

# **Child participation structures in Ireland: implementation of agency rights in the UNCRC**

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Thesis submitted in the framework of the  
Master of Advanced Studies in Children's Rights

30 September 2016

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## List of abbreviations

AGM	Annual General Meeting
CDB	City and County Development Board
CNN	Comhairle na nÓg
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CoE	Council of Europe
DNN	Dáil na nÓg
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DECLG	Department of Environment, Community and Local Government
DoHC	Department of Health and Children
LA	Local Authority
LCDC	Local Community Development Committee
LECP	Local Economic and Community Plan
NCO	National Children's Office
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OMC	Office of the Minister for Children
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
PPN	Public Participation Network
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

## **Executive Summary**

This dissertation explores how children's agency rights became prominent in Irish public policy and analyses the effectiveness of Comhairle na nÓg (child and youth councils) as a mechanism for realisation of UNCRC agency rights. It investigates the practice standards, funding, governance, support for and operation of the Comhairle na nÓg (CNN) structure in meaningfully enabling the voice of children and young people to be heard by adult decision-makers with influence. It also focusses on the effectiveness of the CNN structure in enabling children and young people to have a voice on and participate in decision-making on issues that affect their everyday lives.

## **Methodology**

The research methods adopted include: desk based research on international and national peer reviewed literature on childhood studies, sociology, law, education, human rights; a review of international and national good practice guides; a review of formal evaluations, grey literature and meeting notes; semi structured interviews with adult stakeholders; and a focus group with young people. Best practice was adhered to on ethical considerations.

## **Children's agency in the UNCRC**

Historical perspectives on the sociological and psychological perceptions of childhood were examined in the period leading to the development of the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1924 (League of Nations, 1924) and of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The priority afforded by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to respect for the views of the child was noted to have been strengthened by its General Comment 12 (CRC Committee, 2009). The dissertation reviewed a number of interpretations of Article 12 of the UNCRC with particular focus on the debate on children's entitlements to collective rights under Article 12. The rights of children to collective rights under Article 12 was argued using Lundy's (2007) model of participation.

## **Children's agency rights in Irish public policy and the development of a structure to realise agency rights**

A review of the historical context of children's rights in Ireland revealed that in response to the Concluding Observations on Ireland first report (CRC Committee, 1998), the Irish Government developed its first National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000). Under this Strategy, a National Children's Office (NCO) was established in 2001 as a dedicated Government agency with a Junior Minister to lead on its implementation. The findings note the very significant impact of the Concluding Observations on Irish public policy, evidenced by the fact that the Foreword of the Strategy was written by the Taoiseach [Prime Minister] who referred to it being: "Rooted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child" (DoHC, 2000, p. ).

It was found that children's agency rights had a prominent place in the Strategy. Goal 1 of the Strategy stated that "*children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity*" (DoH, 2000, p. 11 ). Under Goal 1, local and national structures for the voice of the child were established to give expression to Article 12 of the UNCRC. It is noted that in 2002, CNN were established in the 34 local authority areas to give children and young people (under the age of 18) a voice in the development of local services and policies. In a move that was found to be very progressive at the time, a dedicated Unit was established in the NCO to take the lead national role on implementation of Goal 1. It is found that in the ensuing years, evidence-based policy, improved structures and best practice to deliver on children and young people's participation were developed.

The NCO evolved to become a full Government department in 2011 - the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). Throughout this period, there was no dilution of the commitment to oversee implementation of Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy or any reduction in the budget allocated to this area of work. Indeed, increased funding was allocated in 2007 to enable more strategic and sustained support for the development of the 34 CNN.

The dissertation found that the CNN structure was significantly developed and improved in the years following its inception in 2002. It is evidenced that improvements to the structure and its operation at national and local level were informed by feedback from children and young people and international good practice. At the end of the first three years, the Fund was deemed by an independent evaluator to be delivering on its objectives and had become a regular part of the DCYA annual budget (McEvoy, 2011). It is a finding of the dissertation that such good practice is rare in the literature. There remains a paucity of research on what the impacts of participation are (Sinclair, 2004, p. 114; Kirby and Bryson, 2002).

The key developments that led to a strengthening of the CNN structure were evidenced to be the establishment of the CNN Development Fund in 2007, the establishment of the Children and Young People's Participation Support Team in 2009, and the publication of a Toolkit to support the organisers of CNN in 2011. These developments are evidence of the ambition of the Irish Government to strengthen the capacity of CNN as a mechanism to enable the participation of children and young people in decision-making at local level. The dissertation then explored the impact of this ambition.

### **The impact of the CNN Development Fund on good practice improvements**

In analysing the impact of the Fund on good practice in CNN, it was noted that its membership has grown steadily and 4,176 children and young people attended Annual General Meetings (AGMs) across the country in 2015. Two membership difficulties were consistently noted in all evaluations and annual reports of the Fund;



the challenge of attracting 12-15 year olds to CNN and that of attracting seldom-heard young people.

The evaluation reports of the first three years of the Fund noted that it resulted in “a more systematic and structurally robust programme” and that “very significantly, 72% of all Comhairlí are meeting at least once a month – and some more often” (McEvoy, 2011). By 2013, 94% of CNN reported that there had been an outcome from the young people’s participation in the structure. Many reported that young people felt listened to, that they had made a positive contribution, that they had learned a lot about the decision makers who affect their lives and felt more confident in themselves to contribute this way in future (Pobal, 2014, p. ). Mixed findings emerge on this issue and the need for better organisation of meetings and setting realistic goals continued to be an issue noted by young people. However, it was found that the regularity of CNN meetings around the country improved incrementally under the Development Fund.

Challenges raised by young people are noted to include: a lack recognition of the value of CNN in their schools; difficulties in attending meetings due to transport problems; and the need for more structured meetings and focussed work plans to achieve their goals. The dissertation notes that adult stakeholders have concerns about poor participation by seldom heard young people; the lack of respect for young people by adult decision-makers; and challenges in making an impact on their chosen topics.

It is clear that since the establishment of CNN at the start of the millennium, significant improvements have taken place in increasing children and young people’s impact on decision-making and affording them meaningful opportunities to participate in civic life. Issues that require continuous attention are noted and include efforts to include seldom-heard young people, a strengthening of engagement with decision-makers and ensuring that CNN are conducted as child rights structures.

### **The influence of the views of children and young people on the development of CNN**

The influence of the views of children and young people on the development of CNN as a nationwide structure to deliver on their agency rights at local level is explored. Commenting on this issue, Austin (2010) notes the importance of involving children in all phases of a project. The review of reports and other documents reveals that since the inception of the Fund, there were two mechanisms adopted for hearing directly from children and young people about how they would like to influence the running of CNN.

The level of influence of young people’s views on the development of CNN, at both local and national level, is analysed under themes informed by issues raised by young people themselves:

- A space for friendship and inclusion

- The operation of CNN
- Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people
- Effective engagement with decision-makers
- National development relevant to CNN

Participants commented on the friendships they developed in CNN with a more diverse range of people than their normal social circle. They value the opportunity to have a voice, to make new friends, that everyone is heard, the good teamwork and creativity and that everyone is different. Ackermann et al. (2003, p. 20) note that participatory activities can change the attitudes and knowledge of young people in relation to issues of equality and discrimination, and in particular challenge negative attitudes towards people from other backgrounds and traditions, leading to increased acceptance, tolerance and awareness of discrimination.

Other findings highlight that the views of young people on the need for inclusiveness played a pivotal role in the CNN Toolkit urging against adult style elections and promoting more inclusive ways of selecting the CNN committee, with spaces reserved for seldom-heard young people.

The findings show considerable evidence on the range of ways that young people influenced the development of CNN at local level: in determining the kind of space they want in which to realise their agency rights; in getting the chance to engage with decision-makers; in advising on the locality and type of meetings; and in having a two-year term of office to achieve their goals and make a difference. Young people were found to experience frustrations and challenges about some of the engagement with adult decision-makers, particularly when their ideas fall on deaf ears or they have no idea what happens to their views.

The dissertation notes suggestions made by young people at a networking event in 2011 on the need to bring the local activity of CNN to a national stage and strengthen the structure of CNN. These suggestions resulted in a decision by the DCYA to completely revise national child participation structures and events, evidencing the strength of the influence of young people.

Sinclair (2004) points to the need to involve children at all stages of the process with constant checking back with them and where possible gaining information from several points of reference. It can be argued that the above developments met this standard.

### **The contribution of CNN to promoting and ensuring agency in delivering international child rights commitments**

Commenting on the importance of youth participation, Checkoway (2011, p.340) argues that it recognises the potential of children to share perspectives and to participate as citizens and actors of change. The dissertation explores the

contribution of the CNN structure to promoting and enabling children's rights to agency, with reference to published critiques of youth council structures.

The achievements and challenges of the CNN structure are analysed under four themes:

- A space for realising agency rights
- Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people
- Effective engagement with decision-makers
- Structures that support CNN

The dissertation comments on the considerable criticism of youth councils in the literature. In spite of the rationale for youth councils of empowering young people, those involved reported feeling a lack of personal power (McGinley & Grieve, 2010, p. 256). However, this view is not supported by Martin, Forde, Dunn Galvin & O'Connell (2015, p106), whose study of children's view of their involvement in participation initiatives in Ireland found that the youth participants are very positive about the structured environment provided in these spaces. They enjoy their participation experience and many feel that they have fun during their activities, which enable them to feel listened to and respected. This study also found that the involvement of young people [from CNN] on Strategic Policy Committees has meant that decision-makers who would normally have little contact with children and young people are now working with them in a formal setting. These findings are supported by Marshall, Byrne, and Lundy (2015) whose study of children's and young people's face-to-face participation in public decision-making in the UK found that policymakers understood the lived experiences of their decisions more fully, and children reported that their positions were taken seriously.

The findings in the dissertation are found to be applicable internationally, with particular reference to the Council of Europe Recommendation on participation in decision-making of children and young people under the age of 18 (Council of Europe, 2012). It is proposed that the lessons learned and documented in Ireland could be used as good practice guidance on standards, funding, governance, organisation and operation of effective child and youth councils at local or regional level.

### **Policy recommendations on strengthening children's agency rights in CNN**

A key finding is that the CNN structure has made considerable progress since its inception in embedding children's participation in local decision-making and in measuring that progress. However, the evidence in this dissertation also highlights that significant improvements are required. Accordingly, policy recommendations are made on a wide range of issues including:

- Measures on the importance of the UNCRC and children's rights as the foundations for CNN.
- Proposals on statutory requirements for Local Authorities to consult with CNN.
- More effective promotion of CNN in schools.

- Measures to improve the participation of 12-15 year olds and seldom heard children and young people.
- Development of work plans to enable young people to make achievements on their topics.
- Measures towards more effective engagement with decision-makers.
- Information and guidance to Local Authorities on recruiting CNN Coordinators.
- Provision of child participation training for all CNN Coordinators.
- Measures to improve Steering Committee.

Recommendations are also included for the establishment and operation of child and youth councils internationally.

Despite the challenges noted above, the dissertation finds that CNN is a key priority at national level for the DCYA, which uses its influence to work with Government Departments and agencies at national and local level to set standards to build it as a mechanism for implementing children's agency rights. It is also observed that the development of a dedicated strategy on child participation, with commitments from all key government departments and agencies, is highly significant, particularly in view the need for high level political support and action in the international literature on child participation (Lansdown, 2010; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Martin et al., 2015).

There is strong evidence that CNN is functioning as a structure that enables children and young people to participate in decision-making on issues that affect their everyday lives. The voices of children and young people are being heard by adult decision-makers with influence, but there is evidence that significant improvement is required on this issue.

In conclusion, this dissertation found that measures to increase the effectiveness of the CNN structure as a mechanism for realisation of agency rights go a considerable distance in meeting good practice standards and may well be at the forefront of good practice internationally.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

Children should be seen and not heard! The original wording of this proverb was written by an Augustinian clergyman called John Mirk about young women. It can be found in a 14th century collections of homilies for parish priests, which read 'A mayde schuld be seen, but not herd' (Mirk, 1382).

Being seen and not heard was traditionally how children were perceived and treated in Ireland, particularly by the Catholic Church. The consequences of not listening to the voices of children and young people in Ireland are well documented. Reports such as the Kilkenny Incest Case (McGuinness, 1993), the Roscommon Case (Gibbons, 2010), the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009) and the Report of the Independent Child Death Review Group (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012) are stark reminders of the failures of individuals and systems to listen to and act on the voice of the child.

The failure to listen to children and take them seriously was to become a significant issue following Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992. The First National Report of Ireland was submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in April 1996 and was examined in 1998. In its concluding observations (CRC Committee, 1998), the Committee criticised Ireland, noting that that "the rights of the child appears to be somewhat fragmented, as there is no comprehensive national policy which fully incorporates the principles and provisions of the Convention, encompassing all the areas covered by the Convention". The Committee expressed concern that the views of the child are not generally taken into account, including within the family, at schools and in society. The Committee also stated that procedures for hearing children are not fully considered in the legislation. The Committee recommended "the adoption of a comprehensive National Strategy for Children, incorporating the principles and provisions of the Convention in a systematic manner in the designing of all its policies and programmes". The Committee also recommended the promotion and facilitation of children's participation and respect for their views in decisions and policies affecting them, especially through dialogue in the family, at school and in society, in light of articles 12, 13 and 15 of the Convention (CRC Committee).

