An audit of children and young people’s participation in decision-making

1. What is the study’s background?
This audit was commissioned by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) to inform development of a national policy on children and young people’s participation in decision-making for the National Children and Young People’s Strategy (2012-2017). The study was undertaken by Sandra Roe, independent social research consultant, and Olivia McEvoy, independent consultant and lifecoach, Cnagar an Doras.* The report was published in 2011.

2. What is the study’s purpose?
The objective of the audit was to document activity in statutory and non-statutory organisations, that enables participation by children and young people (under the age of 18) in decision-making that affects their lives.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings and conclusions of the study. The full report is available on www.dcya.ie

3. How was the study undertaken?
The methods employed were designed to achieve the above objectives. Four separate online surveys were developed with the use of a popular online survey tool. The first was aimed at Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations, the second at the HSE and HSE-funded organisations, the third at Student Councils and the fourth at Student Council Liaison Teachers. The report is set out in 4 parts to reflect these separate online surveys:

» Part 1 outlines the main findings from the survey of Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations.
» Part 2 outlines the main findings from the survey of the HSE and HSE-funded organisations.
» Part 3 outlines the main findings from the survey of Student Councils.
» Part 4 outlines the main findings from the brief survey of Student Council Liaison Teachers.

4. What are the key findings?
The key findings from each part of the study are outlined below.

4.1 Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations
A total of 71 organisations responded to this online survey, 40.8% of which were Comhairlí na nÓg. Some of the key findings from this section of the report include:

» The majority of respondents were from youth-related organisations (59.2%), such as statutory services and NGOs, and the remainder were from Comhairle na nÓg (40.8%).
» Four out of 5 organisations (80.3%) are currently involving children and young people in decision-making, while a further 8.5% have done so in the past.
» Organisations most frequently consult with children and young people on youth services, leisure and recreation, and mental health issues.
» Organisations most typically involve children and young people in consultations on the development of new or existing policies and services.
» Organisations tend to consult with children and young people through focus groups, ongoing informal consultations, surveys on specific issues, public meetings and events. The most cited approach of organisations to children and

* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.
young people’s participation was to value the right of children and young people to be involved in decision-making.

» 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. Seven out of 10 organisations (70.3%) that engage in participation activity stated that children and young people have influenced decisions about issues that affect them directly.

» Policy development involving children and young people is having the most significant impact at a local and national level. Children and young people are also having a strong impact on the development of youth-targeted services and programmes, including facilities such as youth cafés.

» 85.5% of organisations agreed or strongly agreed that children and young people have a right to be involved in public decision-making and 68% agreed or strongly agreed that there are no decisions which children and young people cannot be involved in, providing they are properly supported.

» Organisations generally reported positive experiences of children and young people’s participation. Almost all of the organisations work with young people aged 13-17 years, with fewer organisations engaging with children younger than 12.

» Nearly all organisations engaged in participation activity have involved teenagers in decision-making, whereas significantly less have involved younger children. Children and young people from ethnic minorities, the Travelling community and early school-leavers are the most consulted seldom-heard groups.

» The least consulted groups of children and young people are those in hospital, followed by those aged 0-4 years, those formerly or currently in foster or residential care, children aged 5-12 years, young refugees and asylum-seekers, children and young people with a physical or sensory disability, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) young people, young offenders and those with a learning difficulty. Almost all organisations involve children and young people from urban areas in decision-making, while just over three-quarters involve those from rural areas.

» Children and young people from the Travelling community, ethnic minorities, early school-leavers and children and young people with a disability were the main groups identified by organisations as being difficult to engage in their services. Despite this, organisations reported good levels of involvement in decision-making from the majority of these cohorts, apart from children and young people with a physical or sensory disability.

» A major concern raised by some organisations is the over-representation of middle-class, well-educated children and young people on participation structures and the under-representation of other sections of society, who are generally in need of more supports and services.

4.2 HSE and HSE-funded organisations

There were 200 responses to this online survey, 44.5% of which were from HSE Local Health Offices, 27.5% from other HSE services and 17.5% from HSE-funded services. Some of the key findings from this section of the report include:

» The majority of respondents were from HSE Local Health Offices, followed by other HSE services, HSE-funded services and from hospital-based teams.

» Just over one-third of respondents (36.2%) from the HSE and HSE-funded services are currently involving children and young people in decision-making and almost one-quarter (19.9%) have done so in the past.

» Only a small number of respondents (15.8%) had ever used the HSE National Strategy for Service User Involvement in the Irish Health Service to help them involve children and young people in decision-making, while over half (56.9%) had received the HSE Guidelines on Working with Children.

» Mental and physical health, education, youth services, recreation, healthcare services and other issues relating to children and young people in care are the key issues on which the HSE and HSE-funded services consult with children and young people.

