

Hearing Young Voices

**Consulting Children and Young People,
including those experiencing
Poverty or other forms of Social Exclusion,
in relation to Public Policy Development in Ireland**

Key Issues for Consideration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This research study has been undertaken by the Children's Rights Alliance in conjunction with the National Youth Council of Ireland and on behalf of the *Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative*.

The *Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative* comprises eight organisations that have come together to promote greater awareness of child poverty and to effect change in public policy to eliminate child poverty. A cut-off point of 18 years is used within the *Initiative* when discussing children/young people. The *Initiative* is underpinned by a commitment to the promotion and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Irish Government in 1992. Poverty denies children many of their fundamental rights as contained in the Convention.

The eight participating organisations in the *Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative* are:

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Foreword

Hearing Young Voices makes an important and timely contribution to the developing effort to ensure that children and young people have the opportunity to be heard in connection with decisions that affect them.

Since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force in 1990, children's rights advocates and government officials have devoted increasing attention to the implications of Article 12 of the Convention, which states that all children have a right to have their views heard in relation to actions that affect them and that "due weight" must be given to those views in accordance with the age and maturity of the children involved.

In November 2000, to progress the implementation of the Convention in Ireland, the Irish Government launched the National Children's Strategy, a wide-ranging ten-year plan of action addressing the broad spectrum of rights of those under the age of eighteen.

Using language nearly identical to that found in Article 12 of the Convention, the first National Goal of the Children's Strategy states that "children will have a voice in matters that affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity."

Making this commitment a reality is the challenge that now must be met.

Hearing Young Voices examines both the theory and practice of consultation with children and takes a close look at many of the practical hurdles and obstacles that must be overcome if we are to respect the right of children to be heard. The study pays particular attention to the special circumstances facing children living in poverty or coping with other forms of social exclusion.

The research undertaken consists of interviews with policy-makers and practitioners; focus group consultations with children experiencing or at risk of poverty or social exclusion; a survey of relevant policy-makers and practitioners; an extensive review of the literature on consulting with children; and the gathering of information regarding the actual practice of listening to children and young people, both in Ireland and in other jurisdictions.

Based on this research, the study identifies the key issues related to the development of good practice in this area and makes specific recommendations on creating equitable and sustainable opportunities for meaningful consultation with children and young people. The counterproductive potential of tokenistic consultation is also addressed.

The study provides support for those who maintain that public policies, particularly those affecting children, can only be improved by taking steps to ensure that the voices and unique perspectives of children are heard in connection with the development of those policies.

Hearing Young Voices also reminds us that policies that affect children go well beyond traditional 'children's issues' and cover a wide range of financial and resource allocation decisions that constitute the basic framework of public policy development. This is especially true for children experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion. Tax and expenditure decisions that may superficially appear to be far removed from issues relating to children may in fact have enormous impacts on the rights and well-being of certain children by undermining the capacity of government to reduce child poverty or to provide equal access to quality health care. Denying children the opportunity to be heard in some meaningful way in relation to such decisions risks trivialising the practice of consultation and discriminating against those most vulnerable to the impact of government actions.

Among the rights recognised by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are the right to an adequate standard of living, to the highest attainable standard of health, to decent accommodation and to protection from abuse and exploitation. The right to be heard is

understood to be one of the underlying principles of the Convention in part because it helps safeguard all the other rights, including those listed above. Insisting that policy-makers and practitioners hear the perspective of children before taking actions that affect those children is a key step to be taken in promoting and protecting the rights of all children, particularly those most affected by public policy and by the decisions and actions of public officials.

Hearing Young Voices will help all of us take that step and in doing so advance the effort to make hearing the perspectives of children and young people an integral part of public policy-making in Ireland.

Raymond Dooley
Chief Executive
Children's Rights Alliance

On behalf of the partner organisations in the *Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative*: Barnardos, Children's Rights Alliance, Combat Poverty Agency, Focus Ireland, National Youth Council of Ireland, Pavee Point, People with Disabilities in Ireland and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Dublin, Ireland
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The researchers would like to express their gratitude to all those individuals and organisations that contributed to this study by providing information on past and present opportunities for children and young people to be consulted, including at the level of public policy development. The researchers are particularly grateful to those policy-makers and practitioners who completed the survey or participated in the interviews that formed part of the research for this study. The information and viewpoints they shared proved invaluable at a time when work in this field is in its infancy in Ireland and documentation relating to this theme is not readily available. The researchers are especially indebted to the children and young people who participated in the ten focus group consultations that were conducted as part of the research for this study. We are most grateful to them for their willingness to express their views and ideas and for the patience, enthusiasm and frankness they exhibited in doing so. Finally, the researchers wish to acknowledge the role played by members of the Advisory Group established for the purposes of this research project, namely: Ray Dooley, Dáithí Downey, Dónall Geoghegan, Diane Hogan, Joan O'Flynn, Heino Schonfeld and Leona Walker.

The views expressed in this research study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Combat Poverty Agency.

The full report on the findings of this research study is available on the websites of the Children's Rights Alliance (www.childrensrights.ie) and the National Youth Council of Ireland (www.youth.ie).

Introduction

Background

In August 2001, the *Open Your Eyes to Child Poverty Initiative* commissioned the Children's Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council of Ireland to undertake research on 'Consultation Models with Children on Policy and Poverty'. The decision to commission this research reflects the following objectives of the *Initiative*:

- To include 'the voice of the child' in its work to increase public awareness of child poverty
- To ensure that policy-makers hear this voice and arrive at an enhanced understanding of the importance of consultation with children and how this might be done.

Aim

The *Initiative* originally envisaged the overall aim of the research as the identification and evaluation of models of good practice for consulting children and young people experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion in relation to public policy developments affecting them. This aim was subsequently revised in light of project-related and context-specific factors, the most significant of which were findings arising from the literature review conducted during the period August to October 2001. These findings suggested that:

- There are no clear-cut answers to how best to respond to the many and wide-ranging issues that arise in relation to formalised consultation with children and young people. Good practice cannot be prescribed and a pre-emptive, normative approach may impede its development.
- The issues that need to be addressed in the interests of good practice are quasi-universal. They are likely to arise in relation to consultation with *all* children and young people and all formal consultation processes, including those relating to public policy development. In the interests of good practice, they must be responded to in a manner that accommodates the needs and capacities of individual children and young people. Thus, although children/young people experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion may require additional supports to allow for their equitable involvement in consultation, providing for consultation with them should not entail their identification as a generic sub-group of 'children and young people'. Instead, these children and young people should be recognised first and foremost as individuals with distinct abilities that need to be accommodated if consultation with them is to produce beneficial outcomes for all concerned.

Prompted by these findings and our awareness that consultation with children and young people remains in its infancy in Ireland, we revised the aim of the research to: key issues for consideration in the development of good practice for consulting children and young people, including those experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion, in relation to public policy development.

Accordingly, this research report:

- Names key issues for consideration in the development of good practice for consulting children and young people at the level of public policy development, with particular reference to children and young people experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion
- Makes recommendations on the actions required to progress the creation of meaningful, equitable and sustainable opportunities for all children and young people to be consulted.

Methodologies

The following research methodologies were selected and implemented between August 2001 and March 2002:

- **Literature review and information gathering** – This element of the research entailed desk and online research, making targeted requests for information to relevant statutory agencies and NGOs in and beyond Ireland; conference attendance, and informal interviews with five individuals working with/for young people out of home.
- **Survey**– A questionnaire was designed, piloted and subsequently disseminated to 124 statutory agencies and NGOs working at national, regional and local level in Ireland. Organisations surveyed included Government Departments, County and City Development Boards, Partnership Companies, Health Boards, NGOs working with/for children/young people as well as national voluntary and community organisations with a child/young person and/or a social inclusion remit. A key aim of the survey was to supplement information gathered during the literature review. Another aim was to establish policy-makers' and practitioners' attitudes and views on consulting children and young people at the level of public decision-making. The response rate to the survey was 48%.
- **Interviews** – Face-to-face interviews were conducted with ten policy-makers and practitioners working with/for children and young people. The focus of the interviews was attitudes towards and observations regarding the involvement of children/young people in public policy development. Interviewees' were invited to respond to questions relating to the meaning of 'consultation'; the status of consultation as a function of social inclusion; key lessons emerging from their experience of consulting children/young people; resourcing consultation; progressing consultation with children/young people; desirable outcomes of implementation of Goal One of the *National Children's Strategy*.
- **Focus group consultations with children and young people** – Focus group consultations were conducted with ten groups of children and young people aged between 7 and 18 years. Most of the sixty-two participants are identifiable as being at risk of or experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion. The aim of these focus groups was to enable children and young people to contribute their views and ideas on good practice to the research. Participants were asked a broad range of questions relating to their attitudes towards having a voice, planning and implementing consultation as well as feedback and evaluation issues. Three methods were used: a 'Question & Answer Wall', booklets and graffiti walls.

These methodologies were implemented between August 2001 and March 2002.

Outcomes

The findings of this research study are intended to:

- Encourage an exploratory and child-centred approach to consulting children and young people at the level of public policy, one that recognises children and young people as individuals and accommodates their specific needs and capacities
- Facilitate reflection by all statutory organisations and NGOs whose work impacts on children and young people on how they might create opportunities for children and young people to be heard that are meaningful, inclusive, sustainable and hence conducive to the production of beneficial outcomes for all concerned.
- Provide a foundation for future, in-depth research into one or more of the issues addressed in this report.

We are hopeful that this study will be a timely contribution to the implementation of Goal One of the *National Children's Strategy* and the project of structurally embedding young voices in public policy-making processes affecting them.

Karen McAuley and Marian Brattman

I. Setting the Scene

1.1. Consultation: A Function of Public Policy-Making in Ireland

The last ten years in Ireland has seen the emergence of a more devolved approach to governance in Ireland. This development has entailed the creation of instruments of public decision-making to enhance the involvement of civil society in Ireland's system of representative democracy.

Ireland's system of Social Partnership is arguably the principal sign of this shift towards facilitating the involvement of civil society in public decision-making. Its establishment has provided an opportunity for the issues and perspectives of socially excluded people, including socially excluded children and young people, to be articulated and taken into consideration in the drawing up of the five National programmes to have emerged from Social Partnership to date.

Among other developments germane to a revised approach to governance are the structures that have been created at local level to facilitate communication between Ireland's public policy-makers and citizens - for example, Local Area Partnerships, Strategic Policy Committees and County and City Development Boards. A recent development in this regard is the local Comhairle na nÓg that are being established under the auspices of the *National Children's Strategy* (2000). These local youth councils will act as a forum within which children and young people can contribute to public decision-making at local level.

There has also been a growing formal recognition from within government of the role that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play in enhancing the effectiveness of public policy-making. The Community and Voluntary Sector are one of the four 'Pillars' of Social Partnership. There are increasing opportunities for NGOs to make submissions in relation to legislative and public policy proposals and to participate in the expert working groups and advisory groups that are part of the infrastructure of public policy development in this country. This recognition was further consolidated in 2000 by the Government's publication of *Supporting Voluntary Activity – A White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector*.

In addition, there has been a move towards enabling individual citizens to contribute directly to public policy development. This development currently finds its most common expression in the advertisements placed in newspapers seeking submissions from individuals as well as representative organisations on a wide range of legislative and public policy proposals.

