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Listening to children: child participation, a foundation for democratic societies²

Preliminary draft report

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1. Introduction

1. Truly democratic societies cannot be built unless we listen to children (those people under 18 years of age). Child participation in decision-making strengthens their understanding of democracy and their skills for dialogue, understanding their rights, and resolving conflicts without violence. It helps them respect themselves and others and increases confidence and self-esteem. In recent times, the issue of child participation has gained unprecedented levels of attention and has become a must for many organisations. Nevertheless, while there exists a wealth of examples of successful practice, too often child participation is not given sufficient priority and resources, and remains tokenistic, sporadic, or limited to the privileged and articulate minority. Child protection is of huge importance, but so is the empowering of children to think and act with confidence. Indeed, such empowerment may enhance protection.

2. Although children have always participated in many ways within societies, the dominant attitude used to be, to a great extent, that of “children should be seen and not heard.” We used to assume that adults know what the best interest of the child is and that they act accordingly. Today, there is a growing realisation that this is not always the case, and that decisions made without consulting children can have negative consequences on their well-being and chances for success in future life. Considering children’s views and experiences allows us to provide them with better care and protection. If children are systematically involved when decisions are made about matters that concern them, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and motivation and ability to contribute to their societies and perform better academically and socially. Such participation benefits not only children, but also adults and institutions which encourage child participation. These organisations gain different perspectives on issues of concern. UNICEF has children on its boards, others have children on committees or advisory panels. I am aware of many examples of this, and the adults involved testify to the benefits to their work of having children involved and speaking from direct experience.

3. Listening to children is not about giving them free rein to do as they like. On the contrary, it enables children to think about their role in society and helps in boosting their ability to express themselves in appropriate ways. I am particularly concerned about the need to involve vulnerable children – those living in poverty, those from minority ethnic or religious backgrounds, those who are disabled, those who are migrants and refugees, those who are LGBT. We can learn about needs better from those directly affected. As a young woman said at a PACE seminar “We are experts by experience.” Children can be very articulate about their needs and willing to express them when asked to be involved. The experience of being involved in decision making can profoundly affect the individual’s own development. They become “active agents” rather than passive recipients, which enhances feelings of self-worth and confidence.³

4. As a former Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Children, and a former teacher, I am personally and professionally committed to child participation, and happy to see its development. I have had many discussions with my colleagues in the Assembly, as well as with civil society organisations across Europe,

¹ Preliminary draft report declassified by the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development at its meeting held on 9 September 2021.

² Title change approved by the Committee at its meeting held on 9 September 2021.

³ Coleman, J. (2021) *The teacher and the teenage brain*. Routledge

including children and youth organisations, and I am convinced that more could and should be done to support child participation. This led me to propose that the Assembly prepare a report on this topic.⁴ Since then, I have had the privilege of discussing opportunities and barriers for child participation in many contexts. These discussions have informed my thinking and ideas. I am indebted to, and would like to thank, all those who have generously given their time to engage with this initiative. The Covid-19 pandemic presented huge challenges for working with teachers, others working with children and children themselves. The initiative, with its original ambitious aims of involving parliamentarians in 12 countries⁵ working with facilitators to deliver sessions on child rights and on the functions of the Council of Europe, had to be scaled down dramatically.

5. However, a great deal was learned, many examples of good practice were found and will be described in this report. I feel confident in saying that now is a good time for the Council of Europe to assess what has been achieved in the area of child participation and how this could be developed. I have seen the potential for parliamentarians to work with children in communities to encourage their engagement with democratic processes. Many colleagues have said, and it is my own experience, that whilst Covid-19 pandemic has devastated local services such as in health and education, many communities, including children, have become more active in stating their needs and pressing for solutions. This report will therefore seek to suggest ways of listening to children and taking on board their concerns and encouraging action, based on what works and what might be possible. Examples of the kind of support measures that are not just about good intentions and “ticking boxes” but genuinely help in making our societies a better place for all children will be described. I hope that these examples will be of use for strengthening child participation in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly, in national parliaments and in other settings where decisions affecting children are made.

2. Definitions: what do we mean when we talk about child participation?

6. In the aftermath of World War II, efforts have been made to develop international standards on human rights. Promoting the rights of the child, including the right for participation, has been part of this process, even if it was more difficult, and took much longer. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was only adopted in 1989, but it has its roots in the philosophy of Janusz Korczak (1878–1942)⁶ who believed that children should be respected and listened to, rather than shaped according to the will of adults. Today, the impetus behind the promotion of child participation comes, on one hand, from the on-going development of the rights of the child, and, on the other hand, from the growing acknowledgement that enabling people to have a say is the best way of developing effective and sustainable solutions.

7. Strategies on Children’s Rights from the Children’s Rights Division of the Council of Europe and from the European Commission have been forcefully articulated and include specific reference to child participation. Indeed, the Children’s Rights Division developed, in 2020, a handbook on children’s participation, “Listen – Act – Change”.⁷

8. The right of children to be heard on all matters that affect them is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and is one of the four general principles that must be applied in the realisation of all other rights. While Article 12 does not include the term participation, the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s (CRC) deems that the right of children to be listened to together with the rights to information, to freedom of expression, religion, conscience, assembly, and association, amounts to “participation.”⁸ The term is widely used to describe children’s right to involvement in decisions that affect them and to have those views considered by decision-makers.

9. According to the CRC, the right to be heard applies equally to children as individuals, as well as to children as a group, such as a class of schoolchildren, the children in a neighbourhood or the children of a country. Vulnerable and hard to reach groups have equal rights to participation.⁹ For example, in a collaboration called “Reaching In”, Eurochild, the University of Central Lancashire, and partners working with children facing discrimination are collaborating to strengthen opportunities for the participation of marginalised children in public decision making. The pilot work concentrates on European public decision making and local,

⁴ In January 2019, the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development tabled a motion for a resolution on “Giving a voice to every child: promoting child participation as a foundation for democratic societies.” The motion was subsequently referred to our Committee for report, and I was appointed rapporteur.

