘90.8% of organisations involved in participation activity believe children and young people have “a great deal of influence” or “some influence in particular areas” with regard to decision-making within their organisation’ (DCYA, 2011b, p. 2). In addition, the audit found that the area of greatest impact for children and young people’s participation activities has been policy development at national and local level, particularly in the area of youth-targeted services, facilities and programmes. A major impact of the work of Comhairle na nÓg is that it is often now considered the main contact point for any consultation with children and young people by Local Authorities in Ireland.

In relation to the impact of participation on their local community, the most positive areas identified by youth participants concern their ability to bring ideas and problems from young people in their community to their Comhairle na nÓg meetings and the increased awareness of children and young people’s issues in the young person’s own community. Some of the adult participants indicated that young people feed back to their schools and youth clubs as part of their work with Comhairle na nÓg and they felt that young people take this responsibility very seriously. The increased awareness of young people’s issues could be viewed as raising the status of children and young people within their own communities. In relation to this improved status, some youth participants felt that the location of Comhairle na nÓg meetings in official Local Authority offices has a positive impact on the perception of Comhairle na nÓg as an important and serious youth space of influence. This is similar to the assertions of Ackermann et al (2003), that children and young people’s participatory community projects can raise the status of children and young people within their communities.

In relation to change within their communities, almost half of youth respondents indicated that they saw positive changes to their community due to their work in Comhairle na nÓg, but a slight majority of participants gave either a neutral or negative response to this question. Linked to this finding, less than half of the youth respondents felt that local Councillors, local businesses and others in the community gave young people feedback on their participation activities.

In relation to how the young people influence their community, presentations to the Local Authorities are the most common method of engaging with local decision-makers mentioned by the research participants. Other information-sharing events include submissions by Comhairlí to local strategic or environmental plans, political speed-dating, development of local service directories and conferences organised by Comhairle na nÓg. A key area in which children and young people can influence policy-making at local level is to occupy designated positions on decision-making bodies. Evaluations of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund have found increased engagement with the Strategic Policy Committees and 69% of Local Authorities have identified Comhairle na nÓg as a ‘priority action’ in at least one Local Authority plan (McEvoy, 2011). At national policy level, Actions 7-9 of Teenspace - National Recreation Policy for Young People (2007) direct Local Authorities to utilise the Comhairlí na nÓg to inform relevant City and County Strategies/Plans, particularly in relation to recreational facilities and community amenity programmes, and to encourage young people to participate on relevant sub-committees, such as the Strategic Policy Committees.

8.3.1 Developments in Comhairle na nÓg structures

Recent structural changes to a number of DCYA participation initiatives were highlighted by adult participants as improving the impacts of child and youth participation. According to McEvoy (2011), 94% of Comhairlí na nÓg now have Steering Committees in place and three-quarters of these had a Comhairle na nÓg member on the Steering Committee to represent other children and young people. The adult participants in this research are mostly positive about the introduction of the Steering Committee. Most feel that it increases the effectiveness
of their Comhairle and allows greater access to other professionals and agencies, which in turn increases the impact of young people’s participation activities by enabling other organisations to be more involved in Comhairle na nÓg.

The second significant development was the introduction of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund and the additional funding and support that has become available through this initiative. Independent evaluations of the Comhairle Development Fund have found that the increased funding has greatly expanded the activities of the individual Comhairlí (McEvoy, 2011). The majority of the adult participants were very positive about the role of the national Participation Officers in supporting youth participation initiatives and it can be viewed as an institutional change in child and youth participation, which has moved the participation agenda forward.

8.3.2 Listening to children and young people
One of the most common reasons given by the youth participants for their motivation to participate is the desire to have their voices heard and to make a difference. Also, throughout the research it is clear that some young people are motivated to participate because of their desire to advocate on behalf of other young people on particular issues, such as bullying and LGBT rights. An interesting finding from the research is that the majority of youth participants feel that while people in power do listen to them, they are less confident about whether their views influence the decisions made by people in power. While they have opportunities to voice their opinions, they are less positive about the actual impact of their views on decisions relating to young people. A focus group conducted by a young researcher found that ‘if people feel they are not being heard, they will leave’. This is similar to the suggestion by Kirby and Bryson (2002) that when children and young people are not listened to, they may have a negative emotional response and be reluctant to speak out again.

Another key topic related to listening to children and young people is the provision of feedback to participants. Davey et al (2010b) found in their research on child participation in schools that lack of feedback left many child participants feeling disillusioned with power-sharing mechanisms. Kirby and Bryson (2002) assert that lack of feedback is a common complaint among youth participants and the provision of feedback is good practice in participation work. Youth participants in the present research were critical of the lack of feedback from local Councillors and businesses on the impact of their work and this was viewed as a barrier to participation. Lack of feedback can mean that young people are unaware of the impact of their involvement and frustrated with the participation process. However, youth participants, particularly those currently involved, are generally positive about the levels of feedback they receive from the adult facilitators with whom they work in Comhairle na nÓg.

8.3.3 Positive impact of child and youth participation on youth spaces
In a recent DCYA audit of children and young people’s participation in decision-making in Ireland, it was found that Comhairle na nÓg and other participation initiatives were most likely to consult with children and young people ‘on issues relating to youth services, leisure and recreation, followed by mental health issues’ (DCYA, 2011b). Other types of youth facilities on which children and young people have been consulted include skate parks, library facilities and influencing the running and services of facilities. The participation audit identifies areas where children and young people’s participation is having an impact on service and programme development, in particular in relation to youth services, but also in relation to sport, racism, transport, mental and physical health, early school-leaving, LGBT issues and migration issues. Similarly in the present research, youth and adult participants reported that local amenities and public services are the most common areas on which the local Comhairlí work, with a particular focus on youth spaces such as youth-friendly transport, youth cafés,
youth service directories and petitioning Government agencies for more youth facilities. Some of the young people reported that their ability to choose what they worked on was central to feeling that the project would be effective. Work on improving youth facilities is a common focus of many of those interviewed in this research and young people are concerned with creating additional youth spaces, both physical spaces and spaces of influence, within their communities.

The issue of interaction between different youth participation initiatives and spaces was raised by youth and adult participants in this research. For example, experience of participation in Comhairle na nÓg influenced one participant’s experience and expectations of his participation in his student council. Also, the work of the Comhairlí is contracted to local youth organisations and this interagency model, at both national and local level, has a positive influence on further embedding the culture of youth participation across agencies. Brodie et al (2011, p. 36) assert that participation can ‘impact on the prevalence and quality of local spaces, events, and groups or organisations, which in turn shapes the environment in which people participate’.

8.4 Impact on institutions and decision-making in Irish society

One of the most positive impacts of the DCYA participation initiatives is that children and young people are given access to decision-makers in a number of local and national forums. Three-quarters of current participants felt that they have the opportunity through Comhairle na nÓg to meet and talk to people in power, such as journalists, Local Authorities and business representatives. In particular, it was noted that participation in the Dáil na nÓg Council allows young people access to national decision-makers. Young people are supported to contribute to adult meetings and forums in a meaningful way, to represent the views of other young people and to be directly heard in a forum where their needs are discussed but their voices often excluded. In addition, the young people in the Children and Young People’s Forum who participated in this research asserted that their position on national participation initiatives allows them to have a voice on behalf of other young people; they refer to the Forum as offering an opportunity to ‘shape your country’.

