

Report from the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group to the Minister for Children, Brian Lenihan TD

April 2007

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Executive summary

Terms of reference of the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group

The terms of reference of the Implementation Group were to:

- Explore key findings from Review of Comhairle na nÓg (Murphy, 2005);
- Explore the possible overlap between Comhairle na nÓg and participation structures proposed under the Youth Work Act (2001);
- Make recommendations regarding:
 - a mechanism for the support and development of Comhairle na nÓg at local level;
 - a mechanism for the support and development of Comhairle na nÓg at national level;
 - roles and responsibilities of relevant organisations represented on CDBs in the development and support of Comhairle na nÓg;
 - roles and responsibilities of relevant government departments and agencies at national level in the development and support of Comhairle na nÓg;
 - good governance arrangements in the operation of Comhairle na nÓg;
- Develop a plan for achieving buy-in for the development and support of Comhairle na nÓg from key stakeholders at local and national level;
- Examine ways of disseminating information on Comhairle na nÓg, in order to attract a broader and more inclusive involvement of children and young people;
- Establish on-going links between key stakeholders and mechanisms for evaluating and monitoring the development of Comhairle na nÓg over the next three years;
- Assess the resource implications of what is proposed.

Review of Comhairle na nÓg

The Implementation Group agreed that key findings from the Review of Comhairle na nÓg (Murphy, 2005), include:

- The need for a strengthening of working relationships at national level between the Office of the Minister for Children, the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the Department of Education and Science and other relevant agencies;
- Recognition of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg as the official structures for the participation of young people in strategy and policy development;
- The need for an increase in resources and an agreed funding strategy for Comhairle na nÓg;
- The need for a strengthening of working relationships at local level, with CDBs as the lead partner.

Comhairle na nÓg questionnaire

On behalf of the Implementation Group, the OMC devised and circulated a questionnaire to all CDBs seeking information about current Comhairle na nÓg activity and support required at national and local level. Completed questionnaires were received by 30 out of the 34 CDBs, thus providing an excellent picture of current practice and needs.

Key findings from the Comhairle na nÓg questionnaire include:

- Recognition of Comhairle na nÓg as the main avenue for consultation with, and participation by, children and young people at local level;

- The need for a national Comhairle na nÓg strategy;
- The need for a national Comhairle na nÓg support service, that sets standards, produces resource materials and good practice guidelines, provides advice and training and monitors progress;
- The need for support for Comhairle na nÓg from relevant Government Departments;
- The need for commitment to Comhairle na nÓg by agencies and organisations at local level;
- The provision of adequate staffing and resources for Comhairle na nÓg at local level;
- Improved communication and co-ordination between national and local bodies;
- The establishment of national and regional Comhairle na nÓg networks;
- The establishment of a national Comhairle na nÓg website;
- The development of good practice in the operation of Comhairle na nÓg;
- Initiatives aimed at increasing the level of involvement in Comhairle na nÓg by hard-to-reach young people;
- The development of links between Student Councils and Comhairle na nÓg.

The role and function of Comhairle na nÓg

The Implementation Group notes that Comhairle na nÓg is currently under-used as a vehicle for consultation with young people. The vision of the Implementation Group is that Comhairle na nÓg should be recognised as a key mechanism for structured input into local government and should be supported by, and a resource for, all statutory and voluntary organisations in the county/city. Comhairle na nÓg should not be the only way of seeking the views of children and young people, but should become a key consultative forum in every CDB area of the country.

Standards of good practice for Comhairle na nÓg

Comhairle na nÓg have developed in a variety of different ways around the country. The Implementation Group believes that minimum standards and performance indicators for Comhairle na nÓg must be put in place, which accommodate local differences. Notwithstanding the additional support provided by a significant number of local authorities to Comhairle na nÓg, it is clear that further support and engagement from agencies at local level is also required. The role of local authorities in developing Comhairle na nÓg at local level needs to be further enhanced, building on best practice.

The Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group is cited in *Towards 2016*, as a key innovative Government measure to increase participation by children and young people in local and national decision-making.

Towards 2016 also makes provision for the establishment of the National Implementation Group (NIG), chaired by the OMC and linked to the HSE's Expert Advisory Group. Under the NIG, multi-agency Children's Services Committees will be put in place in each County/City Development Board (CDB), to be chaired by the HSE. Phase One of this initiative is currently underway, with the establishment of Children's Services Committees in four areas of the country. The Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group notes that the Children's Services Committee should develop strong links with local Comhairle na nÓg Steering Groups, to be established by CDBs.

Summary of Recommendations

(see page 16 for full list of recommendations)

1. The development of a five-year Strategic Plan for effective Comhairle na nÓg, to be completed by December 2007:

- The term of office of the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group will be extended to develop the five-year strategic plan;
- On completion of the Strategic Plan, the work of the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group will conclude.

