

Reaching In Practice Note: Overcoming the challenges to ensure inclusive children's participation in public decision making

November 2022

This document shares professionals' perspectives on twelve challenges to inclusive and impactful children's participation. Strategies for overcoming eleven of these are included in this document. A separate document address the complexity of decision making processes.

The document has been developed through Reaching In. A project with Eurochild, Eurochild members, FAGiC, FPPC, NNC, other NGOs working with Roma children and families, and the Universitat in an initiative led by the University of Central Lancashire. We are collaborating to strengthen opportunities for marginalised children's participation in public decision making.

We have conducted practice exchanges and pilot activities focused on opportunities for influence. The pilot work concentrates the Child Guarantee and works with Roma children and children with experience of alternative care or migration.

What are the challenges?

The twelve key challenges we have identified:

- Challenge 1. Stigma, structural discrimination and marginalisation
- Challenge 2. Building trusting relationships
- Challenge 3. Accessible information/ language
- Challenge 4. Creating enabling environments – possible, safe and worth it
- Challenge 5. Timescales that enable children in vulnerable situations to take a lead
- Challenge 6. Securing appropriate consent
- Challenge 7. Raising awareness of discrimination and of rights
- Challenge 8. Effective, credible and creative methods
- Challenge 9. Transparency about meaning, limits and opportunities of participation
- Challenge 10. Evaluating over longer timescales
- Challenge 11: Lack of investment in participation responding to the pandemic
- Challenge 12: Complexity of public decision making processes

Short term tactics and long-term strategies are needed to create conditions in which it is possible for all children to have the freedom to choose whether to participate in public decision making. This is because some of the barriers to children's participation are caused by current actions or inaction and other barriers are the result of long standing economic, social and health inequalities.

Strategies for Overcoming the Challenges

Challenge 1. Stigma, structural discrimination and marginalisation

Children's participation can be strengthened by:

- **Provision of tools, equipment, relationship and services that ensure all children can connect with schools where their identities are respected and can access education.** This is doubly important when participation opportunities are offered through schools.
- **Accessible and relevant health services that promote the best possible health for children and their families.** This makes it possible for children to take part and may reduce the caring responsibilities that children carry in families experiencing poor health.
- **Adequate family incomes and housing.** This ensures that children are living in conditions where they are more likely to have the energy, time and environments that enable choices to participate.
- **Promoting positive awareness of Roma and other marginalised groups and challenging all Anti-Gypsyism and other forms of discrimination that are present in political, media and popular discourse.** This can include, for example, challenging Anti-Gypsyism in schools and stereotypes about disabilities.
- **Building a critical mass.** This means linking up with children and young people, families and communities and other people who can help bring about short-term gains and the long-term changes that are needed.
- **Co-working with marginalised children and families to raise awareness through campaigns, community events, self-advocacy activities about equal rights for all.**
- **A national strategy for participation in public decisions.**
- **A plan for hearing seldom heard children**

Challenge 2. Building trusting relationships

Children's participation can be strengthened by:

- **Build understanding in the organisations that you are trying to influence.** This can include encouraging them to reflect on their practice, to show how they have challenged their own discriminatory attitudes and to demonstrate how they have responded positively to community suggestions for improvements.
- **Build relationships with parents and ensure that they have opportunities to influence public decisions.** This may help build a family and community confidence in organisations inviting and facilitating children's participation. **Train children and families to gain presentation and leadership skills to advocate for themselves.**
- **Identify past organisational failures, and seek ways of building bridges to overcome these.**
- **Bring people together informally, through music, food and other cultural activities, to build informal relationships.**
- **Work with agencies who already have positive relationships with the children, families and communities that you are trying to reach.**
- **Provide needed services and advocacy not just participation activities.** This can ensure that immediate needs are met and promotes safety by making sure someone is available to support with any issues that arise.

