



## Policy and Literature Review of Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy, 2000-2010

### 1. What is the study's background?

This study was commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to inform development of a national strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making for *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020*. The study was undertaken by Professor Ursula Kilkelly, Dr. Shirley Martin, Dr. Katharina Swirak and Dr. Sarah Field, University College Cork.\* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2015.

### 2. What is the study's purpose?

Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy, *Our Children – Their Lives*, published by the Department of Health and Children in 2000, 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*'.

The aim of this research was to undertake a review of the evidence concerning the extent to which Goal 1 has been implemented during the 10 years of the National Children's Strategy. In addition, the literature review was designed to facilitate conclusions on what progress had been achieved under each of the six objectives under Goal 1, as follows:

1. to put in place new mechanisms in the public sector which achieve participation by children in matters that affect them;
2. to promote and support the development of a similar approach in the voluntary and private sectors;
3. to ensure that children are made aware of their rights and responsibilities;
4. to support children and organisations to make the most of the new opportunities to be provided;

5. to target additional resources and supports to enable marginalised children to participate equally;
6. to support research into and evaluation of new mechanisms to give children a voice.

The research had two broader purposes: first, to facilitate reflection on and evaluation of what substantive progress has been achieved under Goal 1; and, secondly, to provide an evidence base for the development of a policy paper on children and young people's participation to be developed as part of the new national policy framework, now known as *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020*, published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2014.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available on [www.dcyia.ie](http://www.dcyia.ie)

### 3. How was the study undertaken?

The research was a desk-based interdisciplinary study that used a range of academic, policy and online sources in order to identify:

- » developments on implementation and progress under Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy (2000);
- » challenges and gaps emerging from implementation of Goal 1;
- » national and international best practice on children and young people's participation.

\* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

The analysed material was reviewed under each of the six objectives under Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy.

## 4. What are the key findings?

The study indicates that a number of elements need to be in place to ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard by those who work with and for them. These elements are described below.

### 4.1 Law and policy base

- » Giving participation a strong legislative, even Constitutional, basis is an important foundation for the development of policy in this area and ultimately leads to the implementation of participation in practice.
- » Even without coherent legislative provision, strong policy can still provide significant impetus and support to those who work in this area and can help to promote participation at all levels.

### 4.2 Leadership and support

- » There is clear merit in having a central unit within a Government department that has responsibility and dedicated resources for undertaking and supporting participation work.
- » The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) Participation Support Team, together with various stakeholders and committees, has been very successful in undertaking and facilitating consultations with children and young people, and developing local and national structures to ensure the voices of children and young people are heard by decision-makers.
- » The DCYA has built up a wealth of experience and expertise in this area and much of its work has been undertaken in collaboration with partners in the statutory and voluntary sectors. Its commitment to evaluation has been very important.

### 4.3 Structures

- » There has been significant progress in the establishment of structures both at national level (including Dáil na nÓg and advisory committees for the DCYA and the Ombudsman for Children's Office) and at local level (predominantly the Comhairle na nÓg) to ensure that children's voices are heard in all matters affecting them. This work has enabled young people to advocate on behalf of their peers.

- » Such participation structures have benefitted from regular independent evaluation, dedicated and ring-fenced financial support and an overarching commitment to drive progress forward in a coherent and structured manner.

### 4.4 Education and information

- » Education and information have both been key to the implementation of Goal 1. However, there has been insufficient awareness-raising and dissemination of good practice in this area.
- » Information is key to young people exercising their right to participate in decision-making. So far, both governmental and non-governmental organisations have given insufficient priority to making their websites more accessible to children and young people.

### 4.5 Resources and supports to enable seldom-heard or marginalised children and young people to participate on an equal footing with their peers

- » Significant research has been undertaken with the participation of marginalised children and young people and it provides important insights into their experiences in making their voices heard. This has enabled capacity-building to take place and resource materials to be developed, with concrete results for seldom-heard children and young people.
- » The lack of a legal obligation to include children and young people's views in all law and policy-making means that seldom-heard young people face particular systematic barriers to ensuring that their rights are fulfilled.

## 5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

1. There has been progress in the implementation of all six objectives of Goal 1, although this has not been even across these areas. For example, the voices of young children (under the age of 8) have not been heard and these and other gaps must now be addressed.
2. Practices and approaches that ensure that the voices of children and young people are heard by decision-makers are increasing in number and quality all the time. In some respects, Ireland is ahead of its counterparts and it shares the

international emphasis on mainstreaming, on local participation and on ensuring that participation initiatives have an impact on decision-making that affects the lives of children and young people.

3. With its policy base – the identification of Goal 1 is itself a significant achievement – and the experience and expertise of the last decade, Ireland can now begin to build on the foundation of the first National Children’s Strategy by developing a National Participation Strategy that is more specific, measurable and achieves real progress. The goal must ultimately be to embed participation as a cultural value both in Irish law and policy, and in the practice of those in the public and voluntary sectors who work with and for children and young people directly and indirectly.

## 6. What are the recommendations?

This section presents the key recommendations emerging from the study.

### 1. National Participation Strategy

- » The National Participation Strategy should aim to develop a coherent policy basis for the participation of children and young people in all matters affecting them.
- » A high-level Participation Strategy Implementation Group should be established to inform and monitor implementation of the strategy, with representation from all Government departments and statutory agencies.

### 2. Participation Hub

- » It is recommended that the National Participation Strategy formally identify the DCYA Participation Support Team as a ‘champion’ and leader in the area of children and young people’s participation.
- » The DCYA Participation Support Team should be sufficiently resourced to enable it to develop into a central hub or one-stop-shop for children and young person’s participation.
- » Particular attention should be paid to developing resources and capacity to promote the participation of marginalised and seldom-heard children and young people in decision-making. Measures must also be taken to ensure that the views of younger children (under the age of 8) are heard and taken into account.

### 3. Participation and information

- » A broad information campaign is necessary to sensitise the public in general and decision-makers in particular to the importance of listening to children and young people and the value of their contributions.
- » Those engaged in participation initiatives need to communicate more widely and more effectively on the nature of their work and its impact. The learning experience and expertise of those engaged with the participation agenda needs to be more widely disseminated.
- » The DCYA should develop a coherent communication strategy aimed at disseminating the achievements of participation initiatives, raising awareness about the participation structures and making best practice on participation widely available. This fits with Recommendation 2 above on the Participation Hub.

## 7. What are the benefits of the study?

The benefits of this study are seen as follows:

- » it highlights the progress made in the implementation of Goal 1 of the National Children’s Strategy in advancing the right of children and young people to participate in decisions about their lives;
- » it reveals the importance and effectiveness of national policy, coupled with dedicated resources and structures, in advancing children’s rights in practice;
- » it considers the trends and developments in the participation of children and young people in matters that affect them both nationally and in other jurisdictions;
- » it provides an evidence base for the development of a National Participation Strategy.

## 8. What are the challenges and limitations of the study?

The study was a time-limited, desk-based review of the literature. As a result, its limitations include that:

- » it did not involve any consultation with children and young people;
- » it could not capture participation practices that were not documented.



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