

Northern Ireland Standards  
for Children and Young  
People's Participation in  
Public Decision Making

**ASK  
FIRST!**



# FOREWORD

A KEY PART OF DELIVERING THE OVERARCHING TEN-YEAR STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IS ENSURING THAT THEIR VIEWS, EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES INFORM OUR WORK.

We are deeply committed to ensuring that Government Departments are enabled to engage meaningfully and directly with children and young people. We have firsthand experience of the efficacy of such an approach and have been impressed with the sincerity, maturity and creativity of the children and young people with whom we, and our officials, have engaged.

We want to see all Public Authorities here reaping the benefits of such engagement for themselves. It is clear to us that policies and services which impact on children and young people are much more effective if they are based on the lived experience of those whose lives we are working to improve.

We established the Participation Network to help equip Public Authorities to make the most of opportunities to learn directly from children and young people. We are pleased that 81 Public Authorities have already accessed their training, consultancy, advice and technical support services.

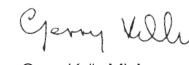
The Ask First standards, developed by the Participation Network, will further assist those Public Authorities who are increasingly recognising the importance of involving children and young people in the development of policy and services.

We believe that these standards for children and young people's participation provide useful guidance for establishing effective direct engagement mechanisms, as well as a benchmark for measuring their effectiveness.

We hope that in fulfilling the shared commitment that all our children and young people thrive and look forward with confidence to the future, Public Authorities will work towards applying these standards and that before developing policy and services they will consult the standards and Ask First.



Robin Newton MBE, MLA  
JUNIOR MINISTER



Gerry Kelly MLA  
JUNIOR MINISTER

# INTRODUCTION

These standards have been developed by the Participation Network to support public authorities in the work of creating effective processes for engaging children and young people in decision making. The standards set out the various elements, which together, ensure that the involvement of children and young people in public decision making is both meaningful for them, and effective for the Public Authorities with whom they are engaged.

Each standard is illustrated by a series of actions that Public Authorities can work towards, and use as a measure of progress, in developing increasingly effective engagements with children and young people.

The standards are underpinned and informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup>, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) and "Our Children and Young People - Our Pledge"<sup>2</sup>, the Government's 10 year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

## THE STANDARDS ARE BASED ON:

- What children and young people told us during the feasibility study that led to the development of the Participation Network (Turning up the Sound<sup>3</sup>)
- Our training and consultancy work with public sector personnel
- The views of the child and youth organisations registered on our database
- The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland Guidance for Public Authorities<sup>4</sup>

It is hoped that the standards will form the basis of future partnership work between the Participation Network, Public Authorities and children and young people.

**STANDARD 1: Appropriate methods**

**STANDARD 2: Support**

**STANDARD 3: Knowledge**

**STANDARD 4: Feedback**

**STANDARD 5: Inclusion**

**STANDARD 6: Respect**

**STANDARD 7: Senior people**

**STANDARD 8: Timing**

<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly Resolution 25 session 44 Convention on the Rights of the Child on 20 November 1989

<sup>2</sup> Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2006). "Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006-2016" (Belfast: OFMDFM)

<sup>3</sup> Keenan, P., Harvey, C. (2004) Turning up the Sound. (Belfast: Save the Children, Youth Council NI, NI Youth Forum, Youthnet.)

<sup>4</sup> Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2008). "Let's talk, Let's listen – Guidance for public authorities on consulting and involving children and young people". (Belfast: ECNI)

“I WAS AMAZED THAT YOUNG PEOPLE MINDSTORMING ONTO THE ‘TALKING WALL’ CAME UP WITH SUCH A WEALTH OF IDEAS.”

(DEPARTMENTAL OFFICIAL)

## STANDARD ONE:

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### APPROPRIATE METHODS

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE ENGAGED IN A VARIETY OF WAYS, BASED ON WHAT IS BEST SUITED TO THEIR AGE AND LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT / MATURITY. IN PARTICULAR, PLAY BASED METHODOLOGIES WILL BE DEVELOPED FOR INVOLVING YOUNGER CHILDREN.

#### PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WILL WORK TOWARDS:

- Ensuring that staff understand participation and are trained and supported to involve children and young people
- Allocating resources to support participation within policy and service development budgets
- Developing a range of ways to involve children and young people
- Ensuring that children and young people have fun and enjoy the process
- Building relationships with child and youth agencies who can help them develop effective participative methods, especially for engaging very young children
- Engaging with younger children in whatever location the children feel most comfortable

“THE FACILITATORS WORKING WITH US HAD THE EXPERTISE TO GET THE BEST OUT OF THE CHILDREN” (LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL)

## STANDARD TWO: SUPPORT

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE PROVIDED WITH THE SUPPORT NEEDED TO ENGAGE EFFECTIVELY IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS.

### PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WILL WORK TOWARDS:

- Ensuring that children and young people have access to a skilled and trusted person who can support them to prepare for their involvement
- Supporting children and young people to access opportunities to learn and to develop skills that will enhance their participation
- Addressing the particular support needs of vulnerable and marginalised children and young people
- Making sure that children and young people are kept safe throughout the participative process and that rigorous child protection measures and safeguards are in place

“I SUSPECT THAT THE  
ADULTS MADE A LOT  
OF USE OF THE CHILD  
FRIENDLY VERSION OF OUR  
POLICY. IT WAS SET OUT  
VERY CLEARLY AND WAS  
VERY EASY TO FOLLOW.”