» Ongoing informal consultation, as well as providing child and youth-friendly literature, is the approach the HSE and HSE-funded services generally take to involve children and young people in decision-making.
Respondents believe participation activity is more likely to influence decisions about issues that affect children and young people directly rather than the development of new or existing policies or services. Decisions children and young people are involved in were found to primarily have an influence at a local level.

The most noteworthy impact of involving children and young people in decision-making is in the area of residential and foster care, where participants have a say in their own care planning, as well as in family issues such as access and custody. Policy development and the development of youth services and programmes are other key areas where children and young people have had an impact.

Dedicated staff time was the most favoured type of resource that HSE teams, departments, organisations and services allocated specifically to support children and young people’s participation. However, a large proportion of respondents stated that they had no resources specifically allocated to support children and young people’s participation.

Over 4 out of 5 of all respondents (84.7%) from the HSE and HSE-funded services ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that children and young people have a right to be involved in public decision-making. Just 9% ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that it is too difficult to involve younger children in decision-making.

Respondents from the HSE and HSE-funded services that engaged in participation activity predominantly had positive experiences of involving children and young people in decision-making.

The formal inclusion of children’s rights in the Constitution of Ireland was called for.

HSE teams, departments, organisations and services most commonly work with and develop policies and services for young people aged 13-17. The HSE and HSE-funded services most frequently involve teenagers rather than younger children in decision-making.

The least consulted groups were children aged 0-4. Children and young people with learning difficulties are less likely to be involved in decision-making than those with a physical or sensory disability.

Early school-leavers, Travellers and ethnic minorities, refugees and asylum-seekers were identified by HSE respondents as the main groups of children and young people they find hardest to reach. Developing relationships and partnerships with organisations that work with specific target groups, as well as targeted projects and programmes, have proved to be the most successful ways to engage with hard-to-reach children and young people.

### 4.3 Student Councils

Despite conducting this online survey on 3 separate occasions over a 9-month period and using a number of different approaches, it proved a considerable challenge to secure responses from Student Councils. Overall, 208 second-level schools, from a possible total of 730 schools, responded to the survey, representing the low response rate of 28.5%. Some of the key findings from this section of the report include:

- The vast majority of Student Council members were elected by other students in their school.
- Almost all Student Councils meet at least once a month, with just over half meeting more than once a month. Student Council meetings are ordinarily attended by Student Council members and Liaison Teachers, and on occasions by School Principals, other teachers, other students and guests. Student Council meetings are usually chaired by a student.
- The main roles of Student Councils, as outlined by respondents, were ‘to make sure students have a say’ and ‘to make your school a better place to be in’.
- 60% of Student Councils always decide on their own activities.
- The most positive relationships reported in the study were between Student Councils and School Principals, followed by teachers and then other students. Only 60% of Student Councils said they always consult with other students on important issues.
- The majority of Student Councils (68%) are sometimes involved in decision-making with school management.
- 78% of Student Councils were consulted in relation to school rules and regulations, while 62% were responsible for changes in rules and regulations in their school (such as the Code of Behaviour). 87% of Student Councils were consulted in relation to school policies and 73% were responsible for changes in policies, such as healthy eating and anti-bullying policies.
The majority of respondents (75%) felt their Student Council had a ‘medium’ impact in their school. The main difficulties identified by respondents were a lack of interest in and understanding of Student Councils among other students. Lack of time for Student Council activities was also cited as a problem and timetabling of meetings was suggested as a solution. Only 32.5% of respondents had used the Student Council Diary to assist in planning and organising their activities. 28.5% did not know what the Student Council Diary was.

4.4 Student Council Liaison Teachers
The online survey with Student Council Liaison Teachers was developed in the second phase of the Student Council audit. There was an extremely low response rate, with only 91 Student Council Liaison Teachers completing the survey. Some of the key findings from this brief survey include:

- Two-thirds of Student Council Liaison Teachers have been in their post for less than 5 years and one-third for the last 5 or more years.
- 87% of Liaison Teachers have used the Student Council Resource Pack, but considerably fewer (58%) have used the CSPE Resource Pack Student Councils in Schools.
- 80% of Liaison Teachers have availed of support or training from the Student Council Support Service.
- The Student Council Liaison Teacher Folder was the most used support among respondents, followed by in-service days, evening workshops and Student Council training. Only a small number of Liaison Teachers had availed of telephone advice and schools visits.
- Key supports identified by respondents to help improve how Student Councils operate included ongoing training for Student Council members and Liaison Teachers (particularly for new members and teachers), training for school management and more school visits.

5. What are the conclusions?
This audit of children and young people’s participation reached 10 overall conclusions, as follows:

1. Organisations, services and structures that have involved children and young people in decision-making activity generally reported positive experiences, benefits and outcomes from such activity.