⁵ Austria, Azerbaijan, France, Georgia, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Turkey, Ukraine, and United Kingdom

⁶ Council of Europe (2007), Children have the right to be heard and adults should listen to their views: Janusz Korczak Lecture dedicated to children participation, Thomas Hammarberg, available on-line at: <https://rm.coe.int/168046c47b>

⁷ <https://rm.coe.int/publication-handbook-on-children-s-participation-eng/1680a14539>

⁸ <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.eurochild.org/>

national, and European policy related to Roma minors' health. In collaboration with children the "Reaching In" team are collecting and sharing examples of good practice of child participation and influence.¹⁰

10. Meaningful participation has been conceptualised by Laura Lundy to include the concepts of "Space" where children can come together and can express their views; "Voice" where children are provided with information and support; "Audience" where children have access to the people who make the decisions; and "Influence" where children's views are given proper consideration and they get feedback on the decisions and how their views were considered. In line with this concept, child participation is defined in Recommendation (2012)² of the Committee of Ministers to the Council of Europe member States as: "individuals or groups of children having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, to be heard and to contribute to decision making on matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity."¹¹

11. Cath Larkins, building on her work on the Council of Europe's Handbook on Children's Participation, has been acting as a consultant to the Sub-Committee on Children in discussions on child participation has developed a model for evaluating child participation in PACE, which includes nine principles drawn from the UNCRC: an initiative should be transparent and informed; voluntary; respectful; relevant; child-friendly; inclusive, supported by training; safe and sensitive to risk; and accountable. The evaluation model also includes a theory of change that sets out the desirable outcomes by which an initiative can be judged - such as numbers of children involved and their diversity; feelings of safety, support and being informed; better awareness, better services, better communities, better laws or policies; increased scrutiny of laws, policy and services, informed links (for example between PACE members and children) and institutional learning loops, resourced plans and concrete strategies developed.¹²

12. One parliamentarian said to me recently "I don't want to just go into a formal Assembly of a hundred kids and talk about me in parliament. It might be a useful starter, but they deserve to be involved in getting to know how parliament really works and how they might have influence". In other words, whilst raising awareness is important, it is limited, and a Council of Europe strategy for child participation involving parliamentarians could go much further.

13. I have been struck by a recent joint study on child participation in EU political and democratic life by Rand Europe and Eurochild, prepared for the European Commission. Eurochild involved members from 10 different countries who in turn organised child focus group consultations. Over 200 children and young people were involved. The study showed that the most prevalent mechanisms of children's participation are children and youth councils, children and youth parliaments and ombudspersons for children (or an equivalent). Initiatives also take place in schools. Other findings were that most mechanisms are adult initiated and good for proposing ideas but lack evaluation to show their impact. The children involved are usually 12 years old and above. There is a lack of availability and accountability of information. There is lack of recognition of children's participation and of feedback to children. Facilitative measures to child participation are listed, such as: EU promoting children's participation in political and democratic life across all levels; investing in child participation; creating national laws and plans to ensure that children are included in government decisions.¹³

3. Piloting child participation in the Parliamentary Assembly

14. As the former Chair of the Sub-Committee on Children I was keen to explore and to introduce child participation in the Assembly. Other colleagues were equally enthusiastic. The first concept of an initiative on child participation in the Assembly was developed after representatives of the Sub-Committee on Children met the (then) President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Liliane Maury-Pasquier, to seek support which she gave readily. A report on the benefits of child participation was produced¹⁴ and a survey was conducted among the members of the Sub-Committee.¹⁵ Twelve members of the Sub-Committee expressed interest in participating in this initiative.¹⁶ Meetings were held to determine the rationale for the work and how it might be carried out. At the June 2019 part-session, the Sub-Committee on Children held a working breakfast with representatives of the Children's Rights Division and the Youth Department, NGOs, children from local schools and the Office of the President of the Assembly, to develop a provisional, organic, and inclusive plan of action. Two experts

¹⁰ For further information please see <https://cpip.ucanmakechange2.org/cpip/>

¹¹ <https://rm.coe.int/168046c478>

¹² For further information please contact Cath Larkins at info@pencom.eu.

¹³ How can we improve child participation in EU policymaking? A joint study on child participation in EU political and democratic life by Rand Europe and Eurochild, contracted by the European Commission, available on-line at:

<https://eurochild.org/news/how-can-we-improve-child-participation-in-eu-policymaking/>

¹⁴ AS/Soc/Child/Inf (2019) 01, Expert memorandum on Promoting child participation in and through the Parliamentary Assembly, prepared by Anne Catherine Crowley, Independent consultant, United Kingdom

¹⁵ AS/Soc/Child/Inf (2019) 04, Summary of replies to the Child participation Survey

¹⁶ From Austria, Azerbaijan, France, Georgia, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Turkey, Ukraine, and United Kingdom

on children's rights and child participation were subsequently selected to give advice, and a methodological guide¹⁷ as well as an evaluation model¹⁸ were prepared and shared with parliamentarians. A theoretical base was developed, and many theoretical models were discussed. This report sets the scene on this and will, I hope, enable the Council of Europe to re-examine practice and build on all our experiences.

