

Promoting child and youth engagement in Northern Ireland

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Children and Young People's Right to Heard – the Lundy model

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires governments to ensure that children have their views sought and given due weight in all matters affecting them. The right applies to decisions affecting children as individuals and children as a group. This briefing paper focuses on the latter – children and young people's entitlement to participate in public decision-making and its significance for child and youth engagement.

Research on the implementation of the CRC was undertaken for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) in 2003/4 to inform its priorities for office.¹ The research identified a lack of compliance with Article 12 of the UNCRC as one of the cross-cutting issues affecting children in all aspects of their lives. Drawing on the research for NICCY, I proposed a model for rights-compliant children's participation which offers a legally sound but user-friendly conceptualisation of Article 12 of the CRC.² This model (presented under the title *"Voice' is not enough"*) suggests that implementation of Article 12 requires consideration of four inter-related concepts: **space, voice, audience and influence**. In the appendix, I include one of the most recent depictions of the model from the Irish National Framework on child and youth participation.³

The Lundy Model in practice.

The model is a local product with global impact. It was developed from research for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People conducted at Queen's University Belfast and is now used extensively right across the world. For example, since 2013 I have partnered with **Child Rights Connect**, the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child** (the Committee) and **Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights** (OHCHR) to apply the model and demonstrate how children can be involved in the work of the **United Nations**. The **World Health Organisation** applies the model to promote and map good practice. The **European Commission** promotes it as a way of understanding participation and it assesses funding applications against its criteria (with the knock-on effect that many

¹ <https://www.niccy.org/publications/2004/october/10/childrens-rights-in-northern-ireland/>

² Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice's not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British educational research journal*, 33(6), 927-942.

³ <https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/>

projects adopt the model) and I act as an expert advisor to the **Council of Europe**, currently advising the Andorran government on the involvement of children in its National Plan for Children. International children's organisations (including **UNICEF, World Vision, Plan international**) and hundreds of national NGOs use the Lundy model to plan and evaluate child participation, including for the most vulnerable and marginalised children, in almost every country and every region of the world.

In **Ireland**, the **Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)** adopted the model in a ground-breaking national strategy (2015) covering all government departments.⁴ I collaborated with it and representatives from every government department to develop a participation checklist and more recently to develop a national Framework on Child and Youth Participation⁵ (see appendix for one of the tools from the framework, all of which are based on the model). Others that have adopted the approach include **Taiwan** (where I was appointed to an expert panel reviewing its progress in the UNCRC), **South Africa** in its 2019 national child participation strategy; and government departments and agencies in **New Zealand, Scotland; Belgium, the Netherlands, Chile, Jersey, Iceland and Australia**. I am currently working on a guide to embedding child participation in the **Barnahus** system – a child-centred approach for child victims and witnesses.⁶

Child and youth participation in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has a vibrant children's sector that has been promoting and modelling excellent child and youth participation for decades. Participation was further bolstered by the creation of NICCY and its strong and consistent work to ensure that children and young people are heard in public-decision-making. There are pockets of good practice in the public sector such as the activity of local youth councils and consultations from various Departments (such as the DE consultation on the Children's Strategy). However, child and youth engagement has not been uniform or systematic.

In the past year, there has been a surge in interest and activity, manifested by three extremely promising (and exciting) recent developments. These are: (a) the establishment of the cross-Departmental Participation Project strategy group led by the Department of Education (working with children and young people as advisors); (b) the development of the NI Youth Assembly (co-designed with young people); and (c) the emergence of a youth-led student

⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9128db-national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-dec/#:~:text=National%20Strategy%20on%20Children%20and%20Young%20People's%20Participation%20in%20Decision%20Making,-From%20Department%20of&text=The%20goal%20of%20this%20strategy,the%20five%20national%20outcome%20areas.>

⁵ <https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/>

⁶ <https://www.barnahus.eu/en/#:~:text=PROMISE%20Barnahus%20Network,-The%20PROMISE%20Barnahus&text=The%20Network%20is%20a%20formalisation,Representative%20on%20Violence%20against%20Children.>

movement, the Secondary Students Union for NI.⁷ I am a member of the advisory group for the first two and I am on the Board of the latter. More recently, I have provided training to the NI Chief Executives Forum, Youth Justice Board and NIGALA – all positive indications of an appetite to enhance engagement.

