

Principles of Participation with Children and Young People – Northern Ireland Executive departments

(i) Introduction

This set of **Participation Principles (Section ii)** are intended to inform and support government engagement with children and young people when developing legislation, policies, strategies, services and when taking decisions which impact on their lives.

The principles are aimed at promoting effective and meaningful two-way engagement between government and children and young people.

A set of child / young person friendly principles have been developed by young people and are included under the heading **Principles of Participation – Children and Young People's version (section iii)**.

The principles recognise the importance of adopting a structured approach for engaging with children and young people. The **Lundy Model** is recognised as a highly effective method for defining the elements necessary for effective and meaningful participation to take place.

The model is widely referenced in current approaches and has been a central consideration in developing these principles. The model has four key elements which are:

- **Space:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view
- **Voice:** Children must be facilitated to express their view
- **Audience:** The view must be listened to
- **Influence:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

(ii) Participation Principles

In considering their roles and responsibilities policy and decision makers will:

- When planning new strategies, policies or decisions ensure that identification of all participation opportunities or engagement needs is considered at the outset of the process;
- Be aware that early identification of the need to engage with children and young people should provide better opportunities for meaningful engagement and effective co-design;
- Ensure early participation extends to the development of legislation as it often underpins policy development;
- In the planning stages of work actively consider the lead in time which will be required to help prepare and support children and young people to meaningfully take part in the participation process. Officials must bear in mind young people's

commitments for example the school year, examinations and their general availability to take part in participation;

- Start from the position that seeking the views of children and young people's is standard practice unless there is a compelling reason to the contrary, the extent of engagement may be determined adopting a proportional approach. Decisions not to engage should be recorded with a clear rationale for the decision;
- Ensure the right of all children and young people to participate is respected without discrimination on any grounds.
- Particular consideration must be given to children and young people from vulnerable, marginalized or difficult to reach groups;
- Officials may find it helpful to undertake a Child Rights Impact Assessment - this is not currently a formal requirement but may be useful.
- Ensure effective planning of participation needs by basing requirements on **robust** of timelines including specific time to identify, prepare and support the young people who will participate. It may be helpful to document and communicate these needs clearly to all key stakeholders;
- Ensure that children and young people friendly versions of all key documentation is available;
- Ensure the questions you want answered are age appropriate;
- Ensure the children and young people who are participating have the skills or experience to effectively engage and where necessary provide support and /or training to help improve the capacity of children and young people to engage;
- Ensure children and young people have the scope of their participation explained, with limitations in respect of their involvement specified;
- Ensure staff have the capacity, skills and experience necessary to effectively engage with children and young people. Or alternatively staff have access to knowledgeable and experienced support to facilitate the participation while being visible and available for the young people to discuss issues with them;
- Staff engaging with children and young people must be sensitive to potential risks; and.
- Always be prepared to provide feedback to children and young people to outline how their participation has influenced or changed the development of policies strategies or decisions, this must include explanations for circumstances where their views have not influenced outcomes.

(iii) Principles of Participation – Children and Young People’s version

These principles were researched, developed, written and agreed by children and young people.

- Your views will be included in the development of laws and policies that affect children and young people.
- You and other young people will have an input from the very start.
- You have the right to take part without being treated unfairly.
- You will be provided with the appropriate support no matter what your needs are.
- You will have appropriate people using suitable ways to help you take part.
- You will be provided with support and preparation to be consulted on a subject of interest to you.
- You will be given time and resources to make sure your involvement is meaningful.
- You will be provided with clear and understandable information on changes that are possible.
- Your views will be heard using child and young person friendly information
- You will be given information and feedback of how we listened to and used your views.
- You will take part in a safe and supported space where you can speak your views with no outside influence or pressure.

(iv) Guidance to supporting implementation of the Participation Principles

This section provides additional information to support implementation of the principles. Further Guidance and Training resources are referenced at the end of this section.

Identification of need for participation of children and young people

For participation to be effective, meaningful and sustainable, it needs to be recognised as a process and not as a one-off event. It requires commitment in terms of both time and resources.