2. On completion of the Strategic Plan, a Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee should be established to oversee implementation of the Plan, led by the Office of the Minister for Children and comprising key stakeholders including, the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the Department of Education and Science, Local Authorities, HSE, IVEA, Garda Síochána, Youth Sector, young people and hard-to-reach organisations;

- The Chair of this Steering committee will become a member of the National Implementation Group on Children's Services;
- The Steering committee will develop a set of minimum national standards for the operation of Comhairle na nÓg;
- The Steering Committee will oversee the development and dissemination of Comhairle na nÓg resources.

3. The Steering Committee will oversee the establishment by the OMC of a central support service for Comhairle na nÓg, subject to evaluation and review after three years, which will:

- promote Comhairle na nÓg through the formal and non-formal education sectors and develop links with student councils;
- ensure the involvement hard-to-reach children and young people;
- ensure the exchange of good practice on running Comhairle na nÓg in a democratic, accountable and transparent manner;
- establish a national network for those organising Comhairle na nÓg.

4. The establishment by CDBs of local Comhairle na nÓg Steering Groups with strong links to Children Services Committees, once established.

5. The provision of resources, as appropriate, for Comhairle na nÓg at local level by CDB member agencies.

6. Recognition of Comhairle na nÓg as the main avenue for consultation with and participation by children and young people at local level.

7. Strengthening and development by the OMC of Comhairle na nÓg funding schemes

The €500,000 in OMC budget for supporting and developing Comhairle na nÓg in 2007 will be used as follows:

- €5,000 per annum, will be allocated to each of the 34 CDBs, to support the running of Comhairle na nÓg;
- Additional funding will be available to encourage good practice and develop and support specific programmes of activity for Comhairle na nÓg, subject to application under criteria, which will subsequently be measured and evaluated;
- A scheme to build capacity for less well developed Comhairle na nÓg. A number of Comhairle na nÓg will be selected by the OMC, to be funded for a two-year period. This scheme will be independently evaluated.

Introduction

Shortly after the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) in December 2005, it was agreed that the development of effective Comhairle na nÓg throughout the country would become a major priority.

The OMC set up the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group in September 2006, in response to the findings of an independent review of Comhairle na nÓg, commissioned by the National Children's Office (now the Office of the Minister for Children), which was completed in October 2005. The review concluded that some City and County Development Boards, under the leadership of the local authorities, have established regular sessions of Comhairle na nÓg, which link with the adult county council. (Murphy, 2005) This practice is very much welcomed and should be extended to all CDB areas. At successive sessions of Dáil na nÓg, the issues around Comhairle na nÓg across the country have been raised by many young delegates. The Minister for Children and the OMC recognise the need to improve, support and develop Comhairle na nÓg structures.

The Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group is comprised of representatives from the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the Department of Education and Science, the HSE, City and County Development Boards, local authorities, young people and the youth sector (see Appendix A for a full list of members). This Group is chaired and managed by the OMC and was mandated to report to the Minister for Children with a plan for the development of Comhairle na nÓg by May 2007.

The Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group is cited in *Towards 2016*, as a key innovative Government measure to increase participation by children and young people in local and national decision-making.

Towards 2016 also makes provision for the establishment of the National Implementation Group (NIG), a high-level group chaired by the Office of the Minister for Children and linked to the HSE's Expert Advisory Group. The NIG was established in November 2006 and its membership is drawn from the relevant Government Departments, the HSE, representatives of local authorities, the education sector and other key agencies. The key priorities of the NIG are to ensure implementation of all strategic plans and policy documents on children's services and to ensure integration of service delivery, cross-sectoral working and the joint implementation of children policies and initiatives.

Terms of reference for the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group

The terms of reference of the Implementation Group were to:

- Explore key findings from Review of Comhairle na nÓg (Murphy, 2005);
- Explore overlap between Comhairle na nÓg and participation structures proposed under the Youth Work Act (2001);
- Make recommendations regarding:
 - a mechanism for the support and development of Comhairle na nÓg at local level;
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Participation by children and young people in decision-making

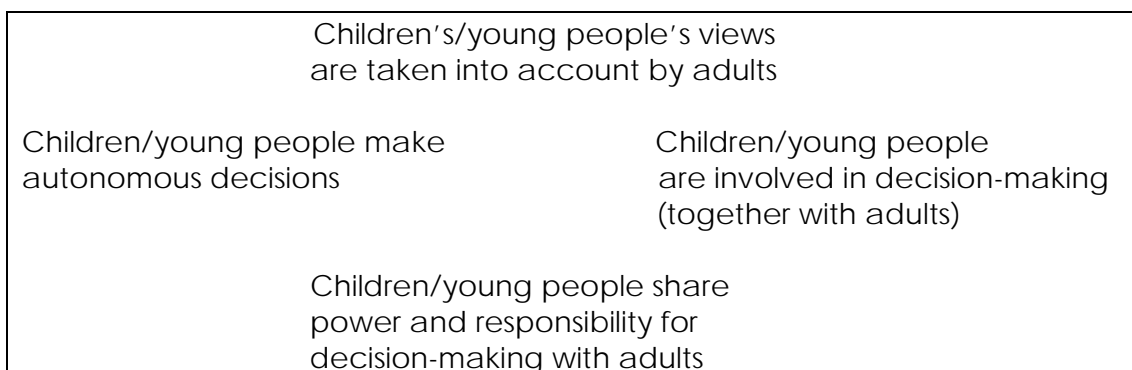
The instruments that promote the voice of children and young people are set out in the National Children's Strategy and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, the infrastructure to provide a meaningful voice for children and young people is at an early stage of development. There is a growing international literature that supports the importance of participation by children and young people in decision-making, particularly at community and local level. The involvement of children and young people in decision-making 'improves the relevance and quality of policies and services, gives young people a sense of civic responsibility, makes them more interested in national and local politics and increases the likelihood that they will vote in elections' (Children and Young People's Unit, 2002).