In response to the observations of the CRC Committee, the Irish Government worked with the non-government sector and academics and developed the first National Children's Strategy in 2000 (DoHC, 2000). Under this Strategy, a National Children's Office (NCO) was established in 2001 to lead on the implementation of the Strategy. The Strategy notes that this Office was a dedicated Government agency with a Junior Minister under the responsibility of the Department of Health and Children (DoHC, 2000).

Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy (NCS) stated that "*children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in*

*accordance with their age and maturity*". Under Goal 1 of the NCS, it was noted that local and national structures for the voice of the child would be established to give expression to Article 12 of the UNCRC. It is noted in an interview in this dissertation, that it was decided to establish a dedicated Unit within the NCO with responsibility to oversee and drive implementation of Goal 1 of the Strategy.

According to the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, Goal 1 of the NCS was strongly aspirational and in full accord with Article 12 of the UNCRC. The structures and processes established under the NCS for collective participation by children in decision-making were initially inadequately funded and lacked a detailed policy focus and direction. Over time, and led by the National Children's Office, the Office of the Minister for Children and the DCYA, evidence-based policy, improved structures and best practice to deliver on children and young people's participation were developed (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015, p.6).

The DCYA has a dedicated Citizen Participation Unit, which takes the lead national role in ensuring that children have a voice on matters that affect their lives. According to DCYA (2015), the work of this Unit is responsible for much of the progress achieved under Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy through the development of effective structures for children's participation in decision-making, conducting consultations and dialogues with children and young people, and the development of evidence-based policy in keeping with national and international best practice.

In 2015, the Irish Government published its first National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (DCYA, 2015). Commenting in the Foreword, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs said:

"My Department is strongly committed to the participation of children and young people in decision-making. We are proud to be the first country in Europe to develop a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. The strategy builds on the developing infrastructure for children's participation established by my Department and other organisations since the publication of the National Children's Strategy in 2000. The strategy focuses on the everyday lives of children and young people and the places and spaces in which they are entitled to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, including in community, education, health and well-being, and legal settings. The strategy is guided and influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights".

The Strategy (DCYA, 2015, p. ) defines children and young people's participation in decision-making as "the process by which children and young people have active involvement and real influence in decision-making on matters affecting their lives,

both directly and indirectly" ( Checkoway, 2011; Couch & Francis, 2006; CoE, 2008; Save the Children, 2005).

The DCYA funds and oversees Comhairle na nÓg (CNN), DNN and the Children and Young People's Participation Support Team comprising regional Participation Officers, who provide advice, resources and training to all 31 CNN Co-ordinators. The Unit collaborates with other Government departments, statutory bodies and non-governmental organisations in providing opportunities for children and young people to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, with a strong focus on ensuring participation by seldom-heard children and young people (DCYA, 2015).

There are a number of other key structures and initiatives led and overseen by the DCYA, which are relevant to the CNN structure. Dáil na nÓg (DNN) is the national youth parliament for young people aged 12-17 years. It was established under the National Children's Strategy to provide a national forum for young people to discuss and vote on issues that affect their lives. Some 200 delegates, elected through the 31 CNN, participate in the biennial DNN event, hosted by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. As part of the day-long event, delegates get the opportunity to meet with adult decision-makers and policy-makers. The DCYA is responsible for funding and overseeing DNN (DCYA, 2015).

The CNN National Showcase is held every alternate year to showcase the work of the 31 CNN to decision-makers. It is hosted by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and funded by the DCYA (DCYA, 2015, p.33).

The CNN National Executive is comprised of one elected member from each of the 31 CNN. The role of the National Executive is to take action on behalf of young people on the top recommendation voted at the previous DNN. The National Executive has a term of office of two years and is facilitated and supported by the DCYA to ensure that its members get the opportunity to engage with appropriate Ministers, policy-makers, Parliamentary Committees and other decision-makers. Some improvements and wins have been achieved by young people from CNN through successive CNN National Executives (DCYA, 2015, p.33).

While DNN and the CNN National Executive are relevant to the CNN structure, their operation and activities are not the subject of this dissertation, which will focus specifically on the operation of CNN.

CNN are child and youth councils in the 31 local authority areas of Ireland and is the recognised national structure for children and young people (under the age of 18) to have a voice in the development of local services and policies. All local authorities have regular meetings of CNN, which link with adult decision-making bodies (DCYA, 2015, p34). According to DCYA (2015), the CNN gets young people's voices heard in two ways: working on young people's topics; and acting as a consultative forum. Examples of the topics selected by young people include: mental health, facilities for young people, how young people are treated by the adult world and homophobic bullying. In their capacity as a consultative forum for

adult decision-makers, CNN are consulted by many local agencies to get the views of young people on the development of services and policies, such as heritage plans, play and recreation policies, policing plans and the location or type of sports facilities. CNN are also often asked for submissions on local policies or to take part in public consultations (DCYA, 2015, 34).

DCYA (2015) notes that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) established a Development Fund in 2007 to improve the operation of CNN. The Fund is awarded under good practice criteria, to local authorities to run effective CNN.

However, despite the progress highlighted above, challenges remain and a number of authors argue the need for the UNCRC to be incorporated into Irish law. Since Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC, the participation rights of children and young people have increased in profile, yet these rights have not been incorporated into Irish law. There is a general consensus that Ireland's legal and policy framework does not adequately address the participation rights of young people, including those seldom heard (e.g. Frazer & Devlin, 2011; Kilkelly, 2007).

Although children and young people's right to participate is enshrined in the UNCRC, the manner and extent to which it is reflected in domestic legislation and policy development of participating countries differs. For example, Finland has incorporated the UNCRC into its Constitution, Article 6 of which states 'children shall be treated equally and as individuals and shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to them ...'. Other countries have incorporated the UNCRC into specific legislation (e.g. Norway and Northern Ireland). In Northern Ireland, Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 makes it a requirement for statutory bodies to consult with all those affected by their policies, including children and young people (Kelleher, Seymour & Halpenny, 2014, p.10)

This dissertation will analyse the form and substance of the CNN structure as a mechanism for the realisation of UNCRC agency rights. Some authors point to the limitations of Article 12 of the UNCRC (Woodhead, 2010; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). However, the CRC Committee sees the scope of the Article 12 as encompassing the participation of children and young people in issues affecting their everyday lives and their active citizenship (CRC Committee, 2009). This broader interpretation is shared by Landsdown (2010) and Lundy (2007). Both interpretations will be explored in Chapter 3.

The particular focus of this dissertation will be on the effectiveness of CNN as a structure that enables children and young people to have a voice on and participate in decision-making on issues that affect their everyday lives. It also investigates the practice standards, funding, governance, support for and operation of the CNN structure in meaningfully enabling the voice of children and young people to be heard by adult decision-makers with influence.



## Chapter 2      Methodology

The research methods adopted for this dissertation included:

**1.      Desk based research on:**

- International and national peer reviewed literature in the disciplines of childhood studies, sociology, law, education, human rights
- Review of international and national good practice guides on children's participation in decision-making
- Review of formal evaluations commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- Review of grey literature and meeting notes from the files of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs

**2.      Semi structured interviews with four adult stakeholders:**

- John Collins, the former Director of the National Children's Office
- Martin Donohoe, Senior Child and Youth Participation Officer
- Don Tuohy, Administrative Officer, Waterford City and County Council
- Martin Keeney, Coordinator of Donegal CNN

**3.      A focus group with 11 young people from Cork City CNN, Dublin City CNN and Mayo CNN**

**4.      Ethical considerations**

**Focus Group with young people**

Best practice was adhered to in compliance with Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011a). In advance of the focus group with young people, a letter explaining the purpose of the focus group was sent to each young person, with a child assent form and a parent/guardian assent form. Written assent was received from every young person. Written consent was received from the parent/guardian of every young person.

At the start of the focus group, the young people were informed of their right to leave the discussion at any time.

**Interviews with adult stakeholders**

Adult interviewees were sent the list of questions in advance of the interview. At the start of each interview, interviewees were informed of their right to discontinue the interview at any time.

## **Chapter 3            Children's agency in the UNCRC**

Before exploring the agency provisions in the UNCRC and interpretations of their meaning, this chapter will examine the sociological and psychological perceptions of childhood in the decades leading up to the development of the UNCRC. It will discuss interpretations of Article 12 with a particular focus on the debate about individual versus collective rights and explore a model that provides a theoretical and practical understanding of Article 12.

### **3.1    Sociological and psychological perceptions of childhood since the late nineteenth century**

According to James (2009), since the late nineteenth century, children were observed and studied for what they revealed about humankind, as the youngest members of the human race.

Lee (2001) notes that children were mainly envisaged as a preparation for the future and as dependent and passive recipients of adult actions. He states that this view can be traced back to the growth and influence of developmental psychology. Burman (1994) notes that Piaget, one of the most prominent developmental psychologists of the twentieth century, depicted the child as a subject who is positioned in history, to a large extent without subjectivity and individuality. James contends that this view was prevalent in developmental psychology sociology and anthropology. She notes that sociology focused on the category of children as providing the vehicle for the reproduction of adult life with emphasis on the facilitating role of social institutions such as the family and school. The author argues that although anthropology challenged notions of universal culture and personality, it also focussed on children primarily as becomings. Anthropologists studied children to get to know more about processes of cultural reproduction rather than to understand their present lives (James, 2009). According to Lee (2001), children were seen as inadequate, incomplete and dependent. Society must invest in their care, training and upbringing since children are the future of the social world. There was little room for the agency of the child in this framework.

However, James (2009) highlights that there was a break with this traditional perception of children in the late 1970s and 1980s. According to James the end of traditional socialisation theory was signalled by the following key historical, political, sociological and theoretical developments:

- 1979 was the International Year of the Child, with a focus on children, including affected by war, famine, poverty and other negative factors.
- Child abuse became a public issue.
- Different childhoods began to emerge such as those who are abused, hungry, in care, disadvantaged and marginalised.
- Donaldson (1978) challenged Piaget's laboratory experiments with children noting that the laboratory is an unfamiliar environment for children, which affected their responses.

- Vygotsky's theories on children's active role in human development were gaining acceptance. He believed that children are involved in social relations as social actors.
- The social sciences of 1950s and 1960s attracted a structuralist and functionalist agenda.
- The development of the counter cultural movements in the 1960s of feminism and anti-colonialism.

In addition to the above developments, a number of respected authors challenged traditional social theory. Hardman (1973) suggested that children might inhabit a self-regulating autonomous world, which does not necessarily reflect early development of adult culture, and in which they could be seen as social actors. James (2009) notes that Giddens (1979) was responsible for a major shift in thinking in stating that social scientists have to take account of agency and structure to explain the social world. According to James, this shift gave birth to childhood studies.

### **3.2 Development of the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child**

Despite the evidence of the shift in the perceptions of childhood noted above, there were visionary individuals and professionals who had a perception of children as equal human beings, deserving of respect long before the 1960s or 1970s.

Woodhead (2010, p.xviii) states that in 1919, Eglantyne Jebb, a British social reformer, set up the Save the Children Fund in response to the suffering of children in the defeated nations of Europe after the First World War. He notes that she was ahead of her time in believing that compassion towards suffering children was not enough. According to the Woodhead, Jebb developed a number of principles based on respect for the child, which included the right to life, food, care and protection, normal development and to be in a position to earn a livelihood without exploitation. Jebb played a prominent role in the development of the five principles and was one of the international signatories to the original 'Declaration of the Rights of the Child', which was endorsed by the newly established League of Nations in Geneva in 1924 (League of Nations, 1924). The 1924 Declaration outlined the duty of all nations and individuals within states to protect weak, marginalised or impoverished children.

Woodhead (2010, p.xiii), notes that another signatory of the 1924 Declaration was the Polish doctor, pedagogue and children's writer Janusz Korczak. Woodhead states that Korczak is best known for setting up an orphanage in Poland during the Second World War and for insisting on accompanying the children from his orphanage to the Treblinka extermination camp. *The Child's Right to Respect*, one of Korczak's final books, was published in 1929 and includes a statement that is just as radical today as it was 80 years ago: "Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect" (Woodhead, 2010, p. xx). The reference to "people of today" could be interpreted to imply agency rights and civil and political rights.

An expanded version of the Declaration on the Rights of the Child was approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1959 (The United Nations, 1959), primarily based on the rights of the child to care and protection from adults. The 1959 Declaration contained no references to the agency of the child or to children's civil and political rights, which is not surprising in view of the perceptions of childhood at that time.

### **3.3 Development of Article 12 of the UNCRC**

In 1978, the Polish Government proposed to the United Nations that it should adopt a Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Polish text was broadly based on the 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child (Travaux préparatoires, 1992). Neither the first Polish draft nor the views received on it addressed issues regarding the right of the child to express an opinion in matters that affect their lives (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2007).