1.2. Consultation on Poverty and Social Exclusion

Launched in 1997, the *National Anti-Poverty Strategy* (NAPS) aimed to address within a ten year time-frame (1997-2007) several areas of policy affecting the lives of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion. Preparation of the NAPS involved extensive consultation with people experiencing poverty and social exclusion and their representative groups. A return to broad-based consultation in relation to the NAPS was prompted by a commitment in the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (2000-2003) to review the NAPS in light of many of its targets having been met. A nationwide consultation process initiated in April 2001 invited individual citizens and interested organisations within civil society to make submissions relating to a review of targets to combat poverty and disadvantage. While not providing for the direct involvement of children and young people in the preparation of the Review, this public consultation did afford their representative groups an opportunity to advocate on behalf of children and young people experiencing or at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Published in February 2002, *Building an Inclusive Society* formally recognises children and young people as one vulnerable group and includes commitments to reduce child poverty. While the Review provides no indication as to whether children and young people will be consulted in relation to one or more aspects of its implementation, paragraph 44 of *Building an Inclusive Society* suggests an awareness on the part of public policy-makers that their involvement would be desirable: “To become a true national strategy, all sectors of Irish Society – social partners, communities and families – must play their role in ending poverty.”¹

Other established mechanisms for consultation on national policy relating to poverty and social exclusion include the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) and opportunities for NGOs representing socially excluded people to contribute to the development of initiatives aimed at addressing issues such as educational disadvantage, homelessness and health as well as the needs of specific groups such as Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers, and people with disabilities. Within this, relevant NGOs have been engaged in the drawing up of plans to address poverty and social exclusion issues as they pertain to children and young people. Examples in this regard include *Breaking the Cycle*, the Forum on Youth Homelessness, the review of *YOUTHREACH*, the development of a *Code of Practice concerning the Employment of Young Persons in Licensed Premises* and involvement in the Traveller Health Advisory Committee, whose recommendations fed into the recently published *Traveller Health: A National Strategy, 2002-2005*.

1.3. The Current Status of Consultation in relation to Public Policy-Making

We would suggest that the use of formal consultation processes to involve civil society in public policy development would benefit from a critical evaluation. The principle of consultation can only be strengthened by a re-examination of its meaning and value from the perspectives of all concerned and through the prism of experience garnered over the last ten years. Among the issues that such an evaluation might address with a view to improving the effectiveness of consultation as a function of public decision-making are:

- Providing for a more equitable and inclusive approach to direct consultation with individual citizens
- Redressing the imbalance of credibility and corresponding authority that informs consultation processes which aim to involve different sectors of society in public policy-making at a macro level
- Identifying the causes and offsetting signs of consultation fatigue with regard to consultation as a function of public decision-making.

An evaluation that engages with such issues is desirable in light of hearing young voices, including at the level of public decision-making, having become a matter of national public policy. To introduce children and young people to a public policy-making arena jaundiced by consultation would be inauspicious in light of the well-documented alienation of young people from Ireland’s political system and, concurrently, the optimism with which many children and young people will approach their first opportunity to be heard at the level of public decision-making.

1.4. Hearing Young Voices

Commitments to Hearing Young Voices

21 September 2002 marks the tenth anniversary of Ireland’s ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC). In ratifying the CRC, Ireland made a commitment under international law to implement its principles and provisions. The 41 rights defined in the CRC are commonly grouped under four themes: survival, development, protection and participation. The latter theme is articulated in particular in Article 12, which stipulates the right of all children and young people under eighteen years to participate in decision-making processes affecting them in accordance with their age and maturity. Perhaps more so than any other article in the

¹ Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA), *Building an Inclusive Society: Review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (Dublin: DSCFA, 2002), p. 28.

CRC, Article 12 promotes and provides for the recognition of children and young people under eighteen as active subjects with rights as well as recipients of adult care and concern. While action favourable to the vindication of children's rights has been taken in countries throughout the world, the status of children as such and their right to be heard in the context of decision-making processes affecting them remain a practical and psychological challenge at both an institutional and an individual level in those countries to have ratified the CRC since its adoption by the UN General Assembly in 1989.

Hearing Young Voices at International Level

At international level, children and young people from around the world are participating in international fora and projects. Examples in recent years include:

- The annual UN World Youth Forum
- The International Young People's Participation Program, 2000 sponsored by End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking (ECPAT)
- The International Conference on War Affected Children in September 2000, held in Winnipeg and organised by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
- The International Forum for Child Welfare's (IFCW) World Forum, 2001 held in Limerick and organised by Barnardos
- The Youth Millennium Project
- The UN Special Session on Children in New York in May 2002
- The International Children's Conference on the Environment in Victoria, British Columbia in May 2002.

In addition, the World Wide Web is emerging as a new 'cross-border' forum within which children and young people can articulate their views and experiences and contribute to public policy development at national and local level.

Hearing Young Voices in Europe

Key developments at European level include:

- The 1996 *European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights*, which posits the right of children and young people under eighteen years to participate directly or indirectly in judicial proceedings affecting them
- The 1992 *European Charter on the Participation of Children and Young People in Municipal and Regional Life*, which advocates that local authorities and regions in Europe should implement policies to facilitate children's and young people's participation in community life
- The consultation with young people (15-25 years of age) in relation to the preparation of the *European White Paper on Youth*, an initiative that enabled thousands of young people from EU member states to submit their opinions and recommendations to the European Commission and national governments.

Hearing Young Voices at Country Level

At country level, diverse actions have been taken to provide for and facilitate children's and young people's involvement in decision-making processes affecting them, including at a public policy level. For example:

- In Finland, the principles of the CRC were incorporated into the 1995 Constitution
- In Spain, the right of children to participate in society is contained in a Royal Decree
- A number of European countries have established Ombudsmen for Children (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Spain)
- Some countries, including Jordan and Zimbabwe, have created national children's parliaments
- Several countries have created equivalent structures at local level – for example, local and regional children's parliaments in Germany, Parish Youth Councils in the UK, Conseils Municipaux des Enfants in France, and school and youth community councils in the Netherlands.

Hearing Young Voices in the UK

Several initiatives in the UK illustrate how the creation of opportunities for children and young people to be heard can involve collaboration between the statutory and NGO sectors:

- The Scottish Office commissioned Save the Children to undertake a consultation with forty three groups of children and young people aged 12-18 years on progress towards implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Scotland. Part of the UK's preparations for its second report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, this consultation took place between September 1998 and January 1999.
- During May and June 2000, the Scottish Executive and the International Teledemocracy Centre at Napier University collaborated in running a Youth Summit Electronic Consultation. Young people with access to the Internet could find out about issues facing young people in Scotland, what other young people had to say on these issues, add their own views and vote on what they felt were the top ten issues for young people in Scotland.
- During 2000, Save the Children and the Children's Law Centre assisted the Northern Ireland Office of Law Reform with its *Consultation with Young People on Physical Punishment in the Home*.
- Save the Children and the Children's Law Centre also assisted the Human Rights Office of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister with their recent consultation with children and young people on future roles for the proposed Commissioner for Children for Northern Ireland.
- NGOs, including Save the Children and the Children's Law Centre, supported the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in its efforts to elicit views from children and young people on the *Bill of Rights* for Northern Ireland.

Among such wide-ranging initiatives in the UK are those seeking to enable the voices of children and young people experiencing or at risk of poverty/ social exclusion to be heard. These include:

- *Bread is Free*, a consultation on poverty undertaken by the Children's Rights Alliance for England and Save the Children during 2001 with 106 children and young people aged 5-16 years and living in communities with high levels of poverty and social deprivation across England.
- A collaboration between Save the Children and Disability Action in Northern Ireland to support a group of young people with disabilities – Educable – to research the educational experiences of young people with disabilities in Northern Ireland.
- The 1999 *Ask Us* project led by The Children's Society, which used a multi-media approach to enable 200 children and young people with disabilities aged between 4 and 25 years to influence the UK government's *Quality Protects* programme.

To similar or equivalent initiatives in Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales can be added the guidelines developed to support consultation with particular groups of children and young people at risk of or experiencing social exclusion – for example:

- Children in Scotland's training manual for professionals on involving children and young people with disabilities in decision-making
- Broad-based guidelines on consulting "vulnerable young people" prepared by the Children's Law Centre and Save the Children in Northern Ireland
- A comprehensive toolkit for consulting children and young people on public policy issues recently published by Save the Children, Scotland.

Notwithstanding such developments, understanding and practice with regard to hearing young voices remains in its infancy. Consultation with children and young people on matters of public policy remains a novel and challenging concept and much needs to be done if children's and young people's voices are to become structurally embedded in civil society's deliberations. A particular challenge will be to provide for the equitable involvement of socially excluded children and young people, a group that has been under-involved to date. This applies not only to the UK, but also to Ireland.

Bringing It All Back Home: Key Instruments and Initiatives in Ireland

Prior to the launch of the *National Children's Strategy* (Strategy) in 2000, statutory bodies and NGOs were taking actions supportive of hearing young voices. These include:

- Information provision and dissemination to young people
- Public information initiatives on children's rights and the CRC
- The creation of educational materials on or related to children's rights and responsibilities
- Opportunities for children and young people to explore different media of self-expression
- Surveys of and reports on youth opinion on a variety of issues
- Children's and young people's conferences and discussion fora
- Legislative and other developments at national level – for example, provisions in the *Education Act, 1998* for the establishment of student councils in post-primary schools.

National Children's Strategy

Launched by the Government in 2000, this Strategy marks an unprecedented opportunity to build on such initiatives and thereby advance the implementation of Article 12 of the CRC in Ireland. Goal One states: "Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity". While it does not amount to a legislative provision, Goal One does establish hearing young voices as a matter of national public policy. This is in keeping with the significance attached to 'having a voice' by the 2,488 children and young people who made submissions on the Strategy. The structures created to support implementation of the Strategy as a whole provide a framework for a cross-departmental and inter-sectoral approach to realising commitments outlined under Goal One. As such, Goal One and these structures provide:

- A bedrock of legitimacy for hearing young voices
- A means of ensuring that children's and young people's right to be heard remains on the public policy agenda
- A foundation for the systematic development of opportunities for young voices to become structurally embedded in the democratic process.

Commitments under Goal One to ensuring that children and young people are heard in relation to the many and wide-ranging issues affecting them are underpinned by six key objectives. Of these, the most germane to the context of this study are:

- "To put in place new mechanisms in the public sector which achieve participation by children in matters which affect them"
- "To promote and support the development of a similar approach in the voluntary and private sectors"
- "To target additional resources and supports to enable marginalised children to participate equally".²

Implementing Goal One: First Steps

Since the launch of the Strategy and under its auspices, first steps have been taken towards implementing Goal One:

- The first session of Dáil na nÓg was held at the Mansion House in Dublin on 5 September 2001 and the second session is scheduled for October 2002
- Local Comhairle na nÓg are being established by the County and City Development Boards

² Government of Ireland, *Our Children – Their Lives: The National Children's Strategy* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 2000), p. 32.

- Supported by the National Children's Office, the ISPCC's recently established Children's Consultation Unit is providing support and training in the development of appropriate mechanisms for involving children and young people in decision-making.
- Three young people are among the members of the National Children's Advisory Council and a sub-group of this Council has a role to play in ensuring that a coordinated approach is taken to progressing implementation of Goal One.

Additional Developments

There have been other developments of late that, while in keeping with Goal One, have taken place independent of the Strategy's structures. Two notable broad-based developments are:

- Auditing current levels and modes of children's and young people's involvement in decision-making processes affecting them – for example, the audit undertaken by TCD's Children's Research Centre in the context of the *National Youth Work Development Plan* and the National Youth Council of Ireland's audit for the Carnegie Young People Initiative
- Promoting an ethos of hearing young voices – for example, Best Health for Children's recent report on the creation of an adolescent-friendly health service, which recommends that provision be made for the systematic involvement of young people in the area of health.

Consulting Children and Young People experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion

Opportunities have been created in Ireland for children and young people at risk of or experiencing poverty/social exclusion to be consulted in relation to services and public policy developments affecting them. Pressing issues that some of these children and young people have spoken to in recent years include:

- Guidance provision for young people at risk of social exclusion (*My Name's Not Down*)
- Early school leaving (National Economic and Social Forum Report)
- Supporting teenage student mothers to remain in mainstream education (*Waterford Student Mothers Group*)
- Residential care services and the rights of children/young people in care (Western Health Board's *Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care*)
- Youth homelessness (via the Forum on Youth Homelessness)
- Play and recreation (Ballymun Regeneration Ltd. *Masterplan* for the physical, social, and economic regeneration of Ballymun).