It is internationally recognised that young people are disaffected from politics, resulting in poor turnouts of first-time voters in elections. Evidence and practice indicates that the involvement of young people in decision-making about their own lives, directly impacts on their attitude to the importance of citizenship. 'Citizenship practice is learned through the lived experience of belonging and participating, of listening and speaking, of being valued and included' (*Maurice Devlin, Background Paper, Youth Ministers' Conference, Dromoland Castle, March 2004*). Indeed, the recently published *Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship* (2007) supports Devlin and emphasises the importance of citizens becoming involved in community life.

Definitions of participation in decision-making by children and young people

'Effective participation is the involvement of children or young people that actually leads to an outcome or change' (*Building a Culture of Participation, Department for Education and Skills, UK, 2003*). It is a very new way of doing business as it involves working with children and young people as equals, while ensuring their safety and protection. In *Young Voices: Guidelines on Involving Children and Young People in Your Work* (2005), participation is defined in its broadest sense, to mean 'children and young people taking part in making decisions on issues that affect their lives'.

A very useful model of participation is put forward in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), UK, publication *Building a Culture of Participation* (2003). This model is non-hierarchical and does not assume that one approach is better than another, but that each one may be useful in different situations. The model describes four types of participation and is presented in the diagram below:



Participation by children and young people in decision-making does not simply happen, but requires champions at national, local and organisation level. However, evidence and practice also illustrate that champions are not enough to guarantee sustained and long-term participation by children and young people. Structures and systems need to be established that survive the loss of individual or organisational champions.

Children and young people have unique perspectives and experiences to offer on issues that affect their lives. In 2004, the National Youth Agency and the British Youth Council carried out a survey of statutory and voluntary sector organisations in the United Kingdom, in order to establish a systematic picture of the levels and ways in which they involve children and young people in public decision-making. Among those organisations which had structures for participation, approximately 80% of both statutory and voluntary sector respondents agreed that their services had improved as a result of involving children and young people in decision-making (Oldfield and Fowler, 2004).

Participation work with children and young people is often confused with 'youth work'. 'Youth work' is defined in the Youth Work Act (2001), as 'a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is (a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and (b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations'. While the skills and qualities required for youth work can be of enormous assistance in participation work, it is important that a clear distinction is made between these two very different ways of working. It is possible to be engaged in youth work in an organisation in which there is no involvement by children or young people in decision-making. There is however, a growing awareness in the youth sector of the value of involving children and young people in decision-making about their organisations, clubs or activities.

Establishment of Comhairle na nÓg

According to the National Children's Strategy (2000), 'County and City Development Boards and their associated sub-structures provide an ideal opportunity for children's views to be captured'. The papers approved by the Cabinet Committee on Children on the proposed functions and staffing of the National Children's Office (now Office of the Minister for Children), in March 2001, state that the NCO will be responsible for 'supporting the development of local network processes and structures as the basis for providing representation in the Dail na nÓg'. On 15 February 2002 it was announced that '€2,500 (from the NCO) will be available to each City and County Development Board to hold a Comhairle na nÓg in their area'. The actions outlined in NCO Statement of Strategy 2003 – 2005, commit the NCO 'to work with CDBs on facilitating children's participation at local level and the further development of Comhairle na nÓg' and 'to support and develop measures to improve the quality and relevance of Dáil na nÓg'.

The 34 City and County Development Boards (CDBs) were established in 2000, the same year as the publication of the National Children's Strategy. CDBs have a key role in implementing the National Children's Strategy at local level and in establishing local Comhairle na nÓg. The purpose of the Comhairle na nÓg is to give children and young people a voice at local level and an opportunity to influence local policy and planning. Young people are elected to Dáil na nÓg through their local Comhairle na nÓg. The OMC continues to provide the annual grant of €2,500 to each CDB to support the Comhairle na nÓg.

While some CDBs have established regular sessions of Comhairle na nÓg, which link with the adult county council, it is acknowledged that the majority of Comhairle na nÓg are not functioning at this level and require further support and development in this regard.