According to Travaux préparatoires (1992), issues relating to the right to express an opinion were first discussed by a Working Group established to develop the Convention at its 1981 session during which a draft text was adopted. This draft text was referred to as article 7 throughout the first and second readings and the revised Polish draft read as follows:

"The States parties to the present Convention shall enable the child who is capable of forming his own views the right to express his opinion in matters concerning his own person, and in particular, marriage, choice of occupation, medical treatment, education and recreation."

However, this draft contained no references to evolving capacities and fundamental freedoms.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2007) notes that most delegations felt that the matters concerning the child in which the States parties to the convention would enable him to express his opinion should not be subject to the limits of a list, and that the list ought to be deleted.

During the second readings (1988-1989), the Working Group had a proposal from Finland submitted on behalf of a drafting group that read:

"1. The States Parties to the present Convention shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with (his) the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child,

either directly, through a representative or an appropriate body, in accordance with the procedural rules of national law."

Despite a wide range of alternative wordings proposed by number of member states, the text proposed by Finland was approved by the Working Group and became the final text approved by the General Assembly in its resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 (OHCHR, 2007). The unofficial heading for this article, "the child's right to express opinions", was reformulated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child at its first session (1991). The reporting guidelines of the Committee refer to the article as "respect for the views of the child". The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted by the United Nations in November 1989. The convention contains 44 substantive articles, a number of which relate to the child's right to agency.

### **3.4 Interpretations of Article 12**

Article 12 is the subject matter of a considerable literature, from theoretical, practical and legal perspectives. Willow (2010, p.46) argues that the right to be heard enshrined in Article 12 of the UNCRC no longer needs to be justified in such terms, but is, rather, simply a 'right' to which children are entitled.

Woodhead (2010, p. xx) notes that the UNCRC "redefined the status of children and young people by acknowledging their civil and political rights, notably through Article 12". He points out that Articles 13, 14, 15 and 16 are less commonly cited as agency rights, but that they give the child the right to freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, rights to peaceful assembly and rights to privacy. Woodhead (p.xx) highlights the fact that: "these rights are carefully qualified by recognition of the duties of parents to provide direction to the child, in accordance with the child's 'age and maturity' and 'evolving capacities'". He (p.xxii) contends that taken together, the participation rights in the UNCRC establish that the child may have autonomous interests, views and feelings from their family and other authorities and that the child has the capacity to develop and express their own views and decisions. Woodhead states that these rights "mark a radical departure from earlier rights frameworks".

Indeed, this view of the child as a participating member of society is reaffirmed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment 7 (CRC Committee, 2005), which states:

"The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognised as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view".

The priority afforded by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to respect for the views of the child was further strengthened in its development a specific General

Comment on the Right to be Heard in 2009. Paragraph 2 of this General Comment (CRC Committee, 2009) states:

“The right of all children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental values of the Convention. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) has identified article 12 as one of the four general principles of the Convention, the others being the right to non-discrimination, the right to life and development, and the primary consideration of the child’s best interests, which highlights the fact that this article establishes not only a right in itself, but should also be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights.”

The above quotation highlights the clear view of the Committee on the primacy of Article 12 in the children’s rights framework.

### **3.5 Individual or collective rights**

The issue of whether Article 12 relates to the rights of the individual child or the collective rights of children is critical to the interpretation and implementation of the provision. Percy-Smith & Thomas (2010, p.2) argue that the phrase ‘the child’ and the wording of Part 2 of the Article, suggest that the scope of Article 12 covers only individual and private matters. The authors note that this perspective is shared by Cantwell, who argues that the intention of the drafters was to provide the right to be heard to individual children, and that it is inflating the right to seek to extend its meaning. Others, including Lansdown contend that the article has a broader interpretation which extends to the right to collective participation in decision-making by children and young people.

The contention that it applies only to the individual child as noted above is not supported by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which states the following in paragraphs 87 of its General Comment 12 (CRC Committee, 2009):

“The practice of implementation deals with a broad range problems, such as health, the economy, education or the environment, which are of interest not only to the child as an individual, but to groups of children and children in general. Consequently, the Committee has always interpreted participation broadly in order to establish procedures not only for individual children and clearly defined groups of children, but also for groups of children, such as indigenous children, children with disabilities, or children in general, who are affected directly or indirectly by social, economic or cultural conditions of living in their society”.

This interpretation of Article 12 as applying to children collectively is shared by most child rights practitioners and childhood studies academics.

It could be argued, that putting individual and collective child rights in competition with one another is contrary to the spirit of both the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights and the UNCRC. This is considerable evidence that children need and want a voice on decisions about a wide range of issues, some individual and some collective. For example, in McEvoy (2010) it was noted that young people in one locality in Ireland argued they were being deprived of their child rights by being charged adult fares on public transport over the age of 16. The young people also argued that they could not afford tickets due to the inflexibility of tickets from one mode of transport to another. These are both individual and collective issues and contribute to depriving children of their rights as children and of their right to freedom of association. Indeed, under the European Convention of Human Rights (CoE, 1950), a violation of an individual human right by a Member State becomes a right that can be claimed by other individuals or groups of individuals, if that State is deemed to have violated the right by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

A number of authors argue that the distinction between the individual and the collective is frequently blurred. Dinstein (1976, p. 103) argues that where individual human rights are concerned, the individual is the measure of all things. He notes that the contravention of individual human rights on a large scale may entail a collective response. He notes that "at times, the enjoyment of individual human rights is virtually impossible unless a collective human right is implemented". He gives the example of freedom of religion, noting that if compliance with the rules of a particular religious minority requires worship in a temple, "no individual member of the group can exercise freedom of religion, as an individual human right, unless and until these institutions are constructed". Holder and Cornthassel (2002, p.128-129) note that "many indigenous groups emphasise the interdependence of individual and collective claims and gravitate toward solutions such as dual-standing group rights (rights which are predicated of a group but can be claimed by particular members as well as collectivities)". In their 2002 study, they illustrate how indigenous peoples believe that collective and individual rights are "mutually interactive rather than in competition".

Qvortrup (2009) contends that childhood exists independently from individual children and that childhood constitutes a particular social form. A number of authors (Corsaro, 2011; Qvortrup, 2009; Alanen, 2014;) argue that sociological theories of childhood must break away from an individualistic doctrine that regards the social development of children as the child's private internalisation of adult skills and knowledge. Corsaro proposes that children participate and create their own unique peer cultures. Corsaro (p.21) describes peer culture as "a stable set of routines, artefacts values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers". The views of these authors would point to a case being made for children's collective rights.

Wall (2007, p.235) notes that "the key to any successful distinctively liberal argument for collective rights—is the notion of *joint options*". According to Wall, "joint options are options to pursue ends that require the coordinated activity of individuals who view themselves as members of a common group". He contends that most writers

interested in justifying collective rights stress that the groups in question must have a shared history and a common culture, which is a similar argument to that made by Corsaro (2011) regarding children's peer cultures. Wall (p. 263) concludes that "the collective freedom argument grounds collective rights in the autonomy interests of those who are given the rights" and that it has a strong claim to be taken seriously.

### **3.6 The scope of Article 12**

Woodhead (2010, p.xxi-xxii) believes that the concept of children's participation is paradoxically both bland and all-encompassing, which presents a challenge for its effective implementation. Percy-Smith & Thomas (2010, p.366) share Woodhead's view that the full participation of children and young people may need to focus on children and young people's active citizenship and participation in everyday life, which may mean moving beyond Article 12 of the UNCRC. These authors appear to interpret Article 12 in a more limited way than paragraph 88 of General Comment 12 (CRC Committee, 2009), which states:

"This broad understanding of children's participation is reflected in the outcome document adopted by the twenty-seventh special session of the General Assembly entitled "A world fit for children". States parties have promised "to develop and implement programmes to promote meaningful participation by children, including adolescents, in decision-making processes, including in families and schools and at the local and national levels".

Thus, the Committee sees the scope of Article 12 as encompassing the participation of children and young people in issues affecting their everyday lives and their active citizenship through the establishment of procedures for meaningful participation.

Lundy (2007, p.938) argues the importance of interpreting Article 12 in a manner that is "generous and child-empowering rather than negative and opportunity-restricting". She argues that "Article 12 is one of the most widely cited yet commonly misunderstood of all of the provisions of the UNCRC". She notes that frequently used abbreviations of the article include: 'the voice of child', 'the right to be heard', 'the right to participate' and 'the right to be consulted'. She argues that these are used as a convenient shorthand to explain the long-winded and awkward wording of Article 12. But, she believes that such abbreviations have the potential to diminish the impact of the article and communicate an imperfect summary of what is required by the article. She goes on to say that they (abbreviations) overlook key elements of the article, in particular that it applies to "all matters affecting the child", without restriction (Lundy, 2007, p.930). Lundy believes that an informed interpretation of this phrase is critically important and that a conservative understanding has the potential to severely limit and restrict the application of Article 12.



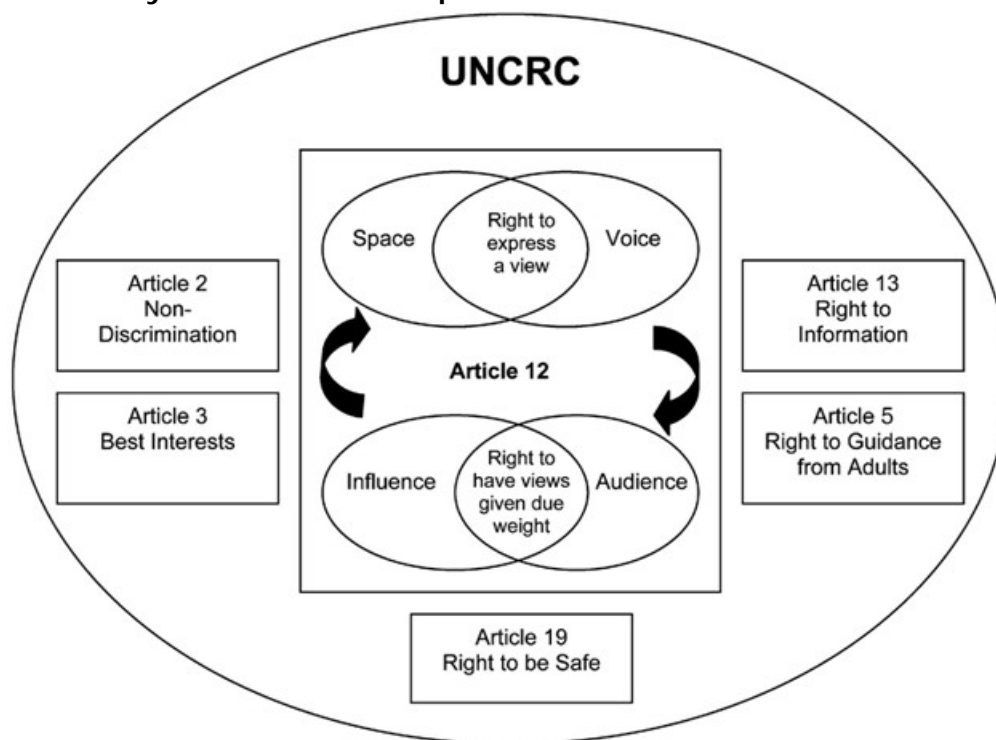
### 3.7 A theoretical and practical understanding of Article 12

Lundy (2007) proposes the need for a new means of communicating the legal and human rights imperative in Article 12 through a model for its successful implementation based on the four interrelated elements: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence.

In the years since publication of the article in which Lundy (2007) first outlined her model, it has become one of the most cited articles on child participation. Her model is widely acknowledged as being of significant value in interpreting Article 12 of the UNCRC, both in theory and practice. In 2013, Lundy was invited by the Irish Government to work on the development of its first national strategy on children's participation in decision-making, during which she adapted the model and developed an accompanying checklist for decision-makers (DCYA, 2015).

Because of the significance of its contribution to an informed understanding of Article 12 from a theoretical and practice perspective, Lundy's original 2007 model is explored in some detail for two reasons. Firstly, the model (Lundy, 2007, p.931) outlines a conceptual framework linking the four elements outlined in the model with the two main strands of Article 12 and other relevant UNCRC provisions as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Secondly, it unpacks the legal implications of Article 12 through an analysis of each phrase in the Article. Lundy's analysis draws on the text of the UNCRC, General Comments and Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which she argues are the main jurisprudential sources for the UNCRC.

**Figure 1: Lundy's Model of Participation**



Her model is intended to focus decision-makers on four elements of the rights provisions in Article 12:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views
- Audience: The view must be listened to
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Lundy's (2007, p.932-933) model depicts the four elements as interrelated and proposes a significant overlap between (a) space and voice and (b) audience and influence. It also highlights that Article 12 has an explicit chronology with the first stage ensuring the child's right to a view followed by the right to have the view given due weight. The model recognizes the fluid nature of decision-making processes in its construction. The model represents the fact that a true understanding of Article 12 must include other relevant UNCRC provisions, particularly, Article 2 (non-discrimination); Article 3 (best interests); Article 5 (right to guidance); Article 13 (right to seek, receive and impart information); and Article 19 (protection from abuse).