While welcome, such initiatives are few and far between. Findings of the survey undertaken for this study reinforce existing evidence that children and young people at risk of or experiencing poverty/social exclusion are less likely to be involved in the context of existing opportunities for hearing young voices. Of the 59 responding organisations:

- 52% consult with children and young people experiencing or at risk of poverty or other forms of social exclusion
- 45% consult with young Travellers
- 32% consult with children and young people with disabilities
- 28% consult with children and young people out of home
- 40% consult with children and young people with literacy difficulties
- 25% consult with children and young people from cultural/ethnic minorities.

Goal One of the *National Children's Strategy* indicates that public policy-makers are aware of this deficit. That this is the case can be welcomed as a necessary first step towards redressing it.

Consultation: A Function of Social Inclusion?

In light of initiatives such as those above and a commitment in the *National Children's Strategy* to facilitate an inclusive approach to the implementation of Goal One, it is noteworthy that both

policy-makers and practitioners interviewed for this study felt that consultation with socially excluded children and young people at the level of public policy development might be a function of social inclusion:

- At a micro level, through being an empowering experience for the individual children and young people concerned
- At a macro level, by contributing to the creation of more effective public policies to tackle issues arising in relation to child poverty and social exclusion.

However, for consultation to perform this function requires the creation of meaningful opportunities and effective mechanisms. If done superficially and inappropriately, consultation with socially excluded children and young people could prove counterproductive on both counts. It could:

- Exacerbate any existing sense of being marginalised harboured by socially excluded children and young people.
- Render policy-makers, practitioners and others less rather than more convinced of the need to hear young voices in the context of public policy development and thus reluctant to facilitate their future involvement at this level of decision-making.

That understanding and practice in relation to hearing young voices is in its infancy in Ireland enhances the scope for an exploratory approach to getting consultation real *and* right. That doing so should include a concerted effort to create equitable and inclusive opportunities for children and young people to be heard at the level of public decision-making was one of the aspirations articulated by interviewees for this study. For several of them, implementation of Goal One of the *National Children's Strategy* should entail supporting social excluded children and young people to be heard on an equal footing with their peers and in relation to the many issues affecting them.

"It will take [young people out of home] time ... to be able to be vocal about what they think and what way they want things to be ... It's about opening up those possibilities ... for them" – *Practitioner working with young people out of home*

"For me, ... it's that ... the process of consultation is inclusive ... and is seen as a process that works" – *Pavee Point representative*

"At national level, ... I'd like to see ... Dáil na nÓg becoming a major focus for young people, ... that it's earned ... the respect that gets them listened to ... I tie it ... back to the vision of what children's rights means: children as citizens. ... Some concrete meaning can be given to it" – *Public policy-maker at national level*

"In 2010, we should be able to clearly see in policy documents that children have had their views listened to and taken on board ... I'd like to see ... [that] it's just part of the way society is" – *Community and Enterprise Development Officer with a Local Authority*

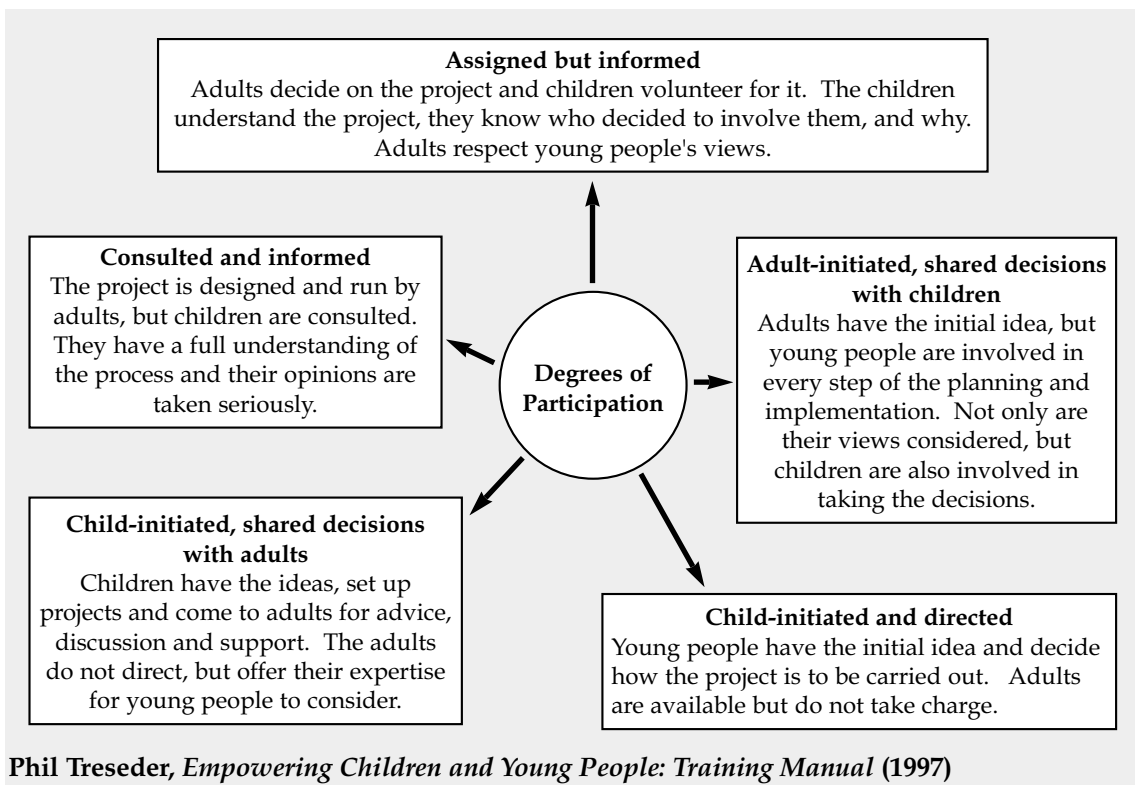
II. Defining 'Consultation'

Literature Review Findings

As it pertains to children and young people, the diverse meanings that can attach to 'consultation' are generated not only by their various expectations for the process, but also by how consultation with them is approached by those seeking their involvement. This multiplicity of meanings is partly attributable to a given society's prevailing conception of childhood and corresponding understanding of what children and young people can be expected to contribute and should be enabled to contribute to.

There is a considerable body of literature available to facilitate the development of a single, coherent definition of consultation as a mechanism for involving children and young people in decision-making, including in relation to public policy development. In a period spanning over thirty years, Arnstein, Hart, John, Franklin, Treseder and Lansdown are among those to have forwarded definitions of consultation and, moreover, to have situated these definitions schematically in relation to other modes of involvement. Hart's ladder of participation was the model chosen for presentation in the *National Children's Strategy*. However, we would suggest that Treseder's model is a preferable basis for moving towards consensus on what consultation should mean as a mechanism for involving children and young people in public policy development. Treseder's dynamic, non-hierarchical model:

- Promotes an understanding of different approaches to and degrees of involvement as each having the potential to be the most appropriate under a given set of circumstances.
- Supports a non-prescriptive approach that takes account of the conditions particular to a given initiative to hear young voices, not least of which will be the needs and capacities of the children and young people concerned.



The discussion that needs to take place on what ‘consultation’ ought to mean should also be informed by an awareness that the literature frequently represents different modes of involving children/young people in decision-making in terms of the distribution of authority and responsibility between adults and children/young people that a given mode entails. Within this, consultation is typically conceptualised as a mode of involvement where the balance of power rests firmly with adults and as having the following characteristics:

- Adults formulate, design and run the initiative
- Children/young people are provided with an opportunity to contribute
- Children/young people are given the information they need to make an informed decision regarding their involvement as well as informed contributions
- Adults listen actively to participating children/young people and are committed to taking their views seriously.
- Adults decide what to do with the material generated through the consultation
- Adults provide children/young people with feedback.

Interview Findings

Policy-makers and practitioners interviewed for this study typically characterised consultation as a *process*. Most interviewees suggested that this process does not and should not differ in its application to children/young people and adults.

“I don’t think it should differ ... because the views expressed still have to be ... distilled in policy development work” – *Public policy-maker at national level*

“It has some commonalities in terms of it’s being a sign of respect and recognition” – *Public policy-maker at national level*

“The end product and the principles that you use in consulting ... should be the same” – *Community and Enterprise Development Officer with Local Authority*

All interviewees also identified differences, linked to:

- The different status accorded to children/young people and adults in society
- The ages of participating children and young people
- The levels of decision-making at which children and young people might be consulted
- The stages of a consultation process (planning, implementation, evaluation)
- Aspects of one or more of these stages (for example, methodologies, treatment of views)
- The needs/capacities/perspectives of a particular group of socially excluded children/young people).

“Young people [talk] quite differently from adults ... I certainly think for young Travellers ... the interpretation can be quite different from what young settled people are saying ... You need to be clear around what you’re hearing” – *Pavee Point representative*

“Obviously you have to take into consideration themes and issues and age-appropriateness” – *Children’s consultation officer*

“You have to be very sensitive to the audience you’re addressing and you have to be able to pitch and tailor the consultation process to that level” – *Public policy-maker at national level*

An additional difference raised by several interviewees presents a particular challenge. It concerns what ‘taking on board’ views should mean in relation to children and young people. Arguing that initial experiences of consultation must be positive for children/young people if their future involvement is to be secured, several interviewees suggested that young participants need tangible evidence of their views having been ‘taken on board’. Providing such evidence

may require a commitment to implement some if not all of what children and young people say. For some interviewees, this was particularly important with regard to children and young people experiencing poverty/social exclusion. However, some interviewees argued that it would be preferable to manage children's and young people's expectations of involvement in consultation.

"If you don't put anything down for young people ... it will further disillusion them ... When I [say] 'take on board', I mean implement what young people are saying" – *Pavee Point representative*

"I think they do need to see the immediate impact of something they have said" – *Practitioner working with children and young people with physical disabilities*

"I think young people ... understand that it's not once you say something, it happens. And ... there's no point including stuff for the sake of it because that just makes it false ... If the purpose is to constructively influence policy, then I think it has to be seen that it's related and worthwhile what they're saying" – *Practitioner working with young people out of home*

Implications and Recommendations

There is a need for the National Children's Office and the National Children's Advisory Council in consultation with other relevant/interested parties to:

- Move towards an agreed and shared understanding of what 'consultation' ought to mean as a mechanism for involving children and young people in relevant public policy developments at national and local level
- Consider the involvement of children and young people in arriving at this definition and/or in its translation into language and formats that are accessible to children and young people of different ages and capacities
- Agree on any differences that *ought* to exist between consultation as mechanism for involving adults and as a mechanism for involving children/young people in public policy development
- Seriously consider, in light of its far-reaching implications, whether a 'positive action' approach should be taken with regard to the treatment of views put forward by children and young people and/or by children and young people experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion in the context of consultation relating to public policy.

III. To Consult or not to Consult? That is the Question

Literature Review Findings

The 'voice of the child' is emerging as a live issue that is attracting both curiosity and concern. In the context of increasing opportunities for children and young people to be heard, the debate continues as to whether children and young people should be consulted at all and in particular at the level of public decision-making. Key arguments for and against consulting children and young people are summarised below. When considering them, the following points should be kept in mind:

- There will be occasions when consultation with children/young people is likely to be inappropriate and exploitative
- A tokenistic approach to consultation is worse than not doing it at all and is likely to be counterproductive.

