

**THE  
PARTICIPATION  
NETWORK  
ENGAGING/  
EMPOWERING**

**Response**

**Northern Ireland Network for Youth  
Pre-consultation**

**September 2007**

In 2007, the [Children and Young People's Unit](#) of the [Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister \(OFMDFM\)](#) demonstrated government commitment to promoting children and young people's participation, and allocated funding to form The Participation Network. The work of The Participation Network focuses on developing the capacity of statutory agencies, local government and government departments in Northern Ireland to fulfil their duties to effectively engage children and young people in public decision making.

The Participation Network believes that all children and young people have a right to be engaged in the development of services and policies that affect them, that this engagement is beyond the statutory duty consultation requirements, and that it is the government's responsibility to engage with children and young people.

## What is your vision of an ideal NINFY?

The Participation Network believes that NINFY's vision to "*strengthen the direct voice of young people in all relevant aspects of government provision*" should be extended to include children as well as young people. Therefore, the name and the vision must include both children and young people (0-25 years).

It is essential that this vision becomes a reality and children and young people have a **direct voice in all aspects of government**. In order to achieve this, children and young people must be at the forefront of all government developments and the issues that impact on children and young people's lives should be what shape future policies and services. To ensure children and young people affect any real change to the way in which government provides services, their voices must be listened to at the onset of any developments.

The Participation Network recommends that NINFY should **coordinate** all the participative activities for children and young people (0-25 years) in Northern Ireland. It is envisaged that the Network will be a **driver of change** towards a culture where the views of children and young people actively participate in matters which impact on their lives.

The Participation Network believes that **excluding young children aged 0-3** years sends out misleading and incorrect message regarding their ability to communicate their views and feelings on matters that impact on them. Young children are no longer seen as recipients of their environment, but they influence what goes on within their world. It is essential that the input from young children is valued and central to this new development.

We also recommend that NINFY has multi-levels, led by a high level strategic group with ministerial representation/accountability. There should be a number of sub-sections/branches that would have a variety of functions to support participation in Northern Ireland, including support for practitioners that work directly with children and young people. There must be representation on NINFY from the children and youth sectors and the structures established to access children and young people's participation should be as flexible and diverse as the children and young people it serves. This Network for Northern Ireland must be tuned into and informed by children and young people.

**The vision for NINFY should ensure we live in a society where children and young people:**

- **know their rights and have them respected;**
- **are valued, involved, listened to and understood; and**
- **have opportunities to participate as active citizens.**

## What sort of values and principles should NINFY adopt?

The Participation Network recommends that the underpinning values included in the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People (OFMDFM, 2006) should be adopted by the network. Values that recognise that all children and young people have **rights**, are unique individuals each with a valuable and **diverse** contribution to make to society and, are **active participants** in society must underpin the work of NINFY (OFMDFM, 2006). We also recommend that NINFY is guided by the principles of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Particularly, Article 2 which states children **rights** should be respected regardless of their status such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national ethnic or social origin or disability. Article 12, states the child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely **in all matters** affecting the child. The principles of inclusiveness, equality and the voice of children and young people must be central to the work of NINFY central.

It is important that the **whole child** approach is adopted which recognises the **individuality** of all children and young people and the variety of ways children and young people can **contribute to society**.

It is essential that NINFY works in **partnership** and in **collaboration** with current participative structures/initiatives which include children and young people as equal players.

## What functions should NINFY cover?

There are **particular needs** that NINFY would be able to address in its high-level position. For example, there is a need for a uniform, agreed definition of what 'participation' for children and young people in Northern Ireland is.

There is a need for coordination between community, voluntary, statutory sectors and children and young people themselves to develop a vision for children and young people's participation, and oversee the implementation of that vision. NINFY could be a vital central point of access for this coordination.

Support the capacity development of organisations with expertise, and ensure training and staff development for those working with children and young people in participation.

In an overarching, coordination role, NINFY would be able to map the current existing participative structures in NI, identify gaps, and produce a cohesive action plan to address the gaps. In addition, NINFY could have a monitoring role to measure the impact of participative activities on all levels, across NI.

With the endorsement and involvement of the Ministers responsible for children, as well as the Minister for Education, who is responsible for Early Years and Youth Service, NINFY can also serve as a vital accountability link between government and its young constituents.

### **How would NINFY link with existing participative structures?**

NINFY must be complementary to other relevant participation initiatives. It must be a Northern Ireland wide mechanism to join together all existing structures. It must not displace any of the existing best practice examples of children and young people participation but strengthen and lead on existing structures.

NINFY must seek buy-in from current structures at the development stages.

### **Are there any existing models in the UK or internationally that would be relevant to this initiative?**

We would recommend that those developing NINFY refer to Turning Up the Sound, the feasibility study which has formed the basis for the work of The Participation Network, for a range of research about children and young people's participation in public decision making.

In addition, the Republic of Ireland is involved in a high-level co-ordination of student councils and a shadow youth parliament via Dail na nOg.

The Welsh Assembly is significantly further on in its development of government-led initiatives on children and young people participation, particularly the element of children and young people's participation embedded into their training for civil servants

In the United States, the phrase 'civic participation' is used to emphasize the connection between participation by children and young people and their development as active citizens in society.

### **What are the barriers that would stop NINFY from being effective?**

One **potential barrier** that would prevent NINFY's effectiveness would be the lack of thorough support structures for such a wide, regional vision. **Training for government officials** on how to engage effectively with children and young people, as The Participation Network offers, would be one such support structure.

During this developmental phase, there must be recognition and a place for organisations with expertise and experience in children and young people's participation, and for the groundwork done prior to the NINFY initiative.

NINFY's establishment must represent the foresight of developed relationships between government and its young constituents, which will enhance the quality of policy development and service design in the long-term, and ensure the longevity of policies and services that adults currently are working on, rather than being discarded. Without weight given to NINFY in the form of **resources and support from top-level officials**, particularly the Ministers for children and Minister for Education, NINFY runs the risk of raising the hopes of NI's children and young people, creating further instability and insecurity.

There is also a danger that a lack of flexibility within NINFY for the diversity of children and young people and respect for their self-determination with their agendas will compromise NINFY's potential and lead to tokenisation of children and young people.