In regard to the element of 'Space', Lundy (2007, p.933) highlights that Article 12 requires States to 'assure' the right of the child to express a view. She notes that the word 'assure' is much stronger than phrases such as 'take appropriate measures' or 'use their best efforts to ensure', which appear elsewhere in the UNCRC. This view is also held by Lansdown (2010, p.13) who argues that Article 12 elaborates the child's right to be involved and taken seriously in decision making, and it requires governments to *assure* the realisation of this right to every child. According to Lundy, the use of this language indicates a positive obligation on States to proactively encourage children to express their views, rather than just being the recipient of such views. She states that the UN Committee has stressed the need to ensure the participation of children with disabilities, who may suffer double denial of their right (CRC Committee, 1997).

Under the element of 'Voice', Lundy (2007, p.935) notes that Article 12 gives children the right to express their views, but that this is not confined to Article 12, nor to the UNCRC. Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (The United Nations, 1948), all human beings have the right to a voice. Article 12 of the UNCRC affords this right to a child 'who is capable of forming his or her own views'. Lundy points out that in discussion about Article 12, this phrase frequently disappears as the focus tends to be on an assumption that the right depends on the child's capacity, age and maturity. According to Lundy, the right is not dependent on the child's capacity to express a mature view but "only on their ability to form a view, mature or not". Under this element, Lundy further explores the assurance of Article 12 on the child expressing her/his views 'freely', noting that children often need the help of others to form and express a view, as outlined under Article 5. She also points to Article 13, which provides for freedom of expression including the right to impart information

'either orally, in writing or print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice'. She notes that "the fact that judicial and administrative proceedings are considered to be a particular example of an instance in which there may be a need for representation and advocacy does not preclude the need for it elsewhere".

Commenting on the element of 'Audience', Lundy (2007, p.936) states that Article 12 requires children's views to be given 'due weight'. She states that "while most of the other UNCRC provisions have their roots in preceding human rights covenants, this aspect of Article 12 does not have an obvious ancestry". She notes that even though adult human beings have a right to express their views, the right does not extend to their views being given weight, except indirectly in elections. Lundy argues that the concept of due weight implies that children have a right to have their views listened to, and not just heard, by decision-makers. Her argument concurs with the view held by many authors on the equal rights and special rights of children discussed as the 'difference dilemma' or comparing childhood with adulthood by Hanson and Vandaele (2013). According to Rodham (1973), children have additional special rights based on their age. Rodham poses this as a double claim – the recognition of adult rights and the recognition of special rights for children.

Under the element of 'Influence', Lundy (2007, p. 937) highlights that Article 12, requires State Parties to ensure that children's views are given "due weight in accordance with their age and maturity". As noted above, according to Lundy, "applying the provision in the spirit and context in which it was drafted would require an interpretation that is generous and child-empowering rather than negative and opportunity-restricting". She cites support for this view by noting that Article 5 of the UNCRC requires adults to provide children with guidance and direction in line with their evolving capacities. She notes that in its General Comment 7, the UN Committee said:

"Evolving capacities should be seen as a positive enabling principle. It should not be interpreted as an endorsement of authoritarian practices that restrict children's autonomy and self-expression and which have traditionally been justified by appealing to children's relative incompetence and their need for socialization" (CRC Committee, 2005, para. 17.).

In further exploring the element of 'influence', Lundy (2007, p.938) notes the possible tension between the operation of Article 3, which requires children's best interests "to be a primary consideration" and other articles of the Convention, which recognise the evolving capacities of children. The limit to children's autonomy is a topic that is widely debated by child rights practitioners and childhood studies theorists. Saywitz, Camparo and Romanoff (2010) explored recent trends in research, policy and theory on interviewing children in cases of contested divorces in regard to the weight to be afforded to information provided by children. They found that age and improvements in competence do not necessarily lead to better decision-

making. These authors (p.547) contend that decision-making is not an unchangeable skill and does not develop in a linear trajectory. They point out that adults often make irrational decisions. They argue on the basis of their findings, that using age limits as markers for competence is inappropriate, as levels of participation vary from case to case and the context of decision-making processes must be taken into consideration. Rodham (1973) argues that in exploring children's rights and competence, a presumption of competence over one of incompetence should be adopted.

In regard to the issue of influence, Lundy (2007, p.938) notes that one of the most common criticisms made about Article 12 is that adults often listen to children and ultimately ignore their views. She notes that Alderson (2000) found that tokenistic school councils had as much, or a more negative impact than having no council at all. Lundy highlights the challenge of developing mechanisms for listening to children and taking their views seriously.

Lundy (2007, p. 940) concludes her article by noting the complexity of compliance with Article 12 arguing that "it is not only complex and multifaceted but runs counter to the instinct and interests of many of the adults who are key to securing the right". She reiterates that commonly used concepts such as 'the voice of the child' address specific elements of Article 12, which taken individually, are incapable of conveying the full extent of the right.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

As illustrated above, Article 12 was the subject of considerable debate during the drafting of the UNCRC. It continues to be controversial for a number of reasons, including whether it applies to individual or collective rights and whether it goes far enough in enabling real participation in decision-making as noted by Thomas and Percy-Smith (2010). Lundy's (2007) very comprehensive legal, theoretical and practical analysis highlights that if interpreted in a "generous and child-empowering" way and implemented in its entirety rather than in individual elements, Article 12 has the potential to be a powerful instrument.

## Chapter 4

### How children's agency rights became prominent in Irish public policy and the development of CNN as a mechanism for realising agency

This chapter explores why and how children's agency rights became prominent in Irish public policy; tracks the historical development of CNN as a mechanism for realisation of UNCRC Article 12 and other agency rights and analyses the impact of the CNN Development Fund.

#### 4.1 Development of a national children's strategy

As noted in the Introduction, Ireland's first national report was submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in April 1996 and was examined in 1998. In its concluding observations (CRC Committee, 1998, para 28), the CRC Committee recommended "the adoption a comprehensive National Strategy for Children, incorporating the principles and provisions of the Convention in a systematic manner in the designing of all its policies and programmes". In regard to agency rights, the Committee also recommended the promotion and facilitation of children's participation and respect for their views in decisions and policies affecting them, especially through dialogue in the family, at school and in society, in light of articles 12, 13 and 15 of the Convention.

It is noted in DoHC (2000) that in response to the observations of the Committee, in 1999, the Irish Government established an Inter-Departmental Group under the chairmanship of the Secretary General of the Department of Health and Children (DoHC) to develop a national strategy on children. The Group appointed a cross-departmental team to draft the Strategy under the leadership of John Collins, a senior official from the Department of Health and Children, who was interviewed for this dissertation. The Group also appointed three expert panels to support the drafting team: a Non-Governmental Advisory Panel; A Research and Information Advisory Panel of national and international experts; and a Health Board Liaison Group (DoHC, 2000).

Speaking about the process of drafting the Strategy, John Collins, who was interviewed for this dissertation, noted:

"our job was to actually do the spade work, to develop the concepts, the drafts and the ideas. I chaired the all the panels, including the international experts, the Irish expert panel and the health board liaison group. We made our formal report once a month and submitted drafts to them."

Collins outlined the innovative way the drafting team worked over a twelve-month period:

“We deliberately worked in an open space to make it as informal as possible so that everyone would feed into and know what was going on. We had somebody from the voluntary sector who came to work in the office with us for a period in helping to develop it. We also had John Pinkerton from Queen’s University, who was to bring the academic eye.”

Highlighting the political importance afforded to the development of the Strategy, Collins said: “The Taoiseach [Prime Minister] at the time, Bertie Ahern was very interested in it, and we had the Minister for Health and Children and the Junior Minister, who was very involved and I would report to her regularly.”

The first National Children’s Strategy (NCS) was published in 2000 and committed to the establishment of a National Children’s Office as an independent body under the Public Service Management Act, 1997, to lead on the implementation of the Strategy. This Office was established in 2001 as a dedicated Government agency with a Junior Minister under the responsibility of the Department of Health and Children. When asked about the decision to establish a National Children’s Office (NCO) to drive the Strategy, Collins remarked: “We felt the mechanisms were important to make it [the Strategy] sustainable and to make sure that it sort of gained compass and developed, that it was essential to have an office that was committed to driving this.”

The Strategy (DoHC, 2000, p.11) was underpinned by three national goals:

- Goal 1: Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
- Goal 2: Children’s lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.
- Goal 3: Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

It is observed from the developments and views noted above, that the Concluding Observations (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1998) had a very significant impact on Irish public policy on children, with buy-in at the highest political level. The Taoiseach [Prime Minister] of Ireland states in the Foreword of the NCS that it is: “Rooted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it [NCS] represents a different way of doing business, which will, if we all work together, help us become a society which fully respects and values children” (DoHC, 2000, Foreword). The successor to the NCS is *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014a).

## 4.2 Agency rights and measures of implementation under the National Children's Strategy

Under Goal 1 of the Strategy (DoHC, 2000, pp. 32-35), a number of measures were outlined to give expression to Article 12 of the UNCRC, including the establishment of: Dáil na nÓg (a national youth parliament); an Office of Ombudsman for Children; national and local fora for the voice of the child under the County and City Development Boards; Family Group Conferencing under the Children Bill, 1999; a review of the Guardian Ad Litem Service; strengthening of the rights of children in private and family law proceedings; a representation and complaints procedure for children in care; a discussion paper on consent to medical treatment by children; and prioritisation of considerations regarding children's constitutional rights (DoHC, 2000). The NCS (DoHC, 2000) also committed to establishing new structures to enable implementation of Goal 1 of the NCS. According to the 2002 Annual Report of the NCO (National Children's Office, 2003a, p.12), a decision was taken to establish a new local level initiative under the City and County Development Boards (CDBs), called Comhairle na nÓg (local child and youth councils) to mirror its national equivalent, Dáil na nÓg (national child and youth parliament). The Report (NCO, 2003a, p.12) states: "The purpose of CNN is to give children a voice in their local community in line with Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy and to select local delegates to represent their areas at Dáil na nÓg (DNN)".

When asked how agency rights came to have such a prominent place in the Strategy, John Collins said:

"Well, obviously, the Convention was the initial springboard in looking at what would such a Strategy have to do. The Junior Minister for Children was very conscious that that was an important element of what she had to deliver. John Pinkerton from Queen's [University] was very clued into that as well. I had already been working in the childcare area and so I was familiar with a lot of the issues and was very committed to delivering that because I could see there was an issue here [regarding the voice of the child]".

Commenting on the thinking behind the voice of the child measures, John Collins noted:

"The Strategy was for all of children. That was our biggest challenge because how do you make this relevant to all children while at the same time making sure that some very important issues like the guardian ad litem service like other issues weren't lost in the bigger picture. We were very conscious from the very start, both John Pinkerton and myself that this had to be a broad strategy, so therefore the voice of the child was the voice of all the children. We kicked off with the idea of the DNN, which came from two sources. Professor Gilligan in Trinity made a case for it and the Minister herself was very interested in doing this. I think there was a feeling that you needed to put down a good, a strong political marker".

However, as noted in the introduction, despite Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC, the views of many young people are not included in public decisions that affect them. The UNCRC is not enshrined in Irish law, as it is in other countries. (Kelleher et al., 2014, p.10).

### **4.3 Establishment of a Unit within the NCO to lead on children's participation**

As noted in the Introduction, a dedicated Unit to take the lead national role on implementation of Goal 1 of the Strategy was established within the NCO. It is observed that the decision for a government agency to take the lead role in implementing voice of the child initiatives was progressive and taken long before the development by the UN Committee of General Comment 12 on the Voice of Child in 2009. In this General Comment the Committee states:

"The Committee has stated in its general comment No. 5 on general measures of implementation for the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "It is important that Governments develop a direct relationship with children, not simply one mediated through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or human rights institutions." (CRC Committee, 2009, para. 88)

Recruitment for the Head of this NCO Unit was conducted in late 2002 by public competition, instead of exclusively from within the civil service. John Collins explained that this decision was taken because it was recognised that this role "was a little bit different and there was a lot of development needed, as this was a very high-level Strategy".

The job description for the post, which was obtained from NCO files (National Children's Office, 2002, p.2), described it as follows:

"The Head of Communications will be a member of the Senior Management team and will be responsible for the management of the National Children's Office. The position will also carry responsibility for progressing the Strategy goal of ensuring that children will have a voice".

The principal tasks relevant to children's participation in the job description were listed as:

- "Developing and implementing an innovative children's participation programme, which will provide opportunities for children's participation at national and local level and in both the statutory and non-statutory sectors;
- Identifying the needs of statutory and non-statutory agencies in facilitating children's participation and developing guidelines, training programmes and providing support for the relevant organisations and the children;
- Planning and organising the annual meeting of DNN and preparing and publishing a report of the DNN proceedings;



- Supporting the development of local network processes and structures, including the selection of children for the National DNN and putting in place permanent structures for children's participation at local level."