Benefits of Comhairle na nÓg

Since their inception in 2001, Comhairle na nÓg around the country have contributed to the lives of young people and the community to varying degrees. Despite the difficulties experienced by the majority of Comhairle na nÓg, examples of good practice exist in several cities and counties, a compilation of which is being prepared by the OMC. Donegal Youth Council (DYC) is the best resourced Comhairle na nÓg in the country. While part of its success is attributable to cross-border funding, the main drivers have been championship of youth participation by key individuals and an innovative partnership between the HSE North West and the Local Authority, which jointly manage DYC. Below is an account of some of the activities and achievements of DYC, which illustrate the benefits of a well-resourced and vibrant Comhairle na nÓg, to young people and the wider community. It is the ambition of the Implementation Group that these benefits can become available in every county and city in the country.

Case Study: Donegal Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg

Donegal Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg was established in 2001 as part of the National Children's Strategy. Interestingly, it is the only county/city that uses the English version of Comhairle na nÓg. Elections to the Youth Council are held every two years in second-level schools and training centres in the six

Local Electoral Areas. DYC is a 'Level Three' Action in *An Straitéis 2002-2012; Strategy for Social, Economic and Cultural Development*.

Below are examples of work conducted by the young people in DYC:

Donegal Youth Survey 2005

Youth councillors were trained in compiling a questionnaire and carried out a survey with 100 students in each of the 23-second level schools in Donegal. The survey has been a great source of information for youth service providers and others as it deals with 19 different issues pertaining to young people's lives in Donegal.

Dáil na nÓg

Taking part in and representing young people at the Dáil is an annual highlight for members of the Comhairle and young people in Donegal. Issues highlighted at Dáil na nÓg have received media attention locally.

Alcohol Project – Teenage Kicks!

Working with the Arts Centre in Letterkenny and the HSE West Health Promotion Department, this interactive project worked with schools and youth councillors to highlight the issues of alcohol in young people's lives. It ran for three years and was brought to schools in the county on the back of a lorry.

Production of Employment Rights Poster

This poster was produced by DYC and highlights the rights of young people and the responsibilities of employers. It was distributed to all schools and youth projects in the county.

Party in the Park (an annual event)

This annual event started as a 'something to do' in the summer for young people in Letterkenny. It has become part of the international Errigal Arts Festival and includes a Battle of the Bands for young bands who perform on stage in Letterkenny Town Park. DYC members sit on the organising committee.

Working on School Bus Issues with VEC/Bus Eireann and Lough Swilly

This effective piece of work is ongoing by DYC members in the county, to improve conditions in the school transport system. The project has expanded into wider issues around rural transport in the county.

Cross community/Cross Border Work

DYC's work with Fermanagh Shadow Youth council has led to the creation of the EForum project, an interactive website where youth councillors from both sides of the border can talk to each other in forum sessions on line.

Campaigning and lobbying for Skateboard Park in Letterkenny

This work was started when Letterkenny town council decided to put plans together for a new town park and leisure centre. Youth councillors have met to ensure that a skateboard park was included in the plans and last summer met with planners and engineers to design the shape of the park for younger teenagers

Working with Student Councils in Donegal

The DYC works with student councils in two ways:

1. The Youth Council Co-ordinator, in co-operation with the Letterkenny Youth Information Centre and the HSE Cross Border Youth Participation Project, worked together to train student councils.
2. The DYC has held meetings in schools, to accommodate those members who were sitting their Leaving Certificate, which has led to a greater sharing of information and activity between DYC and student councils.

DYC members have been/are involved in the following consultations and partnerships:

- North West Alcohol Forum
- Electoral Area Meetings of Donegal County Councils
- DYC Expert Advisory Group
- Finn Valley Alliance for Positive Mental Health
- Donegal Local Development Company Youth Education and Training sub panel
- Donegal Sports Partnership
- Donegal Road Transport Working Group

Young people's views on the benefits of being involved in DYC

'I never used to watch news and current affairs programmes, but now I'm really interested, especially if there's a Councillor, TD, Senator or a Minister on, whom I've met and talked to. We attend full County Council meetings and the Councillors come to our meetings. We question them on issues that concern us and they consult us and listen to our views with respect'.

Jackie O'Connell, outgoing Youth Council Chairperson (2006)

Even amongst those who classified themselves as poor attendees, almost all Youth Councillors say they benefited in one way or another from their experience. They claimed greater confidence, a better understanding and respect for politics, more knowledge of what young people want and meeting a new and large group of friends. One councillor said they were 'more open-minded' as a result of being involved and 'not as quick to judge'.

A lot of people enjoyed working as part of a team, learning research skills and handling the media, canvassing and dealing with various different people, especially older people, in a diplomatic manner. One councillor from Milford made numerous appearances on TV and local and national radio during her tenure. Other councillors gained great confidence in public speaking whilst participating in the famous McGill Summer School.

A considerable number of councillors (about ten) said they would now consider pursuing either a career or a third level course in politics as a result of being involved in the youth council. One said that his experience in the youth council has given him the confidence and experience to say he would consider a career in politics.