Challenge 3. Accessible information/ language

Children's participation can be strengthened by:

- **Workers knowing about the opportunities for influence**
- **Using children's own native languages when chatting online and creating the national level participation spaces in which this is possible.**
- **Using language and concepts that relate to children's everyday life, and working from these to connect to more abstract ideas in ways that are meaningful.**
- **Work with people who know the children you are working with, as they will know how to facilitate understanding.**
- **Work with other children to cocreate any information, to make sure that it is more understandable and relevant.**
- **Communicate using a variety of media and platforms.**
- **Ensure that all materials meet European accessibility standards.**
- **Finding out about children's concerns, and making information and resources in response to that**
- **Trainings for professionals how to prepare an easy-read format materials/guidance for children with diverse learning difficulties and intellectual impairments.**

Challenge 4. Creating enabling environments – possible, safe and worth it

Children's participation can be strengthened by:

- **Build trusting relationships as described above.**
- **With children, develop and implement national participation strategies**
- **Prepare decision makers with briefing information about all activities, and about specific needs of the children they are meeting with.**
- **Build alliances and opportunities for communication so that political institutions and children can come together to find solutions to concerns that they share.**
- **Connect informal participatory spaces with formal spaces where these are present.** For example invite children who are engaged in leisure activities to visit the city council or parliament and to share their ideas with individual politicians who have shown a commitment to listening.
- **Fund activities at grassroots levels so that children can develop an informed view and grow their confidence in advocacy.** Supporting the most marginalised children to believe in the relevance of policy making takes time, money and dedication.
- **Support peer to peer mentoring by children.** Supporting the transformation of informal peer relations into semi-formal mentoring, in order that more successful (resource-rich) peers can actively share their experience with other, while others may offer care and emotional support for her/him. (Mind that formalising mentoring roles may put burden on older, more experienced, more resourceful peers)
- **Linking identity to success.** Provide information about and opportunities to meet successful individuals and movements from children's communities and heritages, to build their recognition of their strengths and to connect them with inspirational examples; provide opportunities to meet and establish personal relationships and transform these opportunities to possible mentoring relationships. **Role models;**
See also Council of Europe Handbook Section 2: <https://rm.coe.int/publication-handbook-on-children-s-participation-eng/1680a14539>

- **Creating safe online platforms for effective participation** (with agreed Code of Conduct for children and adults involved) **and funding for grassroot organisations to engage with this.**

Challenge 5. Timescales that enable children in vulnerable situations to lead

Children's participation can be strengthened by:

- **Allowing at least as long for children to share their views as the time allowed for adults.**
- **Provide long term support for organisations working with children in vulnerable situations.** This will help children in contact with these to have the time to gain experience and to build their capacity to lead.
- **Respond swiftly and positively to children's initiatives and requests for support.** This is because they may only have a short amount of time in which they are available to lead, or their concerns may need urgent action.
- **Provide support for children to become self-advocates through learning and practicing new skills-** to prepare their own speeches with confidence, to feel comfortable to share their stories, to have confidence to speak up in front of politicians.
- **Build relationships with diverse groups of children across identities, social groups, borders**
- **Focus on specific groups of children i.e. inclusive of refugee children**

Challenge 6. Securing appropriate consent

- **The efforts must be taken to ensure informed consent from both children and their parents or guardians.** Informed consent means the voluntary agreement of an individual, or his or her authorized representative, who has the legal capacity to give consent, and who exercises free power of choice, without undue inducement or any other form of constraint or coercion to participate in the activity. The individual must have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the nature of the proposed activity, the anticipated risks and potential benefits, and the requirements or demands of the activity to be able to make an informed decision.
- **Establish and follow policies. Train everyone to work inclusively**
- **In almost every situation, consent to participation is needed from parents as well as from children.** Sometimes guardians have a role, and residential institutions and whoever has parental responsibility.
- **Take consent for every individual case, situation or event; Spend enough time to explain the child and/or parent why it is important, where it will be used, how long it will be valid and at any time children or parents could inform they give up of consent.**
- **To make sure consent explain what it means in a range of inclusive ways.** Peer to peer approach to present information. Ensure information given is full alongside opportunities to reflect on it. Outreach to the places people live
- **Build trust with adults.** For example, Work with parents to build their knowledge, and with 'Virtual Headteacher' to also gain initial consent - this person champions the education of children in care. Building trust and relationships with organisations.
- **Avoid insisting on children's inclusion (those who don't want in)**