Ensuring clarity on roles and responsibilities regarding participation will be vital to success. Policy and decision makers must understand what participation means from the perspective of children and young people and how they can help facilitate

this. Those seeking to engage with children and young people should be aware of the Participation Principles outlined above.

Children and Young People - Planning for effective co-design & participation.

Early recognition of the need to involve children and young people is vital for effective two-way meaningful engagement and the opportunity for improved policy and decision making leading to potentially better outcomes. The failure to plan for participation of children and young people is regularly identified as an area of weakness across the public sector.

To ensure the engagement process is effective, the following approach is recommended:

- Early and active consideration of robust timeframes where it is recognised that children and young people must be engaged with;
- Early engagement with children and young people to actively demonstrate a positive and inclusive approach to co-design, this should include involving children and young people in planning and decision making for the participation process;
- Identification and inclusion of resource needs within planning for policy reviews;
- Ensuring children and young people have the skills or experience to effectively engage and/or where necessary provide support and /or training to help improve the capacity of children and young people to engage;
- Encouraging staff to avail of suitable training, where appropriate, including use of the Introduction to Children's Rights and Child Rights Impact Assessment training available on the NICS LInKs platform;
- Ensuring staff engaging with children and young people are sensitive to potential risks including when discussing sensitive or emotive issues;
- Ensuring the right of all children and young people to participate is respected without discrimination on any grounds;
- Ensuring easy read versions of key documents are available;
- Ensuring particular consideration is given to children and young people from vulnerable, marginalized or difficult to reach groups including those with additional support needs and young children;
- Recognition of participation as a process and not a one-off event. It requires commitment in terms of both time and resources;
- Ensuring time is made available throughout the engagement process to provide detailed and meaningful feedback to children and young people regardless of the success or impact of the engagement; and
- Consideration of the actions necessary to ensure children and young people are protected through effective safeguarding

Within planning it will be necessary to carefully consider the audience, location and facilities, access and timing to ensure the process is productive and takes account of children and young people's school day, year and examination commitments.

Government should ensure that staff development and awareness of the requirements for effective participation is recognised as central to effective participation.

Children and Young People - explanation of the process including feedback

Public sector staff should ensure there are suitable mechanisms for receiving and providing feedback during each participation event. Roles, responsibilities and expectations should be clear to all participants. This must be central to the engagement process and ensure:

- Children and young people have the scope of their participation explained, with limitations in respect of their involvement specified;
- Timely and detailed feedback is provided to children and young people throughout the engagement process to outline how their participation has influenced or changed the development of policies strategies or decisions, including explanations for circumstances where their views have not influenced outcomes; and
- Public Sector participants should bear in mind the need for active listening to ensure the views of children and young people are actively considered and that feedback is based on the contributions made.

Online approaches for engaging with children and young people

For participation systems to be effective careful consideration will need to be given to how government uses technology to support effective practice, particularly in today's digital world, ensuring social media is a key element.

Additional guidance and training Resources

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has published a guide which provides advice for public bodies on participation with children and young people which can be accessed at:

<https://www.niccy.org/publications/participation-with-children-and-young-people-advice-to-public-bodies/>

In addition to section 75 considerations officials may wish to consider using a Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA). This is not a formal requirement but may be useful. NICCY has published information on CRIA, including a checklist, which can be accessed at: <https://www.niccy.org/what-we-do/training/cria/>

During 2022 NICCY developed two training modules to promote children's rights and the Child Rights Impact Assessment process.

The two online child rights-based training modules are available for NICS staff on the LInKs training platform:

Introduction to Children's Rights - The course explores children as rights holders, adults as duty bearers and how the actions of government impact children more than any other group. Decisions about education, public health, migration, employment, social welfare and other global issues have life-long effects.

Child Rights Impact Assessments - This module is the 'next stage' companion to the Introduction of Children's Rights module and is designed to build the capacity of participants to conduct Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs). It aims to help participants understand the benefits of undertaking CRIAs and how to integrate them in the development of policies, legislation, budgets, services, practice or planning decisions.