Trips away were particularly popular with the councillors, including Dáil na nÓg and cross-border projects with the Fermanagh Shadow Youth Council.

The work of the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group

Exploration of key findings from Review of Comhairle na nÓg (Murphy, 2005)

The Implementation Group agreed the following realities regarding the operation of Comhairle na nÓg:

- a) Current funding is inadequate;
- b) There is considerable variation in the running of Comhairle na nÓg;
- c) Some CDBs run on-going programmes while others hold once-off event to elect delegates for Dáil na nÓg;
- d) Some CDB staff organise the event/s and others contract the work out, mainly to local youth organisations/services;
- e) Local CDB priorities, resources and circumstances dictate the scope of the Comhairle na nÓg.

The Implementation Group further agreed that key findings from the Review of Comhairle na nÓg (Murphy, 2005), of relevance to the terms of reference of the Implementation Group, are as follows:

- The need for strategic development of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg, through a strengthening of working relationships between the Office of the Minister for Children, the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the Department of Education and Science and other relevant agencies;
- Recognition of Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg as the official structures for the participation of young people in strategy and policy development;
- The importance of linking with the implementation of the Youth Work Act 2001 (DES) and the proposed Local Youth Work Development Plans (VECs);
- The need for an increase in resources and an agreed funding strategy;
- The need for support to:
 - disseminate models of best practice;
 - set performance indicators, linked to appropriated supports, standards, targets and evaluation processes;
 - provide training;
 - provide mentoring for young people;
- Funding for Comhairle na nÓg be reviewed on the basis of local youth population and transport costs;
- Sufficient notification to be provided annually to CDBs and other relevant agencies in preparing for Comhairle na nÓg and Dáil na nÓg events;
- At local level, working relationships across a range of statutory and voluntary agencies need to be strengthened, with CDBs as the lead partner, in order to inform the adoption of a multi-annual work programmes for Comhairle na nÓg linked to realistic budgets and relevant evaluation processes;
- Member organisation of each CDB, where possible, could contribute financially to the running of Comhairle na nÓg and other *Youth Participation* initiatives, so as to co-ordinate resources effectively for the benefit of children and young people;
- Young people should be sourced on a District Electoral Division basis, so that geographical representation, consultation, feedback and follow-up can be maximised;

- Each CDB needs to develop and maintain a database of young people's attendance and participation, to assist in targeting those who are consistently under-represented in Comhairle na nÓg events and at Dáil na nÓg.

Exploration of potential overlap between Comhairle na nÓg and participation structures proposed under the Youth Work Act (2001)

The Implementation Group discussed the potential overlap between Comhairle na nÓg and participation structures proposed under the Youth Work Act (2001).

Comhairle na nÓg were established in each of the 34 City and County Development Board areas, under Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy to provide a forum for children and young people to discuss local and national issues that are of relevance to them. Membership of Comhairle na nÓg is for children and young people up to the age of 18 years.

The Youth Work Act, 2001 provides for the establishment of a Voluntary Youth Council elected in accordance with section 22 of the Act, to advise the Vocational Education Committee for that area on the preparation or implementation of any matter specified in a Development Plan prepared by the Vocational Education Committee. A Voluntary Youth Council, in addition to this function shall be a forum for the voluntary youth work organisations operating in the vocational education area to discuss the provision of youth work programmes and youth work services in the area. The Youth Work Act Councils are intended to be participative structures relating to youth work and members can be up to 25 years old. The Vocational Education Committees (VECs) are in the process of appointing over 21 Youth Work Officers whose duties will include the development of local youth work plans and the coordination of youth work programmes and services in their area.

The Implementation Group agreed that Comhairle na nÓg complement voluntary youth councils and that no overlap exists. The Group also recommends that the local authority personnel responsible for supporting Comhairle na nÓg in each County/City Development Board should co-operate and work with the new youth work officers currently being appointed in the youth service.

Presentation from Donegal Youth Council as an example of good practice and partnership

Aiden Carty (Donegal Youth Councillor), Guanitta Brady (Donegal Youth Councillor), Janet Gaynor (Health Promotion Manager, HSE) and Jo Ann Kilmartin (Donegal CDB, Community and Enterprise Department) gave a presentation on the work of Donegal Youth Council.

It was agreed by the Implementation Group that the Youth Council in Donegal works well and is a model of good practice. The Donegal Youth Council is co-funded by the HSE and the CDB. The Implementation Group agreed that the management and funding of DYC is an area that needs to be examined in relation to other Comhairle. It was agreed that the Expert Advisory Group that was set up to oversee DYC works very well. This Group includes representatives from local agencies in the CDB as well as the OMC.