To Consult	Not to Consult
<p>Children/young people have a right to be heard and are as much 'customers' and 'clients' as adults.</p> <p>Parents/guardians and other adults do not always speak/act in the best interests of children/young people. Children's right to be heard is a function of their right to be protected.</p> <p>All organisations whose work impacts on children/young people should speak with children/young people.</p> <p>Refusing or failing to provide opportunities for children/young people to be heard is infantilising.</p> <p>Children/young people have a right to decide whether they wish to exercise their right to be heard.</p> <p>Legislative or other provisions require that children/young people be consulted.</p> <p>Consulting children/young people will lead to improved policies/services because children/young people provide unique perspectives. Children/young people can make informed and meaningful contributions if enabled to do so.</p> <p>Existing structures of decision-making can and ought to be adapted to accommodate consultation with children/young people.</p> <p>Children/young people are more likely to use and respect services for them if they have been involved in their planning.</p> <p>Being heard is part of children's/young people's civic education. It can strengthen their commitment to democracy and respect for human rights.</p> <p>The experience of having a say and being heard will encourage children/young people to be active participants in society as adults.</p> <p>Guidelines exist and training is or will be made available.</p> <p>The necessary resources will be made available.</p>	<p>Children must learn to take responsibility before they can be granted rights.</p> <p>Parents/guardians should exercise children's/ young people's right to be heard on their behalf.</p> <p>The interests of children/young people are already articulated by their representative organisations.</p> <p>Upholding children's right to be heard means foisting adulthood on them prematurely.</p> <p>Children/young people do not want to be consulted.</p> <p>Consulting children is not part of the organisation's remit.</p> <p>Children/young people lack the maturity, knowledge and skills to make meaningful contributions to decision-making, especially at a public policy level.</p> <p>It is not possible to accommodate consultation with children/young people within existing decision-making structures.</p> <p>Affording children/young people opportunities to be heard will undermine their respect for adult authority, including that of their parents/guardians.</p> <p>Young people are not interested in politics and public policy.</p> <p>There are no guidelines or training in place to support consultation with children/young people.</p> <p>There are insufficient resources available.</p>

Survey Findings

Relevant findings from the survey in relation to this key question are as follows:

- The principal reasons given by responding organisations for not consulting children/young people were:
 - The absence of structures or guidelines to support consultation
 - It is not part of the organisation's remit.
- 100% of respondents believe children/young people *should* be consulted in relation to decision-making and policy-making processes affecting them.
- According to respondents, the principal 'very significant' reasons why children/young people should be consulted are:
 - Having a say and being heard is a right of children/young people
 - Children/young people can bring different perspectives and insights to existing decision-making processes affecting them
- The main barrier to consultation with children/young people identified by respondents is lack of resources (funding and personnel).

Interview Findings

All interviewees believed children and young people could make a meaningful contribution to public policy development at national and local level. There was also consensus that children and young people need to be enabled to do so and that adults have a responsibility in this regard. A number of interviewees also asserted that adults need to be equipped to ensure that the meaningfulness of that contribution is communicated and heard. When asked about the nature of the meaningful contribution that children and young people could make to public policy development, interviewees typically suggested that children and young people could provide new content and/or alternative perspectives. A number of interviewees conceptualised the usefulness of this perspective as affording an insight into 'childhood in the present tense'.

"I think it's probably a nuance or a perspective ... I don't think anybody can remember what it's like to see things through a child's eye. And not only remember. Times have changed. I think that's often the problem is that what we do is remember ... It's different times, different parents, ... totally different circumstances ... So, it's not enough to remember" – *Representative of the voluntary youth sector*

All interviewees also believed that consultation with socially excluded children/young people could be a function of social inclusion. When asked how such work might contribute to the social inclusion agenda, interviewees responded by saying that benefits might be reaped at a micro level and/or at a macro level:

- The experience of *meaningful* consultation could be of personal benefit to participating children/young people, enhancing their knowledge, skills, self-esteem and self-confidence
- Policies being developed for them are likely to improve through their input
- Services arising from these policies are more likely to be used and respected by children and young people if children and young people had been involved in their planning.

Benefits to Children and Young People experiencing Social Exclusion

"Even at a services level, when you include young people in planning ... or whatever, it does empower them and makes them feel that ... they are more valued" – *Practitioner working with young people out of home*

"If some of our young people were to be involved in some of the discussions that go on [at local level], I would prefer to think that they would be there as young people, not as young people with a disability ... I think that the inclusion piece and making it more real would be that 'Yes, I'm part of that community.'" – *Practitioner working with children and young people with physical disabilities*

Benefits to Social Inclusion Policies and Services

"I firmly believe that if young people have a say in something, they will utilise it ... and they will feel part of it ... By consulting young people, they [policy-makers] will be ... able to deliver better services, better amenities, better facilities." – *Children's consultation officer*

"It would really enrich the work that we do to be able to hear what children have to say and to hear what they want and how they want it ... What we're saying is that it is no longer sufficient just to get the view of adults who are unemployed in a household, that the unemployment, the income levels, the social exclusion experience by that household has a major impact on the children. It's important to hear how the children experience that and what particular needs they have arising from it." – *Community and Enterprise Development Officer with a Local Authority*

Focus Group Findings

Of the 62 children and young people who participated in the focus groups for this study, 57 said that children and young people should have a say when plans are being made that affect them. The most common reasons were:

- The service/policy being planned is for children/young people
- Adults do not (necessarily) know what children and young people think and/or what children and young people like/want/need
- All people, including children and young people, should be treated equally
- Children and young people have a right to have a say.

- "Adults don't know what's going on in our heads"
- "It's good to have the experience of being listened to"
- "Children should be part of making their own plans"
- "We're all equal"
- "It's for you. It's not for them"
- "Because adults are gone out of times"

Implications and Recommendations

- The creation of meaningful and sustainable opportunities for children and young people to be consulted will be facilitated by promoting rather than stifling debate on the question of whether or not children and young people should be consulted in relation to public policy development at national and local level.
- Those with responsibility for promoting consultation with children and young people will need to do more than reference national public policy provisions in this regard if policy-makers and professionals are to be convinced of the value of consulting children and young people. That survey respondents identified children's and young people's *right* to be heard as the principal 'very significant reason' for consulting them suggests that a rights-based approach should be taken to promoting consultation with children and young people.
- There is a need to assess and raise awareness levels, in particular among public policy-makers, of the relevance of their remit to children and young people and thus of children and young people as a 'client' group that should be considered for inclusion in future consultations relating to public policy.
- Supports, in particular funding, training for future facilitators and good practice guidelines need to be provided if organisations are to undertake consultation with children and young people.
- Children and young people, including those experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion, can make a meaningful contribution to public policy development, but they must receive support to enable them to do so.

- If done in meaningful and appropriate ways, consultation with socially excluded children and young people could be a function of social inclusion at both the micro level of the individual and the macro level of public policy development and service provision.

IV. Resource Issues

4.1. FINANCE and FUNDING

Literature Review Findings

Amounts and conditions of funding play a pivotal role in determining the scope, quality and sustainability of any consultative initiative involving children and young people. Potential cost areas arising in relation to consultation with children and young people in the round include: insurance, venue hire, transport, refreshments, consultation materials and payment/payment in kind for assistants and participating children/young people. Some of the supports that socially excluded children and young people may require to facilitate their equal access to and involvement in consultation mean that additional costs may arise in relation to consultation with them.

As regards funding:

- The creation of sustainable opportunities for children and young people to be consulted requires a commitment on the part of funding bodies to support initiatives in the medium- to long-term
- Conditions of funding should take account of the unpredictability that is part-and-parcel of consultation with children/young people

Survey Findings

The survey findings reinforce the status of finance and funding as a make-or-break issue. Several organisations that do not currently consult with children/young people identified lack of resources (personnel, funding, etc.) as a principal reason. Furthermore, respondents identified lack of resources as the main barrier to consulting children/young people at the level of public policy: lack of resources was seen by 39% of respondents as a 'very significant' barrier and by 40% of respondents as a 'significant' barrier. Accordingly, the provision of adequate resources was identified by several respondents as a key measure to progress the quantity and quality of opportunities for children/young people to be consulted at a public policy level.

Interview Findings

Interviewees identified finance/funding as a key resource issue. In light of the survey findings, one notable finding of the interviews is that policy-makers were inclined to argue that costs should not be a barrier to progressing consultation with children/young people. Interviewees' comments regarding a lack of mainstream funding for consultation with children/young people reinforce the survey finding that funding in this area is ad hoc and piecemeal. As regards future funding for consultation with children/young people at the level of public policy, interviewees argued that funding should be centralised and mainstreamed, with several interviewees vesting responsibility for funding provision and coordination in parent Government Departments and/or the National Children's Office.

"The Government has a key role to play in light of the National Children's Strategy. The National Children's Office should coordinate the resource issue at national level. Decisions on implementation could be made locally" – Pavee Point representative

"I do think it's about prioritising mainstream funding ... It needs to be cross-departmental ... and then, within that, Departments need to put resources aside" – Representative of voluntary youth sector

A number of interviewees suggested that making consultation with children/young people a condition of funding might help to progress work in this area. However, there were differences of view on the form that a stipulation of this kind might take.

“... you can make connections with funding, but in a way that’s saying ... ‘In funding organisations, we expect organisations to have professional or quality standards in youth work. This includes the following’ ... So it becomes more ... [about] encouraging people than punishing them” – *Representative from the voluntary youth sector*

“People weren’t thinking in terms of gender equality until it became a requirement of EU funding that you gave a gender equality focus. And now people do it all the time ... If agencies start to put in a requirement to consult with children, ... it would mean that ... it would become an integral part of their work” – *Community and Enterprise Development Officer with a Local Authority*

4.2. TIME and PERSONNEL

Literature Review Findings

Consulting children and young people can be time-consuming. While the amount of time required will depend on a variety of factors, the following general rules of thumb can be applied:

- If in doubt, overestimate the time needed
- Plan ahead and afford sufficient time for the planning stage
- Allocate equal time for the planning, implementation and feedback/evaluation stages of the consultation.

A flexible timeframe should be devised and consultation with children/young people embarked upon prior to consultation with any other relevant stakeholders involved in the consultation process.

The time required for consultation can be disproportionately greater than the time available to staff members in light of their existing responsibilities. Personnel options include:

- Appointing an additional member of staff on a full-time, part-time or occasional basis
- Involving volunteers
- Integrating this role as part of the job description for existing or future positions.

Interview Findings

Time and personnel were both identified by interviewees as key resource issues. Practitioners in particular underscored the time implications of consultation with children/young people. While they had different views on how the issue of personnel should be addressed, there was consensus that approaches to staffing consultation would need to be realistic.

“Time is the other piece ... That’s why I think it needs to be dedicated people to do it because the people on the ground are operating the services ... Day-to-day stuff just takes over and it will get put on the back burner” – *Practitioner working with young people out of home*

4.3. TRAINING in FACILITATION

Literature Review Findings

The use of trained facilitators is key to ensuring that children/young people can participate in a consultation to the best of their ability and hence that meaningful outcomes are produced for all concerned. The literature suggests that training should be provided not only to those with no direct experience of working with children/young people, but also to those who already work

with children/young people on a daily basis. Save the Children and the Children's Law Centre, for example, provided training to thirty people to enable them to facilitate a consultation on the Northern Ireland's *Bill of Rights* with children and young people they *already* work with. It may also be advantageous to provide future facilitators with training/education that enhances their understanding of the experiences, needs and capacities of specific groups of children/young people experiencing or at risk of social exclusion – for example, training/education in the areas of disability, Traveller culture, cultural/ethnic diversity and youth homelessness.

Survey Findings

The importance of training was reinforced by survey respondents.

- Of the responding organisations that do not currently consult with children/young people, several said that they do not because they do not have trained personnel to undertake this work.
- The unavailability of training courses and resource materials was identified by 24% of respondents as a 'very significant' barrier and by 44% of respondents as a 'significant' barrier to consulting children/young people at the level of public policy development.