It is noted in the NCO Annual Report 2003 (NCO, 2004, p.2) that following the appointment of communications and research staff, steady progress was made in implementing the participation and research goals of the National Children's Strategy.

#### **4.4 A watershed in implementing agency rights**

Internal NCO files reviewed for this dissertation note that in June 2003, the Head of this Unit spent a week visiting government and non-government agencies in the UK with expertise on children's consultation and child participation. A paper was developed following this visit and was reviewed for this dissertation. The paper proposed that the NCO should refocus its thinking, work and public statements onto the area of participation by children and young people rather than consultation with them (NCO, 2003b). The proposals in this paper and their acceptance by the Director of the NCO marked the beginning of a new approach in the development of policy and practice to support implementation of children's agency rights. Given the importance of this decision to the way in which children's agency rights under the UNCRC would be implemented in Ireland, key elements from the paper are explored below.

The paper (NCO, 2003b, p. 1) notes that at that time, the focus on implementing children's agency rights in the UK was on the participation of children in decision-making, rather than simply consulting with children. The paper notes: "All of the experts with whom I met, regarded consultation as merely one aspect of participation". It highlights that in Ireland "all parties appear to have become stuck on the issue of consultation". The paper (NCO, 2003b) contends that the text of the Irish National Children's Strategy is quite weak in the area of participation, despite the inclusion of Hart's ladder of participation and references to the rights of children and young people to participate in civic life according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The author (NCO, 2003b, p.1) says:

"The Strategy is stronger on the specific cases of children who are in care or troubled (Guardian ad Litem, Family Group Conferencing). There are no clear references to participation by children and young people in the work of government departments and public bodies. There is however, a statement about the importance of participation (3.4), which is couched in very general terms. The Strategy repeatedly urges the importance of obtaining the views of children and young people but does not expand on how to go beyond consultation".

The paper continues that "the reason the Strategy is weak in respect of participation, is because of the poorly developed participation infrastructure in Ireland in the statutory and NGO sectors" (NCO, 2003b, p.1).

The paper (NCO, 2003, p.1) proposes that the NCO should “refocus its thinking, work and public statements onto the area of participation by children and young people, with consultation as an important part of such participation”. The paper states that the NCO recognised that DNN was heading down a tokenistic path, with the first two annual sessions representing discreet events with little follow-up or resulting action. It notes that the National Youth Council of Ireland was awarded the tender to organise DNN “because it was the only organisation, which had a vision about how the views of young people at DNN could become a real part of national decision-making and how the delegates could become participants in that process” (NCO, 2003b, p. 2).

NCO (2003, p.2) states: “Consultation is rarely an end in itself. Even when an agency needs the views of children/young people in the design or delivery of a service, policy, website, playground, building or other public amenity, the real end is to make that service/policy more relevant to children and increase participation by children in its use”. Percy-Smith (2010) presents a similar line of argument in suggesting 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.

The key proposals in the paper (NCO, 2003b, p.3) relevant to this dissertation include:

- The NCO needs to examine the aspects of our work in which we should involve children and young people.
- The NCO needs to examine the guidelines for City and County Development Boards on consulting with young people at CNN to ensure their participation in decision-making.
- The NCO needs to start working with Community and Enterprise Development Officers to ensure that CNN representatives become involved in local strategic policy committees and community forums.
- In forthcoming departmental seminars, the NCO should include participation by children and young people as an integral part of the role of government departments in implementing the Strategy and devising more effective policies and services.

It is possible that the significance of the above proposals was not realised at the time, but in exploring the history of the status of children’s agency rights in Irish public policy, acceptance of these proposals appears to mark a watershed.

#### **4.5 The NCO grows and evolves**

In reviewing publications and other documents for this dissertation, it is observed that the years 2003 and 2004 marked development and change in the NCO, culminating in the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children in 2005, which subsumed the functions and staff of the former NCO. Commenting in the Foreword of the Annual Report (Office of the Minister for Children, 2007a, p. v), the Minister for Children said:

"In December 2005, the Government took the innovative and historic decision to establish the OMC under my direction as part of the Department of Health and Children. The Taoiseach [Prime Minister] announced that I would have additional responsibilities and attend Cabinet meetings. The establishment of the OMC is evidence of the commitment of the Government to the interests of children. It is also a new and exciting experiment in bringing together civil servants from a number of Government departments to provide a joined-up government approach in the development of policies and services for children".

Implementation of the National Children's Strategy remained a key objective of the OMC, as noted by the OMC Director in the same Report (OMC, 2007a).

In regard to CNN, the OMC (2007a, p.10) noted:

"The operation of CNN varies from county to county and many CNN are in need of significant support. The development of effective CNN throughout the country is a major OMC priority for 2006-2008 and is cited [...] as a key innovative Government measure. Effective CNN in every county will ensure that children and young people can participate in appropriate local and national decision-making. During 2006, an Implementation Group was established by the OMC to devise a plan for the effective development of CNN. The group comprises representatives from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government; the Department of Education and Science; the HSE; City and County Development Boards; local authorities; young people; and the youth sector".

The OMC was further expanded in 2008 and took on responsibility for Youth Affairs, which was previously under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009). The role of the OMCYA in regard to children's participation in decision-making was noted by the Minister as "central to policy considerations and a priority over the course of 2008 and my Office continues to support CNN and DNN" (OMCYA, 2009, p.v).

Further development of the OMCYA occurred in 2011. According to DCYA (2015), the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established in 2011, the first full Government department dedicated to the needs of children and young people. "The legislation underpinning the Transfer of Departmental Administration and Ministerial Functions to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs names one of the functions of the Minister as '*overseeing the development, improvement and monitoring of policies and structures to promote and enable participation by children and young people in decision-making on matters that affect their lives*'. Thus, the participation of children and young people in decision-making is legislatively underpinned and is embedded in all aspects of the work of the DCYA" (DCYA, 2015, p.30).

It is interesting to note, that throughout these years, there was no dilution of the commitment to oversee implementation of Goal of the National Children's Strategy. Nor was there any reduction in the budgetary allocation to the Unit responsible for this work. Indeed, increased funding was allocated to the Unit in 2007 to enable more strategic and sustained support for the development of the 34 CNN, as will be outlined below.

#### **4.6 How the CNN structure developed as a mechanism for the realisation of agency rights since 2002**

According to NCO (2003a, p.12), twenty seven of the thirty four CDBs held a meeting of a CNN, for the purpose of selecting delegates to DNN 2002. At that time, each CDB was awarded an annual grant of €2,500 by the NCO and the majority of CDBs held only one annual meeting of its CNN. Following the appointment of the NCO Head of Communications, a review of CNN and DNN was commissioned by the NCO in 2004, which was published in October 2005 (Murphy, 2005). The review highlights that some CDBs had established regular sessions of CNN, which link with the adult county council, but that the majority of CNN are not functioning effectively (Murphy, 2005).

The Review of CNN (Murphy, 2005, p.14-15), recommends that "a work programme is needed for each CNN and the necessary back-up supports with appropriate funding put in place. Practices across the country vary considerably both in the quality of CNN events and programmes and the frequency whereby young people come together to give voice to their views and to make their views known". The Report also noted: "Greater efforts must be directed towards achieving inter-departmental co-ordination at Government level and collaboration across other relevant statutory and voluntary agencies" (Murphy, 2005, p.87).

The report recommended that CNN and DNN be recognised by Government as the official consultation process for involving young people in policy formulation (Murphy, 2005, p.87). This recommendation suggests limiting the scope of CNN and DNN to that of 'consultation', which falls short of the Murphy's own finding that "participation in decision-making and influencing policy are potentially at the heart of the work, according to the overwhelming majority of those consulted during this review process" (Murphy, 2005, p.4). Despite this finding, Murphy did not recommend that CNN and DNN be recognised as the official structure for 'participation in decision-making' by children and young people. This is all the more surprising given that the NCO had taken a decision in 2003 (NCO, 2003b) to focus on participation by children and young people, with consultation as a part of such participation.

The measures adopted to strengthen the CNN structure (outlined below) following the Murphy Report went beyond Murphy's recommendation and used the language of 'participation' rather than 'consultation'. An independent review of the National Children's Strategy undertaken on behalf of the National Children's

Advisory Council at mid-term point uses the language of ‘participation’ (National Children’s Advisory Council, 2006). This reviews identified the establishment of a range of measures to promote participation by young people, particularly the DNN and CNN structures, as one of the key successes of the Strategy. Kilkelly (2007, p.77) also uses the language of ‘participation’ and notes that in order to improve the influence young people have in decisions that affect their lives the evidence suggests that the avenues of communication between formal participation structures for young people and decision-makers are ‘integrated into the mainstream political and administrative decision-making structures at local and central levels’. As noted in Chapter 2, Lundy (2007, p.938) argues that if interpreted in a “generous and child-empowering” way and implemented in its entirety rather than in individual elements, Article 12 has the potential to be a powerful instrument. Many authors and the General Comments of the CRC Committee contend that Article 12 and other CRC agency rights go beyond consultation and embrace the full participation of children in decision-making (CRC Committee, 2003; CRC Committee, 2005; Lansdown, 2005; Kilkelly, 2007; Lundy, 2007; CRC Committee, 2009; DCYA, 2015).

Following the Murphy Review (2005), notes of meetings record that the OMC began exploring a model for an enhanced CNN funding scheme focussed on promoting and enabling participation in decision-making by children and young people. The same notes record that in 2006, the OMC was advised by officials from the Department of the Environment and Local Government in developing a funding model. It is noted in OMC (2007a) that additional Government funding for CNN was obtained. These developments are evidence of a new chapter in strengthening the capacity of CNN as a mechanism to enable the participation of children and young people in decision-making at local level, which will be outlined in detail below.

#### **4.7 Strengthening the CNN structure**

From a review of published evaluations, reports and internal policy documents from the NCO, OMC and OMCYA, it can be observed that the key developments that led to a strengthening of the CNN structure include: the establishment of the CNN Development Fund in 2007; the establishment of the Children and Young People’s Participation Support Team in 2009; the publication of the CNN Toolkit to support the organisers of CNN in 2011; and the decision to contract the financial oversight of the CNN Development Fund to Pobal, an organisation that manages publicly funded programmes on behalf of the Irish Government in 2011. The significance of each of these developments is explored below.

#### **4.8 Supports for CNN**

As noted above, the CNN structure was in need of significant support and development to become a meaningful mechanism to deliver agency rights. It is also clear that the DCYA dedicated Citizen Participation Unit, which takes the lead national role in ensuring that children have a voice on matters that affect their lives, was and continues to be pivotal to supporting and driving initiatives and

mechanisms to implement children's agency rights, including the CNN structure (DCYA, 2015). The need for effective support in this area is recommended by the UN Committee in its General Comment 12, in which it strongly recommends that States parties exert all efforts to listen to or seek the views of children speaking collectively (CRC Committee, 2009, para.14). The General Comments also states that the Committee welcomes the growing number of local youth parliaments, municipal children's councils and ad hoc consultations where children can voice their views in decision-making processes (CRC Committee, 2009, para.127).

### **The establishment of the Children and Young People's Participation Support Team**

In their study on children's experiences of the impact of participation in initiatives in Ireland, Martin et al. (2015, p.34-35) note that in March 2009, the OMCYA established the first phase of a Children and Young People's Participation Support Team to:

- "provide support for the development of effective CNN under all 34 Local Authorities, through driving implementation of actions outlined in the CNN Implementation Group Report and future actions to be developed by a Children and Young People's Participation Partnership Committee;
- support the operation and development of the DNN process;
- support other children and young people's participation initiatives. Two Regional Participation Project Officers were appointed to the Participation Support Team to provide training and support for CNN, DNN and other participation initiatives".

The independent evaluation reports of the CNN Development Fund (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy, 2010; McEvoy, 2011) highlight the value of the support, information and training provided by the three regional Participation Officers including; the marked improvement in the operation of many CNN resulting from their involvement; the important role they played in creating a strong link between CNN at local level and the DCYA at national level; and the provision of excellent information on expenditure under the Development Fund.

### **Development of the CNN Toolkit**

The need for guidance on good practice is widely acknowledged in the literature, including the documenting of activities and methodologies used in participation projects which is crucial in order to share best practice with other initiatives and with other Government departments and agencies (Martin et al., 2015).

In recognition of the need for good practice guidance, the OMCYA Children and Young People's Participation Support Team developed a set of guidelines, including a manual for new personnel, minimum standards and best practice in managing CNN (McEvoy, 2011). A resources committee was established to oversee and support this development comprised of OMCYA staff, OMCYA Participation Officers and local coordinators of CNN, which advised on all aspects of its development and format.

The CNN Toolkit (DCYA, 2011b) was published in 2011 and contains best practice examples; case studies; and key advice. Guidance in Toolkit draws on national and international good practice. DCYA meeting notes obtained for this dissertation record that the Toolkit was considered to be extremely helpful and as a result of requests from coordinators of CNN, a revised and updated Toolkit has been developed, which will be published in September 2016.