8.4.1 The influence of Dáil na nÓg

Youth participants were generally very positive about the work of Dáil na nÓg and in particular about the effectiveness of Dáil na nÓg in bringing about change, its work on issues relevant to young people in Ireland and its representation of a wide range of young people. Youth respondents were also very positive about the role of the facilitators and there was very strong agreement with the statements relating to the guidance from facilitators and their facilitation of delegates’ ideas and input. However, current youth participants were less positive about the Government taking Dáil na nÓg seriously. Adult participants highlighted a number of key achievements of Dáil na nÓg over the years (see below).
Some extremely important achievements have been made by successive Dáil na nÓg Councils. These include:

- **Fairsay!** media campaign highlighted the negative portrayal of teenagers in the media and urged media organisations to ‘talk to teenagers’ rather than ‘talking about teenagers’ (2007-2008).

- Participated in reference panel of young people involved in developing the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention’s Youth Mental Health advertisement, called *The boy with the hoodie*, and awareness campaign (2008-2009).

- Influenced the Minister for Health and Children’s decision to commence the cervical cancer vaccine programme for 12-year-old girls (2010).

- Got a commitment that questions on sexual behaviour will be asked in the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey in Ireland in future years (2010).

- Conducted the first-ever peer-led, evidence-based survey on implementation levels of SPHE and RSE among young people. The report *Life skills matter – not just points: A Survey of Implementation of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in second-level schools*, published by the OMCYA in 2010, highlighted a very low level of implementation of RSE in Senior Cycle.

- Conducted a consultation with young people on reform of the Junior Cycle in partnership with the DCYA and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which was launched by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Education and Skills in July 2011. Findings from the consultation are included in the NCCA Framework for reform of the Junior Cycle being implemented by the Minister for Education and Skills.

- Conducted a peer-led, evidence-based survey among 2,200 teenagers on body image in November 2011. *How We See It: Report of a survey on young people’s body image* was published by the DCYA and launched by young members of the Dáil na nÓg Council and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in October 2012.

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### 8.4.2 Policy commitment to child and youth participation

The recent participation audit (DCYA, 2011b) identifies a number of key areas where children and young people are influencing policy development at local and national level. These areas include sport, play, recreation, transport, the environment, libraries, museums, active citizenship, child protection, children and family services, drugs and sexual health. Examples of local policy development cited in the audit include influencing County Development Plans and Local Authority Strategies. While there is growing commitment to child and youth participation in many aspects of public policy and local governance in Ireland, the youth participants in this research identified policy change as the area in which their participation activities has the least impact. Some adult and youth participants expressed the desire for legislative change to give young people more power in decision-making. They also suggested that there should be more formal guidelines and directives from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government requiring the Local Authorities to consult children and young people on a wider range of policy implementation – it was suggested that Local Authority staff would take the role of the local Comhairle more seriously if there were a statutory requirement to consult with them.
8.4.3 Active citizenship and political engagement

The majority of youth participants felt that their participation experiences have had a positive impact on their willingness to volunteer. This is similar to the findings of research with former members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (2011), which found that involvement in the Parliament has a positive impact on young people’s engagement in voluntary work.

The majority of past youth participants in the current study agreed that their participation experiences impact positively on their interest in international affairs, their interest in working for other people’s rights and involvement in their community. Democratic citizenship as participation and involvement acknowledges that, like adults, children both influence and are influenced by their society in an ongoing and (inter)active way (Jans, 2004, p. 39). Participation ‘locates children within the public domain as social agents’ (Wyness, 2009, p. 396). While reflecting on their experiences of participation, past youth participants identified areas where they are able to act as social agents, such as volunteering and opportunities for community engagement. Linked to this, some of the adult participants observed that many of the young people who participate tend to come from families that are involved in their own communities.

A small number of youth participants identified an interest in politics and the political system as a significant factor in their motivation to join participation initiatives (but this was the least frequently mentioned motivating factor). This finding might indicate that the young people see Dáil and Comhairle na nÓg as separate from the political party system and this broader interest in politics does not appear to be a significant motivator for participation. Some differences emerged among past and current youth participants regarding their attitudes to politics. Past participants were more positive about the impact of participation on their understanding of the Irish political system and on their attitude to voting. A significant number of past participants also viewed participation in Comhairle na nÓg as having a positive impact on being active in politics. Current youth participants, on the other hand, were more likely to rate their participation experiences as having a neutral impact on these areas. These findings might indicate that eligibility to vote increases interest in voting and the political system, and therefore the significance of their participation experiences. Tisdall et al (2013) point out that the transformative potential of participation may lie in the future if ‘young people take their experiences and learning into adulthood, to alter ways of working, cultures of participation and spaces of engagement’. Young people who have been involved in participation may have increased expectations of engagement with the political process as adults, as demonstrated by the past youth participants involved in this research.

8.4.4 Positive impact on social justice and youth issues

The audit of child and youth participation identifies areas where children and young people’s participation is having an impact on service and programme development, in particular in relation to youth services but also in relation to sport, racism, transport, mental and physical health, early school-leaving, LGBT issues and migration issues (DCYA, 2011b). Similarly, in the present research there is a strong social justice and social inclusion theme in many of the projects identified by the participants and a recurring focus on equality for young people in all areas of public life. Examples of social inclusion projects included raising awareness of discrimination against young people, anti-bullying campaigns and homophobic bullying work, mental health awareness, children’s rights and cross-border work. Many of the youth participants in the research area were interested in social change and working for the rights of others, and some of the young people identified themselves as advocates for other groups of young people.
8.4.5 Changing cultural attitudes to children and young people’s participation

One of the most notable impacts of the DCYA child and youth participation initiatives concerns the emerging change in attitudes towards child and youth participation among decision-makers. While it is acknowledged that this change can be slow, there has been a noticeable shift towards the inclusion of children and young people’s views in some decision-making processes. A particular factor in this cultural shift in the recognition of children and young people’s views is the work of adult facilitators or participation ‘champions’ in pushing the participation agenda. Some of the adult participants discussed the importance of changing decision-makers’ attitudes to the value of children and young people’s participation. Many identified that an important aspect of their own work is to increase the awareness of the importance of listening to children and young people and to act as champions for their participation.

It is also notable that other Government departments and Government services are seeking advice and support from the DCYA Participation Unit on consulting with children and young people. An interviewee from the DCYA spoke about the importance of requiring children’s participation as a condition of Government funding. Such conditions are already attached to two national policies on children spaces – *Ready Steady, Play! A National Play Policy (2004)* and *Teenspace – National Recreation Policy for Young People (2007)*.