The survey findings also suggest that future facilitators might benefit from training to consult with specific groups of children/young people experiencing or at risk of poverty/social exclusion:

"... those conducting consultations with minorities need to be aware of how they interpret what those from different cultures from their own are saying"

Interview Findings

The importance of facilitators having the requisite skills to consult children/young people was also emphasised by interviewees. One interviewee stressed that knowledge/skills arising from training should not rest with the person trained, but also be "spread throughout the organisation"

"... you need highly skilled people ... Money needs to go into getting people skilled up to do the work" – *Practitioner working with young people out of home*

4.4. SUPPORTING CHILDREN and YOUNG PEOPLE

Literature Review Findings

Children and young people require support to make an informed and meaningful contribution to public policy developments affecting them at national and local level. A crucial support in the first instance is the provision of adequate information and preparation. In the short-term, discreet preparatory work needs to be undertaken with the children and young people whose involvement is being sought in a given consultation. Taking a longer-term view, the project of structurally embedding consultation with children/young people in the public policy development process will benefit from maximising the potential of existing opportunities within the formal and non-formal education sectors to furnish children and young people with:

- A knowledge of key issues affecting them
- An understanding of citizenship and Ireland's structures of governance
- The skills that are part-and-parcel of effective involvement.

Survey Findings

Survey respondents also identified supporting children/young people to be consulted as a resource issue:

- A number of responding organisations who do not currently consult with children/young people stated children's and young people's lack of skills as the reason for not doing so.
- Lack of supports for children/young people was identified by 28% of survey respondents as a 'very significant' barrier to consultation with them and by 52% of respondents as a 'significant' barrier.

Interview Findings

Interviewees underscored the importance of providing adequate and appropriate support to children and young people.

"They need training, ... basic skills, ... even committee skills, ... training which would focus on ... personal development" – *Health Board practitioner*

"Preparation work is essential to help young people think through issues" – *Public policy-maker at national level*

Implications and Recommendations

Finance and funding

- Amounts and conditions of funding will play a key role in determining the scope for creating inclusive and sustainable opportunities for children and young people to be consulted. Due regard will need to be given to the additional costs that can arise to support the involvement of children and young people experiencing or at risk of social exclusion. The findings suggest that it will be necessary to assess and agree:
 - The nature and amount of resources required, including additional resources required to support the involvement of socially excluded children and young people
 - How these resources might be provided (funding structures)
 - By whom resources might be provided (funding sources)
 - Conditions of funding, including duration of funding
 - If, when and in what ways, consultation should be condition of funding.
- Future work in this area might benefit from the creation and dissemination of sufficiently comprehensive information on the cost areas associated with this type of work.
- Some of the additional supports required to facilitate the equitable involvement of children/young people experiencing or at risk of poverty/social exclusion have cost implications. To offset any possibility that these additional costs might curtail an equitable approach to consultation with children and young people, it is suggested that relevant statutory organisations and NGOs:
 - Draw up and disseminate an inclusion policy or equivalent
 - Make inclusion one aspect of future evaluations of their work in this area.
- Conditions of funding should take sufficient account of the unpredictability of this kind of work. Those seeking funding might clarify in their funding applications any 'risk factors' associated with the consultation they are seeking to undertake.

Time

- Due consideration needs to be given to the time required to undertake consultation with children and young people. Awareness needs to be raised that consulting certain groups of children/young people experiencing or at risk of poverty/social exclusion may be especially time intensive – for example, children/young people with certain physical disabilities are likely to need additional time to fashion their responses.
- In cases where children/young people are one of several groups to be consulted in relation to a given area of public policy, consultation with them should be initiated prior to consulting other stakeholders.

Personnel

- Organisations need to be realistic in assessing personnel options. Options to consider include:
 - Appointing an additional member of staff on a full-time, part-time or occasional basis
 - Involving volunteers
 - Integrating this work into the responsibilities of existing members of staff.

Training in Facilitation

- Training should be made available to professionals who already work with children and young people directly and not only to those who have no previous experience of doing so.
- Varying levels of existing expertise and experience should be reflected in the development of different training programmes.
- Consideration should be given to providing training/education that enhances trainees' understanding of the experiences, needs and capacities of particular groups of children/young people experiencing or at risk of social exclusion.

Supporting Children and Young People

- Children and young people require support to be consulted. Thought is needed on the key supports required and how they will be provided in the short-, medium- and long-term. At a minimum, children and young people should be equipped with:
 - A knowledge of public policies affecting them
 - An understanding of the public policy-making process at national and local level
 - The skills to enable them to contribute effectively and to the best of their ability.

V Ethical Issues

5.1. CONSENT

Literature Review Findings

Gaining formal consent from parents/guardians is a cornerstone of ethical practice in relation to consultation with children and young people. However, the literature reviewed for this study did not engage with the key question of what consent should be sought for. This question *must* be addressed, not least to clarify legitimate grounds for overriding a child's/young person's right to be heard with a parents'/guardians' entitlement to exercise their duty of care to their child. An additional question requiring clarification is from whom should be sought in the case of children/young people who are in residential care or out of home on their own.

That children's/young people's involvement in consultation should be voluntary is also a given of good practice. However, documents gathered during the literature review suggest that the principle of voluntarism is not always sufficiently impressed upon children, young people and the adults from whom consent is being sought for their involvement in a consultation. The literature suggests that there is no standard approach to the attendant matter of seeking formal consent from children/young people themselves. However, in the field of research with children/young people, it is generally accepted that ethical research with children/young people will entail gaining their informed consent prior to involving them in a research project. In determining whether formal consent should be sought from children/young people to consult with them on matters of public policy, consideration needs to be given to:

- Levels of competency among children/young people to give informed consent
- Criteria for establishing competency
- Who is best placed to determine a given child's/young person's competency to give consent.

Focus Group Findings

A resounding majority of participants (56 out of 62) were unequivocal in asserting the importance of having the choice of participating in a consultation.

- "We should have the right not to participate if we don't want to"

In asserting that they should have the choice, several participants were critical of what they regarded as adults' failure to afford children/young people sufficient opportunities to make choices.

A significant majority of participants also affirmed the importance of gaining consent from parents/guardians. Reasons given were:

- Safety of children and young people
- Peace of mind for parents/guardians
- Parents/guardians are entitled to be informed and asked for their consent
- Parents/guardians have responsibility for children/young people
- Parents/guardians have authority

Participants who questioned the need for consent from parents/guardians were all young people. Accordingly, they did so on the grounds of age.

- “I’m nearly 15 and I still have to get my Ma to say it in writing. I don’t like that.”

5.2. CONFIDENTIALITY

Literature Review Findings

As it pertains to consultation aimed at enabling children and young people to contribute to areas of public policy development, confidentiality typically means “public confidentiality”.¹ The application of public confidentiality frequently involves quotations from children/young people remaining unattributed or attributed in way that makes it impossible to identify the child/young person being cited. While these are common practices, the rationale for them is not entirely clear. As such, their status as good practice cannot be taken given. Consideration needs to be given to whether the use of public confidentiality is always already an ethical touchstone of good practice. Among the questions that need to be addressed in this regard is whether and on what grounds confidentiality ought to be negotiated with children/young people being invited to participate in a given consultation. At the very least, a decision taken on confidentiality in relation to a particular consultation and the implications of it need to be communicated to the children/young people concerned and to family members and others who may express an interest in knowing what children/young people said during the consultation.

In light of *Children First* and *Our Duty to Care* a further issue that arises in the Irish context is mandatory reporting. It will be essential for consensus to be reached on whether mandatory reporting should be operational in the context of consultation with children/young people on public policy developments affecting them. Once agreed, the approach to be taken must be communicated to all organisations with a role to play in hearing young voices at the level of public policy as well as to participating children/young people and their parents/guardians.

Focus Group Findings

Approximately 50% of participants said that information from children/young people should be subject to public confidentiality. Reasons given included:

- Safety
- Protection from the possibility of being mocked for their involvement and/or for what they say
- Embarrassment
- Personal/private information

- “It should be treated as private ... No names used. Just the ideas.”
- “People could use it against you to hurt your feelings.”
- “It’s safer”

26 participants relativised the need for confidentiality, with many asserting that children and young people should have the choice of whether public confidentiality is practiced.

- “It would depend on what situation it is”
- “If somebody wants their name beside it ... that’s their choice”

¹ Hill, M., ‘Ethical Issues in Qualitative Methodology with Children’, in Hogan, D. and Gilligan, R. (eds.), *Researching Children’s Experiences: Qualitative Approaches* (Dublin: Children’s Research Centre TCD, 1998), pp. 11-22, here p. 19.

Those who rejected the need for public confidentiality were quite assertive in this regard.

- “If you’re putting down something belonging to me, ... I would want my name put down beside it”

5.3. TRANSPARENCY

Literature Review Findings

Enabling children to make an informed decision about their involvement in a consultation is widely recognised as a given of ethical practice. Clear, concise information in appropriate language and formats should be provided on:

- The theme(s) of the consultation, including an indication of the questions to be asked
- The aim(s) and anticipated outcomes of the consultation
- The implication(s) of involvement, i.e. what expectations participants can/cannot have of their involvement
- Approaches being taken to ethical issues such as consent and confidentiality
- Who else will be present or involved in the consultation
- Methodologies
- The venue, duration and schedule for the consultation and associated practical details
- A contact person with whom to follow-up queries or seek reassurances.

Children/young people should also be informed prior to and/or during the consultation of when they can expect to receive feedback and when outcomes of the process (reports, services, etc.) are likely to be available.

Interview Findings

A majority of interviewees stressed the importance of providing children/young people with accessible information that enables them to make an informed decision regarding their participation in a consultation as well as a meaningful contribution to it.

“They need to know exactly where it’s fitting in, what their role is in it, where it’s going, possible impacts, ... what they can expect” – *Health Board practitioner*

“Young people ... need to have a clear understanding ... about the subject matter being discussed” – *Pavee Point representative*

Focus Group Findings

A resounding majority of participants (60 out of 62) asserted the importance of receiving information.

- “So you know if it’s appropriate for young people”
- “You should know what you are going to before you decide to do it or not”
- “So you can participate”

5.4. EQUALITY and INCLUSION

Literature Review Findings

In addition to young children, children and young people experiencing poverty/social exclusion are less likely to be involved in consultations involving children and young people. A stated objective of Goal One of the *National Children's Strategy* is to ensure the provision of "additional resources and supports to enable marginalised children to participate equally".² In providing these, thought will need to be given to methods of ensuring equality at the levels of access, involvement and outcome.

In the case of forum-style consultations, issues to address in the interests of an equitable approach to inclusion at the level of **access** are:

- Enabling children/young people to elect representatives
- Equipping children/young people with the ability to elect representatives from among their peer group
- Clarifying with representatives what speaking in a representative capacity means, who they are representing and that they are willing to speak and be heard in this way
- Preparing representatives to speak in this capacity.

In the case of consultations where individual submissions are sought from children/young people, issues to address in the interests of arriving at an equitable approach at the level of access are:

- Methods of raising awareness of the consultation among all relevant young stakeholders
- Providing adequate information in language and formats appropriate to prospective participants' ages and capacities.

In relation to forum-style consultations, an equitable approach at the level of **involvement** will be facilitated by:

- Clarifying that children/young people from socially excluded groups are comfortable with making contributions in an integrated group setting
- Equipping children with the supports they need to contribute to the best of their ability in this setting
- Providing alternatives or modifications to the integrated group setting in the short-, medium- or long-term in the event that members of a particular group of children/young people are not sufficiently comfortable in such a setting to feel able to contribute on an equal footing.

As regards public consultations seeking individual submissions, an equitable approach can be facilitated by enabling children/young people to respond in formats that allow them to contribute to the best of their ability and providing them with sufficient time to respond.

The matter of equality and inclusion at the level of **outcome** is far from straightforward. Both Article 12 of the CRC and Goal One of the Strategy promote an approach to consultation that affords 'due weight' to children's/young people's views in accordance with their age and maturity. However, as the findings presented in Chapter Two illustrate, consensus is needed on what such provisions will mean in the context of consulting children/young people at the level of public policy. Questions to address include:

- What is "due" weight?
- How are age and maturity to be assessed and applied, and by whom?
- Ought views to be treated equally or equally relative to the age and maturity of the contributors?