(DEPARTMENTAL OFFICIAL)

## STANDARD THREE:

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## KNOWLEDGE

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE PROVIDED WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THEY NEED TO ENGAGE FULLY IN DECISION MAKING PROCESSES. INFORMATION WILL BE EASILY UNDERSTOOD, CHILD FRIENDLY AND PRODUCED IN A RANGE OF ACCESSIBLE FORMATS.

### PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WILL WORK TOWARDS:

- Producing easily understood, child friendly versions of background materials, proposals and policies and ensuring that these are widely disseminated
- Making sure that children and young people understand what is being asked of them, who is involved in the process and how decisions will be made
- Ensuring that consultation materials are available in formats that are accessible to children and young people with sensory and learning disabilities

“THE WORKER TOLD ME HOW PROUD THE YOUNG PEOPLE WERE TO BE ABLE TO PICK OUT THINGS THEY SAID IN THE FINAL DOCUMENT.”

(DEPARTMENTAL OFFICIAL)

## STANDARD FOUR: FEEDBACK

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE TOLD ABOUT THE OUTCOMES OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT AND HOW THEIR INPUT HAS BEEN CONSIDERED. WHERE THEIR IDEAS HAVE NOT BEEN TAKEN ON BOARD THEY WILL BE TOLD WHY THIS HAS HAPPENED.

### PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WILL WORK TOWARDS:

- Keeping young people informed of progress made in relation to the process they have been engaged in
- Letting children and young people know what has changed as a result of their involvement and, where relevant, explaining why their ideas have not been taken on board
- Ensuring that the contribution of children and young people is acknowledged
- Asking children and young people what they think of the participative process as part of ongoing evaluation and review

“WE ENDED UP HEARING FROM OVER 600 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE.

LOOKING AT THE LIST OF GROUPS THEY BELONG TO I DON'T THINK WE COULD HAVE MISSED ANY CATEGORY OF YOUNG PEOPLE HERE.”

(DEPARTMENTAL OFFICIAL)

## STANDARD FIVE: INCLUSION

ALL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE FACILITATED TO ENGAGE IN PUBLIC DECISION MAKING PROCESSES. PARTICULAR MEASURES WILL BE PUT IN PLACE TO ENSURE THE INVOLVEMENT OF THOSE WHO ARE VULNERABLE AND MARGINALISED, IN LINE WITH SECTION 75 AND UNCRC OBLIGATIONS.

### PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WILL WORK TOWARDS:

- Developing participation strategies that are clearly equality proofed
- Seeking the support of specialist agencies to ensure the involvement of vulnerable and marginalised groups of children and young people
- Meeting any additional costs of ensuring that engagement processes are fully accessible and inclusive
- Creating opportunities to engage with children and young people in their own locations
- Ensuring that opportunities for engagement are widely advertised

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# STANDARD SIX:

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## RESPECT

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE TREATED WITH RESPECT. THEY WILL DECIDE THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT, INCLUDING THE OPTION NOT TO PARTICIPATE.

### PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WILL WORK TOWARDS:

- Showing children and young people that they are respected and valued by allowing them enough time to prepare and think through their ideas and by listening to and taking their views seriously
- Conducting transparent participative exercises and being honest about what can or cannot be changed
- Ensuring that children and young people have the opportunity to set agendas and bring their own issues to the table
- Guaranteeing that children and young people will not be penalised for deciding not to participate

“I was worried about telling them (young people) some of their ideas couldn't happen but they understood where we were coming from.”

(Architect)

“THE YOUNG PEOPLE BROUGHT THE  
ISSUE TO ME DIRECTLY. HEARING  
THEIR EXPERIENCES PROMPTED  
ME TO DO SOMETHING  
ABOUT IT.” (MINISTER)

## STANDARD SEVEN: SENIOR PEOPLE

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WILL HAVE DIRECT CONTACT WITH SENIOR PEOPLE WHO ARE IN A POSITION TO MAKE DECISIONS AND TAKE ACTION IN RELATION TO THEIR IDEAS, VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES.

### PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WILL WORK TOWARDS:

- Creating opportunities for children and young people to have direct contact with politicians and senior public sector personnel
- Encouraging senior personnel to attend consultative exercises
- Ensuring support is provided to enable the effective participation of children and young people in appropriate high level decision making forums

“HEARING FROM THE CHILDREN BEFORE WE LIFTED A SPADE GAVE US CONFIDENCE THAT WE WERE BUILDING SOMETHING THEY WOULD REALLY USE.”

(COUNCILLOR)

## STANDARD EIGHT: TIMING

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE INVOLVED AT THE EARLIEST POSSIBLE STAGES OF POLICY AND SERVICE DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING PROCESSES TO ESTABLISH THE NEED FOR SERVICE OR POLICY INITIATIVES.

### PUBLIC AUTHORITIES WILL WORK TOWARDS:

- Ensuring that children and young people have opportunities to inform and shape the initial development of services and policies
- Making sure that participative opportunities are scheduled to take account of children and young people's availability
- Creating service and policy development models that clearly show how children and young people's views and experiences inform each stage of the process

# NOTES

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**Participation Network**

Supporting the Public Sector to engage  
children & young people



Office of the

**First Minister and  
Deputy First Minister**

[www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk)

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