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one of the fundamental principles. Although children in the UK do have a responsibility to take account of legislation.¹

while also recognising the evolving capacities of children and their right to have a say in decisions affecting them.

Promoting participation

In an article on children's participation in education, Professor Lundy proposes a new model for conceptualising article 12, outlining four separate factors – Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence.⁸

Space:

Children must be given the opportunity to express a view. This involves recognition of children's right to express their views and the need to reflect this in structures, legislation, policies and procedures.

Voice:

Children must be facilitated to express their views. Appropriate information must be provided and children supported to develop and express their views. This is particularly the case for younger children and those who are marginalised or vulnerable.

Audience:

The view must be listened to. The context in which a child exercises his or her right to be heard should be enabling and encouraging, so that the child may be confident that the decision-makers will listen and seriously consider the views expressed.

Influence:

The view must be acted on as appropriate. The decision-maker has to inform the child of the outcome of the process and how his or her views were considered. Children should be able to appeal or file a complaint if they wish to challenge the decision.

1. Government should continue to develop strategic approaches to participation ensuring that all Government departments and public bodies establish structures to consult with and include the views of children.

Since devolution there has been an increased commitment to establishing structures for participation, including the Network for Youth, and NI Youth Assembly. These are to be welcomed – but will require skillful facilitation to ensure that children from a range of backgrounds are supported to formulate and express their views. Moreover, they will require commitment from decision-makers to both listen to and take into account the views expressed.

We recognise the commitment by a number of Government departments to develop a policy on children and young people's participation and encourage the Executive to formalise this as standard practice across all departments. Decision-makers are also supported to engage with children through the establishment of the Participation Network in 2007, funded by OFMdFM.

However, despite these developments, and the apparent guarantee in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that children will be consulted, the realisation of article 12 has been limited. There are few examples of quality participation by children in Government decision making – or evidence that their participation truly influences policy development.

A comprehensive audit of children and young people's participation is required to benchmark current activity and to measure future improvement. Child friendly versions of documents – especially consultation documents – must be produced. Furthermore, engagement cannot be limited to just young people, but should be extended to younger children, and those who are particularly marginalised.

Duty bearers: All Government departments, agencies and public bodies.