In the recent audit of child and youth participation in Ireland (DCYA, 2011b), organisations were asked about the impact of children and young people’s participation on their organisation’s work. Over 70% stated that participation of children and young people in their organisation has influenced decisions about issues that affect children and young people directly. 60% felt that they have influenced the development of new policies and services in their organisation. Many of the adult participants in this current research spoke about the role of the DCYA participation initiatives in widening the culture of youth participation by influencing the participation culture in other child and youth organisations. For example, the involvement of young people on Strategic Policy Committees and Steering Committees has meant that decision-makers who would normally have little contact with children and young people are now working with them in a formal setting. Members of Comhairle na nÓg regularly consult with young people in their schools and communities, which encourages broader participation. The interagency model at both national and local level has a positive influence on further embedding the culture of youth participation across agencies. In addition, other Government departments and services are increasingly seeking advice and support from the DCYA Participation Unit on consulting with children and young people. Developing a culture of inclusion and consultation within organisations is complex and little research exists on models of best practice. However, unless change occurs within organisations where decisions affecting the lives of young people are made, the efforts of the young people and the adults who support them will be wasted (Kirby and Bryson, 2002).

8.4.6 Engagement with the media

The issue of public awareness of participation initiatives was mentioned by youth and adult participants and there was a consensus that greater public awareness would improve both recruitment to and the impact of the participation initiatives. Engagement with the local and national media was identified as a key enabler to increasing awareness and impact of participation initiatives. According to the DCYA (2011), during 2009-2010, 84% of the Comhairle na nÓg engaged with the media to promote their activities. The majority of the adult and youth research participants in this study felt that the national and local media are very positive about DCYA participation initiatives and that the activities of these initiatives help challenge negative stereotypes of young people. The majority of the youth participants felt that the media see Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg as a representative voice for young people in Ireland. Participants were particularly positive about the interest of the local media in the
activities of Comhairle na nÓg and most Comhairlí appear to have a very good relationship with their local radio stations and newspapers. They agreed that the positive stories in the local media about children and young people’s participation activities have a constructive impact on the image of young people in the community, however, it was suggested by participants that the media coverage needs to move beyond sound bites and personal interest stories and focus instead on engaging with children and young people in serious policy debates. In a survey of 280 participation workers in the UK, Davey et al. (2010a) found that participation workers think that the media does not respect children’s involvement in decision-making processes. The same study was also critical of the attitude of the general public to child and youth participation. Participation workers argued that the UK Government needed to promote attitudinal change among adults to improve the level of respect for child and youth participation. Some of the participants in this current research mentioned the positive impact of the Fairsay! media campaign organised by the Dáil Na nÓg Council in 2007-2008 to challenge the negative portrayal of young people in the media.

8.5 Issues in child and youth participation

This final section explores some issues in the participation of children and young people in Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg.

8.5.1 Issues of representation and representativeness

Representation and representativeness are difficult issues in children and young people’s participation, as the discussion in the literature review has revealed. Over three-quarters of past and present members indicated that they consider Comhairle na nÓg to be broadly representative of young people in Ireland, while most participants expressed satisfaction that Dáil na nÓg acts as a representative voice of young people. However, qualitative data from the survey and interviews with young people reveal that these responses are quite nuanced. Significant numbers of respondents indicated that they understand representation as meaning ‘having a voice being heard, and making a difference’, rather than necessarily about representativeness. For some, it means actively representing other young people, while for others it refers to the opportunity to have a say in young people’s issues and in decisions that affect their peers. Several of the adult interviewees suggested that many Comhairle members see their role as acting as a voice for other young people. These results echo the aims of State-led participatory initiatives, which seek to give children and young people ‘a voice in the design, delivery and monitoring of services and policies that affect their lives, at national and local level’ (DCYA, 2011, p. 8). The results of the survey indicate that Comhairlí engage in a wide range of projects and initiatives concerning children and young people, but young people’s views of the impact of their work are mixed and only a minority of past and present members agreed that there have been positive changes in their community as a result of their work. Effective representation of views does not therefore automatically lead to community change on issues of interest to children and young people.

It is clear from the survey results and from the interviews with adults that the membership of Comhairle na nÓg is not generally representative of children and young people. Members are mainly older teenagers, between the ages of 15 and 16 (see also McEvoy, 2009b). This suggests that despite DCYA guidelines, which specify a membership age of between 12 and 18 years, much of the Comhairle membership is drawn from young people doing Transition Year in the Senior Cycle of school. Further analysis is required to identify the reasons for the under-representation of young people under 15 and how this issue may be addressed.

Another area that affects representativeness concerns the role of gatekeepers in determining ‘who participates’. The literature review discussed the problems that arise when schools control who is put forward for participation (Cairns, 2006; Wells, 2009). The reasons for this may be
practical, but there may also be other considerations in play (see Section 8.6.2 below on schools and representation). The research findings indicate that information on Comhairle may reach just some groups of students, particularly those in Transition Year. As a result, students from other years, particularly younger students, may not be informed about Comhairle. Moreover, as agents of socialisation and as hierarchical entities, schools are likely to select young people who manifest conservative values and who are therefore less likely to challenge existing arrangements. In recent research on children’s views of participation in the UK, Davey et al (2010b) found that children who were clever, popular, well-behaved and good attendees were disproportionately represented on school councils and other children felt this was not representative of the school community. The youth participants in this current research felt that there is a perception that young people must be on school student councils to be involved in Comhairle na nÓg and suggested that the strong links between Comhairle and student councils might put other young people off joining Comhairle na nÓg. Some respondents suggested that the perceived weakness of the student council model as a participative structure within the school environment may have an impact on the perception of other youth participation initiatives by children and young people. Cairns (2006) argues that because in most cases students have no legal right to be involved in decisions in their schools, schools are the worst equipped structures to enable young people’s participation. School councils are susceptible to adult manipulation and methods of pupil selection may well not meet standards of democratic representation (Hill, 2004; Keogh and White, 2005).

A related issue is schools’ tendency to put forward high achievers or ‘star’ pupils. These ‘super participators’ (Cockburn, 2010, p. 315) may be involved in a number of social, youth and community activities and are often both experienced and confident. They are therefore more likely than other young people to put themselves forward for positions on the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive and Dáil na nÓg Council. The ongoing challenge for Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg is to balance the recruitment of these young people with others who may have fewer opportunities to participate and may lack the confidence to put themselves forward.

A final area concerning representativeness is the participation of seldom-heard young people. It is clear from the findings that Comhairle na nÓg facilitators are aware of the importance of involving seldom-heard young people and have been successful in recruiting them to Comhairle in significant numbers. Partnerships with agencies that work with seldom-heard young people have generated participation from young people from a number of minority groups. Participants from these groups have made a significant contribution to the work of Comhairle and have found Comhairle to be a safe space in which they can express themselves and have a voice. The development and consolidation of relationships with agencies working with children and young people will help to develop the membership, representativeness and diversity of Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg in the future.