15. As stated earlier, original plans have been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools and education centres have been closed or only opened sporadically. Teachers, children, and parents have been under stress and it has been impossible to have face-to-face meetings. This required a re-consideration of what could be achieved in such adverse conditions, and what might be useful for this report. The Sub-Committee on Children has continued to meet online, and updates of progress have been shared. I have attended several webinars and other meetings and listened to children's experiences (particularly regarding the pandemic) and have carried out consultations with a few individuals and organisations online. The parliamentarians involved with schools and clubs have continued to work, to the best of their ability, to encourage child participation in various ways. Most work has been carried out online. Such meetings have inevitably been less satisfactory than physical face-to-face meetings. At the same time, one advantage of this is that it has been possible to involve more children than would otherwise been achievable.

a) Examples of good practice

16. In the United Kingdom, we have worked with Burntwood School in London. This is a comprehensive school educating girls from 11 to 18 years, multi-ethnic and multifaith, from all backgrounds. It has been a UNICEF Rights Respecting School (RRS) since 2008 and has gained UNICEF's top award of the gold standard. The school has 100 "Ambassadors" who take responsibility for running school assemblies and visiting primary schools in the area to talk about children's rights. As one facilitator put it, "Primary schools love it. They feel a real connection with the older pupils." Several senior pupils are involved in a circuit of schools who run conferences in conjunction with the UN and there is an active School Council.

17. PACE member Lord Simon Russell of Liverpool contacted the school to explain the Council of Europe initiative. The Headteacher approved and the Deputy Head, Katelyn Farrenson, became the facilitator. She included the Council of Europe initiative in her programme on "Social Responsibility and Democracy" which involves students from age 11 to 17 in discussions on rights and responsibilities in both school and society. A small group and the facilitator have presented the initiative at two sessions. The children were encouraged to find something they were passionate about (for example, mental health, climate change) and discuss what they can do about it, with the help of the parliamentarians. Lord Russell, and I, to a lesser extent, kept in touch with the facilitator on a regular basis. The activities were carried out online, apart from when the school was not in lockdown. He has recently, once they opened, visited the school, and talked to a group of older students. The students readily incorporated the principles of the Council of Europe materials which helped to further discussions. The facilitator said that the Council had opened a new perspective to the learning and was a light in the difficulties and stress generated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

18. Lord Russell and I plan to invite a group of students from the school into Parliament this autumn to meet with parliamentarians working in an area chosen by the students as well as attend a parliamentary session. We will also try to get them into a committee meeting of interest to them. The students will be prepared for this by our visiting the school to discuss the programme for such a visit.

19. The Irish Senator Joe O'Reilly, Member of the PACE Social Affairs Committee, led the initiative to involve *Fofoige* in the Assembly work on child participation. The organisation *Fofoige* has branches all over Ireland. It engages over 50,000 young people aged 8 to 24 and 5,500 volunteers. Its vision is "*An Ireland that believes in every young person, that includes you.*" It focuses on uniqueness, creativity, taking responsibility, relations with others, making a difference in the world, having an influence, and learning from every situation. The Ombudsperson for Ireland is supportive and involved. The work includes a "Big Sister, Big Brother" mentoring programme and others on "Youth Citizens", "Youth Leaders up" and "Youth Entrepreneurship". It has its own Charter of Rights. It produces a wide range of publications, including posters. *Fofoige* works with other organisations, such as the Irish Youth Justice Service and programmes on sexual health. Children are involved in developing aims and objectives for every programme and evaluating them.

20. Senator O'Reilly has kept in touch with *Fofoige* and involved them in two presentations at Council of Europe events, on children's rights, the right to safety online and climate change. The methods of working on

¹⁷ AS/Soc/Inf (2020) 01rev, Proposal for a Methodology on Child Participation in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, prepared by Ms Zsuzsanna Rutai, independent children's rights consultant

¹⁸ Framework for Evaluating Children's Participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, prepared by Cath Larkins

children's rights and increasing knowledge of democracy in societies are fully described in their report to the Parliamentary Assembly and follow the materials produced by the Assembly. Over 130 young people aged 15 to 18 were involved. Senator O'Reilly described his role in the Council of Europe and what it stands for. Some participants had heard of the Council of Europe but were initially uncertain about the roles of the different European organisations. After the discussion they noted that the most important function of this organisation was that of upholding the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, and ensure that countries do not see war as a solution to conflicts and disagreements.

21. The group researched and discussed the rights of young people, using Council of Europe materials as well as other similar ones. A poll was taken on 9 topics, one of which would be presented to Senator O'Reilly. The chosen one was the right to protection while using the internet. The group expressed their wish that the Parliamentary Assembly streamline this topic across all 47 member states as a priority and engage with schools and youth groups in the consultation process.¹⁹ The group also discussed my colleague Jennifer de Temmerman's report on climate change and prepared their own presentation with their concerns and recommendations on what governments could do. This was presented to the Social Affairs Committee in December 2020 and in June 2021 and reflected children's frustration about climate change and the lack of dialogue between generations. They discussed the Sustainable Development Goals and concluded that their generation would have enormous influence on future change.

22. The young people who took part in these discussions expressed their appreciation of "an opportunity to engage in a consultation process directly with PACE." They also noted that presenting to a parliamentarian felt like they were making a difference or starting the process of change and that it was very important for young people to have opportunities to engage and be heard.

b) Hearings

23. As part of the above-mentioned activities children from Azerbaijan, France, Ireland, and United Kingdom attended face-to-face and on-line public hearings organised by the Social Affairs Committee in November 2019 - June 2021. They made presentations and took part in the discussions. They expressed their feelings, shared their research, and made practical recommendations. Children from 10- to 18-years-old took part in these meetings and were accompanied by their teachers or NGO leaders. This has been a very enriching experience both for the children and the parliamentarians.