While it is questionable whether criteria can be prescribed in isolation from a given consultation, there is a risk entailed in leaving the assessment of children's/young people's views until after

² Government of Ireland, *Our Children – Their Lives: The National Children's Strategy* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 2000), p. 32.

they have spoken. There is a danger, for example, that where the views of a child/young person digress from the views of adult ‘experts’ participating in the same consultation process that the views of that child/young person will be considered or treated as less competent or incompetent.

Survey Findings

The survey findings support existing evidence that children/young people at risk of or experiencing social exclusion are less likely to be involved in consultation. Of the organisations surveyed:

- 52% consult with children/young people experiencing or at risk of poverty or other forms of social exclusion
- 45% consult with young Travellers
- 32% consult with children/young people with disabilities
- 28% consult with children/young people out of home
- 40% consult with children/young people with literacy difficulties
- 25% consult with children/ young people from cultural/ethnic minorities.

Interview Findings

Several interviewees characterised existing opportunities in Ireland for children/young people to be consulted as exclusive in terms of the number and/or diversity of children and young people involved. A number of interviewees expressed concern that children/ young people experiencing poverty/social exclusion will be excluded in future unless purposeful efforts are made to provide for their equitable inclusion. Interviewees identified practical and/or ethical difficulties entailed in ensuring an equitable approach to inclusion, in particular in the context of forum-style consultations. One interviewee argued that, despite its flaws, a targeted approach to inclusion would be necessary in the short- to medium-term to ensure the involvement of disadvantaged children/young people.

“There are loads of young people out there who aren’t being asked ... You have to look at [involving] ... kids who can’t read or write, who can’t express their opinions in a group, in a forum” – *Health Board practitioner*

“Until Travellers as a community ... [are] included equally, ... you won’t get that group’s contribution at all ... I think initially we really need to target ... if we want to be inclusive” – *Pavee Point representative*

“I would have a major concern about having a mass of children’s fora up and running tomorrow because I think we would run a major risk of having only one set of children’s views represented” – *Community Enterprise and Development Officer with a Local Authority*

“A lot of young people we would work with [would be] quite intimidated in a ... formal setting where there are young people who are very articulate” – *Practitioner working with young people out of home*

Focus Group Findings

Participants were asked one question relating to the equality/inclusion at the level of outcome, namely: whether children’s/young people’s views should carry more, equal or less weight than those of adults consulted on the same issue. A significant minority of participants (24) said that children’s/young people’s views should be afforded equal weight. Ten participants relativised this slightly on the grounds of age, arguing that the views of younger children should carry less weight. Nine participants asserted that children’s/young people’s views should carry more

weight. Only one participant was unequivocal in saying that children's/young people's views should carry less weight.

More Weight

- "I think it's more serious than adults ... It's up to the children and the teenagers ... because they're the ones ... who are going to be using those facilities"
- "Because it's in the best interests of the kids"

Same Weight

- "Because it's for you. It's not for them"
- "We should be all treated as equals"
- "I don't think they [adults] would, but they should"

Less Weight

- "It's going to go on the age group ... If you're a child, you don't know what you're saying ... Where you're an adult, you know what you're saying"

5.5. RESPECT and INTEGRITY

Literature Review Findings

Treating participating children/young people with respect and their involvement with integrity are ethical cornerstones of good practice. Respect can be demonstrated in variety of ways – for example:

- Adequately informing participants about the consultation
- Using age- and need-appropriate methodologies that enable them to contribute to the best of their ability
- Listening to their views in a non-judgemental manner
- Holding the consultation in a comfortable setting
- Giving them sufficient breaks and quality refreshments
- Providing them with timely feedback.

A commitment to transparency and honesty in relation to consultation with children/young people will help to ensure the integrity of the process. Participants should also be encouraged to be open and honest in their contributions – for example, to ask questions when they do not understand something and to feel free to critique one or more aspects of a consultation they have participated in when evaluating it

Implications and Recommendations

Consent

- With regard to consent from parents/guardians, the following issues need to be addressed:
 - What consent should be sought for when consulting children/young people at the level of public policy development
 - Who to seek consent from in the case of children/young people in residential care and children/young people out of home
 - The scope and grounds for negotiating consent from a parent/guardian following an initial refusal by them to provide it.
- With regard to consent from children and young people, the following issues should be addressed:
- How to promote the principle of voluntary participation among children/young people, their parents/guardians and other relevant professionals

- Whether seeking formal consent from children/young people should be an ethical requirement of good practice in the context of consulting children/young people at the level of public policy development
- The scope for seeking formal consent from children/young people
- Stages during a consultation process when children/young people should be afforded opportunities to re-affirm or withdraw their consent.
- Methods/mechanisms for seeking formal consent from parents/guardians and/or children/young people.

Confidentiality

- Careful consideration should be given to the status of public confidentiality as an ethical touchstone of good practice as regards consulting children/young people at the level of public policy development.
- If consensus is reached on its status as such, then awareness raising on the importance of public confidentiality is needed among all those involved in future consultations with children and young people in relation to public policy.
- It will be desirable to arrive at consensus on:
 - Who should have access to the identity of participating children/young people and/or their contributions where public confidentiality is being used
 - Whether children and young people should have the choice of whether information provided by them should be subject to public confidentiality.
- It will be important to explain to children/young people the rules that have been agreed about confidentiality in the context of a consultation they are participating in.
- Awareness raising is needed around the issue of network confidentiality.
- In light of *Children First* and *Our Duty to Care*, consensus is needed on whether mandatory reporting should be operational in the context of consulting children/young people about public policy developments affecting them.

Transparency

- Awareness raising is needed on:
- The kinds of information children/young people should be provided with
- When this information should be provided
- Formats in which to provide information to children/young people.

Equality and Inclusion

- It will be necessary to identify and provide for equitable approaches to inclusion at the levels of:
 - Access
 - Involvement
 - Outcome (treatment of children's and young people's views).
- In terms of providing for the equitable involvement of children/young people at risk of or experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion, careful thought must be given to whether it will be more appropriate to consult with them in integrated or segregated settings and how they might be enabled to contribute in an integrated setting. The findings of the focus groups with children and young people suggest that it will be desirable to negotiate the setting with children/young people themselves

Respect and Integrity

- Awareness raising is needed on ways of demonstrating respect to children and young people.
- It will be important to promote the importance of integrity and honesty at all stages of a consultation involving children and young people.

VI. Additional Planning Issues

6.1. DIRECT or INDIRECT CONSULTATION?

Literature Review Findings

Goal One of the *National Children's Strategy* refers briefly to the issue of direct/indirect consultation with children and young people:

"Opportunities for effective participation in decision-making can be either direct or mediated. It is important to take account of the age and capacity of children in designing specific measures and prioritising the need for direct participation."¹

It remains the case both in and beyond Ireland that most organisations representing the rights and interests of children/young people do not consult with them during the preparation of submissions on public policy proposals affecting children/young people. If a child-centred approach is to be taken to progressing consultation with children/young people, then the matter of direct and indirect consultation with them will need to be addressed. Moreover, it should be addressed not in terms of the "need" to consult them directly or indirectly, but in terms of the *appropriateness* of adopting one or the other approach in light of a given set of circumstances.

Survey Findings

Survey findings on the frequency and degree of consultation with children/young people suggest that work is needed to progress the direct and indirect involvement of children/young people at higher levels of decision-making. This is true of both the NGO and statutory sectors:

- 41% of voluntary organisations and 21% of statutory organisations 'most often' consult with children/young people at an 'operational' level
- At the 'managerial level', 17% of voluntary organisations and 35% of statutory organisations *never* consult with children/young people
- At the 'financial' level, 33% of voluntary organisations and 61% of statutory bodies *never* consult with children/young people at a 'financial' level
- 32% of voluntary organisations and 39% of statutory organisations *never* consult with children/young people at a 'political' level.

6.2. LEGAL and PROTECTION ISSUES

Literature Review Findings

The literature reviewed for this study did not yield information on or discussion of whether and, if so, what legal issues might arise in relation to consulting children and young people at the level of public policy development. However, it is the case in Ireland that, in the interests of child protection, direct work with children and young people is subject to increasingly stringent requirements and procedures, with organisations having to establish policies and practices to protect both children/young people and those who work with them. As such, it will be in the interests of future good practice for targeted research to be undertaken that clarifies the legal

² Government of Ireland, *Our Children – Their Lives: The National Children's Strategy* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 2000), p. 31.

implications of consultation with children/young people at the level of public policy development. Among the issues that this research might address are Garda clearance, mandatory reporting and insurance. Research of this kind will help to ensure that good practice in this area evolves in such a way that children's and young people's protection rights are not undermined by the advancement of their participation rights and, equally, that children's and young people's participation rights are not unnecessarily curtailed by efforts to safeguard their protection rights.

6.3. MAKING CONTACT

Literature Review Findings

Contact routes should be chosen that are safe for *and* acceptable to children and young people. Schools, for example, are likely to continue to be identified as safe routes for accessing potentially large numbers of children and young people. However, this route may not be acceptable to particular children/young people for one or more reasons, resulting in their unwillingness to participate or inability to participate to the best of their ability. A second issue with regard to making contact is that adults can act as gatekeepers and for reasons that may not be bound up first and foremost with a concern for the best interests of the children/young people in their care.

Interview Findings

One interviewee spoke directly to the issue of adults acting as gatekeepers. Her account suggests that, in addressing this issue, it will be advisable not to preclude the possibility that even those adults whose professional roles entail the empowerment of children/young people may act as gatekeepers.

"We would have tried to consult with children ... One of the difficulties is that we would have called a consultation meeting around youth, sent out a notice to youth clubs and things like that. And the leaders came. And they never brought the children... I really don't know, but my feeling is that maybe the youth workers were afraid ... they were being undermined" – Community and Enterprise Development Officer with a Local Authority

Focus Group Findings

Participants named the following as possible contact routes:

- Community-based services attended by children and young people
- School
- Home, through parents/guardians
- Public advertisements
- Internet and email.

Participants were divided on the status of schools as a good contact route. Reasons given both for and against contacting children/young people through schools were as follows:

Schools 'good'

- It makes sense at second level in light of the CSPE course.
- Most children and young people attend school.
- It is a good contact point so long as potential participants are not selected by the school authorities (principals and/or teachers).

Schools ‘not good’/‘bad’

- “...it would disrupt our school work”
- One group of young Travellers did not like the idea of contact being made with them through their schools if this would entail their being requested to participate in a consultation within a mixed school/classroom setting. With one exception, all participants in a second focus group with young Travellers did not identify school as a ‘good’ contact point either.

A significant majority of participants (51 out of 62) expressed a preference for being invited to participate in a consultation on an individual basis. Reasons given were:

- It makes you feel important and special
- It helps to ensure that you and your parents/guardians receive the necessary information
- It is more exciting to receive an individual invitation
- It is nice to get something addressed to you in the post.

Implications and Recommendations

Direct and indirect consultation

- In the interests of good practice consideration should be given to:
 - When and on what grounds it will be more appropriate to consult with children/young people directly or indirectly in relation to public policy development
 - When and on what grounds it may be more appropriate to consult only with relevant representative organisations
 - Whether efforts can and ought to be made to ascertain that a decision by policy-makers and/or organisations not to consult with children/young people directly has been made in good faith
 - In cases of mediated consultation with children/young people, how to assist organisations with ensuring that they act both faithfully and strategically in their presentation of young voices and viewpoints
 - How to quantitatively and qualitatively increase opportunities for the direct and indirect involvement of children/young people in decision-making relating to public policy development.

Legal and protection issues

- Research is needed on how best to respond to legal and protection issues arising in relation to consultation with children/young people at the level of public policy development in Ireland. Among the issues this piece of research should address are: Garda clearance, mandatory reporting and insurance. Subject to their approval at macro-level, guidelines should be disseminated to all relevant organisations.