8.5.2 Youth participation in adult spaces

The recent audit of young people’s participation (DCYA, 2011b) discusses the role of young people as representatives in traditionally adult environments, such as on the Boards of Management of organisations. A number of organisations involved in the audit reported establishing sub-groups or sub-committees where children and young people are represented, particularly committees related to the development of youth services and funding applications. Some of the young people interviewed for this research are also engaged with adult committees in Local Authorities, such as Strategic Policy Committees. This raises issues concerning how both young people and adults are supported to participate in these adult environments with decision-makers. Young people in the research were cognisant of ‘tokenism’ within adult environments and in particular some were critical of the patronising attitude of some adults whom they met in these environments. Structural barriers can significantly hamper impact, including such factors as time constraints, output requirements, formality, complexity and bureaucracy within the participatory project itself, as well as within organisations concerned with decision-making (Kirby and Bryson, 2002).
An adult participant in the present research felt that an enabler for these interactions between policy-makers and young people is to actually train and prepare the adults to work with children and young people and to support them in listening to children and young people’s voices. Also, it was suggested that the attitudes and communication styles of adults (including parents) can either encourage or discourage young people’s participation. Similarly, Hill et al. (2004, p. 82) suggest that the ‘foremost barriers to participation comprise adults’ perceptions, including their images of children’s capacities, and their self-interest in maintaining their own position with respect to children’. Checkoway (2011) also discusses the concept of ‘adultism’ which undermines young people’s self-belief because it assumes that adults are entitled to act on behalf of young people without their agreement.

Head (2011) contends that in decision-making arenas, children’s participation has to compete with other agendas and often, as a result of the relative powerlessness of children, can be the first to be sacrificed when resources are limited. A key barrier identified by the adult participants in this research was the impact of the current recession on child and youth participation. A common area where this impact was seen relates to staffing issues in Local Authorities and the difficulty in accessing key decision-makers because of staff shortages. Such difficulties in accessing local decision-makers may highlight the fact that some adult decision-makers view child and youth participation as a periphery activity rather than a core part of their work, and can undermine the value of the young people’s participatory activities. In light of these findings and to increase the ‘influence’ of the child and youth voice, the focus of child and youth participation needs to engage further with changing the adult spaces where young people engage with decision-makers.

### 8.5.3 Adult allies for participation

A recurring theme in this study was the role of key adults or adult ‘allies’ in supporting children and young people’s participation activities. Checkoway (2011) contends that adult allies are instrumental to participation. In the current research, the role of adult allies (such as youth workers or teachers) in encouraging young people to become involved with Comhairle na nÓg was a strong motivating factor and was frequently mentioned as a factor for the young people’s involvement. Many of the young people received encouragement from teachers and youth workers to become involved in participation activities. The recent audit of young people’s participation (DCYA, 2011b) indicates that the DCYA recognises that child and youth participation requires champions, structures, systems and processes at national, local and organisational level. This research identifies that champions of participation are central to the experience and success of youth participation. The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (2011) cites the ‘enthusiasm of the converted’ in relation to a growing number of practitioners and policy-makers who are committed to children and young people’s participation.

Evidence of this enthusiasm among many adult professionals working with children also strongly emerges in this research. The youth participants in this research are very positive about being listened to by adult facilitators and also about the work of these adult facilitators. Tisdall and Davis (2004) discuss the role of adults in working alongside children and ‘translating’ children’s voices into having an impact on policy. All of the adults interviewed for this research articulated very clearly their support for children and young people’s active and meaningful participation and engagement with policy-making. Most spoke of their role as ‘ambassadors’ for child and youth participation in their own organisations and their localities, and were passionate about child and youth participation. The adults’ role is to connect with the institutions from which children and young people are traditionally excluded, such as the Local Authorities and policy-making spaces. Adult involvement requires a ‘complex process of supporting children and young people’s attempts at articulating their interests, and in many instances trying to re-articulate these interests and bring them in line with relevant dominant adult agendas’ (Wyness, 2009, p. 404). Most of the adult participants felt that having a dedicated adult coordinator or facilitator was a key ingredient for a successful participation.
An examination of children and young people’s views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

initiative. Central to successful facilitation was the availability of training for adults working with children and young people. A number of adults interviewed felt that facilitators with a background in youth work have a specific skill-set for facilitating participation. Networking and sharing participation practices for adult facilitators were identified as positive developments and key enablers for those working in participation.

8.6 Barriers and enablers to participation

The research participants were asked to highlight the issues that might act as barriers or enablers to participation for children and young people. These are listed and discussed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key findings on barriers and enablers to participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>› Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg are safe, fun spaces in which young people can develop friendships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Dedicated adult facilitators assist in the in-depth coverage of Comhairle topics, encourage learning and enable fulfilling experiences for children and young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Cooperation with organisations that work with seldom-heard young people is essential to encourage and sustain their participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Holding some Dáil na nÓg events outside Dublin would encourage participation by young people from rural areas and seldom-heard young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Schools need to promote participation in Comhairle na nÓg and encourage a greater range of students to get involved in Comhairle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Multimedia advertising of the work of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg would encourage broader participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>› Decision-makers and policy-makers need to listen to young people’s voices and take their views and ideas into account in policy formation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.6.1 Participation by seldom-heard young people

Children and young people may not participate for a range of personal, social and economic reasons, including lack of confidence, ethnicity, disability and geographical issues. Transport was mentioned by youth and adult participants alike as a key issue for access to participation initiatives; this was a particular problem for those living in rural and island areas. The Rural Transport Scheme was identified as an enabler for participation, but some rural participants suggested that funding cuts to their transport budget have led to more reliance on parents, which has had a negative impact on attendance of some seldom-heard young people.

Centralisation of national activities in Dublin was seen as a barrier to some young people’s involvement at national level.

Language barriers and literacy issues were identified as a barrier for participants from new migrant communities in Ireland and some adult participants identified language supports provided by the local VEC as assisting in this issue. A problem was identified in sustaining involvement of young people with disabilities; while there might be initial involvement, this was often short term. Also, children in care and young people from the Traveller community were identified by adult participants as two groups who were more likely to drop out of participation initiatives before projects were completed. Recruitment and retention of seldom-heard young people requires support from other organisations working with these groups and many of the adult participants spoke about the positive relations they have with such organisations, including local Traveller youth groups and disability support groups. Participation on the Steering Group Committee of Comhairle na nÓg by professionals working with seldom-heard young people was viewed as a way to target these groups.
8.6.2 The role of schools

Schools influence opportunities for and experiences of participation. One of the young people’s focus groups in this research study suggested that teachers need to display an interest in and know more about Comhairle na nÓg. This issue was also highlighted by adult participants, who suggested that schools might benefit from outside expertise such as youth workers who have direct experience of child and youth participation, thereby promoting greater links between schools and local community organisations. Members of the Children and Young People’s Forum felt that Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) should be an official examination subject and should be taught at every level.

The youth participants felt that there is a perception that young people must be on school student councils to be involved in Comhairle na nÓg and suggested that the strong links between Comhairle and student councils might put other young people off joining Comhairle na nÓg. Both adult and youth participants suggested that a related barrier to participation is the perception that participation is only for students who have higher levels of academic attainment. Some adult participants felt that scheduling Comhairle AGMs and meetings outside school time might increase access to participation to a wider child and youth audience.

8.6.3 Safe, enjoyable participatory spaces

The young person’s initial encounter with a participation initiative was seen as key to encouraging them to engage further with participation. Young people working in groups also have the chance to develop friendships and peer relations.

The creation of a safe space within participation initiatives for the discussion of sensitive topics was viewed as an important enabler by adult participants. Topics such as bullying and body image demand a sensitive approach, team-building, time and space for discussion, but there is a tension between this type of personal development work and the need for outputs from the young people’s participation. Many of the participants felt that the issues worked on in participation initiatives need to be relevant to children and young people’s lives because this leads to a more fulfilling and engaging experience for those involved.