#### **4.9 The establishment and governance of the CNN Development Fund**

As noted above, the CNN Implementation Group (CIG) was established by the OMC to devise a plan for the development of effective CNN:

“In response to the recommendations in the CIG’s report, the OMC established the CNN Development Fund and an independent evaluation process. This scheme aims to ensure that CNN operate according to best practice and provide enhanced opportunities for the participation of children and young people in local decision-making. The scheme has proved hugely popular and in 2007, 30 of the 34 CNN received funding. The independent evaluator’s work includes getting feedback from young participants and making recommendations on good practice” (OMC, 2008a, p.2).

Under this Fund, up to €20,000 was available to each of the 34 City and County Development Boards. In the first year of the Fund, a document entitled “Conditions of the Enhanced Programme of Activities Grant” was issued by the OMC (OMC, 2007b), the criteria for which included: evidence that the programme is in keeping with best practice in youth participation; evidence of inclusion of hard to reach young people in the programme; relevance of issues outlined in the programme to local young people; and the establishment of links to adult decision-making structures. McEvoy (2009) notes that in addition to meeting the above criteria, City and County Development were required to submit an annual progress report to the OMCYA and provide evidence of their child protection policies and link the CNN website to the OMC.

A methodology for assessing the CNN Development Fund was adopted, which included: in-depth evaluation of three CNN, interviews with CDB officers and youth workers involved with CNN and a focus group with CNN members (McEvoy, 2009, p.4). The methodology remained consistent over the three years and in-depth evaluations were conducted with 11 of the 34 CNN (McEvoy, 2011).

At the end of the first three years, the Fund was deemed to be delivering on its objectives and had become a regular part of the annual budget of the Citizen Participation Unit (McEvoy, 2011). By this stage the description of CNN had evolved and from 2010 onwards, the structure was described as follows:

“CNN get young people’s voices heard in two ways: by working on topics of importance to young people and by acting as a consultative forum for adult decision-makers in the locality. Every CNN holds an Annual General Meeting

(AGM), to which children and young people are invited from schools, local youth clubs and other projects. There, participants work on identifying local topics of importance to them. A CNN Committee is elected at the AGM and is responsible for working on the topics identified during the coming year, as well as being the consultative forum that works with decision-makers" (DCYA, 2015, p.34).

In addition, Ireland's dedicated Children's Participation Strategy (DCYA, 2015) adopted the principles from the Council of Europe's Recommendation on participation in decision-making of children and young people under the age of 18 (CoE, 2012). Since publication of DCYA (2015), all structures and organisations engaging in child participation are required to use these principles, which refer to good practice in the context and process of participation.

As a means of ensuring expert oversight and monitoring of the CNN Development Fund, the OMCYA announced a significant change to the funding arrangements in a letter to the Directors of Services in all Local Authorities (OMCYA, 2010a). Under a Memorandum of Understanding (OMCYA, 2010b), the OMCYA contracted Pobal to undertake administration of the Fund and provide technical support and advice to the OMCYA and Local Authorities. Pobal is noted on its website ([www.pobal.ie](http://www.pobal.ie)) to be "a not-for-profit organisation that manages funding programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and EU bodies". Pobal conducts verification visits of four CNN per annum (OMCYA, 2010b) and developed a Portal that enables CNN to complete and submit their reporting documents online (Pobal, 2014).

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

It is argued here that the methodology for evaluating the Fund can be considered good practice, as it was sufficiently robust to provide evidence of a comprehensive picture of on-the-ground activity around the country. Such good practice is rare in the literature and although the area of youth participation is now well established, there remains a paucity of research on what the impacts of participation are (Sinclair, 2004, p. 114; Kirby and Bryson, 2002).

In order to apply for funding under this scheme, CNN were required to meet criteria that demonstrated engagement between members of the CNN and decision-making structures, in line with recommendations from the Murphy Report of 2005 (Martin et al, 2015). It is evident that the drive to improve practice in effective child and youth participation was at the heart of the funding criteria and evaluation mechanisms established under the Fund. But did the Fund result in good practice improvements in the operation of CNN as a mechanism to realise children's agency rights on the ground? This will be explored in the next chapter.



## Chapter 5

### The impact of the CNN Development Fund on good practice improvements on the ground

This chapter analyses the impact of the CNN Development Fund on good practice improvements in the functioning of CNN on the ground.

The achievements and challenges recorded in evaluation and annual reports on the Fund compiled by the independent evaluator and Pobal (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy, 2010; McEvoy, 2011; Pobal, 2014; Pobal 2015; Pobal 2016) are thematically analysed under six headings. These themes were developed from key challenges and recommendations identified in the above evaluation and annual reports, as listed below:

- The operation of CNN
- Membership of CNN
- Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people
- Effective engagement with decision-makers
- Support for the CNN Programme
- National developments and oversight

#### 5.1 The operation of CNN

In its first year, the Development Fund resulted in significant improvements in the operation of many CNN (McEvoy, 2009). McEvoy notes that the additional funding enabled many CNN to meet on a regular and sustained basis, “possibly the single biggest achievement of the scheme” (p.50).

The second report of the independent evaluator points to further improvements stating that one impact of the increased funding over two years is that there has been a number of instances where CNN have made contributions resulting in positive changes for young people at local level (McEvoy, 2010). McEvoy also showed improvements in the regularity of meetings and in renewed emphasis on meeting the core CNN objectives. However, one of the key Recommendations from the Report is that attention needs to be paid to CNN failing to meet ‘minimum standards’. The Third evaluation report contends that the Development Fund resulted in “a more systematic and structurally robust programme” and that “very significantly, 72% of all CNN are meeting at least once a month – and some more often” (McEvoy, 2011, p.1).

By 2013, the vast majority of CNN (32; 94%) reported that there had been an outcome from the young people’s participation in the structure. Many reported that young people who were consulted with or canvassed by organisations at local and national level felt listened to, that they had made a positive contribution, that they had learned a lot about the decision makers who affect their lives and felt more confident in themselves to contribute this way in future (Pobal, 2014, p. 18).

A number of key developments occurred in 2014, under the Local Government Reform Act 2014. The County and City Development Boards (CDBs) were dissolved. The number of Local Authorities was reduced to 31, with a commensurate reduction in the number of CNN. Local and community development activity previously undertaken by the CDBs came under the remit of the new Local Community Development Committees (Pobal, 2015, p. 4).

The findings noted above are encouraging and in keeping with guidance in General Comment 12 (CRC Committee, 2009, para. 133), which states: "If participation is to be effective and meaningful, it needs to be understood as a process, not as an individual one-off event."

## **5.2 Membership of CNN**

In order to be an effective mechanism for implementing children's agency rights, CNN needed to attract and retain children and young people (McEvoy, 2009). The impact of the Fund since its inception is explored here by reporting on the number of young people that attend CNN AGMs nationwide; the involvement of 12-15 year olds; and the involvement of seldom heard young people involved. Two difficulties are consistently noted in evaluation and annual reports of the Fund; the challenge of attracting 12-15 year olds to CNN and that of attracting seldom-heard young people (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy, 2010; McEvoy, 2011; Pobal, 2013; Pobal 2014; Pobal, 2015; Pobal, 2016). As already noted, evidence of effort and results in recruiting 12-15 year olds and seldom heard young people are criteria for funding under the DCYA Development Fund.

Every year in the month of September or October, children and young people are invited to attend the 31 annual CNN AGMs, which take place during October and November. Invitations are issued to all second-level schools, youth groups and organisations representing seldom-heard children and young people in the local authority area. In a small number of CNN, 11 and 12 year-old children from primary schools are also invited to attend. One of the national performance indicators for the Chief Executive of Local Authorities in Ireland, under the theme of Youth and Community Participation, reads: "Percentage of local schools and youth groups involved in the local Youth Council/Comhairle na nÓg scheme" (National Oversight and Audit Commission, 2014).

The membership of CNN has grown steadily since the inception of the Development Fund in 2007, as outlined in Table 1 below. 4,176 children and young people attended AGMs in the 31 local authority areas in 2015 (Pobal, 2016).

**Table 1      Number of young people attending Comhairle na nÓg AGMs**

Year	Attended AGM
2008	2,334
2009	2,684
2010	2,280
2012	2,830
2013	4,280
2014	5,530*
2015	4,176

In 2011, the timing for the annual funding cycle was changed and no evaluation or reporting occurred.

\*The increase in numbers attending AGMs was because of the additional once-off funding from DCYA for enhanced CNN AGMs to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UNCRC (Pobal, 2015).

### **The involvement of 12-15 year-olds in CNN**

The criteria for funding CNN include evidence of the inclusion of children and young people from the age of 12 (McEvoy, 2009). The first evaluation report noted that CNN was devised as a participation initiative for young people, aged 12-18 but stated: “considerable numbers of Comhairlí are populated by young people over the age of 15” (McEvoy, p19).

This issue continued to be a problem as one of the key recommendations from the second evaluation report noted that the under-representation of young people under the age of 15 needs to be addressed (McEvoy, 2010). The third evaluation report notes evidence of a concerted effort to address the imbalance in the age profile, stating: “An average of 41% of the CNN membership is now aged 12-15 years. However, there are a number of CNN that have much work to do to align their membership to this national average” (McEvoy, 2011, p.12). The challenges in recruiting 12-15 year-olds continues to be an issue, but Pobal (2016) notes some improvements, with a total of 30 of the 31 Comhairlí reporting that they worked to improve participation of young people aged 12 to 15.

### **The involvement of seldom heard young people in CNN**

The term ‘seldom heard’ is described by Kelleher et al. (2014, p.53) as an umbrella term to describe young people from an extensive range of backgrounds and life experiences whose voices typically are not heard in decisions that affect them. Kelleher et al. note that the experience of having fewer opportunities for seldom heard young people to participate resonates in the broader international literature. The World Health Organisation (2010) for example outlines that young people with disabilities have fewer opportunities to participate in public as opposed to private decision-making. The challenges associated with identifying, accessing and engaging with seldom heard young people have been identified as contributing to their under-representation in decision-making. (Kelleher et al., p.53).

CNN has difficulties in attracting and retaining seldom heard young people. McEvoy (2009) notes that the development of local partnerships with external agencies, such as youth services or other organisations engaged with seldom heard young people, has been pivotal in ensuring broad access to CNN. However, according to McEvoy the successful and meaningful inclusion young people has only resulted when partnerships between the CDB and agencies that work with seldom heard young people and/or a capacity-building programme has been put in place. As a means of addressing this issue, McEvoy (2010) recommended the need for a revision by the Department of the Environment, Community (DECLG) and Local Government to the performance indicator for City and County Managers for regarding CNN.

Martin et al. (2015) note that the DECLG, which oversees the Local Authorities, issues performance indicators to the Directors of Community and Enterprise which are linked to a performance pay-related component of salary and reviewed on an annual basis. "One of these performance indicators relates directly to CNN. The former OMCYA worked with the DECLG to amend the original performance indicator to reflect the fact that CNN members come from youth services and clubs as well as from schools, which supports the role of seldom-heard young people in CNN" (Martin et al., 2015, p. 34-35).

There was a steady increase reported in the participation of seldom-heard children and young people in 2010 (McEvoy, 2011). However, challenges were noted, including the need to maintain a balanced membership profile by a continued relationship development with schools, youth services and organisations representing seldom-heard young people (McEvoy, 2011, p. 13).

Pobal (2014, p.13) notes that across all CNN, a significant effort is being made to be inclusive, with a total of 155 organisations worked with in seeking the involvement of seldom heard young people in 2013. The report notes that it is difficult to establish the extent to which these efforts were ultimately successful in increasing participation from more marginalised young people. "This may be worthy of further examination in future" (Pobal, 2014, p. 13). Commenting on a growing involvement of seldom heard young people at CNN AGMs and other meetings in 2014, Pobal (2015, p.14-15) notes that many CNN put an emphasis on the inclusion of delegates either from outside the mainstream education system or from groups and communities that might be more marginalised.

The literature notes the importance of diversity. Multicultural participation is important in democratic societies whose populations are becoming more socially and culturally diverse, and whose changes challenge communities to develop their capacities. Indeed, the future of these societies will depend in part on their ability to recognize differences and build bridges across group boundaries (Boulden, 2007; Farmer, 2006; Lepischak, 2004; Quiroz-Martinez et al., 2004).

The above developments highlight the efforts being made by all 31 CNN to involve seldom-heard children and young people. Such efforts should be sustained as the benefits of participation by marginalised children and young people have been described as resulting in their improved self-esteem and assertiveness, feelings of empowerment and access to information and skills (Prout et al., 2006; Willow, 2010; Head, 2011, p. 544.).