Challenge 7. Raising awareness of discrimination and of rights

Children's participation can be strengthened by:

- **Finding out what children already know about their Rights** and providing further input

- **Children organising and leading cultural activities or training.** This can raise adults' (and other children's) awareness of their heritage and it can increase their own sense of pride in their identity.
- **Provide information and education about rights to participate in political and social issues.**
- **Provide information about economic, social, cultural and other human rights to marginalised children.** This can lead to increased demands for rights. It should be supported by capacity to help children try to claim their rights.
- **Provide, facilitate and fund online spaces/ platforms for children to learn, share, advocate, lead on their own projects in long-term**

Challenge 8. Effective, credible and creative methods

Children's participation can be strengthened by using different methods as the suitable methods and activities vary according to different children's interests and according to what decision makers will accept and respond to as a compelling evidence story. Methods described in our practice exchanges so far include:

- **Foster children developing a survey and bringing the results to parliament.**
- **Young people in care using creative techniques to speak about their experiences and to propose solutions.**
- **Mapping children's needs at schools through school parliaments using 'playful activities' around what children want to change**
- **A press conference activity linking children with regional government - where children will be able to ask questions of government ministers, with a focus on how to involve marginalised children.**
- **Focus group discussions during Covid (some online some off line) in which 200 children and young people in 10 countries helped identify successes and challenges in children's participation.** Moving online meant wider reach in some ways but also lost a lot of children, i.e. LGBTQ+ children who felt less safe to participate online while at home.
- **Children as young as age 6 expressing their ideas to older decision makers through arts programmes.** They used materials that are accessible and affordable especially during a pandemic i.e. through painting with coffee.
- **Children and young people with disabilities participate as researchers.**
- **Peer to peer mental health support for children with disabilities and in residential care during Covid-19.**
- **Children creating their own methods**
- **There are many more practices reported on the website.**

Challenge 9. Transparency about meaning, limits and opportunities of participation

- We know that it is important to be clear when inviting children to participate in activities. This means explaining what we want to talk about and why they are invited.
- We know we need to empower both minority and majority groups of children, whilst being honest about the likelihood and timescales of any expected change and the expected limitations.
- **Participation is a free choice for children. They need to receive as much as possible information in advance, so to take their decision to join or not to some activities.**

- **Always give feedback to children about their participation – how they contributed, what was achieved after their involvement, acknowledgement.**
- **One thing often missing is clear accountability** about why some ideas are taken into account and others are not.
- **Co-create a definition of participation with children**
- **Provide clear guidelines and support for children and professionals**
- **Professionals and carers reflecting on their power positions** so that they can be clear about what decisions they are taking and how children are included or not.
- **Make honest assessments of what share decision making is possible.**
- **Ensure there is sufficient time for understanding where change may be possible and for feeding back**
- **Engaging with political groups and political process, to secure commitments and monitoring these.**
- **Attracting publicity and high profile supporters**