Comhairle na nÓg questionnaire

It was agreed by the Implementation Group that the drafting and circulation of a questionnaire to all CDBs would be a useful way of ascertaining the operation, strengths and needs of Comhairle na nÓg. The OMC agreed to devise and circulate the questionnaire, which would become the basis of the Implementation Group report and assist the Group in reaching its final recommendations. The questionnaire sought information about current practice and support required at national and local level. The Research Team of the OMC assisted the Participation Team in developing and analysing the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were received by 30 out of the 34 CDBs, thus providing an excellent picture of current practice and needs.

Key findings from the Comhairle na nÓg questionnaire include:

- Recognition of Comhairle na nÓg as the main avenue for consultation with, and participation by, children and young people at local level;
- The need for a national Comhairle na nÓg strategy;
- The need for a national Comhairle na nÓg support service, that sets standards, produces resource materials and good practice guidelines, provides advice and training and monitors progress;
- The need for support for Comhairle na nÓg from relevant Government Departments;
- The need for commitment to Comhairle na nÓg by agencies and organisations at local level;
- The provision of adequate staffing and resources for Comhairle na nÓg at local level;
- Improved communication and co-ordination between national and local bodies;
- The establishment of national and regional Comhairle na nÓg networks;
- The establishment of a national Comhairle na nÓg website;
- The development of good practice in the operation of Comhairle na nÓg;
- Initiatives aimed at increasing the level of involvement in Comhairle na nÓg by hard-to-reach young people;
- The development of links between Student Councils and Comhairle na nÓg.

The role and function of Comhairle na nÓg

The Implementation Group discussed the findings from the questionnaire to CDBs and used this information as the basis for analysing the role and function of Comhairle na nÓg, standards of good practice for Comhairle na nÓg and the compilation of recommendations to the Minister.

The Implementation Group discussed the role and function of Comhairle na nÓg and agreed that it should become a key forum for consultation with, and participation by, children and young people in every CDB area of the country. This structure is in keeping with the EU Charter on Youth Participation in Local and Regional Life (2003), which recommends that local and regional authorities are the most appropriate bodies to take responsibility for ensuring participation in decision-making by children and young people.

The election of representatives to the annual Dáil na nÓg is only one of the many potential functions of Comhairle na nÓg. The Implementation Group notes that in some counties, this is currently the sole function of Comhairle na nÓg.

If Comhairle na nÓg are to become truly effective, the Implementation Group believes that member organisations on CDBs should support them to become the child/youth version of the county/city council. In some counties this is already happening and Comhairle na nÓg meetings take place in the council chambers. In other counties, Comhairle na nÓg representatives have been elected to local strategic policy committees, sports partnerships and community forums. The Implementation Group notes that Comhairle na nÓg is currently under-used as a vehicle for consultation with young people.

The vision of the Implementation Group is that Comhairle na nÓg should be recognised as a very important mechanism for structured input into local government and should also be supported by, and a resource for, all statutory and voluntary organisations in the county/city. This vision recognises the importance of children and young people being involved in decisions that affect their lives, in order to create more effective local services and to engage children and young people as active citizens, with an invaluable contribution to social and political life. It is the view of the Implementation Group that working or engaging with the Comhairle na nÓg should not be the only way of seeking the views of children and young people, but should become a key consultative forum in every CDB area of the country.

Standards of good practice for Comhairle na nÓg

Comhairle na nÓg have developed in a variety of different ways around the country. Some CDBs have more resources and funding available for Comhairle na nÓg, thus enabling them to have made excellent progress. Other CDBs have fewer resources but despite this, some have also made excellent progress.

There is considerable diversity in the agencies with whom local authorities partner in developing and running Comhairle na nÓg. These include local youth organisations or services, the HSE or Childcare Committees. The Implementation Group recognises that Comhairle na nÓg can only be developed incrementally and that local arrangements which are working satisfactorily should be respected. It is also acknowledged that a flexible approach must be adopted to allow Comhairle na nÓg to develop in ways most appropriate to local circumstances. At the same time, the Implementation Group reaffirms the need for the Comhairle na nÓg to, at all times, operate in a democratic, accountable and transparent manner.

The Implementation Group believes that minimum standards and performance indicators for Comhairle na nÓg should be put in place, which allow for local differences. It is also clear that strong support and engagement from agencies at local level is a priority. The role of local authorities in developing Comhairle na nÓg at local level also needs to be enhanced, building on best practice in this area to date..

Establishment of targets and goals in the operation of Comhairle na nÓg

The Implementation Group discussed and agreed the following vision for the development of Comhairle na nÓg around the country:

- Within five years, all CDBs, with the support of their relevant member agencies, should be holding a minimum of 4 meetings per year of Comhairle na nÓg and facilitating democratic elections or other youth-led, inclusive selection methods for Comhairle na nÓg;

- Each Comhairle na nÓg will establish an elected executive committee of young people;
- Young people will be involved with those responsible for Comhairle na nÓg, in developing the annual work plan and producing an annual Comhairle na nÓg report;
- The annual work plan will be presented to the Comhairle na nÓg Steering Group;
- Annual work plans and reports will have a common format for each Comhairle na nÓg. Templates will be developed by the OMC.
- The CDB will monitor the results of the plan and report on progress in the Annual Report of the CDB;
- The periodic review of the CDB strategy will include a specific consultation with Comhairle na nÓg members.