### **5.3 Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people**

The literature contends that having a sense of ownership is relevant to engaging young people and key to sustaining the involvement of young people from diverse backgrounds in the longer-term (Bell et al., 2008). When young people identify their own issues, it can awaken their spirit and move them into action. (Checkoway, 2011, p. 342)

The initial Conditions of Funding (OMC, 2007b, p.1) sought “evidence that the programme is in keeping with best practice in youth participation”. Accordingly, the OMCYA expected CDBs to ensure that the CNN gave young people the opportunity to influence change on topics that were important to them. By 2010, funding criteria required that a CNN AGM be held “where issues are discussed and prioritised by a large group of young people, after which a smaller CNN committee of young people is (s)elected to pursue those issues and particular outcomes throughout the year” (McEvoy, 2011, p.20).

In reviewing reports and documents for this dissertation, two key issues emerge under this theme: the importance of young people being given the space to identify issues that are important to them and their peers and make positive changes on those issues; and the need to have sufficient time to make positive changes on their issues. These are explored below.

#### **Space to identify issues that are important to young people and make positive changes on those issues**

“Children’s participation should build on the personal knowledge, information and insights that children have about their own lives and issues that affect them” (Save the Children, 2005, p. 6). On this issue, the first evaluation report noted that some CNN used the funds to develop innovative ideas to enhance the experience of young members (McEvoy, 2009). However McEvoy states: “It is not enough for CNN members simply ‘to be involved’ and ‘have their voice heard’. CNN members are also keen to ‘make a difference’ and ‘achieve change’ locally if they are to consider the system and process a success” (McEvoy, 2009, p.9).

By the second year, it was reported that “the bulk of funding was used for members to identify topics of importance to children and young people in each locality and influence action on these topics” (McEvoy, 2010, p.47). According to McEvoy,

examples of these projects have culminated in surveys, DVDs, websites, youth events and seminars on issues that young people themselves consider important. McEvoy (p.47) states that “the Development Fund has resulted in:

- a more robust and sustainable programme;
- an activity-fuelled programme that is more attractive to young people;
- young people engaging in campaigns and events;
- better involvement with peers and the local community through various projects and events;
- involvement in programmes and policies that affect young people”.

The third evaluation report (McEvoy, 2011, p.v) notes: “the impact of the funding over the last three years shows that an increased number of CNN have succeeded in identifying issues of concern to young people and spearheading positive changes on those issues”. However, McEvoy (p. 55) comments that some CNN continue to have challenges and recommends:

“ensuring CNN is youth-led and that young people are facilitated to identify and prioritise the issues that matter to them; and developing the CNN work programme to allow young people to focus on those issues to achieve targeted outcomes”.

By 2013, Pobal (2014, p.18) was able to report that many CNN demonstrated tangible outputs from their chosen topics, in the form of DVDs, apps and YouTube videos created to highlight issues and communicate messages to young people. Many CNN reported awareness-raising on their topics – most often on mental health, bullying and cyberbullying.

“There were examples where CNN were able to make statements such as “4,350 young people were educated in relation to cyber-bullying” and “over 800 young people have a better understanding of mental health” following their activities. Others were able to state that their work and research carried out through campaigns has led to a revision of anti-bullying and cyber-bullying policies in many schools and youth organisations.” (Pobal, 2014, p. 26).

Significant progress on this issue was also noted for 2014. Pobal (2015, p.12) highlights that the majority of CNN report back to young people in their locality on the progress of their key actions on dedicated Facebook pages, Twitter and other social media such as Local Authority websites. Mainstream media opportunities were also employed by some CNN to highlight their work and key messages. Some also reported social media as an effective tool to recruit young people. Pobal (2015, p.12) highlights that a number of CNN addressed school assemblies, used school noticeboards or student councils and reached out to youth organisations. Continued progress on identifying and making changes to topics that are important to young people was recorded for 2015 (Pobal, 2016), including campaigns to

challenge prejudice of marginalised groups within the community, development of information packs and tools that can be used as resources for young people, teachers or youth workers. Commenting on the impact of the work of CNN, Pobal, (2016, p.20) lists a table of good practice, one example of which is below:

“Dublin City CNN assisted Dublin City Council in carrying out a survey of all 13 recreation centres across the city by Dublin City Council to establish the best location to set up a Youth Café to provide an alcohol free space for young people. Following the submission of a comprehensive report, the Manager of Recreation has secured funding to set up a youth café in the city in 2016.”

The developments noted above are evidence of an exponential level of progress in CNN providing a space for young people to identify issues at AGMs and pursue those issues in more depth with the smaller CNN committee. Vromen & Collin (2010) describe meaningful participation as fun, informal and youth-led. The authors argue that “where young people see relevance to their lives – in all aspects of the process: atmosphere, relationships, activities, role and outcomes – they are more likely to consider participation opportunities as a priority” (p.108).

### **Sufficient time to make positive changes**

Commenting on the issue of children participating on their own terms, Save the Children (2005, p. 6) states: “Recognising their other commitments, children should be able to participate on their own terms and for lengths of time chosen by them”.

In the first CNN evaluation report, young people had raised as a priority their wish for a two-year term of office to enable them to complete their projects and make a difference (McEvoy, 2009). The Report recommended that a two-year term of office be adopted by all 34 CNN for the members of the CNN committee elected at the AGM. At that stage only 29% of CNN had a two-year term of office (McEvoy).

The 2010 Report (McEvoy, 2010, p.37) notes an increase in the number of Comhaire na nÓg operating a two-year term to 52% and noted the following benefits:

- “formal and improved links between young people and decision-makers are more likely to occur because more time is available to forge and develop these links;
- young people have more time to get the necessary skills and confidence to make the most of their experience;
- young people have indicated that they prefer a 2-year term;
- a CNN is not dominated by members who have served ‘longer terms’;
- young people are more likely to be interested in the activities of the CNN if they are committed to serving a 2-year term”.

By 2010, 84% of CNN were operating a two-year term of office for committee membership (McEvoy, 2010) and by 2015, all 31 CNN were operating a two-year

term (Pobal, 2016). The very significant progress illustrated above is evidence of good participatory practice. This is supported by Kirby, Lanyon & Sinclair, (2003), who argue that to develop meaningful participatory practice organisations have to change, so that they are willing and able to listen to young people and then act on what they say.

#### **5.4 Effective engagement with decision-makers**

Effective engagement with decision-makers is a key criterion under the Fund, as was illustrated above. In this regard, Lundy (2007, p.937) argues that in order to have effective influence “children at least have a 'right of audience' - a guaranteed opportunity to communicate views to an identifiable individual or body with the responsibility to listen”. However, such engagement can be challenging. In certain cases, children who participate in policymaking are entirely reliant on the powerful political entity they seek to influence, the entity that likely employs the worker supervising the children and provides their meeting rooms (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Faulkner, 2009).

In the first year of funding, only some CDBs established regular sessions of CNN, which link with the adult county council and interact with policy-makers to ensure that the views of young people are included in shaping policies and services (McEvoy, 2009). McEvoy notes that across the country considerable efforts were made to forge links between Comhairlí and decision-making bodies. However the report (McEvoy, p.25) states that it is important for decision-making bodies to meaningfully involve young people and to consider alternative means for young people to contribute to decision-making processes without having to sit on committees. Improved links with decision-making bodies was highlighted in the second evaluation report (McEvoy, 2010, p.56), but challenges were noted with a recommendation, which said: “the greatest challenge for most Comhairlí is to ensure that links are formalised in the system so that they are sustainable and not reliant on any one person or agency”.

By 2010, CNN was noted to being gradually more embedded in the Local Authority system and less dependent on individual champions (McEvoy, 2011, p.2). However, the report outlines one of the key challenges as: “Ensuring CNN remains a key area of work in the structure and strategic plans of the Local Authorities” (McEvoy, 2011, p.3). Commenting on progress in linking with decision-makers in 2013, Pobal (2014, p. 18) states:

“It [Development Fund] also heightened the profile and work of CNN among decision makers who now will consult CNN where previously this may not have happened. The participation of young people has allowed them to be part of the decision making process at local level, being respected as valued members of the community where their views and opinions are valued. A number of CNN have been involved in mental health initiatives in which the CNN members have an ongoing role as the youth reference panel”.



Considerable progress was reported, noting that 97 organisations presented policies, strategies or plans to CNN nationally as consultative forums during 2015. Local county or town councils were involved with 20 CNN nationally on issues such as planning, recreation and community and enterprise and 58% of CNN inputted into the Local Economic Community Plans (LECPs) and local development strategies (Pobal, 2016, p.28) Pobal states that this may be the result of correspondence from the Department of the Environment and Local Government (DECLG) and the DCYA to Local Authorities asking them to ensure the involvement of CNN in local economic and development plans.

In highlighting good practice in embedding the CNN into the work of the Local Authority, Pobal (2016, p. 28) states:

“Kerry County Council named the Kerry CNN in its Development Plan 2015-2021 as a stakeholder in all consultations involving young people. For example, the CNN is specifically referenced under the headings of Social Inclusion and Community Development. In addition to this, they were also consulted as a statutory structure in the development of the Kerry Local Economic and Community Plan, with CNN members participating in a stakeholder consultation meeting. The outcome from these consultations resulted with the inclusion of a goal *to secure improved outcomes for children and young people including more effective service delivery and better opportunities, by working with them and the appropriate agencies*”.

Don Tuohy, Administrative Officer, Waterford City and County Council, who was interviewed for this dissertation said:

“The fact that CNN is a structure operating in that sphere and meeting the local council, there is an opportunity for them to collectively get a voice heard and speak freely about various issues and bring the viewpoint of youth across to the decision-makers at a more senior level. So it certainly is working in that respect”.

Commenting on engaging with decision-makers, a boy from Cork City CNN said:

“They’re getting our perspective, our viewpoint on an issue that we might have an entirely different view of the issue, or an entirely different opinion or some way that, what we were thinking about it that they hadn’t thought of, and well, they get, you know, they get more sides of the story, so to speak”.

As evidenced above, since the inception of the CNN Development Fund, considerable progress has been made in effective engagement with decision-makers and in embedding a culture of involving children and young people in local decision-making both as a consultative forum and on their own issues. In their Study of children’s views on the impact of their participation, Martin et al. (2015, p.110) note “An interesting finding from the research is that the majority of youth participants feel that while people in power do listen to them, they are less confident about whether their views influence the decisions made by people in power. While

they have opportunities to voice their opinions, they are less positive about the actual impact of their views on decisions relating to young people". However, it must be noted that the interviews with young people from CNN in the Martin et al. study took place in 2012 and much progress is evidenced above since then.

## **5.5 Support for the day to day running of the CNN Programme**

The Save the Children (2005, p. 6) recommend that adult workers can only encourage children's participation effectively and confidently if they have the necessary understandings, skills and support. On the issue of supports required for the day-to-day running of the CNN, two key issues emerge from evaluation reports and annual reports of the Fund. One is the need for dedicated staff and the other is the need for a Steering Committee to support the CNN.

### **The need for dedicated staff**

The importance of adult allies is frequently noted in the literature. Central to the role of successful adult allies is the importance of leadership development and education for these adults, in tandem with supports and education for young people (Checkoway, 2011, Martin, et al., 2015).

According to the first evaluation report (McEvoy, 2009, p.16 ), some Local Authorities used the funds to employ part-time workers to drive and improve their CNN and this was very beneficial. However, a number of challenges were noted, one of which was that many CDBs used Development Fund monies to retain workers from youth organisations to work with CNN. According to McEvoy (2010, p. 45) some of these youth workers were conducting the CNN as a youth club, with a priority on the personal development of young people:

"In the Youth Work Act 2001, youth work is defined as an educational and developmental process of '*non-formal education*'. Youth participation, on the other hand, can be defined as '*involving young people in decisions on any matter that affects their lives*' and is an integral part of best practice in youth work. CNN is not youth work and should not be mistaken for youth work. The personal or social development of young people is important for the success of a CNN, but it cannot be the sole focus. Involving them [young people] in the decision-making process in a systematic fashion must be the primary focus or core objective of every CNN."

The tendency for CNN Co-ordinators to run the CNN like a youth club was also noted in subsequent years McEvoy (2011). On this issue, Martin Donohoe, Senior DCYA Child and Youth Participation Officer, who was interviewed for this dissertation, spoke of the impact of an initiative to promote the UNCRC among CNN in 2014. Pobal (2015, p.4) notes that in order to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the UNCRC, DCYA provided a separate fund of €5,000 each to CNN towards their 2014 AGM. Conditions for this fund (DCYA, 2014, p.1) noted: "This funding is awarded to enable

the CNN AGM to focus on promoting and celebrating the UNCRC and children's rights". Commenting on this initiative and its impact on the tendency of co-ordinators to run the CNN like a youth club, Martin Donohoe said:

"In discussions with CNN co-ordinators, it was like a pivotal moment for a lot of them because due to getting the extra funding, they were focused on the UNCRC and on children's rights. And they started getting people out from organisations like Children's Rights Alliance to find out more about the UNCRC and children's rights. And the penny dropped for an awful lot of people. I think that really, really improved the situation for CNNs generally because the co-ordinators are now going, 'Yeah, this makes sense. This is where our foundation is and this is what we should be working from'".