Some of the challenges going forward will be the same as occur elsewhere. This includes, for example, addressing scepticism about the value of child and youth engagement and ensuring that opportunities are open to all children, with young children and children with disabilities often excluded. In Northern Ireland, we have the additional challenge that many of our children and young people are growing up in communities affected by violence and social deprivation and do not feel connected to or heard and understood by public decision-makers. Given our context, there is particular onus on and motivation for us to make sure that all children and young people can engage and influence decisions that affect them.

What would further enhance child and youth engagement?

I have advised on child participation in a number of ‘small’ jurisdictions (Andorra, Iceland, Jersey, New Zealand). I am convinced that we also have the potential to be world-leading in this area, given: the compelling need for child and youth engagement; our expertise across the children’s sector; and our size and therefore our ability to reach out to and involve every child and young person in ways that are effective and meaningful. The innovative, participatory approach to the development and implementation of the NI Youth Assembly is an example of this. My recommendations for further enhancing child and youth engagement are as follows:

Law: As far as I am aware, the only statutory obligation to consult children and young people as a group is placed on Schools’ Boards of Governors in relation to discipline and bullying policies.⁸ In Wales, Ministers are required to prepare a Children’s Scheme and to ensure children and young persons are involved in the preparation of the draft.⁹ Scotland’s proposed legislation incorporating the UNCRC has a similar provision.¹⁰

Education and training. Enabling child and youth participation requires training and support for adults. Ireland’s Hub na nÓg is an excellent example of this in practice.¹¹

Support for the children’s and youth sector. The sector plays a crucial role in building children and young people’s capacity to engage and supporting them to do so, with a focus on child-

⁷ <https://www.ssuni.org/>

⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2003/424/article/19/made>

⁹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/mwa/2011/2/section/3>

¹⁰ <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/legislation/bills/current-bills/united-nations-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child-incorporation-scotland-bill/stage-3/bill-as-passed.pdf>. S. 11(3)

¹¹ <https://hubnanog.ie/hub-na-nog-training-approach-design-and-delivery-model/>

and youth-led initiatives.¹² A healthy, resourced children's sector is crucial to youth engagement in public decision-making, especially for marginalised and seldom heard groups and is a necessary complement to formal spaces such as youth and student councils.

Child and youth friendly information. For children and young people to engage in public decision-making, they need to grasp the issues involved. The European Commission's 2021 Strategy on the Rights of the Child, for example, includes a commitment to ensuring that all laws and policies are produced in a child-friendly format.¹³ We are currently working with it to produce the guidance that will be used across the EU to support the implementation of that. There is no reason why this could not happen for law and policy in NI.

Effective mechanisms for consultation. The NI Youth Assembly will play a key role here, but it cannot do everything and nor should it. There is no one right way to do ensure that children and young people are engaged in public decision-making: certain activities will require bespoke consultations. However, we should build on our strengths. One of these is Ark, a collaboration between Queen's and UU who run two annual surveys for children and young people (Kids Life and Times and Young Life and Times). These surveys provide a convenient and cost-effective way for public bodies to get representative data on children and young people's views and experiences.¹⁴ The Department of Education and Education Authority are also well-placed to access every child in NI who is in a state school. This is the approach adopted by the Andorran Government in its recent consultation on its Children's Plan.

¹² See the research we conducted for Save the Children International
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/right-children-participate-public-decision-making-processes>

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en

¹⁴ <https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/>

Evaluation Checklist

This checklist is a guide for the self-evaluation and external evaluation of policies, plans, services, programmes, governance, research and legislation at national, local and organisational level.