24. The children involved considered that children knew best what their needs were, they should be involved in every discussion affecting them, and it was a great idea to involve children in the work of parliaments. Some ideas put forward were: children should be able to choose their own representatives; the language used in the consultations needed to be simpler and more understandable; and it was important to define how we knew what worked. Combinations of different ways of participation were needed, and a step-by-step approach should be applied. The children felt that participation had a substantial impact on their psychological development and positive implications on self-control, responsibility, communication skills and the ability to perceive others' point of view, as well as expressing one's own opinions. Being able to discuss their problems and to ask for help allowed children to lower stress levels and to build better foundations for their future. The negative effects of not participating included high levels of uncertainty and anxiety. The main reasons for children not participating included: lack of experience and the lack of opportunities for expressing their feelings, opinions and wishes. Adults could help children prepare from an early age to make decisions by and for themselves, by giving them freedom and options to make choices, while ensuring the necessary control and providing support. Adults could also advise children on the possible consequences of their decisions, and arrange children's participation at different levels, in accordance with their age and maturity.

c) Next steps

25. While the work is still in progress, and this chapter is still to be completed – hopefully with examples from other colleagues, I think we can conclude already that there are many ways to support child participation in the Assembly. Much has been written, many reports have been produced and much valuable discussion has taken place, but I expect that many colleagues are not aware of these important sources of ideas and recommendations.

26. Achieving child participation requires effort but it is exciting and fulfilling. Such participation can be integrated within the existing school and NGOs programmes and activities. It can be very basic or very ambitious, depending on the available resources. It requires political support and individual commitment. My

¹⁹ Consequently, following Mr O'Reilly's initiative, the draft motion on "The children's right to protection while using the internet" was submitted to the Committee on Social Affairs for consideration at the meeting on 9 September 2021.

suggestion would be to enshrine in the Rules of Procedure of the Parliamentary Assembly an obligation to consult children on all the reports that deal with issues that can affect children's lives (and not necessarily only those that deal specifically with children's rights), to propose several simple models, and to provide practical and easy-to-use tools for such participation. There is already a great deal of expertise and experience available on this subject, and the support materials developed as part of the preparation of this report could be a good starting point.

27. I am keen to hear more about the efforts of my colleague, Jennifer de Temmerman, with regard to involving children in issues related to climate change. We have already held a useful exchange of views and have held mutual sessions with children.

28. I hope that we will be able to hold displays and events during a PACE plenary session in order to inform, consult and inspire colleagues to take on board the importance of children's rights and child participation.

29. I am in negotiations about the prospect of producing a child led, child-friendly report, based on this initiative, for use in schools and other arenas where children meet.

4. Overview of existing practices

30. In this section, I will consider some other existing practices, which illustrate what can be done to encourage children to learn about democratic principles and human rights; to help them gain participation skills, and to involve them effectively in decision-making processes. The contexts include parliaments, schools, youth organisations, international organisations, local government, and the voluntary sector (NGOs). I recognise that there will be many more examples of good practice experienced by colleagues, and hopefully these will be useful in future deliberations on how the Council of Europe, this Assembly, and national parliaments might move forward with a strategy for child participation as a foundation for democratic societies.

4.1. The Council of Europe

31. The Council of Europe, which was set up to protect and promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in its 47 member States, considers child participation of crucial importance for achieving its objectives. Its Strategy for the Rights of the Child is developed by the Children's Rights Division. It promotes child participation both as a key strategic objective and as a cross cutting approach that is mainstreamed into the organisation's standard-setting, monitoring, and co-operation activities. To support such participation, a Council of Europe Safeguarding Policy is currently under preparation. It will cover a broad range of issues, from data protection and consent arrangements to ensuring that no child labour is involved when running procurement procedures. The Children's Rights Division is currently updating the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child and involving a wide number of contributors, including children, NGOs, and parliamentarians.

32. The Council of Europe aims to support its member States in strengthening democracy and human rights by facilitating the development of common basic standards that the governments agree upon ("standard-setting"), putting in place procedures for checking if these standards are respected ("monitoring"), and helping the countries to work together on bridging the gaps ("co-operation"). The main contributors to this work in the area of children's rights are the Children's Rights Division and Youth and Education Departments, but virtually all other parts of the Organisation are involved.

a) Standard setting: agreeing on common rules

33. In 2012, the member States adopted the Recommendation on participation of children and young people under the age of 18²⁰, which provides practical guidelines on the rights of children and young people to be heard in all settings. Also in 2012, the member States adopted the Recommendation on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, thus undertaking to promote democratic governance in all educational institutions "both as a desirable and beneficial method of governance in its own right and as a practical means of learning and experiencing democracy and respect for human rights." These recommendations express the political consensus on child participation and provide a useful basis for the development of national legislation. They also underpin co-operation activities that bring together government officials, professionals, and civil society representatives from the 47 member States.

34. In the youth sector, back in 1995, the Council of Europe introduced a ground-breaking co-management system. Within this system both representatives of public authorities responsible for youth issues and young

²⁰ Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18

Europeans have an equal say, and exchange ideas and experiences. Through this co-operation, mutual understanding and respect are developed and the legitimacy of the decisions made gets reinforced, enabling their effective implementation.²¹ One of the main aims of this system is to bring the youth perspective to the Council of Europe's work, and its deliberations often lead to the adoption of resolutions, recommendations and treaties, such as the "Revised European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life".²² A motion for a PACE resolution on the establishment of a youth partner status with the Assembly was recently tabled.²³ The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities operates a youth delegates scheme, whereby one youth delegate per member state is selected following an open call and they take part in the Congress sessions for one year, undertaking projects and advising the Congress on various issues.²⁴

b) Monitoring and evaluation: assessing progress

35. Efforts have been made to include children in monitoring activities, which aim to assess to what extent the countries uphold the commitments voluntarily undertaken under various treaties. The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse ("Lanzarote Convention"), requires criminalisation of sexual offences against children. The countries that have ratified the Convention ("Parties to the Convention") undertake to prevent sexual violence, to protect child victims and to prosecute offenders. The Committee of the Parties to the Convention ("Lanzarote Committee") monitors whether the countries effectively implement the Convention. It seeks the views of civil society and requires countries to "encourage the participation of children, according to their evolving capacity, in the development and the implementation of state policies, programmes or other initiatives" (Article 9 (1)). Guidelines for the Implementation of Child Participation have been developed to support the 2nd thematic monitoring round on "The protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs)."

