

Strategy for the Participation of Young People In Decision-Making

October 2017



1.0 Introduction

Oberstown Children Detention Campus provides safe and secure care and education to young people referred by the courts. In doing so, the Campus is bound by the requirements of national law and policy and it is committed to ensuring the implementation of international children's rights standards. Ireland is a party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and in 2015, the Government adopted the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020. Under the Oberstown Strategic Plan 2017-2020, the Campus made a commitment to adopt a strategy for the participation of young people in decision-making with a view to ensuring that the views of young people are heard and taken into account in matters that affect them, both individually and as a group. The Oberstown participation strategy is based on Lundy's Model of Participation,¹ (see diagram below) a rights-based approach to involving young people in decision-making.



¹ Lundy, L. (2007) 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' British Educational Research Journal 33:6, 927-042

2.0 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

By ratifying the UNCRC, Ireland committed to ensuring that the views of children and young people would be heard and taken into account in matters that affect them, in line with Article 12 of the Convention. This general principle of the UNCRC means that participation in decision-making is a right, and it is also a principle that should inform every other right in the Convention. According to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the right of the child to be heard applies to the individual child, while also requiring that the views of children, as a group, are heard and taken into account in matters that affect them, including in the formulation of policies and rules (CRC Committee, 2009). The Committee has highlighted that children's views must be respected at all stages in the juvenile justice process, noting that in recent times the voices of such children are increasingly becoming 'a powerful force for improvements and reform, and for the fulfilment of their rights' (CRC Committee, 2007).

Young people in Oberstown must thus be supported to develop and express their views, and decision-makers at all levels must hear those views and respond to them in a timely manner. Hearing young people's views does not necessarily equate with those views being endorsed or acted upon in part or in full. However, it does require that safe spaces are created for the expression of the views of young people, these views being taken seriously by decision-makers who must provide feedback to young people on the outcome of the process.

In line with these standards, Oberstown is committed to ensuring that the views of all young people are heard and taken into account in all matters that affect them. More generally, it considers this to be a cornerstone of a rights-respecting Campus, along with the implementation of the rights of young people under the UNCRC and associated international instruments. This document sets out further how this is to be achieved over the lifetime of the Strategy.

2.1 National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making

The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020 was adopted by Government and published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2015.

The National Strategy's guiding principles are that young people have a right to be heard in all matters that affect them, in line with the UNCRC, that they should always be fully informed of the scope of their participation, including any limitations on their involvement, the expected and actual outcomes of their participation, and how their views were ultimately considered.

Furthermore, in line with the guidance of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Strategy notes that all processes in which young people are heard should be transparent and informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant to children's lives, in child-friendly environments, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, and accountable. Importantly, the National Strategy sets out as a key priority that seldom heard young people specifically must be enabled to participate in decision-making.

The Strategy states that organisational culture and strong leadership are 'critical in ensuring the involvement of seldom-heard children and young people in decision-making.' It further notes that if meaningful, effective and sustainable participation of seldom-heard young people is to take place, a cultural climate that 'values inclusiveness, empowerment and participation,' is required.

2.2 Lundy's Model of Participation

The National Strategy is underpinned by Lundy's Model of Participation,² which is grounded in the UNCRC and represents a rights-based approach to involving young people in decision-making.

According to Lundy, for participation to be compliant with Article 12 of the UNCRC, it must involve the four elements of space, voice, audience and influence as follows:

1. **Space:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their view.
2. **Voice:** Children must be facilitated to express their view.
3. **Audience:** The view must be listened to.
4. **Influence:** The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Adopted as the preferred approach to participation under the National Strategy, Lundy has developed a checklist to help organisations working with and for children and young people to engage in participation that is UNCRC compliant. Oberstown is committed to working with the Lundy model and to using the checklist in its work in this area.



² Lundy, L. (2007) 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' British Educational Research Journal 33:6, 927-042

3.0 Participation in Oberstown

Oberstown Children Detention Campus is committed to ensuring that young people have the right to participate in decision-making that affects them both individually and as a group in line with national strategy and in a manner informed by the Lundy model. The following sections will consider how the requirements of Lundy's Space, Voice, Audience and Influence are met under different mechanisms of participation in Oberstown.

Individual Decision-Making

Space: In Oberstown, young people interact constantly with staff, and in particular their key-worker, about decisions that affect their lives both in detention and following return home. Young people have an individual placement plan focusing on five areas - Care, Education, Health, Offending and Planning for the future. Young people are supported through their placement planning meetings (regular meetings with guardians, Oberstown staff and other relevant parties) and interactions with keyworkers to express their views and contribute to planning for their future.

Voice: The views of young people are actively sought as part of the placement planning process. While young people are encouraged to attend placement planning meetings, they may choose to opt out of the meetings and this will be respected.

Audience: Young people can make requests through their key worker as part of their placement planning process and are supported to write letters/communicate with the relevant decision-makers in order to progress their requests.

Influence: Young people have a dedicated key worker with whom they can discuss their individualised plan. Young people's views are taken seriously and written into their plans. Young people can make requests specific to them and their needs, for example opening of bank accounts, taking extracurricular educational courses and the driving theory test. Young people can also influence how they are dealt with in a crisis by sharing information about triggers or identifying the best ways to approach them in certain situations.

