

STATEMENT ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S RESOURCE PACK



PARTICIPATION

What does the UNCRC say?

Article 12: Respect for children's views

Children and young people have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children and young people seriously.

Article 13: Sharing thoughts freely

Children and young people have the right to share freely with others what they learn, think and feel, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms other people.

Articles 14 (Freedom of thought and religion), 15 (Setting up or joining groups), 17 (Access to information)

are also important to children and young people's right to have a say in decisions that affect them.

What does the UNCRC Committee say?

You have the right for your views to be listened to, and to be respected when decisions are being made that affect you.

- The government should introduce programmes so your voice is heard. They should consider your views when making laws, policies, plans and services.
- They should listen to your views when making all decisions, including on

discrimination, violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, the care system, sexual education, leisure and play, and any other issues that affect you. They should work hard to involve younger children, and those who may face particular barriers or problems, for example children with disabilities.

- The government should discuss with you what could happen if they change the way legal cases are funded in Northern Ireland. They should make sure that these changes will not make it more difficult for you to get justice when you are being treated unfairly.
- The government should establish a Youth Parliament in Northern Ireland to advise them on important issues affecting children and young people.
- They should make sure that children should not only be heard, but listened to. Your views should be taken into account by professionals (e.g., teachers, doctors, nurses, etc.) who work with you.
- The government should listen to your views on whether the voting age should be lowered from 18 to 16. If the voting age is lowered, the government should make sure you are provided with the education and support you need to decide for yourself who you want to vote for.



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CAMPAIGN RESOURCE

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PARTICIPATION



What's the situation in NI?

“Working together means.... Government Departments actively listening to the voice of children and young people, parents and guardians and stakeholders when considering children and young people’s issues.”

The UNCRC is clear that children and young people should have a say in decisions that affect them now, not just when they are adults. This is important because they are experts on their own experience and can help make better decisions.

At the moment because of Coronavirus, lots of the usual places where children and young people can have their voices heard (e.g., school councils and youth groups) are not running as normal so Government need to make sure that they find other ways to listen to the opinions of children and young people and feed back to them about why decisions are made.

In 2018 we asked the government to:

1. Listen to children and young people’s views and think about how to use this information to create change and track how their opinions make a difference in decision-making;
2. Make plans for children and young people’s voices to be heard in their local areas and link this in to Northern Ireland wide structures such as a Youth Assembly; and
3. Check how well they are doing at participation across time.

So how is NI doing at Participation?

Even though the Northern Ireland Assembly wasn’t running for a long time there have still been some positive developments in making sure children and young people are included in decision-making.

The Children and Young People’s Strategy is a Government plan to make sure all children and young people can enjoy their rights and be supported to grow up safe and well. To help them with this, the Government has started a Participation in Decision Making Initiative that will make sure that all decision makers find out what children think to help them make decisions about things like education, health, environment and safety. The Assembly Commission has also put plans in place for a Northern Ireland Youth Assembly that will make sure children and young people’s voices are heard and taken seriously at Stormont when they are developing new laws.



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Through local councils NICCY has been working with Community Planning teams to make sure they know how to involve children and young people in decision making in their own communities. This could help influence decisions made at council level about things like parks and leisure centres. There are some other good examples of good participation in health, education and family courts.

It is good to see some progress in plans for participative structures that will make children and young people's voices heard in decisions made at local and NI Government and that these opportunities will be linked to make sure information gets to the right people. It is important that this is followed up with proper feedback showing how their opinions have been taken in to account. The Department of Education and Assembly Commission should work together to make sure the Youth Assembly and Participation in Decision Making Initiative are linked well to each other and to local participation forums in councils and schools.

We are sorry to see that the Department of Education still doesn't tell schools that they must involve pupils in decision making in the school, even though NICCY and the UN Committee have said they should. More work is needed to make sure that pupil participation is meaningful and really help pupils have a say in their school life.

Our recommendations to Government:

1. **Prioritise participation of children and young people by having good plans and training in place.**
2. **Make sure the *Participation in Decision Making Initiative* has support from all public bodies and provides opportunities for children and young people to have a say in all areas of their lives.**
3. **Make sure Government Departments and public bodies are properly trained to find out what children and young people think, put their ideas in place, feedback to those involved and report on how they are doing.**
4. **The Department of Education should make sure all schools have a meaningful school council or forum and make sure children's rights is taught in all schools.**