



An Roinn Leanaí  
agus Gnóthai Óige  
Department of  
Children and Youth Affairs



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL  
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

# Research Development Initiative

## Research Briefing Note

### An examination of children and young people's views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

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

This study was commissioned under the Irish Research Council's Research Development Initiative, in conjunction with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The study was undertaken by Dr. Shirley Martin (Primary Investigator) *et al* of University College Cork.\* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2015.

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

The research investigated the experiences and outcomes of participation for children and young people who have been involved in participatory initiatives of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) since 2000. The research specifically focused on Dáil na nÓg (the National Youth Parliament) and Comhairle na nÓg (local child and youth councils in the 34 Local Authorities in Ireland), the Children and Young People's Forum (operated from 2004-2011 as a reference and advice panel of children and young people to the DCYA) 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 underpinned by four realms of impact – personal, familial, communal and institutional. Using a participatory research approach, the project takes account of children and young people's voices, is informed by consultation with the DCYA and is grounded in the national and international literature.

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 design consisted of a number of stages of data collection, with the participation of children and young people being central. Young people in this study were trained as

researchers and were involved in the collection and interpretation of the data. Key stages were:

- » A project Steering Group was established at the outset, consisting of 3 youth participants from DCYA initiatives, the Research Team, 3 members of the DCYA Participation Unit and an international advisor, Professor Kay Tisdall, Professor of Childhood Policy at the University of Edinburgh.
- » Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed in the data collection for the study, including surveys of past and present youth participants, interviews, focus groups and observations.
- » Young researchers administered the survey of present participants of 17 randomly selected Comhairle na nÓg, as well as facilitating a number of focus groups and interviewing key decision-makers.
- » The study employed purposeful sampling, comprising 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). In total, 330 young people were involved in this study as respondents and researchers.
- » The adult sample consisted of 17 in-depth interviews with Comhairle na nÓg Coordinators, 6 key national support staff connected to the DCYA participation structures and 5 decision-makers.

#### 4. What are the key findings?

##### 4.1 Personal impacts for child and youth participants

- » The research findings 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.

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

## 4.2 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. The two most positive areas where this impact was identified were (1) the opportunity afforded to bring ideas and problems from young people in their community to their Comhairle na nÓg meetings; and (2) the increased awareness of children and young people's issues in the young person's own community.

## 4.3 Impact on families

- » The majority of participants reported that their participation in Comhairle na nÓg had little impact on their relationship with their families. 72% reported a neutral impact and 28% reported a positive impact, while none of the participants reported a negative impact. The majority of participants indicated 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 provide practical support for their participation activities (71% responded positively and 12% negatively).

## 4.4 Impacts on institutions and decision-making in Irish society

- » 75% of current participants felt that they have the opportunity, through Comhairle na nÓg, to meet and talk to people in influential positions, such as journalists, members of Local Authorities and business representatives.
- » Research participants in the study contended that seldom-heard young people have made a significant contribution to the work of Comhairle na nÓg and have found it to be a safe space in which they can express themselves and have a voice.
- » 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 establishment of the Comhairle na nÓg Development Fund in 2007, the employment of 3 national Child and Youth Participation Officers since 2009 and the introduction of Steering Committees in each Comhairle na nÓg.

## 4.5 Key findings on barriers and enablers to participation

- » Dedicated adult facilitators assist in the in-depth coverage of Comhairle topics, encourage learning and enable fulfilling experiences for children and young people.
- » Cooperation with organisations that work with seldom-heard young people is essential to encourage and sustain their participation.

- » Schools need to promote participation in Comhairle na nÓg and encourage a greater range of students to get involved in Comhairle.
- » Multimedia advertising of the work of both Comhairle and Dáil na nÓg would encourage broader participation.
- » Engagement with the local and national media was identified as a key enabler to increasing awareness and impact of participation initiatives.
- » Decision-makers and policy-makers not taking young people's views into account in policy formation was identified as a barrier to youth participation.
- » Networking events for adult facilitators were identified as a positive development for those working in participation.
- » 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, including accessing key decision-makers.
- » The bureaucracy that young people face when working at local level inhibits their participation.