Separating participation activities from children and young people’s everyday spaces and acknowledging them only in the work of formal participation initiatives was seen as a barrier to meaningful participation for children and young people. This requires recognition – from adults in families, communities and schools, as well as from other children and young people – of the informal participation activities children and young people engage in.

8.6.4 Listening to children and young people

Regular feedback from facilitators on the impact of consultation work was identified as crucial to a positive participation experience. Other enablers linked to this were adult facilitators giving clear guidance to young people, the availability of resources to allow them to put their ideas into action and giving all participants responsibility for an aspect of the work. Participants need support and training in order to maintain a youth-led ethos while implementing their activities.

Adult and youth participants indicated that there need to be tangible outcomes from participation work for young people to feel that their input is acknowledged and useful. A focus group conducted by a young researcher found that ‘if people feel they are not being heard, they will leave’. Kirby and Bryson (2002) suggest that when children and young people are not listened to, they may experience a negative emotional response and a reluctance to speak out again. Participants felt that the adult facilitator needed to be able to give children and young people control and enable (rather than dictate or hijack) their participation activities.
The issue of listening to the views of children and young people who were not involved directly in participation initiatives was also raised. The majority of youth participants indicated that they do listen to the views of other young people and represent them through their participation work. It was suggested that different and new forms of communication (such as text messaging, online surveys and Skype) could be used to access greater numbers of young people and consult them on their views. Peer research is becoming a popular participative methodology and is being used as a means of representing the voice of a wider population of young people by collecting their views on specific issues (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). Peer research is youth-led and provides opportunities to listen to young people not directly involved in participation initiatives.

8.6.5 Facilitators and adult allies
Most of the adult participants felt that having a dedicated adult coordinator or facilitator was a key ingredient for a successful participation initiative. Central to successful facilitation was the availability of training for adults working with children and young people, and a number of adults interviewed felt that facilitators with a background in youth work had a specific skill-set for facilitating participation. The multi-agency approach to staffing and running participation initiatives was seen as very beneficial by many participants and in particular the role of youth work organisations in facilitating Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg activities. Also the availability of an annual budget to adult facilitators was seen as an enabler for participation work. Networking events for adult facilitators were identified as a positive development for those working in participation and sharing participation practices was seen as a key enabler.

8.6.6 Profile of the initiatives, advertising and awareness
Participants felt that certain misconceptions concerning the profile of participation initiatives might act as barriers for some young people. In relation to Comhairle na nÓg, some participants felt that there is ‘an image of it being only for nerds or very smart people’ and ‘it is not cool and that is important to young people’. Many young people in the focus groups admitted that initially they had assumed that Comhairle na nÓg was political in nature until they became involved.

There was a consensus that greater public awareness would improve both recruitment to and the impact of the participation initiatives. A member of the Children and Young People’s Forum recommended more multimedia examples of the youth participation work, such as videos, Facebook and blogs. Regular submission of reports and work to decision-makers and engagement with the local and national media were identified as key enablers to increasing awareness and impact of these initiatives.

8.6.7 Adult attitudes to young people
The attitudes and communication styles of adults (including parents) can either encourage or discourage young people’s participation. Some of the young people felt that adults held a number of negative perceptions about children and young people. Checkoway (2011) also discusses the concept of ‘adultism’, which undermines young people’s self-belief because it assumes that adults are entitled to act on behalf of young people without their agreement.

An important enabling factor for children and young people’s participation identified by the participants was support from parents and family members for the young person’s participation activities. Families provided practical support through transport and financial help, giving people the self-confidence and encouragement to participate, and in identifying opportunities for participation.
8.6.8 Access to policy-makers and decision-makers

Access to policy-makers and decision-makers was viewed as a key enabler for youth participation. An adult participant felt that an enabler for these interactions between policy-makers and young people is to actually train and prepare the adults to work with children and young people and to support them in listening to children and young people’s voices. Cairns (2006) contends that ‘ensuring key adults listen’ and value young people’s voices is the challenge since this raises issues concerning the traditional distribution of power. In relation to the work of the local Comhairle na nÓg, almost all of the adults interviewed stated that a key enabler to the success of the work of the Comhairle is strong support from the Local Authorities. A youth focus group in the study suggested that policy changes were necessary in order to give young people more legislative power in decision-making.

The position of the national participation structure of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive (previously the Dáil na nÓg Council) within the DCYA was viewed as an enabler, but also as a barrier. It allows the participants to directly access policy-makers, Ministers and civil servants from a multitude of Government departments. It also gives it an official recognition and space within a Government department, possibly lending it more credibility for adult decision-makers. A small number of adult participants questioned whether an independent national council would ‘think of more creative ways to have an impact; there’s examples in other countries where the youth parliament is more independent, like the Funky Dragon’ (Dáil na nÓg Facilitator).

8.6.9 Institutional and structural issues

A key barrier identified by the adult participants was the impact of the current recession on child and youth participation. Cutbacks have led to staffing shortages in Local Authorities and consequent difficulties in accessing key decision-makers. The allocation of specific resources such as the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund to participation initiatives was viewed by adults and youth participants as a key enabler to participation.

Another barrier identified by both adult and youth participants concerned the bureaucracy that young people face when working at local level. Kirby and Bryson (2002, p. 5) suggest that ‘output requirements, formality, complexity, and bureaucracy within the participatory project itself, as well as within organisations concerned with decision-making, can significantly hamper impact’.

8.7 Recommendations

8.7.1 Listening to children and young people

› Skills training, such as training for committee work and public speaking, is essential to equip youth participants with the confidence to work in the more traditional adult environments and contexts where decision-makers operate.
› Regular feedback from facilitators is crucial to a positive participation experience.
› There needs to be tangible outcomes from participation work for young people to feel that their input is acknowledged and useful.
› Different forms of communication, such as text messaging, online surveys and Skype, could access greater numbers of young people and consult them on their views.
› Young people want to be kept informed of policy decisions and progress after their official participation work has ended.
› Training adult decision-makers is needed for preparing them to work with children and young people and to support them in listening to children and young people’s voices.
› Increased contact is needed between the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive and representatives from various Government departments to enable delegates to lobby on youth issues.
› Participation initiatives need to be more active in engaging children and younger teenagers since currently this group is under-represented and less likely to participate.
8.7.2 Advertising and awareness

- Public awareness of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg could be improved through increased advertising locally and nationally. This could contribute to both improving recruitment to these initiatives and increasing their impact. Advertising could include a Facebook campaign and multimedia examples of the youth participation work, such as videos and blogs which can be communicated to larger groups of young people, widening the pathways to participation.
- Efforts need to be made to recruit a wider age range of children and young teenagers to Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg.
- Continued regular submission of reports and work to decision-makers could increase the profile of participation initiatives.
- Engaging with local decision-makers more effectively is needed in order to increase their attendance at events such as the Comhairle na nÓg National Showcase.
- An Internet or social media platform is needed to support networking among Comhairle na nÓg members from around the country.