Challenge 10. Evaluating over longer timescales

- **Follow-up with children on the results of their participation.** Way to often the organisations that involve children into decision making, research and other activities fail to report back to children on taking into consideration children's views. Thus, the child participation process should always include the follow-up stage ensuring that children are informed on actions taken based on their participation.
- **Participation of children in evaluation processes is voluntary.**
- **Don't just focus on what can be counted**
- **Having an framework** i.e. psychosocial resilience/ecological models/theory of change
- **Focus on what counts for children and creating positive change**
- **Ask children how they felt about the process of participating (pillars of feeling)**
- **Integrated loop of accountability:** children give their opinions – their opinions are fed back to them
- **Making evaluation in the form of a conversation**
- **Cocreated child-friendly methods and tools with the children and adults involved** – for ex., create a body map, questionnaires, drama play, storytelling, focus groups, etc.
- **Create a safe environment for children to feel comfortable to share feelings and opinions fearless.**
- **Enable children to learn new skills through the process of evaluation.**
- **Make it fun.**
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Challenge 11: Lack of investment in participation responding to the pandemic

This challenge arises from a lack of investment and stopping any consultation process with children in marginalized groups and communities (including in child care settings) due to the interdictions of face-to-face gathering and events. Solutions have been suggested in research already published (see below):

- **Provide Recognition.** Commit to children's participation in shaping public decision making in relation to responses to COVID-19. Celebrate children's everyday contributions in responding to the pandemic and challenge age-based judgements against children's actions, ideas and proposals.
- **Support Individual Children:** Support individual children's participation in decisions and meetings that affect them. Take a more participatory approach to understand and respond to individual concerns. Improve the coordination between adults in contact with each individual child (e.g. parents, teachers, social/youth workers). Ensure children have regular direct contact with named individuals, in education and social care.
- **Support Collective Influence:** Increase opportunities for children to collectively share their ideas, to ensure that they can highlight concerns, inform decisions, and hold decision-makers to account. Create and share safe, accessible platforms for children's digital participation. Ensure that decision-makers engage with these directly, so that children have direct access to people they can influence, promoting accountability. Use paper, post, face-to-face, phone, television, radio as well as digital tools.
- **Promote Inclusion:** Adopt a critical Children's Rights Based Approach, which is guided by the concerns of the most marginalised children and communities (including children and young people who are care experienced, young Roma, children with experience of vulnerable family situations, migration, poverty and disability and those vulnerable to CSE, trafficking and violence). Considering the implications of all decisions and measures related to COVID-19 on all children, revise decisions and implement measures to respond to any challenges highlighted.
- **Coordinate Digital and Offline Solutions:** Ensure provision of digital equipment, electricity and access to data for all children. Share internet safety information with children and exchange examples of safe, inclusive professional practice, maintaining contact with children. Upgrade professionals' digital and creative skills and organisational guidance where needed. Support peer to peer learning through digital equipment. Ensure support for usage of digital equipment for children whose parents are illiterate, including individualised teaching support via personal contact. But, do not rely on digital communication -some children are overloaded with this. Provide printed copies of any materials available online, particularly for children in households with limited access to electricity and internet.
- **Resources for Professionals:** Safeguard professionals' time for participation activities, ensure they have the status and Personal Protective Equipment needed to conduct individual case work. Provide funding to organisations in direct contact with specific groups of children, to maintain relationships with marginalised children and communities. For example, youth workers, community art-based organisations, Roma and Pro-Roma NGOs, and organisations working with children and young people who are care experienced, experiencing vulnerable family situations, migration, poverty and disability or vulnerable to CSE, trafficking and violence.
- **Public Health Inclusion.** Ensure children's inclusion in formal structures and processes for community and public engagement. This should be supported through dedicated funding streams at EU and national levels, with particular reference to ensuring their involvement in governance of children's services and public health structures.
- **Economic Measures.** Ensure that children's best interests are promoted in economic decision-making, learning from children about how best to ensure this is achieved nationally, and in shaping EU Funding. An adequate minimum income for children and adults would promote the conditions in which children can access opportunities, participate and thrive. Work with children to amend laws and programmes where needed to ensure immediate and permanent access to funds for provision of nutrition, medication, housing and essential services, for children and adults experiencing poverty and in other vulnerable situations.

For details of this research on Covid19 See <http://cllok.uclan.ac.uk/33087/>