36. The role of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights is to foster the effective observance of human rights, identify possible shortcomings in the law and practice, and assist member states in the implementation of human rights standards. Commissioner Dunja Mijatović gives high priority to child participation and has recently pointed out that few governments "have made systematic efforts to institutionalise mechanisms at different levels for children to participate actively and meaningfully in all decisions that affect them. In many countries children still face challenges in accessing information about their rights and national policies that affect them."²⁵

37. Children play an active role in high profile evaluation events, such as the Conference on "Redefining Power: Strengthening the rights of the child as the key to a future-proof Europe", which was organised in 2019 to review mid-term progress with the implementation of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child.²⁶ Similarly, the "Learning to Live Together" Conference, held in 2017, aimed at reviewing the implementation of the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education.

38. The Child Participation Assessment Tool provides indicators to measure progress in implementing the Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18. The Tool is accompanied by an Implementation Guide with a roadmap and detailed guidance on information collection and focus groups, based on the results of reporting to the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child. It was tested in Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, and Romania.

c) Co-operation: working together to improve the situation

39. In April 2021, the Council of Europe and its Partners from the Czech Republic, Finland, Iceland, Portugal and Slovenia, launched the EU-CoE Joint Project "CP4EUROPE - Strengthening National Child Participation Frameworks and Action in Europe" which they will implement until 31 March 2023. The expected results include child participation assessments and improved national frameworks, as well as the creation of a "Child participation leadership network", and a new webpage to facilitate the sharing of resources and experiences.

²¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/co-management>

²² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/adopted-texts-and-recommendations>

²³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/co-operation-between-the-parliamentary-assembly-and-the-advisory-council-on-youth-intensifies>

²⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/youth-delegates>

²⁵ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/boosting-child-and-youth-participation-from-voice-to-choice?inheritRedirect=true&redirect=%2Fen%2Fweb%2Fcommissioner>

²⁶ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/strengthening-the-rights-of-the-child-as-the-key-to-a-future-proof-europe>

40. For successful child participation, adults working with children need to be duly prepared and trained. The Council of Europe develops practical materials based on existing practice and lessons learned. Among the latest examples there is the publication of “New and innovative forms of youth participation in decision-making processes”²⁷ and the Handbook on children’s participation “Listen – Act – Change”, both for professionals working with children.²⁸ The HELP Online course on “Child-friendly Justice and Children’s Rights” supports child participation within the justice system.²⁹

41. Child participation is also promoted through the Europe Prize, which was set up in 1955 by the Parliamentary Assembly to reward towns which champion European ideals, for example, by means of twinning of towns, European events, or exchanges between educational establishments. Towns must apply first for the European Diploma, then for the Flag of Honour and the Plaque of Honour. The Europe Prize Sub-Committee, of which I am a member, adjudicates on each category annually. In 2021, a new Europe Prize trophy replaced the original trophy. It was designed by a team of young graphic artists from the Strate School of Design in France. The city of Khmelnytski, in Ukraine, was the winner of the Europe Prize trophy in 2021. I am always delighted to see, when we examine the entries for awards, the emphasis which is placed on involving children and young people. This year, for example, I visited (virtually) the town of Meudon (near Paris) to present the Plaque of Honour. Meudon is outstanding in involving young people in the life of the town. It runs Europe Clubs to raise awareness about European issues among young people, organises visits to the European institutions for young people from the city’s youth sites and for young, elected officials of the Municipal Youth Council, and involves children in World War II commemorations. Apart from this formal competition, many parliamentarians will be aware of the numerous activities in their local towns where children are involved in community service, and where local councillors encourage child participation.

4.2. Other international institutions

42. The European Union has expressed a clear commitment to child participation, including in the Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 24), the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and the EU Agenda on the Rights of the Child. As previously mentioned, in 2021, the European Commission published a “Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life.”³⁰ The study covers a broad range of mechanisms that have been implemented since 2012 across 28 countries. During this research, over 200 children and young people shared their experiences. Thanks to leading child rights organisations, the Commission received over 10,000 online submissions from children on the new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. The Commission is also publishing child-friendly versions of the report and of the Strategy. The European Forum on the Rights of the Child is an annual conference, which gathers key actors, international organisations, NGOs, Ombudspersons for children, practitioners, academics, and EU institutions to promote good practice.

43. In the European Parliament, *Parliamentariums* in Brussels and Strasbourg offer a role-play game for young people. They are installed in a dedicated space as part of a permanent exhibition. The role-play game accommodates 16 to 32 players aged 14 and above. It lasts for about 2.5 hours and must be pre-booked around 4 months in advance. The young people are given the roles of MEPs of four political groups discussing two fictitious cases, the aim being to simulate the legislative process. The game is fully automated, and the students use mobile phones to guide them through the game.³¹

44. Established in 1987, the European Youth Parliament (EYP) is a peer-to-peer educational programme operating in 40 countries across Europe. Its mission is “to inspire and empower young Europeans to become open-minded, tolerant, and active citizens.” It operates through a network of organisations of National Committees across Europe and provides a forum for young people to express opinions on a wide range of topics. Most participants are aged 16–25 years. Overall, more than 500 EYP events are organised each year at local, national, and international levels and more than 30,000 young people take part in those activities.