8.7.3 Schools

- The perception that Comhairle na nÓg is only for members of student councils or high academic achievers needs to be addressed in schools.
- Greater cooperation is needed between Comhairle Coordinators and a network of staff within schools, including HSLC, TY Coordinators and School Completion Coordinators. Schools might benefit from outside expertise, such as youth workers who have direct experience of child and youth participation.
- Official recognition of participatory initiatives should be forthcoming from the Department of Education and Skills, along with the development of guidelines to recruit children and young people to participation initiatives.
- In order to encourage wider youth participation in Irish society, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) should be a compulsory subject at every level of school, from primary school to Senior Cycle at second level. The reforms to the Junior Cycle have led to the downgrading of CSPE from a Junior Cert examination subject to a non-compulsory short course to be provided at schools’ discretion. This is a regressive and contradictory development given that the new Junior Cycle curriculum is aimed at encouraging critical awareness and active citizenship (Jeffers, 2014).

8.7.4 Participation spaces

- Issues worked on in participation initiatives need to be relevant to children and young people’s lives because this leads to a more fulfilling and engaging experience for the children and young people involved.
- Child and youth participation should be embedded into all spaces and activities which children and young people engage with. This requires recognition of the informal participation activities children and young people engage in with adults in families, communities and schools, as well as with other children and young people.
- The personnel involved in the DCYA participation initiatives are skilled and could bring those skills to other services in delivering training for child and youth participation to further embed a youth participation culture in Ireland.
- Development of formal guidelines and directives from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government should be encouraged in order to require Local Authorities to consult children and young people on a wider range of policies.
- There is currently a centralisation of national activities in Dublin. This was seen as a barrier to some young people’s involvement at national level. It was suggested that the national Dáil na nÓg event could sometimes take place outside of Dublin.
8.7.5 Supporting adult facilitators and adult allies

- A dedicated adult coordinator or facilitator and the availability of an annual budget are both essential for successful participation initiatives.
- Networking events for adult facilitators were identified as a positive development for those working in participation. Such networking events could be open to all those working with children and young people to encourage greater dialogue about participation and move it beyond participation initiatives.
- All adult coordinators need to be able to access social media websites from their organisations’ computer networks.
- The documenting of activities and methodologies used in participation projects is crucial in order to share best practice with other initiatives and with other Government departments and agencies.
- Employment of a Child and Youth Participation Officer in every Government department is needed to encourage mainstreaming of participation and child/youth issues.

8.7.6 Supporting seldom-heard participants

- Recruitment and retention of seldom-heard young people requires continued support from other organisations working directly with these groups.
- Participation on the Steering Group Committee of Comhairle na nÓg by professionals working with seldom-heard young people supports participation of these groups of young people.
- Resources are needed to support the extra requirements often associated with the participation of seldom-heard young people.


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OMCYA (2010b) Dáil na nÓg Council: Final Evaluation

Appendices
Appendix 1: [Present Participants] – Independent Samples $t$-Test\(^1\) to identify differences in survey responses contingent on gender of the respondent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Male to Female</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)(^2)</th>
<th>Mean Difference(^3)</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>More interested in my education</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.990</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>(-0.198, 0.196)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>Made new friends</td>
<td>1.373</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.171</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>(-0.028, 0.155)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>Easier to talk to young people</td>
<td>2.366</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>(-0.028, 0.313)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>Easier to talk to adults</td>
<td>0.177</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.861</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.096</td>
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<td>Q6</td>
<td>More able to make changes to own life</td>
<td>-0.976</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.330</td>
<td>-0.088</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>(-0.166, 0.090)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>Question things more</td>
<td>-3.322</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.748</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>(-0.242, 0.174)</td>
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<td>More understanding of other people’s lives</td>
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<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.629</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>0.094</td>
<td>(-0.140, 0.230)</td>
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<td>Q6</td>
<td>More able to speak in a group</td>
<td>0.335</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.746</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>(-0.136, 0.189)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>Learned new skills</td>
<td>0.609</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.543</td>
<td>0.047</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>(-0.106, 0.201)</td>
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<td>Q6</td>
<td>Miss other things because of Comhairle na nOg</td>
<td>-0.897</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>-0.119</td>
<td>0.132</td>
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<td>Q7</td>
<td>My family proud of me</td>
<td>1.224</td>
<td>169</td>
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<td>Q7</td>
<td>Feel more respected at home</td>
<td>1.454</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.148</td>
<td>0.165</td>
<td>0.113</td>
<td>(-0.059, 0.389)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>My family are interested in what I do</td>
<td>3.620</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.717</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>(-0.186, 0.269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>My family help me in my involvement</td>
<td>-0.725</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.470</td>
<td>-0.078</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>(-0.392, 0.135)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>My family worry my school work or hobbies will suffer</td>
<td>-0.434</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.665</td>
<td>-0.057</td>
<td>0.132</td>
<td>(-0.317, 0.203)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>Friends interested in what I do</td>
<td>1.041</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.299</td>
<td>0.133</td>
<td>0.128</td>
<td>(-0.119, 0.385)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>Friends interested in being involved</td>
<td>1.167</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.245</td>
<td>0.146</td>
<td>0.125</td>
<td>(-0.101, 0.392)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>School feels it is a good thing</td>
<td>0.669</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.486</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>0.103</td>
<td>(-0.131, 0.274)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>Friends have joined</td>
<td>-0.560</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.576</td>
<td>-0.074</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>(-0.333, 0.186)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>Can get time off school when needed</td>
<td>-0.447</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.655</td>
<td>-0.061</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>(-0.330, 0.208)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>Can bring ideas and problems from young people</td>
<td>0.412</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.681</td>
<td>-0.031</td>
<td>0.074</td>
<td>(-0.116, 0.177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>Comhairle na nOg represents young people</td>
<td>1.168</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.245</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>(-0.074, 0.288)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>Can make a difference in my community</td>
<td>-0.800</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.425</td>
<td>-0.066</td>
<td>0.083</td>
<td>(-0.219, 0.097)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q12</td>
<td>How satisfied are you with the outcome of your work on issue</td>
<td>-1.669</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.097</td>
<td>-0.134</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>(-0.392, 0.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13</td>
<td>Meet and talk to people in power</td>
<td>1.019</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.985</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>(-0.180, 0.177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13</td>
<td>People in power come to listen to us</td>
<td>1.317</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>-0.132</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>(-0.331, 0.066)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13</td>
<td>What we say affects decisions made</td>
<td>-2.94</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.769</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td>(-0.264, 0.196)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13</td>
<td>We bring issues to the media</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.996</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>(-0.224, 0.243)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13</td>
<td>Media see Comhairle na nOg as representative</td>
<td>1.323</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.188</td>
<td>0.152</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>(-0.075, 0.379)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13</td>
<td>Comhairle na nOg helps to change how people view young people</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>169</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.777</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>(-0.151, 0.302)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Independent Samples $t$-Test
\(^2\) Sig. (2-tailed)
\(^3\) Mean Difference
### Sex differences: Male to Female