The Implementation Group notes that under the National Implementation Group on Children's Services, multi-agency Children's Services Committee will be put in place within each County/City Development Board (CDB), to be chaired by the HSE. Phase One of this initiative is currently underway, with the establishment of four multi-agency Children's Services Committees. Four sites were chosen for the initial roll-out of the Children's Services Committees: Dublin City County Council, South Dublin County Council, Donegal County Council and Limerick City Council. The aim of this initiative is to test models of best practice which promote integrated, locally led, strategic planning for children's services. The NIG will work to provide guidance and practical assistance to each of the Committees as they begin their work to establish themselves and develop an integrated plan for children's services in their county/city areas. The Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group believes that the Children's Services Committee (once they have been established) should develop strong links with local Comhairle na nÓg Steering Groups.

Recommendations

Structure and buy-in at national level

The Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group recommends:

1. The development of a five-year Strategic Plan for effective Comhairle na nÓg. The deadline for completion of this Plan is December 2007:

- The term of office of the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group will be extended to develop this five-year strategic plan;
- The Strategic Plan will be guided by the recommendations from the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group;
- On completion of the Strategic Plan, the work of the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group will conclude.

2. On completion of the Strategic Plan, a Comhairle na nÓg Steering Committee should be established to oversee implementation of the Plan, led by the Office of the Minister for Children and comprising key stakeholders including, the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, the Department of Education and Science (possibly through CSPE support service), Local Authorities, HSE, IVEA, Garda Síochána, Youth Sector, young people and hard-to-reach organisations:

- The Chair of this Steering committee will become a member of the National Implementation Group on Children's Services;
- The Steering committee will develop a set of minimum national standards for the operation of Comhairle na nÓg,;
- The Steering Committee will examine creative inter-agency approaches, in recognition of the need for the appointment of dedicated staff at local level, with time, appropriate skills and resources as a key issue in delivering Comhairle na nÓg in a standardised way (allowing for local flexibility);
- The Steering Committee will oversee the development and dissemination of:
 - a toolkit/guide to support local implementation of Comhairle na nÓg;
 - a national Comhairle na nÓg website, with links to sites frequently used by young people, such as BEBO, local sites and the new OMC young people activities and facilities site;
 - promotion and publicity for Comhairle na nÓg to young people through schools, youth groups, the non-formal education sector and other means;
 - the improvement of co-ordination between local and national bodies.
- The Steering Committee will examine ways of ensuring that pre-development work on leadership is done with hard-to-reach young people and that support is provided for their involvement in Comhairle na nÓg;
- The Steering Committee will examine the use of innovative and age-appropriate materials in working with hard-to-reach young people;
- The Steering Committee will promote a positive affirmative approach on involving hard-to-reach young people in Comhairle na nÓg and link with other available supports such as through the Equality Authority;
- The Steering Committee will examine the most effective way of involving children under 12 years of age in Comhairle na nÓg.

3. The Steering Committee will oversee the establishment by the OMC of a central support service for Comhairle na nÓg. This support service will be subject to evaluation and review after three years. The support service will:

- work with the Department of Education and Science and other stakeholders in promoting Comhairle na nÓg through the formal and non-formal education sectors;
- work with the Department of Education and Science and other stakeholders in developing links between student councils and the Comhairle na nÓg;
- work at national level with organisations representing hard-to-reach children and young people to ensure their involvement in Comhairle na nÓg;
- establish a national network for personnel responsible for Comhairle na nÓg, personnel from the organisation/s that organise Comhairle na nÓg in each CDB area and local councillors, in response to identified needs at local level;
- ensure that this national network facilitates the establishment of local networks of adult organisers and young participants;
- host an annual two-day conference for relevant local authority staff and organisers of Comhairle na nÓg, which will involve:
 - Training in child and youth participation
 - Training in child protection
 - Presentations on new initiatives in child and youth participation
 - Exchange of good practice, including in relation to the Comhairle na nÓg operating in a democratic, accountable and transparent manner
 - Workshops and discussion panels

Structure and buy-in at local level

The Implementation Group recommends the following:

4. The establishment of Local Comhairle na nÓg Steering Groups

- Each CDB should set up a Local Comhairle na nÓg Steering Group, with strong links to the Children's Services Committee, once they have been established.
- Membership of the Comhairle na nÓg Steering Group will include:
 - All CDB partner agencies with a service remit relevant to children or young people
 - CSPE teachers from local schools
 - Youth Officer of the VEC
 - Young Comhairle na nÓg representatives
 - Hard to reach representative organisations
 - Sports Partnership
- The role of Local Comhairle na nÓg Steering Group will be:
 - To provide support and resources, as appropriate, to the Comhairle na nÓg
 - To oversee the preparation of an annual work plan
 - To implement actions and respond to issues
 - Provide feedback to children and young people

- To provide a link to the CDB Community and Voluntary Forum (to be retitled Civic Fora)

5. The provision of resources for Comhairle na nÓg at local level as follows:

- The Community and Enterprise unit of the local authority should provide administrative support for the steering group;
- CDB member agencies should provide support and resources, as appropriate, for Comhairle na nÓg to fund the Comhairle na nÓg programme approved by the Steering Committee;
- Comhairle na nÓg should be built into the service plans of key agencies represented on CDBs in terms of budgets, staff allocation and resources, to ensure buy-in from all CDB member agencies.