2. Levels of participation activity and effectiveness varied among respondents. There was a much higher rate of participation in decision-making among children and young people involved in Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations compared with the HSE and HSE-funded organisations. Four out of 5 respondents (80.3%) from Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations are currently involving children and young people in decision-making and 8.5% have done so in the past, whereas 36.2% of respondents from the HSE and HSE funded organisations are currently involving children and young people in decision-making and 19.9% have done so in the past.

3. Involvement in decision-making was typically described as ‘informal’ among those from the HSE and HSE-funded organisations. On the other hand, involvement of children and young people in decision-making within Student Councils, Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations was more structured. The majority of Student Councils are well established and involve young people in decision-making activities on a regular basis.

4. The key issues that children and young people who are involved in decision-making are consulted about varied, although mental health was cited as one of the most common topics. The HSE and HSE-funded organisations were most likely to consult with children and young people on mental health issues, whereas Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations were most likely to consult with children and young people on issues relating to youth services, leisure and recreation, followed by mental health issues. Young people on Student Councils were most likely to be consulted by school management in relation to the development of new or existing school rules and policies.

5. All respondents stated that the greatest impact related to influencing decisions that affect children and young people directly as individuals, such as healthcare and family issues. However, children and young people were more likely to have an impact on the development of policies, rules, services (e.g. facilities for young people and youth cafés) and programmes as a result of participation in decision-making within Student Councils, Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations than in the HSE and HSE-funded organisations. Key points include:
Involvement of children and young people in participation activity was considered to have the greatest impact at a local level by the HSE and HSE-funded organisations, as well as by Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations. However, respondents from Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations felt children and young people were having a stronger impact as a result of their involvement in decision-making at organisational and national levels, compared with respondents from the HSE and HSE-funded organisations.

The impact of participation in decision-making structures was measured from the perspective of children and young people in the Student Council survey. The majority of Student Council members (75%) felt that they were having a ‘medium’ impact in their school.

While 78% of Student Councils were consulted by school management in relation to school rules and policies, only 62% had an actual impact on decision-making in these areas.

Young Travellers, early school-leavers, and children and young people from ethnic minorities were considered by the HSE, HSE-funded organisations, Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations to be the hardest groups to reach in terms of involvement in participation activity.

All respondents to the audit also reported minimal, if any, participation of young people under the age of 12.

All respondents to the audit also noted general difficulties in relation to engaging with young people who are seldom-heard.

Respondents from Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations reported difficulties pertaining to the over-representation of children and young people from the middle classes on participation structures.

Young people involved in Student Councils identified the key benefits of participation as personal benefits. The survey also found that Student Council members considered their main achievements to be the development of their own leadership and communication skills, as well as increased responsibility.

While the majority of Student Council members agreed that making sure students have a say was their main role, only 60% said they always consulted with the student body as a whole in relation to important issues. Furthermore, the survey found that the least positive relationship experienced by members of Student Councils was with other students in their schools.

Respondents from Comhairle na nÓg had higher levels of resources devoted to participation activity, such as dedicated staff, training and premises, compared with those working in the HSE and HSE-funded organisations.

Student Councils also identified the need for additional resources and supports, such as Student Council networks, forums and unions. Although Student Council members called for more resources, just over two-thirds of respondents (67.5%) had never used the Student Council Diary, which is distributed to all schools to assist in planning and organising their activities. Similarly, some 42% of Student Council Liaison Teachers had never used the CSPE Resource Pack Student Councils in Schools. Underuse of resource material was also reported in the survey of the HSE and HSE-funded organisations: only 15.8% of respondents had ever used the HSE National Strategy for Service User Involvement in the Irish Health Service, 2008-2013 to help them involve children and young people in decision-making and only 56.9% had ever received the HSE Guidelines on Working with Children.

The majority of respondents from the HSE, HSE-funded organisations, Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations agreed that children and young people have a right to be involved in public decision-making. However, higher percentages of respondents from Comhairle na nÓg and other organisations (93.5%) valued the right of children and young people to be involved in decision-making compared with those from the HSE and HSE-funded organisations (73.8%). Other findings include:

- The formal inclusion of children’s rights in the Constitution of Ireland was called for.
- In the case of Student Councils, 57% felt their views were ‘always’ taken seriously by school management, but 43% felt their views were only ‘sometimes’ or ‘rarely’ taken seriously.

Furthermore, only 9% of Student Councils were ‘always’ involved in decision-making.
6. **What are the benefits of the study?**

The benefit of this study arises from having documented, for the first time, participation activity currently underway in Ireland in both statutory and non-statutory organisations working with children and young people. This information can now be used to inform the development of a national policy on children and young people’s participation in decision-making for the National Children and Young People’s Strategy (2012-2017). It can also be used by organisations to monitor their own progress and to benchmark their position against other organisations, both those in the same field and those in other fields. This process may also help to improve their structures and systems of including children and young people in the decision-making process.