²⁷ <https://rm.coe.int/new-and-innovative-forms-of-youth-participation-in-decision-making-pro/1680759e6a>

²⁸ Many other publications are available on-line in many languages. The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) is a set of materials that can be used by education systems “to equip young people with the competences that are needed to [...] to participate effectively in a culture of democracy, and to live peacefully together with others in culturally diverse societies”. “Living with controversy - a toolkit for handling controversy in schools” aims to assist educators in helping children to develop skills for respectful dialogue on difficult issues. “Democratic governance of schools” is a manual for school heads, which aims to promote participation of children, but also of their parents and the broader community in the life of the school. Compass and Compasito include training modules on human rights with young people and children. Policy reviews on child and youth participation provide a comprehensive analysis of the compliance of national legislation, policies, and practice with a child’s right to participation.

²⁹ <https://rm.coe.int/help-course-brief-child-friendly-justice/16808b4f27>

³⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child_participation_final_raport_revised_28.04.2021_final_web_pdf.pdf

³¹ <https://visiting.europarl.europa.eu/en/visitor-offer/brussels/parlamentarium> and <https://visiting.europarl.europa.eu/en/visitor-offer/strasbourg/parlamentarium-simone-veil>

45. Children contribute to reporting procedures in the framework of several UN mechanisms, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has integrated child participation in its work in many other ways. Children participate in the design, planning, and organisation of the General Discussion Days.³² The Committee consults with children during the drafting process of its general comments. The Committee engages children in various events, including anniversaries of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

4.3. Parliaments: experiencing democracy

46. Many parliaments across the world are engaged in initiatives and programmes involving children. The publication of “Parliaments promoting Democracy”³³ showcases how some 50 countries around the world are promoting democracy, particularly among young people. It follows a survey conducted by the Austrian Parliament in the lead-up to the Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in August 2020, which it co-hosted virtually with the IPU and the United Nations. A Handbook on Child Participation in Parliament published in 2014 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UNICEF aims “to provide parliamentarians with information on a variety of mechanisms designed to ensure that children’s participation in parliaments is meaningful, reflects the voices of the most marginalised, and contributes to policies, laws, and budgets that intend to correct the disparities and inequities that afflict the world’s children.”³⁴ A review of national children and youth parliaments is included in the recently published “Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life.”³⁵ In what follows, I can only give a snapshot of various approaches, but more information is available on websites or by contacting the programmes concerned.

a) Outreach activities: examples of learning about rights and democracy

47. In the United Kingdom the Parliament runs an Engagement Programme and has an Education Department.³⁶ Visits to Parliament are organised for the public and resources such as booklets, videos, and posters are sent out on request. There are specific resources for children of different ages. Workshops for schools are run by Education Centre staff using participatory methods, including group discussion, role play and games, depending on age, to help children understand how Government works and what children can do to have influence. Outreach work involves MPs and Peers visiting schools or other youth settings to present what Parliament does and their role in it. MPs also have links with Local Government structures and can introduce children to this aspect of democracy. Under the Programme “Learning with the Lords”³⁷, Peers visit schools and invite schools to Parliament. Recently, the Lord Speaker has asked me to set up a small group of Peers involved in this programme to explore, and report back to him on which structures across Parliament work with children and young people and in what manner specifically. We hope to report back by next March.

48. The Austrian Parliament has an educational programme,³⁸ which includes a Democracy Workshop,³⁹ consisting of workshops for students in grades 3 to 9. These participatory workshops introduce the foundations of democracy and parliamentary life, including the role of European institutions. I had the pleasure, when in Austria for a PACE meeting, of attending one of these workshops and was invited to a discussion after the event. The students were curious and informed about Europe and asked and responded to questions with confidence. The Parliament also runs a Youth Parliament and Apprentices Forum. In the Youth Parliament, participants have discussion groups, argue their positions, and vote on topical issues. Its proceedings are videorecorded, and a newspaper covers these activities. In the Apprentices Forum, participants learn about democracy and what it means to each of them, the role of Parliament and how people can influence the democratic process. The Civics Education Department runs these workshops and liaises with the Ministry of Education in relation to school involvement.

49. In the Republic of Moldova, the game “Know Your Parliament” was devised to encourage young people to get involved in decision-making processes. The first round takes place in the Territorial Information Offices of the Parliament, with participants from each district of the country. Teams of six students answer questions on society, democracy, the law-making process, elections, and human rights. The winners of the first round go through to the final one, which takes place in the Parliament building and is organised as a quest contest.

³² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crc/pages/discussiondays.aspx>

³³ <https://www.ipu.org/es/node/10761>

³⁴ <http://archive.ipu.org/PDF/publications/child-parl-e.pdf>

³⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/child_participation_final_raport_revised_28.04.2021_final_web_pdf.pdf

³⁶ <https://learning.parliament.uk/en/>

³⁷ <https://learning.parliament.uk/en/session-workshop/learn-with-the-lords-online/>

³⁸ <https://www.demokratiewebstatt.at/>

³⁹ <https://www.demokratiewebstatt.at/fileadmin/360-dws-virtual/>

The teams pass through 6 rooms - museum, library, press conference room, Europe Hall, a meeting room, and the Plenary Hall. In each place the participants pass an intellectual test, and teams can only move from one room to the next after finding the password. The ranking is based on the quest completion time and the results of the tests. At the end, the participants are awarded certificates by the Speaker of the Parliament.

50. Every other year, Denmark holds three-week long “School Elections”, in which 13- to 16-year-olds simulate the entire process of a real parliamentary election – from the announcement of the election through to broadcasting of the polling results on TV. The programme is designed to strengthen pupils’ confidence in taking part in the political process and broaden their understanding of how elections work. The result of the elections attracts considerable interest in the Danish press.