Making contact with children and young people

- In the interests of good practice, the following actions should be taken in relation to making contact with children/young people:
 - Raise awareness among relevant public policy-makers of the importance of using contact routes that are safe for *and* acceptable to children/young people
 - Raise awareness of the fact that adults can act as gatekeepers and develop and implement a preventive plan to combat this issue in the medium- to long-term
 - Identify when it will be appropriate to issue individual or, alternatively, group invitations to children and young people
 - Consider how invitations might best be delivered and what steps ought to be taken prior to doing so – for example, giving prior notification to and/or seeking prior consent from parents/guardians.

VII. Implementation Issues

7.1. WHAT?

Literature Review Findings

Children and young people in and beyond Ireland are increasingly being afforded opportunities to be consulted on a diverse range of **issues**, including at the level of public policy. These include core issues affecting them such as education, health, housing, youth employment, play and leisure, the protection of children's rights and human rights, bullying, corporal punishment and the environment. Within this and the Irish context, a small number of opportunities have been created for children and young people experiencing poverty or other forms of social exclusion to contribute to public policy initiatives aimed at combating aspects of poverty and social exclusion that affect them – for example, educational disadvantage, early school leaving and youth homelessness.

As regards **levels** of decision-making, children and young people are most often heard at micro levels of decision-making such as organisations' internal decision-making relating to service provision. Consultation with them at a macro level and in relation to relevant public policy developments remains in its infancy in Ireland.

In terms of the **stages** of a consultation process at which children and young people might be involved, the literature suggests that existing opportunities conform to a commonly held understanding of what consultation means: children and young people are not typically involved in the formulation, design and planning stages of consultations and not necessarily involved in the evaluation stage. However, the literature consistently argues that it will be in the interests of good practice and meaningful outcomes to involve participating children and young people in as many stages of the process as possible.

Survey findings

As regards the levels of decision-making at which children and young people are involved, the survey findings confirm evidence gathered during the literature review:

- Children and young people are most likely to be consulted in relation to internal, operational decision-making
- Children and young people are least likely to be consulted or consulted as a matter of course at higher levels of decision-making, including those levels at which organisations are likely to formulate their contributions to public policy development.

In relation to the stages of consultation, survey findings relating to evaluation are as follows:

- 71% of responding organisations have not yet evaluated the involvement of children/young people in their decision-making/policy-making
- Of the 29% which indicated that they had evaluated children's/young people's involvement in their decision-making/policy-making, 33% indicated that participating children/young people had been involved in the evaluations.

Interview Findings

Interviewees named several areas of public policy and service provision about which children and young people should be consulted:

- Health (children and young people generally)
- Education, including policy-making within schools (children and young people generally)
- Housing (children and young people generally)
- Play, recreation and the arts (children and young people generally)
- Anti-racism, multi-culturalism and inter-culturalism (children and young people generally)
- “Youth policies” (children and young people generally)
- Policy and service provision at local level (children and young people generally)
- Policies and services aimed at combating poverty at local and national level (children and young people experiencing poverty/socio-economic disadvantage)
- Policy and services aimed at combating youth homelessness (children and young people out of home)
- Policy and services focused on the Traveller community (young Travellers).

“Start consulting broader than children’s issues ... so that public policy-makers ... begin to see issues as being relevant to children even though they’re not children’s issues” – Representative of the voluntary youth sector

“I think that they could make a very meaningful contribution at all levels and across all of the different ranges of themes that we’d look at. I don’t think there’s anything that children couldn’t make some kind of comment on” – Community and Enterprise Development Officer with a Local Authority

As regards levels of decision-making, interviewees felt that children and young people could make a meaningful contribution at the level of public policy. In stating as much, they underscored the importance of adults:

- Enabling children and young people to make their contributions
- Being both faithful and strategic in their presentation of children’s/young people’s contributions.

A number of interviewees suggested that their contributions would be especially germane in relation to public policy developments affecting them at local level.

“I think the most important ... consultation with children and young people is about what happens at local level. Because that’s where they live their lives ... I think their expectations of what they get from a local level consultation should be greater” – Public policy-maker at national level

7.2. WHERE?

Literature Review Findings

Consultation with children and young people is taking place in a diverse range of settings, which can be classified in the following generic terms: formal and informal settings; central and local settings (in geographical terms); settings that are familiar and unfamiliar to participating children/young people; real and virtual (online) settings. In deciding on the venue/setting for a given consultation, it will be important to bear in mind that pros and cons are likely to arise in relation to each option. In the interests of good practice, venues/settings should be chosen that are accessible and acceptable to participating children and young people.

Focus Group Findings

A significant majority of participants in the focus groups (52 out of 62) expressed a preference for face-to-face consultation. According to them, face-to-face consultation:

- Promotes participants' trust in the process
- Ensures that participants' outstanding queries about the consultation can be addressed
- Enhances the quality of participants' contributions
- Helps to ensure privacy/public confidentiality
- Is likely to be taken more seriously by children/young people and suggests to them that the organisers are taking the consultation seriously too
- Satisfies children's/young people's curiosity to know more about the person/people seeking their views

A majority of participants who articulated a preference regarding the familiarity/unfamiliarity of the venue/setting said that they would prefer to be consulted at a venue they know.

Most participants (41 out of 62) were able to identify a 'best place' to consult with them. Community-based services/settings attended by children and young people were those most frequently identified as the 'best place'. These venues/settings included youth clubs, family centres, community centres and leisure centres.

When asked to characterise the look and feel of a 'good place' to consult with them, participants consistently used terms that conjured an environment that is welcoming, informal, comfortable and enabling for children and young people.

7.3. WHEN?

Survey Findings

The majority of responding organisations consult with children/young people in relation to organisational decision-making 'routinely, as required' or 'as part of their everyday work'. That this is the case suggests that statutory agencies and NGOs are beginning to recognise children/young people as stakeholders and have the capacity to create the conditions necessary for children's/young people's involvement in higher levels of decision-making.

Interview Findings

In identifying time as a key resource issue, interviewees tended to stress the lack of time available to policy-makers and practitioners in light of their existing responsibilities. The three interviewees who injected a child-centred dimension to their comments on this issue suggested that the timing of consultation with children/young people would need to:

- take account of children's/young people's schedules
- be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the unpredictable and at times chaotic nature of some children's/young people's lives
- be strategic with efforts made not to over-consult so as to avoid the onset of consultation fatigue.

"You couldn't just set a time and an agenda ... With this group of young people it won't work like that. And it shouldn't be expected to ... [I]t definitely won't go according to plan" – Practitioner working with young people out of home

Focus Group Findings

Participants' responses to a question concerning the timing of consultation with them were characterised by their specificity. This defining feature underscores that, like policy-makers and

practitioners, children and young people:

- Lead busy daily lives
- Would like this to be recognised
- Have their own priorities and would like consultation with them to be timed to take account of this.

This finding suggests that the development of good practice and securing children's/young people's involvement will benefit from efforts to ensure that consultation is timed to accommodate the schedules of both the adults and children/young people concerned.

7.4. WHO?

Interview Findings

The literature reviewed for this study suggests that facilitation is a key consideration in consultation with children and young people. However, the literature said little about what/who makes for a good facilitator. Like survey respondents, interviewees' recognised the importance of facilitation. They suggested that a good facilitator would:

- Have good emotional skills
- Have a capacity to understand how children/young people think, understand and interpret the world around them
- Know something about the experiences, capacities and communication skills of the children/young people they are facilitating.

Interviewees were, however, divided in their views on whether it would be more enabling for children/young people to be consulted by a person they know or by an independent 'outsider'.

Focus Group Findings

When asked to describe the kind of person they would be happy to share their views and ideas on a particular issue with, participants used terms and phrases which, taken together, characterise a good facilitator as someone who is respectful, a good listener, friendly, informal, trustworthy, playful, non-judgemental, competent in their role, and older than the children/young people s/he is consulting. A majority of participants articulated a preference for having one or more adults who they already know present to assist with a consultation they are involved in.

7.5. HOW?

Literature Review Findings

A wide range of methodologies are being used to consult with children/young people. These include: discussion fora, self-completion questionnaires, one-to-one interviews, drama, arts and crafts, photography, video-making, written submissions (letters, emails, etc.), story-writing and telling, poetry, and games. In terms of selecting methodologies, the literature suggests that:

- There are likely to be advantages and disadvantages to most methodologies, with good practice and successful outcomes best served by selecting a method or methods that first and foremost accommodate the needs and skills of the child/young person being consulted
- Where possible, a range of methodologies should be used. Certain methodologies work especially well at a given stage of a consultation and different methods can complement each other because they elicit different kinds of information.

As regards methods of asking questions, the literature suggests that, while closed questions facilitate the collection of hard data, children and young people should be:

- Reassured that they do not have to answer 'yes' or 'no' to a given question
- Encouraged to give reasons for their answers
- Asked open, non-directive questions as well
- Afforded opportunities to ask their own questions and raise issues of interest/concern to them.

Survey Findings

Notable findings from the survey in relation to methodologies are:

- All responding organisations to have used children's/youth fora and activity-based workshops identified these as effective methods.
- 63% of organisations to have used online settings found these effective (63%). That a significant minority of responding organisations (37%) found online settings ineffective raises the question of whether this mechanism can work on a stand alone basis and, furthermore, whether and, if so, how it might be developed to be more effective and inclusive.
- 84% of responding organisations identified committee meetings as effective.

The fact that these methods were deemed effective and that some organisations registered dissatisfaction with 'surveys' and 'email' suggests that methods involving a hands-on, face-to-face approach are preferable.

Interview Findings

Interviewees' recognised the importance of selecting methodologies appropriate to the ages and capacities of participating children/young people. A number of interviewees also underscored the importance of presenting themes and asking questions in terms that are relevant to and understood by children/young people and that do not lead them towards particular answers.

"It's about breaking down ... issues ... You're not going to ask young people to do a submission on how they think ... hospitals can better cater for the needs of the population ... But you can say: 'When you're in a waiting room in a hospital, what would you like to see around it? What annoys you about it? What makes you cross about it?' And you can say about housing to a Traveller child or to somebody in council housing ... 'What do you need?' ... They can make a meaningful contribution if we ask them questions in a meaningful way" – *Representative of the voluntary youth sector*

"Another issue is around how you elicit children's opinions without directing them ... That struck me as being one of the major problems ... They'll respond to what you ask them, but is that what they wanted to say?" – *Public policy-maker at national level*

Focus Group Findings

Participants consistently identified one or more of the following media of self-expression as methods through which they would enjoy and feel able to express their views:

- Talking (one-to-one, in small groups, in large groups)
- Writing
- Creative writing (stories, poems)
- Drama
- Singing
- Dancing

- Arts and crafts (painting, drawing, model-making, sculpture, video-making, etc.)
- Games, including sporting activities.

Given a tendency on the part of adults to assume that it is preferable to use creative methodologies must be used with children/young people, it was interesting to find that many participants were quite comfortable with the idea of communicating simply by talking.

Almost 50% of participants suggested that consultation should be an enjoyable experience with some arguing that this would be especially important in the case of consultation with younger children. Among their suggestions for what can make consultation enjoyable were:

- Certain methodologies – art, drama, music
- A “nice” facilitator with a good sense of humour
- Good refreshments
- Sufficient breaks
- Games
- A chance to meet new people
- A playful, friendly, relaxing atmosphere
- Not asking too many questions and not making the consultation too long.

Implications and Recommendations

What?

- There is a need to:
 - Raise awareness among *all* agencies whose work impacts on children/young people that children/young people are among their constituents and should be consulted
 - Enhance the number of opportunities for children and young people to be consulted in relation to issues affecting them
 - Promote and support children’s and young people’s meaningful involvement in public policy development at both national and local level
 - Promote children’s and young people’s involvement at all stages of the consultation process, from formulation through to evaluation.