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)²</th>
<th>Mean Difference³</th>
<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Other Comhairle na nÓg members listen to me</td>
<td>-1.587</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.114</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>-0.195, 0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Comhairle na nÓg doesn’t meet often enough</td>
<td>-1.664</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>-0.217</td>
<td>0.130</td>
<td>-0.474, 0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Meetings are enjoyable</td>
<td>-1.922</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>-0.146, 0.088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Team does a good job</td>
<td>-1.922</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>-0.106, 0.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Lots of info to help me make decisions</td>
<td>-2.967</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>-0.076</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>-0.191, 0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14. Get enough support/money</td>
<td>-1.981</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.328</td>
<td>-0.107</td>
<td>0.109</td>
<td>-0.322, 0.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. See changes at home</td>
<td>-1.764</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.446</td>
<td>-0.087</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>-0.314, 0.139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. See changes at school</td>
<td>-0.049</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>0.961</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>-0.249, 0.237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. See changes in community</td>
<td>-0.615</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.540</td>
<td>-0.074</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>-0.313, 0.144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Get regular feedback</td>
<td>-1.169</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.144</td>
<td>-0.145</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>-0.341, 0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Councillors and local business give us positive feedback</td>
<td>-1.335</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.218</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>-0.319, 0.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Dáil na nÓg works on issues relevant to young people</td>
<td>2.800</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.780</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>-0.093, 0.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Dáil na nÓg relevant to my Comhairle</td>
<td>1.085</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.280</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>-0.069, 0.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Dáil na nÓg represents wide range of young people</td>
<td>1.851</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.133</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>-0.009, 0.257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Media see Dáil na nÓg as representative of young people</td>
<td>1.445</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>0.133</td>
<td>0.092</td>
<td>-0.049, 0.316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Taken seriously at Government level</td>
<td>3.211</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.749</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>-0.173, 0.240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. I influence the topics that are chosen</td>
<td>-0.095</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.924</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>-0.160, 0.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. Facilitators take our input into account</td>
<td>0.948</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.344</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>-0.204, 0.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. Facilitators give good guidance</td>
<td>-0.208</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.835</td>
<td>-0.012</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>-0.130, 0.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. We get good training</td>
<td>1.647</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>-0.024, 0.270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. We are given good resources</td>
<td>-3.345</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>0.731</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>-0.157, 0.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. Flexibility around how people can take part</td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.786</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>-0.118, 0.168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. Get enough feedback about how our work does/does not make a difference</td>
<td>-0.048</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0.962</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>-0.176, 0.168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The independent samples t-test is a parametric statistical test utilized to assess for potential differences on a dichotomous variable (e.g., sex) for a scaled variable (e.g., Likert scale). t is a test statistic with a known probability distribution which may be used in the present context to examine whether the differences between two means are statistically significantly different from zero.

2. In the present study, assumptions for parametric testing were met and minimum significance levels were set at p<0.05. As such, when the term ‘significant’/‘significance’ is used throughout the main document, it specifically refers to whether or not the p statistic for that analysis fell within these bounds.

3. The mean difference is a summary statistic equal to the absolute difference of two absolute values drawn from a probability distribution. Put simply, this shows the difference between two means (in this case, male and female). A positive value indicates males rated higher than females, and a negative value indicates the alternative, that females rated higher than males.
## Appendix 2: [Present Participants] – One-way Analysis of Variance\(^1\) to identify differences in survey responses contingent on age of the respondent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age differences: 11-14 years/15-16 years/17-19 years</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.(^2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. More interested in my education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.204</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>.607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>66,909</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>67,317</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. Made new friends</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.133</td>
<td>1.445</td>
<td>.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>15,124</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15,391</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. Easier to talk to young people</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>.458</td>
<td>.634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>37,059</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.226</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37,266</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. Easier to talk to adults</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>1.162</td>
<td>.315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>61,051</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.372</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61,916</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. More able to make changes to own life</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.269</td>
<td>.815</td>
<td>.444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>54,180</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.330</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54,719</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. Question things more</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td>.283</td>
<td>.754</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>77,434</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.472</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>77,701</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. More understanding of other people’s lives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>.612</td>
<td>.543</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>61,089</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.372</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61,545</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. More able to speak in a group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.123</td>
<td>.495</td>
<td>.611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>40,831</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.249</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41,077</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. Learned new skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.275</td>
<td>.760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>40,941</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41,078</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q6. Miss other things because of Comhairle na nOg</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1,712</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.856</td>
<td>1.149</td>
<td>.319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>122,180</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>.745</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>123,892</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Q7. My family proud of me                           |                |     |             |     |           |
| Between Groups                                      | 2,067          | 2   | 1.033       | 2.889| .058      |
| Within Groups                                       | 58,652         | 164 | .358        |     |           |
| Total                                               | 60,719         | 166 |             |     |           |
| **Q7. Feel more respected at home**                 |                |     |             |     |           |
| Between Groups                                      | .013           | 2   | .007        | .012| .988      |
| Within Groups                                       | 88,825         | 164 | .542        |     |           |
| Total                                               | 88,838         | 166 |             |     |           |
| **Q7. My family are interested in what I do**       |                |     |             |     |           |
| Between Groups                                      | 8,719          | 2   | 4.359       | 8.831| .000      |
| Within Groups                                       | 80,958         | 164 | .494        |     |           |
| Total                                               | 89,677         | 166 |             |     |           |
| **Q7. My family help me in my involvement**         |                |     |             |     |           |
| Between Groups                                      | 491            | 2   | .245        | 5.044| .005      |
| Within Groups                                       | 79,821         | 164 | .487        |     |           |
| Total                                               | 80,312         | 166 |             |     |           |
| **Q7. My family worry my school work or hobbies will suffer**|        |     |             |     |           |
| Between Groups                                      | 6,057          | 2   | 3.028       | 4.353| .014      |
| Within Groups                                       | 114,099        | 164 | .696        |     |           |
| Total                                               | 120,156        | 166 |             |     |           |

| Q9. Friends interested in what I do                  |                |     |             |     |           |
| Between Groups                                      | 2,401          | 2   | 1.200       | 1.781| .172      |
| Within Groups                                       | 110,533        | 164 | .674        |     |           |
| Total                                               | 112,934        | 166 |             |     |           |
| **Q9. Friends interested in being involved**        |                |     |             |     |           |
| Between Groups                                      | 2,018          | 2   | 1.009       | 1.571| .211      |
| Within Groups                                       | 105,288        | 164 | .642        |     |           |
| Total                                               | 107,305        | 166 |             |     |           |

\(^1\) One-way Analysis of Variance
\(^2\) Significance
### Appendix 2

#### Age differences: 11-14 years/15-16 years/17-19 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q9. School feels it is a good thing</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>.885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>72.592</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.449</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73.701</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Friends have joined</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>842</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>.565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>120.427</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.734</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>121.269</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Can get time off school when needed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1.944</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.972</td>
<td>1.266</td>
<td>.285</td>
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<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>125.948</td>
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<td>0.768</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>127.892</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Can bring ideas and problems from young people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1.226</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.613</td>
<td>2.744</td>
<td>.067</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>36.642</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.223</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37.868</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q9. Comhairle na nÓg represents young people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>1.420</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.710</td>
<td>2.036</td>
<td>.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>57.203</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.349</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>58.623</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9. Can make a difference in my community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.181</td>
<td>0.623</td>
<td>.533</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>46.907</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.288</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47.359</td>
<td>166</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Q12. How satisfied are you with the outcome of your work on issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q12. How satisfied are you with the outcome of your work on issue</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>.979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>41.881</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.255</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41.992</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