51. The “Democracy Game” is an all-day role-play programme for secondary school students in Hungary. It demonstrates the legislative process through the example of a fictitious bill. Four school groups participate at once, representing different parties with different values. These profiles accompanied by the fictitious bill are sent to them several weeks before the event. During the preparation period they can draft amendments and familiarise themselves with the other parties’ proposed amendments. On the day, the participants attend plenary sittings, committee meetings and parliamentary group meetings, culminating in the final vote. At the end of the day, they hold a press conference. The special feature of the programme is that the coalition does not have a majority in Parliament, so all the party groups must co-operate if they want to succeed.

b) Participating in democracy: consultation leading to change

52. Ultimately, the aim of child participation is to ensure that children’s views are considered when decisions affecting their lives are made, including in parliaments. One example of how this can be done is the project on “Supporting implementation of Barnhaus (Children’s house) in Slovenia”, which was organised by the Council of Europe Children’s Rights Division in 2019-2021 to support victims and witnesses of sexual violence against children. In 2020, the Ministry of Justice held a public consultation on the draft law in which 104 children participated. These consultations were carried out in line with the Council of Europe and other international standards. Following this consultation, in 2021 the National Assembly of Slovenia adopted the Law on Child Protection (“Barnhaus Law”). The children evaluated the process positively. They appreciated that their opinions were valued and expressed interest in taking part in similar activities in the future.

53. Some parliaments, such as those of Germany and Turkey, have established children’s rights committees that examine all laws, policies, and the government budget from a child rights perspective. Such committees can not only invite children to participate in their proceedings and provide testimony but also set up mechanisms for ongoing participation.

54. In the UK, All Party Parliamentary Groups (which include members from all Parties in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords) often invite experts on a particular topic to address the group in order to add to their knowledge. Several groups are concerned with different aspects of children’s rights and welfare. Ministers frequently speak at these groups. Children also speak and attend meetings where their interests are involved. Such involvement of children can impact on the views of Ministers and members of groups. Frequently children are asked to follow-up meetings for further consultation. The select Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights seeks the views of children as relevant.

55. My own view is that a child impact assessment should be made on all Bills affecting children and that children should be part of such assessments.

4.4. The voluntary sector

56. The voluntary sector and its Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are of unique importance in supporting children. There are many international organisations defending children’s rights (such as *Save the Children*, *Child Rights International Network* (CRIN), *Defence for Children International* (DCI) and *Child Rights Connect*), and every country has its own NGOs specialising in children’s issues and collaborating where appropriate (ex. on-line safety). The Centre for Human Rights in Geneva has a children’s rights section with whom the Council of Europe has worked specifically on the issue of safeguarding children and young people in sports. NGOs have grass roots information about children in all contexts and can inform parliamentarians directly, via briefings and meetings. In the United Kingdom, they provide enormous support to All Party Parliamentary Groups for children and other issues. All NGOs I know of have children on their governing bodies or create separate advisory panels, as does the Children’s Commissioner. Some provide services, such as professional training. *Save the Children* has developed a “Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children’s

participation.”⁴⁰ The toolkit provides a conceptual framework, guidance on how to undertake monitoring and evaluation and practical tools, for the organisations working directly with children, child- and youth-led organisations, and for governments that are committed to fulfilling their obligations to respect children’s right to participate.

57. *Eurochild* is a network of organisations and individuals who work with and for children in Europe and has a membership across Europe. They are committed to child participation. *Eurochild* works closely with the European Union and the Council of Europe. It has a Children’s Council, National *Eurochild* Forums and a Child Participation Reference Group. They have produced a resource developed with children and for children which explains the EC Recommendation on Investing in Children. They hold webinars and support participation of children in relevant fora such as the high-profile event held by the European Parliament in Brussels for the 30th anniversary of the UNCRC.⁴¹ They produce policy briefings, working papers and reports on issues which affect the lives of children. Membership is open to all organisations and individuals with an interest in the rights and wellbeing of children and young people.

4.5. Schools and the youth sector

58. Many schools are actively promoting child participation. One example of such work is the Rights Respecting Schools Programme (RSS) run by UNICEF UK. Other national committees of UNICEF are also actively engaged, including Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, and France. More than 5,000 schools across the United Kingdom are currently involved with 1.7 million children and young people. This includes primary and secondary schools, schools for children with special needs and pupil referral units (for disaffected students). The focus is “to work with schools to create safe and inspiring places to learn, where children’s rights are respected, their talents are nurtured, and they are able to thrive.” There are 4 key areas of impact for children: wellbeing, participation, relationships, and self-esteem. The premise is that children who understand their rights understand how they and others should be treated and their sense of self-worth is strengthened.

59. An extensive website supports the programme, including guidance and case studies. There is a training programme for teachers who then share their learning with colleagues. The Head of the RSS UK, Frances Bentley, said, in an interview, that schools must have ownership of the programme. They do not use only UNICEF materials but invent their own and adapt. It is important to have the headteacher and senior staff supportive for RSS to become a whole school approach to empower staff and pupils. The programme links to other initiatives in school from government, local authorities, and the voluntary sector. A school can apply for a RRS award, beginning with bronze and going on, the silver and gold. Some students from the school who have gone on to higher education have set up their own version of RRS. The programme works in settings outside schools, for example in madrassas (religious schools, which are attached to mosques). The Deputy Headteacher who leads the programme in Burntwood also works with an LGBT group outside the school.