## 5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

1. The participation spaces created by the DCYA respect children and young people as community members and value them as citizens in their own right.
2. Children and young people are being given opportunities to be directly heard in forums where their needs are discussed but where traditionally their voices have been excluded.
3. 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 raised social awareness or civic consciousness.
4. 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 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. The majority of youth participants feel that while people in power do listen to them, they are less confident about whether their views actually influence decisions on issues relating to young people.
5. The recruitment of a more diverse and representative grouping of children and young people in participation initiatives was felt to be very important among Comhairle na nÓg facilitators, including seldom-heard young people and young people from both school settings and local youth clubs. Despite DCYA guidelines, which specify a membership age of between 12 and 18 years, much of the Comhairle membership comprises 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.

6. While there is a growing commitment to child and youth participation in many aspects of public policy and local governance in Ireland, youth participants 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.
7. Schools are often the primary site of information about and recruitment into participation initiatives, and 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 a relatively small pool of young people who are already active in participation initiatives.
8. A recurring theme in the research was the role of key adults or 'adult allies' in supporting children and young people's participation activities.

## 6. What are the recommendations?

This section presents the key recommendations emerging from the study.

### 1. Recommendations for decision-makers and policy-makers

- » Training for adult decision-makers is needed to prepare them to work with children and young people and to support them in listening to children and young people's voices.
- » There needs to be tangible outcomes for young people to feel that their participation is acknowledged and useful.
- » Different forms of communication (such as text messaging, online surveys and Skype) could access the views of greater numbers of young people.
- » Young people want to be kept informed of policy decisions and progress after their official participation work has ended.
- » Participation initiatives need to be more active in engaging children and younger teenagers since this group is currently under-represented.
- » Participation should be embedded into all spaces and activities that children and young people engage with, requiring recognition also of the informal participation activities they engage in, both with adults in families, communities and schools, and with other children and young people.
- » Formal guidelines and directives from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government should be developed, requiring Local Authorities to consult children and young people on a wider range of policies.

### 2. Recommendations for schools

- » The perception that Comhairle na nÓg is only for student council members or high academic achievers needs to be addressed in schools.
- » Greater cooperation is needed between Comhairle Coordinators and staff within schools, including HSLC, TY Coordinators and School Completion Coordinators. Schools might, in turn, benefit from the expertise of youth workers with direct experience of child and youth participation.
- » In order to facilitate wider youth participation in Irish society, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) should be an official examination subject and should be taught at every level.

### 3. Recommendations for Comhairle na nÓg

- » Public awareness of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg could be improved through increased advertising locally and nationally. This could improve recruitment, increase the impact of the participation initiatives and widen the pathways to participation. Advertising could include a Facebook campaign and multimedia examples of the youth participation work, such as videos and blogs.
- » Engaging with local decision-makers more effectively is necessary to increase their attendance at events such as the Comhairle na nÓg National Showcase.
- » An Internet or social media platform would support networking among members of Comhairle na nÓg around the country.

### 4. Recommendations for 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 could be open to all those working with children and young people in order 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.
- » Activities and methodologies used in participation projects should be documented to share best practice with other initiatives and with other Government departments and agencies.

## Note No. 2 Research Briefing: Children and young people's views on the impact of their participation in decision-making

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Check out [www.dcyia.ie](http://www.dcyia.ie) for full report of study

### 5. Recommendations to support the participation of seldom-heard young people

- » Recruitment and retention of seldom-heard young people require 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.

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

The study investigates for the first time the perceived impacts of participation for children and young people who are currently, and those who have been, involved in DCYA participation initiatives. The voices of the young people themselves are central in both the design of the research methodology and in the findings. In addition to the inclusion of young people on the project Steering Group, an important part of the study has been the training of young people as researchers involved in data collection and data analysis. The benefits of using a participatory approach in research with children and young people are that the issues identified are those that are important to the children and young people themselves, and that their views and recommendations are central to the process and outcomes of the research.

Taking part in DCYA participation initiatives has been shown to have important benefits for the children and young people themselves, for their wider communities and for the development of effective policy and practice.

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

A number of methodological limitations and challenges arose in the research design for this project. The first challenge relates to accessing past participants since, due to the local nature of the Comhairlí na nÓg, there is a limited central database of past participants. Consequently, participants were contacted through the DCYA and through follow-up contacts with local Comhairle na nÓg, which may have been a barrier to contacting more marginalised past participants.

Secondly, since the majority of the participation initiatives in this research involve older teenagers, there is limited input from younger children and younger teenagers in this study.

Research findings need to be mindful of the fact that these are the views of the young people who are involved in participation structures and do not include young people who are excluded or choose not to participate in formal participation structures.