6. Recognition of Comhairle na nÓg as the main avenue for consultation with and participation by children and young people at local level

- The local Comhairle na nÓg Steering Group should develop arrangements to facilitate organisations who wish to consult with young people;
- The local Comhairle na nÓg Steering Group should ensure that the Children Services Committee (once established) consults with and works with Comhairle na nÓg;
- Comhairle na nÓg should be the nominating body for representation of young people on Strategic Policy Committees and Local Sports Partnerships, as appropriate;
- Links between Comhairle na nÓg and the County and City Community and Voluntary Forum (to be retitled Civic Forum) will be developed in each county/city;
- Promotional work should be undertaken by those responsible for Comhairle na nÓg in each county/city, to ensure that public bodies recognise Comhairle na nÓg, as the forum for the voice of children and young people;
- Comhairle na nÓg members should be afforded the opportunity to attend town and council meetings.

Development and funding of Comhairle na Óg

7. Strengthening and Development by the OMC of Comhairle na nÓg funding schemes

Funding for Comhairle na nÓg is coming from a very low base and it is recognised that considerable resources and funding need to be sought at local and national level.

The OMC sought and obtained €400,000 for the development of Comhairle na nÓg, in the estimates for 2007. €100,000 was already in the OMC budget to provide the annual allocation of €2,500 to each Comhairle na nÓg. There is now a total of €500,000 in the OMC budget for supporting and developing Comhairle na nÓg in 2007.

The Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group recommends that the fund of €500,000 in the OMC 2007 budget for Comhairle na nÓg will be used in the following three ways:

1. Subject to completion of the existing OMC application form, €5,000 will be allocated to all 34 CDBs for the running of Comhairle na nÓg. This funding represents a doubling of the annual allocation of €2,500 to CDBs from the OMC.
2. In order to enhance the effectiveness of Comhairle na nÓg and to develop good practice in participation by children and young people, additional funding will be available to CDBs, based on a more detailed application form, outlining a programme of activity for Comhairle na nÓg, which will be measured against criteria such as:
 - Evidence that the proposed programme is in keeping with best practice in youth participation;
 - The relevance of issues outlined in the proposed programme to local young people;
 - The establishment of links to adult decision-making structures;
 - The planning of a sufficient number of meetings to meet the objectives of the proposed programme;
 - The holding of a democratic elections or other youth-led selection of delegates for Dáil na nÓg;
 - The existence of an appropriate child-protection policy;
 - Evidence of appropriate evaluation of the programme.
3. A scheme will be put in place to provide capacity building for less well developed Comhairle na nÓg. A number of Comhairle na nÓg will be selected by the OMC, to be funded for a two-year period. The selection will be based on a set of criteria that ensure the need for significant capacity building and ensure a geographic and demographic spread. The scheme will be independently evaluated. Criteria for inclusion in this scheme will include:
 - The hosting of only one Comhairle na nÓg meeting per year;
 - Non-involvement of hard-to-reach young people in Comhairle na nÓg;
 - The contracting out of all aspects of Comhairle na nÓg;
 - Selection by adults of delegates for Dáil na nÓg.

Members of the Comhairle na nÓg Implementation Group

Anne O'Donnell	Head of Communications and Participation, Office of the Minister for Children (Chairperson)
Margaret Crawley	Assistant Principal, Office of the Minister for Children
Deirdre Dunworth	Higher Executive Officer, Office of the Minister for Children (Secretary)
Joe Allen	Principal Officer, Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government
Seán Campbell	Chief Executive Officer, Foróige
Rudí Corcoran	Coiste na dTeachtaí Steering Committee
Mary Cunningham	Director, National Youth Council of Ireland
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James Doyle	Coiste na dTeachtaí Steering Committee
Daniel Flanagan	Coiste na dTeachtaí Steering Committee
Claire Hartley	Administrative Officer, Community and Enterprise Waterford City Council
Jessica Kelch	Coiste na dTeachtaí Steering Committee
Hilary Kendlin	Administrative Officer, Community and Enterprise Fingal County Council
Mary Mallon	Director of Community and Enterprise, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council
Seamus Mannion	Assistant National Director of Children's Services, Health Service Executive
Deirdre Phelan	Student Council Project Coordinator, Curriculum Development Unit
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Máiread Ryan	Assistant Principal, Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
Mathew Seebach	Pavee Point
Clive Stone	Participation Officer, Youth Work Ireland
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