60. The programme has been extensively evaluated for its impact on students, teachers, and entire schools. Between 2017 and 2019, UNICEF gathered evidence from 190,000 students and 20,000 staff. This survey found that children know about rights, can exercise their rights, feel valued and recognise the rights of others. School headteachers and staff were overwhelmingly positive about the programme.⁴² In 2020, the Equality and Human Rights Commissions published a research report on 10 RRS schools. The report showed the impact on attainment, attendance, and a reduction in racist and other prejudiced attitudes.⁴³

61. I can testify personally to the success of the RRS. Some years ago, I was a School Governor of a primary school in South London. It was a challenging school with several homeless families, a high incidence of free school meals (an indication of poverty), with over 40 different languages and many children entering school with no English. Academic and behavioural standards were low. It was classed by inspectors as a “special needs” school. The governors appointed a new headteacher who had worked in Rights Respecting Schools. She immediately brought in the programme. Staff were trained, the school appearance was changed with the paintings and other work of pupils displayed around the premises, each class developed its own set of class rules, a School Council was set up. A room for parents was included. A school garden was built. School pets lived in cages in school and children were responsible for their care. New ways of teaching were

⁴⁰ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document-collections/toolkit-monitoring-and-evaluating-childrens-participation>

⁴¹ <https://www.eurochild.org/event/celebrating-30-years-of-the-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child/>

⁴² <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/impact-of-rrsa/>

⁴³ Culhane L. and McGeough E. (2020), *Respect, Equality, Participation: Exploring Humans Rights Education*, available on-line at:

https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/respect_equality_participation_exploring_human_rights_education_in_great_britain.pdf

brought in. Absenteeism was reduced and behaviour improved, academic attainment rose, and more parents were involved and supportive. Within 2 years, the school was judged, by inspectors, to be excellent.

62. I hope to be able to include other examples from colleagues in PACE of work they know about in these sectors. Such contributions will be included in the final report.

5. Preliminary conclusions

63. The Council of Europe with its relevant Divisions and Committees has produced a great deal of excellent work on child welfare, child protection and child empowerment. There are a number of highly committed and knowledgeable people amongst staff and parliamentarians. I feel that we could benefit from a “drawing together” of initiatives in order to have a picture of what we do in relation to child participation and how this has been received and how we might proceed in developing what has been achieved. I would suggest that a panel be convened consisting of parliamentarians, a member of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF), a member of the Lanzarote Committee, a representative from the Children’s Rights Division, the Youth and Education Departments, Eurochild, an agreed number of children, and an independent expert on child participation. Its remit would be to draw together information (in particular, examples of how children have influenced laws and policies) and to suggest next moves. I would suggest that the panel be chaired by either the President of the Parliamentary Assembly or its Secretary General.

64. During work on my last report on the “Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children’s rights”⁴⁴, I was impressed by the wish from representatives of the European Commission and of the European Parliament to collaborate on relevant issues. If the suggested panel on child participation were to be created, I believe that involvement with the EU institutions on child participation could be productive and effective. How that might work would, of course, be up to the three organisations to decide.

65. This report maintains, as do those with whom I have worked in its development, that the opinions and perceptions of children should be considered in all settings, including when forming, and assessing policy in democratic institutions. Child participation should be part of policy development and implementation in areas such as health, education, migration, family, and community affairs. Children have repeatedly shown themselves to be able to participate in decision making. As one 9-year-old said, “we children are more acceptable and reliable than society gives us credit for. Give us the opportunity to participate.”⁴⁵

66. The pandemic has been a difficult time for us all, and children have suffered disproportionately. At the same time, it may have enabled stock-taking for individuals and groups about who they are, what they want to achieve, how they might help others, as well as the benefits and dangers of online engagement. Many local communities have sprung to life during the strictures of Covid-19. Re-thinking our possibilities for involving children in democratic societies could be refreshing and practical. I feel that now is a good time for us to assess what has been achieved and what we could further achieve.

67. While the principle of child participation has been widely acknowledged, too often it becomes tokenism and consequently fails to make a real difference in children’s lives. The main conclusion that emerged from my discussions with different partners is that child participation must be meaningful and sustainable. For this, it needs to be thoroughly prepared, supported with sufficient resources, and integrated with existing structures and working methods.

68. Meaningful participation requires more than just talking to children. Children’s views must be given serious consideration, and they need to be informed about the outcomes of their participation.

69. The difficulty of reaching children from various backgrounds, especially vulnerable groups, needs to be addressed more assiduously. I am particularly concerned about those children who are vulnerable and underprivileged or suffer prejudice – those who live in poverty, are disabled, are from minority backgrounds, are migrants or refugees, are LGBT. It can happen that such children are not involved in activities such as debates, youth parliaments and school councils, often because they lack confidence or are simply disregarded. We need to be aware of this and ensure equality of opportunity for all children.

70. Feedback from children showed that they felt most empowered when they were involved throughout the procedure and when there were opportunities for them to meet other children. They felt that they were listened to, and often went on to become human rights activists. Adult-led spaces and procedures were often overwhelming.

⁴⁴ <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/29352#trace-4>

⁴⁵ International Conference on “Children’s Participation in Decision-Making and Policy-Making at European Union level

71. I am convinced that parliamentarians can be instrumental and a positive force, in encouraging children to participate in, and contribute to organisational thinking in the context of democratic societies, as well as to learn about their rights. Such participation needs to be given higher priority within the parliaments, and it should be integrated in the working methods, through the rules of procedure and the work of committees.

72. Any work with children must be done with caution. Like for health professionals, “do no harm” should be the underlying principle for any action. Both adults and children need to be duly trained and prepared, to ensure respect and protection from excessive exposure or abuse. Any organisation working with children should have a safeguarding policy, as well as mechanisms to prevent and reduce negative experiences, and to address any issues promptly and effectively. I have often found it useful to consult with particular NGOs about child welfare when, for example, children visit Parliament.

73. Children’s rights and the concept of democratic societies are closely linked. Learning about rights reinforces the strength of democracies and learning about democracy reinforces the need to understand rights. Given that democracy is currently facing many challenges, child participation is an essential tool for laying the foundations of future Europe that is prosperous, peaceful, fair, and caring.