#### Q13. Meet and talk to people in power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q13. Meet and talk to people in power</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>.963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>57.999</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.350</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57.455</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### Q14. Other Comhairle na nÓg members listen to me

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q14. Other Comhairle na nÓg members listen to me</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.089</td>
<td>.127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>19.359</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.119</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20.060</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Q14. Comhairle na nÓg doesn’t meet often enough

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q14. Comhairle na nÓg doesn’t meet often enough</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>4.176</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.088</td>
<td>2.916</td>
<td>.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>117.440</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.716</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>121.617</td>
<td>166</td>
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</table>
An examination of children and young people’s views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q15. See changes at home</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>2.367</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.184</td>
<td>2.180</td>
<td>.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>89.034</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>543</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91.401</td>
<td>166</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q15. See changes at school</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.017</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>.974</td>
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<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>104.720</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>6.642</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>104.753</td>
<td>165</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q15. See changes in community</td>
<td>0.444</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.222</td>
<td>0.686</td>
<td>.505</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>100.821</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0.615</td>
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<tr>
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<td>101.265</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Get regular feedback</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>.928</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>66.470</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>4.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>66.539</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q15. Councillors and local business give us positive feedback</td>
<td>2.324</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.162</td>
<td>1.892</td>
<td>.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>100.754</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>6.14</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>103.078</td>
<td>166</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Age differences:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age differences: 11-14 years/15-16 years/17-19 years</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Dáil na nÓg works on issues relevant to young people</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>9.45</td>
<td>.391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>18.612</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18.826</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Dáil na nÓg relevant to my Comhairle</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>.568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>43.562</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41.824</td>
<td>166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16. Dáil na nÓg represents wide range of young people</td>
<td>39.940</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19.92</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>36.846</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>2.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39.686</td>
<td>166</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q16. Media see Dáil na nÓg as representative of young people</td>
<td>0.933</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.467</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>.482</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>59.843</td>
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<td>3.65</td>
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<td>59.776</td>
<td>166</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q16. Taken seriously at Government level</td>
<td>1.032</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.516</td>
<td>1.119</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>75.627</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>4.61</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>76.659</td>
<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q17. I influence the topics that are chosen</td>
<td>9.81</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>2.020</td>
<td>.136</td>
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<tr>
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<td>29.821</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>1.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q17. Facilitators take our input into account</td>
<td>1.319</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.659</td>
<td>3.061</td>
<td>.090</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>36.635</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q17. Facilitators give good guidance</td>
<td>1.008</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.504</td>
<td>3.925</td>
<td>.022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>21.052</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>1.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22.060</td>
<td>166</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q17. We get good training</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>44.1</td>
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<td>37.728</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q17. We are given good resources</td>
<td>68.9</td>
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<td>34.4</td>
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<td>Q17. Flexibility around how people can take part</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>166</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17. Get enough feedback about how our work does/does not make a difference</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.9</td>
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<td>.546</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.18</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) is a parametric statistical test utilised to assess for potential differences on a categorical variable (e.g. three or more levels) for a scaled variable (e.g. Likert scale). F is a test statistic with a known probability distribution which may be used in the present context to examine whether the differences between three or more means are statistically significantly different from zero.

2 In the present study, assumptions for parametric testing were met and minimum significance levels were set at p<0.05. As such, when the term ‘significant’/‘significance’ is used throughout the main document, it specifically refers to whether or not the p statistic for that analysis fell within these bounds.
Appendix 3: [Past Participants] – Independent Samples $t$-Test$^1$ to identify differences in survey responses contingent on gender of the respondent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex differences: Male to Female</th>
<th>$t$-Test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$t$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Confidence – revised</td>
<td>1.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Self-esteem – revised</td>
<td>-0.428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Social skills – revised</td>
<td>2.909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Acceptance of diversity – revised</td>
<td>0.596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Educational aspirations – revised</td>
<td>0.984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Family relationships – revised</td>
<td>0.824</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Personal aspirations – revised</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Skills development – revised</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q10. Contacts/networks – revised</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. Career – revised</td>
<td>2.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. Education – revised</td>
<td>2.306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. Family – revised</td>
<td>1.532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. Voting – revised</td>
<td>0.934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. Understanding – revised</td>
<td>0.766</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. Active – revised</td>
<td>0.819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. International – revised</td>
<td>1.219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. Community – revised</td>
<td>1.377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q11. Rights – revised</td>
<td>0.680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Ideas and problems – revised</td>
<td>0.927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Members listened – revised</td>
<td>0.778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Didn't meet often enough – revised</td>
<td>-1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Meetings enjoyable – revised</td>
<td>1.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Team did a good job – revised</td>
<td>1.214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Respected by adults – revised</td>
<td>1.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Listened to by adults – revised</td>
<td>1.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Lots of info – revised</td>
<td>-0.353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q14. Enough support – revised</td>
<td>0.348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q15. Positive changes in community – revised</td>
<td>-0.357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q15. Positive changes in policy – revised</td>
<td>0.389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past – Q15. Got regular feedback – revised</td>
<td>0.666</td>
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<td>Past – Q15. Others told us we made a difference – revised</td>
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continued
### Sex differences: Male to Female

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<th>Df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)²</th>
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<th>Std. Error Difference</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
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¹ The independent samples t-test is a parametric statistical test utilised to assess for potential differences on a dichotomous variable (e.g. sex) for a scaled variable (e.g. Likert scale). t is a test statistic with a known probability distribution which may be used in the present context to examine whether the differences between two means are statistically significantly different from zero.

² In the present study, assumptions for parametric testing were met and minimum significance levels were set at p<0.05. As such, when the term ‘significant’/‘significance’ is used throughout the main document, it specifically refers to whether or not the p statistic for that analysis fell within these bounds.

³ The mean difference is a summary statistic equal to the absolute difference of two absolute values drawn from a probability distribution. Put simply, this shows the difference between two means (in this case, male and female). A positive value indicates males rated higher than females, and a negative value indicates the alternative, that females rated higher than males.
Appendix 4: [Past Participants] – One-way Analysis of Variance¹ to identify differences in survey responses contingent on age of the respondent

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<td>.625</td>
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<td>.313</td>
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<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>38.970</td>
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<td>.722</td>
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| | Total | 42.316 | 56 | continued
Age differences:
11-14 years/15-16 years/17-19 years

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<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.²</th>
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¹ The one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) is a parametric statistical test utilised to assess for potential differences on a categorical variable (e.g. three or more levels) for a scaled variable (e.g. Likert scale). F is a test statistic with a known probability distribution which may be used in the present context to examine whether the differences between three or more means are statistically significantly different from zero.

² In the present study, assumptions for parametric testing were met and minimum significance levels were set at p<0.05. As such, when the term ‘significant’/‘significance’ is used throughout the main document, it specifically refers to whether or not the p statistic for that analysis fell within these bounds.