Unit Decision-Making

Space: Young people's views are heard through unit meetings with the manager of the unit. The Campus Director also makes regular visits to the units for this purpose. Although this process is currently ad hoc and varies across units, this Strategy commits to rolling out unit meetings with young people across Campus.

Voice: Once unit meetings are rolled out across the Campus, young people will have a wide range of fora to have their views heard.

Audience: This forum is to allow for young people to raise issues of concern about day-to-day life on the unit. As the unit manager will hold the meetings, this gives young people direct access to decision-makers as regards their day-to-day routines on the units. Unit managers should encourage young people to air their views and direct young people on best way to have an issue resolved.

Influence: Young people's concerns should be taken seriously and acted upon where appropriate. Unit managers should take minutes of meetings and ensure that procedures are in place to ensure that young people receive feedback, explaining reasons for decisions taken.

School Decision-Making

Space: The School Council allows young people to influence their day-to-day lives at school and to bring matters of concern/importance to their teachers and the School Principal.

Voice: Young people are elected to sit on the School Council by their peers through a democratic process each school year.

Audience: The School Council is used as a mechanism for young people to raise issues about day-to-day life at school. The Council is also used for fundraising for community groups and other positive events.

Influence: The School Council is supported by the school staff and Principal who continue to give it time and space to develop. The Council is seen as an important mechanism for young people to take ownership of the school and contribute to how it is run.

Campus level Decision-Making

Space: A Campus Council provides a safe space where young people can actively express their views on issues that affect them. Young people have the chance to influence and hear back from key decision-makers in areas of importance, chosen by them. From consultation, they have been identified as: Activities; Complaints procedures; Routines in the Unit; Access to External Education Programmes and Preparation for Leaving – supports etc. Efforts will continue to identify ways to consult with all young people on the issues raised by them in the Campus Council.

Voice: Young people are facilitated to meet every two weeks and to work on issues that they are interested in with a view to canvassing senior managers and getting feedback. In between monthly meetings with senior managers, the Council meets in order to talk through issues they wish to raise at a more senior level.

Audience: The Campus Council allows young people to raise issues that affect their daily lives in Oberstown and to hear back from senior managers on a monthly basis. Young people are informed their views are being communicated to the relevant staff members and those staff members attend meetings to deliver and explain decisions.

Influence: Young people's views are recorded and the minutes of the meeting are fed back to young people and relevant staff members. As the Council develops and the wider population becomes familiar with it and the process of how it works, minutes will be made available to all young people. Where views are not represented, young people will receive an explanation as to why their views could not be accommodated.

Campus Advisory Group

Space: The campus advisory group will advise on matters of policy, youth-friendly literature and other issues relevant to the care of young people in detention.

Voice: This is a new mechanism for consulting with young people. Young people will need to be supported in a youth-friendly manner and engaged in creative ways in order to maximise their participation.

Audience: Young people's views will be recorded and taken seriously including by being incorporated, where possible, into policy and other documents.

Influence: Young people's views will be represented in policy documents. Where views are not represented, young people will receive an explanation as to why their views could not be accommodated.

3.0 Improving participation in Oberstown

3.1 Barriers to participation

Although there are already a number of mechanisms in place for young people to have their voices heard in Oberstown, barriers remain to ensuring that participation is meaningful and fruitful. Principal among these barriers is the wider recognition of the right of young people to have a say and the implementation of the obligation on staff to ensure that these voices are taken into account.³

3.2 Successful participation

Effective participation is the involvement of children that 'actually leads to an outcome or change'.⁴

Research has found that in order for participation to be meaningful, it should reflect the most salient issues for young people at that time, and not the agendas of the organisations and services involved.⁵ In essence, where young people see relevance to their lives, they are more likely to consider participation opportunities as a priority.⁶

In Oberstown, elements that need to be in place to ensure participation is meaningful and successful include:

- Developing and communicating a vision of participation and what this can achieve.
- Ensuring senior management support and ensure access to senior management for young people for resolution of issues.
- Identifying champions of participation and supporting them to drive initiatives with young people.
- Involving young people early on and get their ideas to help guide and drive the process.
- Making participation appealing for young people, through the use of fun activities, incentives, and youth friendly language and spaces.
- Evaluating the mechanisms outlined in section 2 against the [Lundy checklist for participation](#) and reflect on what works and make adaptations as necessary.

3.3 Moving forward

Oberstown will continue to develop each method of participation with a view to improving each one and making them part of day-to-day practice. Lundy's checklist will be used to continually monitor how the various methods are working, and reports/bulletins/updates will be issued regularly on the work produced, or the progress made, in each area of participation.

³ Hart, D. and Thompson, C. (2009), *Young People's Participation in the Youth Justice System*, National Children's Bureau, London

⁴ (*Building a Culture of Participation, Department for Education and Skills, UK, 2003*).

⁵ Percy-Smith (2010), Vromen & Collin (2010).

⁶ *Ibid.*

4.0 Conclusion

This strategy has set out the various methods of participation in use at Oberstown and has assessed each one in terms of space; voice; audience, and influence. Although there are many ways for young people's voices to be heard in Oberstown, work must continue to identify how to overcome barriers to young people's views being taken into account. Oberstown is committed to continually developing participation methods that are rights-based, with a view to ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to express their views in a variety of ways, and to have those views taken seriously and acted upon.



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