Where?

- A diverse range of settings is being used to consult with children and young people. Advantages and disadvantages are likely to arise in relation to most settings. In selecting a setting, it will be important to ensure that it is supportive of children’s and young people’s involvement by being accessible to them, acceptable to them and accommodating of their needs and capacities. The findings suggest that face-to-face consultation can be more effective and that child-friendly settings should be used.

When?

- The findings from the focus groups with children and young people underscore that, like adult professionals, children and young people lead busy daily lives, would like this to be recognised and to have consultations timed to accommodate other priorities they will have.
- Children and young people can develop ‘consultation fatigue’ from being consulted too often, particularly when they are asked to participate in one-off, unrelated consultations. Those seeking to consult with children and young people should be strategic in identifying when it will be most important to consult with them. The risk of children/young people developing consultation fatigue will be further offset by structurally embedding consultation with them in relevant public policy development processes and by integrating consultation with them into existing activities (e.g. youth work activities).

Who facilitates?

- While the importance of appropriate facilitation is widely acknowledged, there is no conclusive evidence on who makes for a good facilitator. However, the findings of the focus groups with children and young people suggest that a good facilitator will be: respectful, a good listener, friendly, informal, trustworthy, playful, non-judgemental, competent in their role and older than the children and young people s/he is consulting. In addition, the findings of the focus groups suggest that children/young people are likely to welcome the presence at a consultation they are involved in of an adult they know.

How?

- Due consideration needs to be given to the manner in which issues are identified to and questions phrased for children and young people. A non-directive approach is recommended. Children/young people should also be enabled to ask questions and raise issues that are of interest and concern to them.
- A diverse range of methods can and are being used. Pros and cons are likely to arise in relation to each method. In identifying the methodology/methodologies to be used, the ages and capacities of the children/young people concerned should be the principal consideration. It is also recommended that, where possible, a range of complementary methodologies be used.

VIII. Feedback and Evaluation

8.1. FEEDBACK

Literature Review Findings

The literature emphasises the importance of providing feedback to children/young people, frequently stressing the following points:

- Children's/young people's conception of whether or not a consultation they have participated in will have been meaningful will be determined in no small measure by whether or not they receive feedback.
- Feedback must be provided in a timely fashion. In the case of public policy development, participants should be made aware that the process can be slow, of its prospective duration and receive interim feedback routinely as well as feedback when outcomes of the process are known.

Children and young people might expect to receive feedback on:

- The findings of the consultation with them and other stakeholders
- How their views and ideas have been received
- How their views have informed resulting decisions and actions.

Feedback should be provided in language and formats that are accessible to the children/young people. While it is not essential to provide them with full reports or equivalent documents, receipt of these can be appreciated. Where possible, feedback should be sent directly to the children/young people concerned rather than through intermediaries such as teachers, youth workers or parents/guardians.

Interview Findings

The status of feedback provision as a cornerstone of good practice was reinforced by several interviewees. One interviewee suggested that organisations/individuals responsible for its future provision will benefit from advice on producing accessible feedback.

"It's feedback. It's so important. They need to see that what they've said, that it's gone somewhere, ... that it's not just being left" – Health Board Practitioner

"Agencies are going to have to get their heads round how information is disseminated because obviously it needs to be disseminated in a different way for children ... And maybe that is by training somebody up to go out and articulate information in a very clear, meaningful way for children" – Community and Enterprise Development Officer with a Local Authority

Focus Group Findings

The importance of receiving feedback was unequivocally affirmed by participants. They also confirmed that failure to provide it is likely to be interpreted by children/young people as evidence of having been involved in a tokenistic exercise.

Feedback is important because ...

- “... then you know why you done it and you know what the people you done it for got out of it”
- “... you want to know what happened with what you said, ... what happened with everything”

Participants made the following suggestions on what children/young people should receive feedback on:

- How and where the project in question is going
- How useful children’s/young people’s contributions have proven to be
- How children’s/young people’s contributions have been used
- What other participating children/young people had to say
- The overall outcome of the initiative.

Letters, face-to-face meetings and email were identified as acceptable formats for feedback.

8.2. EVALUATION

Literature Review Findings

The literature posits evaluation as an essential part of any consultation with children and young people. However, it also reveals that it is far from being a given of consultation with children and young people. Low levels of evaluation mean that valuable learning is being lost and thus the scope for developing good practice curtailed. The literature offers consensus on the need to involve participating children/young people in the evaluation process and to use evaluation formats that are appropriate to their ages and capacities.

Survey Findings

Key survey findings with regard to evaluation are:

- 71% of responding organisations have not yet evaluated the involvement of children/young people in their decision-making/policy-making.
- More voluntary organisations are likely to engage in a process of evaluation than statutory organisations.
- Of the 29% of organisations which indicated that they had evaluated children’s/young people’s involvement in their decision-making/policy-making, 33% stated that children/young people had participated in the evaluation process.

Interview Findings

Reinforcing a point that arises in the literature, one of three interviewees to stress the importance of evaluation suggested that a monitoring and reporting process be established that requires organisations to evaluate and submit regular reports on what they are doing to progress work in the area of consultation with children and young people, including in relation to public policy development:

“Agencies should have to report on the nature and level of consultation they’ve undertaken, ... what mechanisms they’ve used ... To make sure that children’s voices are heard, ... people should have to demonstrate very clearly where they’ve used children’s fora to input ... The reality is, if you want it to happen, tabs are going to have to be kept to make sure that it is happening” – *Community and Enterprise Development Officer with a Local Authority*

Focus Group Findings

A very significant majority of participants indicated that they would like to be involved in evaluating a consultation they had participated in. Among the reasons given was that children's/young people's evaluations would assist organisations with identifying how they might improve their work in this area. Of the participants who expressed a view on the timing of evaluation, most articulated a preference for doing an evaluation immediately after a consultation. As regards formats, one or more of the following formats were consistently named:

- Self-completion questionnaire with open and/or closed questions
- Letter or equivalent 'blank page' approach
- Face-to-face conversation.

Implications and Recommendations

Feedback

- The provision of feedback in a timely fashion and in formats that accommodate the different ages and capacities of children and young people is a cornerstone of good practice. Providing feedback will serve to demonstrate to the children and young people concerned that they have been involved in a meaningful process.
- Feedback ought to include the following information:
 - Key findings arising from the consultation with the children/young people concerned as well as with any other stakeholders
 - How the children's/young people's views have been received
 - How, if at all, their views and ideas have informed resulting decisions and actions
 - The overall outcome of the initiative children/young people have been consulted about.
- Awareness of the importance of providing feedback needs to be raised among relevant organisations and individuals, in particular public policy-makers.
- Organisations may need support in developing accessible feedback for children and young people.

Evaluation

- The importance of evaluation needs to be impressed upon relevant organisations and they should be adequately resourced to undertake it.
- Involving children and young people in evaluation is a function of good practice. It will help to ensure that consultation with them is improved and to identify the added value that children/young people can bring to public policy-making.
- The findings of the focus groups with children and young people suggest that evaluations involving them should occur, where possible, immediately after the consultation has taken place. Furthermore, where possible, the formats should be negotiated with the children and young people concerned since they are likely to have preferences as regards the use of a 'blank page' or a more directive approach.
- A monitoring, reporting and dissemination process should be established at national level to encourage consultation with children/young people by relevant organisations and to ensure that key lessons arising from such work are shared.

IX. Conclusion

The time is ripe for embarking on the project of structurally embedding children's and young people's voices in relevant public policy-making processes at national and local level in Ireland:

- Consultation with civil society, including in relation to poverty and social exclusion issues, is an established function of public policy-making in Ireland
- 21 September 2002 marks the tenth anniversary of Ireland's ratification of *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Article 12 of this Convention posits children's right to have a say and be heard in relation to decision-making processes affecting them.
- Goal One of the *National Children's Strategy* establishes hearing young voices as a matter of national public policy. The new structures created under the auspices of the *Strategy* provide a framework for a coordinated and systematic approach to the implementation of Goal One.
- Opportunities have been created prior and subsequent to the launch of the *National Children's Strategy* (2000) for children and young people to be heard in relation to a range of public policy issues affecting them. Within this, a small number of opportunities have been created to enable children/young people experiencing poverty and social exclusion to contribute their views to the development of relevant policies and services.

Notwithstanding these developments, the practice of hearing children's and young people's voices remains in its infancy in Ireland. The key to ensuring that meaningful, inclusive and sustainable opportunities are created for *all* children and young people to be heard in relation to public policy developments affecting them will be effective management of the process at a macro level. The National Children's Office and the National Children's Advisory Council have a lead role to play in this regard. Additional key players at a macro level will include parent Government Departments, County and City Development Boards and national/umbrella NGOs working with and/or on behalf of children and young people, including those experiencing or at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In the first instance, these actors can support the development of good practice by:

- Promoting awareness among all relevant statutory agencies and NGOs at national and local level of the direct or indirect impacts of their work on children/young people and thus of children's/young people's status as 'customers' who have a right to be consulted by them
- Adopting a non-prescriptive approach to supporting agencies in their efforts to consult with children and young people in a manner that is in keeping with good practice
- Establishing a monitoring and reporting process that ensures emerging lessons are documented and shared.

Next Steps: What Policy-Makers and Practitioners Say

Policy-makers and practitioners surveyed and interviewed for this study were asked to identify priority measures for advancing the quantity and quality of opportunities for children/young people to be heard. They were requested to take particular account of:

- Children and young people experiencing poverty/social exclusion
- Consultation with children/young people at the level of public policy development.

As can be seen from the list below, the measures identified by them are consistent with the recommendations arising from the research findings that have been presented in preceding chapters of this report.

- Raise awareness among relevant organisations of the provisions of Goal One of the National Children's Strategy.
- Enable public policy-makers to recognise public policy issues that may not be children's issues as being relevant to children and young people.
- Ensure that consultation with children and young people remains on the public policy agenda and is placed on the agendas of relevant organisations at national, regional and local level.
- Promote the creation within relevant organisations of a culture and ethos that enables children's and young people's voices to be heard.
- Provide at a macro level for the proper management of the implementation of Goal One.
- Provide information to practitioners on a regular basis on how they can contribute to the implementation of different stages and aspects of Goal One of the National Children's Strategy.
- Educate people in such a way as to alleviate anxieties they might have about whether and/or how to consult with children and young people.
- Provide training to relevant staff to equip them with the necessary skills to facilitate consultation with children and young people.
- Provide children and young people with the support and skills they need to participate in consultation to the best of their ability.
- Adequately resource consultation with children and young people by providing the necessary funds and personnel.
- Identify and arrive at consensus on fundamental principles that should underlie consultation with children and young people.
- Develop and disseminate guidelines on good practice for consulting children and young people.
- Enhance understanding of diversity and how it might best be engaged with and ensure that organisations have an anti-racism policy in place so that children and young people from cultural/ethnic minorities are not excluded from consultation.
- Promote the importance of planning, feedback and evaluation as cornerstones and functions of good practice with regard to consultation.
- Require of organisations that they develop codes of practice that facilitate accountability and transparency in relation to consultation with children and young people.
- Provide for an equitable and inclusive approach to consultation with children and young people that will ensure that children and young people experiencing poverty and other forms of social exclusion are involved.
- Establish a monitoring and reporting process that requires relevant organisations to submit regular reports on work that they have done in relation to consultation with children and young people.
- Use the sectoral experience to facilitate a cross-sectoral approach to consultation with children and young people, one that entails coordination and cooperation between relevant organisations.

Two broader measures were also identified as being advantageous to enhancing the scope for consultation with children and young people:

- Enhance transparency with regard to the policy-making process at local and national level in Ireland so that practitioners on the ground and children and young people have a better understanding of how this process operates.
- Promote improved communication and cooperation within and between relevant agencies and enhance professionals' awareness of each other's roles and how they are linked.