This issue continues to be a challenge in CNN and is addressed later in the dissertation.

### **The need for a Steering Committee**

Adult participants in the study conducted by Martin et al. (2015, p.109-110) are mostly positive about the effectiveness of CNN Steering Committees, believing that they increase the effectiveness of their CNN and allow greater access to other professionals and agencies, which in turn increases the impact of young people's participation activities by enabling other organisations to be more involved in CNN.

According to the first evaluation report, from 2009 there was evidence of a growing tendency in establishing steering committees to support the CNN. McEvoy (2010, p.v) states:

"An increasing number of CNN are establishing steering committees, which typically comprise representatives and organisations such as: young members of the CNN; city and county councils; youth services; education providers; health services; organisations representing 'seldom heard' young people; and Local Partnership Committees, including Sports Partnership Committees; Policing Committees, Youth Diversion Projects; Garda [Police] Youth Liaison Officers; and community groups".

The benefits of steering committees were reported to include: support for the CNN Coordinator to partner with key stakeholders; a stronger engagement by stakeholders with the CNN programme and with the young people; and organisations representing seldom heard young people can contribute to all aspects of the programme (McEvoy, 2010, p.22). The Report notes that the experience of CNN with steering committees demonstrate that "they do not have to be complex or elaborate in style, but rather a structure that actually enhances the CNN programme" (McEvoy, 2010, p.22).

The continued failure of some CNN to establish a Steering Committee was highlighted in McEvoy (2010, p.23), with a key recommendation stating: "where not

already in existence, a steering committee should be established to assist and advise the CNN Coordinator/CDB". A significant improvement on this issue was noted in 2010, at which point, 94% of CNN had a steering committee in place (McEvoy, 2011, p.1). The challenges outlined in McEvoy note the importance of using Steering Committee develop and maintain links with decision-makers.

While the above reports highlight the success of the Fund in ensuring that the vast majority of CNN have Steering Committees in place, Pobal (2016, p.32) noted: "Three CNN said that they did not have any members of the CNN [young people] on the Steering Committee".

## **5.6 National developments and oversight**

Children's right to participate in governmental decision-making processes is part and parcel of the right to participation under General Comment 5 on the UNCRC (Perry-Hazan, 2016). According to Lansdown (2010, p. 15): "In holding Government's to account, little will change unless considerable investment is made in working with adults to sensitise them to children's participation rights and the positive impact of their realisation." It is evident that from the inception of the CNN Development Fund, the Irish Government recognised the need to invest in its nationwide structure established to implement agency rights from the UNCRC. It also showed evidence of wanting to develop good practice by appointing an independent evaluator to make recommendations on the effectiveness and impact of the Fund.

The first evaluation report (McEvoy, 2009, p.51) recommends that OMCYA should clarify the conditions of funding for the annual grant based on the agreed objectives, but dependent on achieving a set of minimum standards. The report finds that the CNN Development Fund made a significant and positive impact on the development of CNN, which otherwise would not have happened (McEvoy, 2009, p.2). Following this first report, the Conditions for the 2009 CNN Development Fund (OMCYA, 2008b) were amended. In 2010, the Conditions of Funding (OMCYA, 2010b) were again revised, based on the findings from McEvoy (2009). The revised conditions demanded considerably more detail about the status and operation of CNN. Criteria from this document, relevant to this dissertation are outlined below:

- the number of schools and youth organisations invited to participate
- the seldom heard groups invited (eg. Travellers, children with disabilities etc.) to participate
- the breakdown of age groups invited to participate
- a detailed programme of activity for 2009 – 2010, including planning of a sufficient number of meetings to meet the objectives of the proposed programme
- evidence that the programme of activity is youth led
- relevance of issues outlined in the proposed programme to local young people

- establishment of links to adult decision-making structures
- evidence of appropriate evaluation of the programme
- links established / enhanced between the local government bodies / agencies/ committees and CNN.

The revised criteria are evidence of the growing expertise of the OMCYA Participation Unit on good practice in children's participation in decision-making. It is notable that this change occurred in the year that the OMCYA enhanced the work of the Participation Unit, by contracting a Children and Young People's Participation Support Service referred to earlier in this dissertation.

The third evaluation report (McEvoy, 2011) highlights the value of the support, information and training provided by the regional Participation Officers contracted by the DCYA through Foróige and Youth Work Ireland; and the important role played by the Participation Officers in creating a strong link between CNN and the DCYA, including the provision of information on expenditure under the Development Fund. The majority of the adult participants were very positive about the role of the national Participation Officers in supporting youth participation initiatives and it can be viewed as an institutional change in child and youth participation, which has moved the participation agenda forward. (Martin et al., 2015, p. 110)

As noted above, the DCYA developed a once-off UNCRC 25th Anniversary Commemoration Fund of €5,000 to each of 31 CNN to host an enhanced AGM (Pobal, 2015). A dedicated application and guidance document was developed stating: "this funding is awarded to enable the CNN AGM to focus on promoting and celebrating children's rights" (DCYA, 2014). According to DCYA (2014), each CNN was required to:

- Broaden the recruitment of children and young people for the 2014 AGM;
- Host a bigger AGM than is usually held;
- Build a focus on children and young people's rights into the AGM;
- Ensure the involvement of local media in the AGM;
- Use the branding (to be supplied by DCYA) to have a dedicated CNN-UNCRC pull-up stand/s made, which is prominently displayed in the public offices of the Local Authority for the remainder of 2014 as well as at the CNN AGM at other public events.

Pobal (2016, p.5) notes that the Government's first *National strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* was published in 2015.

"The strategy focuses on giving children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged and marginalized backgrounds, a voice in decisions that affect their lives. All Government Departments and State agencies have a role in implementing this Strategy, including Local Authorities. The strategy also reiterates that CNN is the nationally recognised structure that enables children and young people to have a voice in local decision-making".

In another development at national Government level referred to earlier in this dissertation, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and the DCYA issued letters to Chief Executives and Directors of Services in all Local Authorities asking them to ensure the involvement and participation of CNN in local economic and development plans (Pobal, 2016).

The evidence above illustrates that CNN is a key priority at national level for the DCYA, which uses its influence to work with other Government Departments and agencies at national and local level to set standards to build it as a mechanism for implementing children's agency rights. It is also observed that the development of a dedicated strategy on child participation, with commitments from all key government departments and agencies, is highly significant, particularly in view the need for high level political support and action in the international literature on child participation (Lansdown, 2010; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Martin et al., 2015).

## **5.7 Conclusion**

According to Lansdown (2004), it is necessary to be able to measure the extent, quality and impact of the actual participation in which children are engaged. Without such measurement, it is not possible to engage in any critical appraisal of what is being done in the name of participation or, indeed, of whether it is actually impacting on the lives of children (Lansdown, 2010, p. 20).

In summarising the development of [Irish] Government participatory initiatives, it is clear that since their inception at the start of the millennium, significant improvements have taken place in increasing children and young people's impact on decision-making and affording them meaningful opportunities to participate in civic life. It is apparent, too, that recommendations emerging from ongoing evaluations have been taken on board and a number of measures put in place to address the issues highlighted. Issues that appear to require continuous attention include efforts to include seldom-heard young people in participation and the development, support and promotion of participation structures such as CNN (Martin et al., 2015, p. 40)

It is evident that the CNN structure has made considerable progress in embedding children's participation in local decision-making and in measuring that progress. However, in a national audit of child participation initiatives, it was found that there should be more formal guidelines and directives from the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government requiring the Local Authorities to consult children and young people on a wider range of policy implementation – it was suggested that Local Authority staff would take the role of the local CNN more seriously if there were a statutory requirement to consult with them (Roe & McEvoy, 2011). The evidence above highlights that despite the progress made, significant challenges remain, some of which are addressed in the following chapters.

## Chapter 6

### The influence of the views of children and young people on the development of CNN

This chapter explores the influence of the views of children and young people on how CNN developed as a nationwide structure to deliver on their agency rights. Commenting on the importance of children having a voice in the development of projects Austin (2010, p. 247) notes: "Our findings underline the importance of involving children in all phases of the project. In particular, children need to be involved early on in the planning process".

#### 6.1 Mechanisms to enable children and young people to influence the development of CNN

The review of reports and other documents reveals that since the inception of the Fund, two targeted mechanisms were adopted for hearing directly from children and young people on how they would like to influence the running of CNN.

The first mechanism is the focus groups with young people conducted by the independent evaluator of the first three years of the CNN Development Fund (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy 2010; McEvoy, 2011).

The second mechanism is the Annual Regional Networking Days conducted by the DCYA Participation Support Team to directly seek the views of young people on their experience of CNN and to give them the opportunity to network with other CNN. Each CNN is invited to send four representatives to one of four regional networking days annually resulting in an attendance of approximately 120 young people per annum. These events were held in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2016. A report of key issues was compiled annually and published on the DCYA website. The issues discussed at each of the five sets of regional events were broadly similar, focussing mainly on the strengths, the weaknesses and proposals from young people on how to improve CNN (DCYA, 2011c; DCYA, 2013; DCYA, 2014; DCYA, 2016). The analysis will address issues raised by children and young people in three of the five events. The year 2011 is selected because it was the first of such events and had the greatest impact on influencing the development of CNN, as will be outlined below. The year 2013 is selected as a mid-point in the process of conducting these events and the year 2016 is selected as the most recent of these events.

The reports reveal that the key themes that are of importance to young people themselves are:

- A space for friendship and inclusion
- The operation of CNN
- Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people
- Effective engagement with decision-makers
- National developments relevant to CNN

Some of these themes overlap with the themes in Chapter 5, which were selected from key challenges and recommendations identified in the evaluation and annual reports. It is interesting to note that some themes deemed important by adult evaluators and decision-makers do not emerge as being of importance to young people. The issues raised by young people are predominantly related to the day to day workings of their CNN, which is not surprising and confirms the importance of ensuring that the focus of participation is on their everyday lives.

## **6.2 A space for friendship and inclusion**

This theme was developed because of the number of comments from young people in all six reports on their positive experience of CNN and their wish for it to be a space for friendship, inclusion and making a difference (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy 2010; McEvoy, 2011; DCYA, 2011c; DCYA, 2013; DCYA, 2016). Martin et al., (2015, p. 106) state "the young person's initial encounter with a participation initiative is seen as key to encouraging them to engage further with participation and many of the youth participants indicated that the positive experience they had at a CNN AGM motivated their ongoing involvement". In a study by Thomas (2012), young people reported that peer friendships and the care and love they receive from the adults who work with them are highly important to them.

A selection of quotes from young people who took part in focus groups and Networking Days, confirm the things that are important to them.

"The friendship CNN creates is seen as a very important part of the process and something that has impacted strongly on most members" (DCYA, 2013, p.3).

"A voice for youth" , "We work well together and listen to one another", "Good teamwork and creativity", "Everyone gets a chance to speak and everyone's voices are taken into account", "Friendship and working together", "Making a difference", "A place for freedom of expression and creativity" , "Changing the world and eating pizza", "Everyone is different and that is class!" (DCYA, 2016, p. 3).

Speaking on whether or not all CNN members should be elected, young people said "CNN needs to be open access, so more people can get involved" (DCYA, 2011c, p.15). Influenced by the views of young people on the need for inclusiveness and in keeping with good practice in child participation, the criteria for funding for the CNN Development Fund require evidence of the involvement of seldom heard young people (Martin et al, 2015). Guidance provided by DCYA in the CNN Toolkit (DCYA, 2011b) urges against adult style elections and promotes more inclusive ways of selecting the CNN committee, with spaces reserved for seldom-heard young people.



### **6.3 The operation of CNN**

Two issues emerge under this theme and are addressed here: the frequency and organisation of meetings and transport.

#### **The frequency and organisation of meetings**

All six reports highlight that young people are keen to be involved in all aspects of their CNN, particularly in directing and influencing what issues are discussed and what is on the agenda for meetings (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy 2010; McEvoy, 2011; DCYA, 2011c; DCYA, 2013; DCYA, 2016).

Young people also want their CNN to be youth-led, with a greater involvement in the running of meetings and setting the agenda; an increased status for the CNN in the media and using new technologies, particularly in the quest to attract additional members; to have better connections with decision-makers and the local community; and to have a greater impact in achieving change (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy, 2010). A similar perspective is put forward in the literature where it was found that participation and active involvement in decision making was meaningful for young people when it was youth-led, fun and informal, and based on relevant, everyday issues rather than complex policy processes (Vromen & Collin, 2010).

Focus groups with the young people highlighted that they had considerable say in the direction and work of the CNN. However, they felt that they would also like to engage in: more hands-on work – at the same time as sitting at tables where the “big ideas stuff” is being discussed. They also lamented that “politicians take credit for our work and just appear at the last moment when something is being launched”, without having any real interest in the process (McEvoy, 2009, p. 29).

Young people also want better organisation of meetings (DCYA, 2011c). The same report notes young people’s frustration at the poor attendance at meetings by some. They want more meetings and all members attending meetings and communicating with each other in between meetings, which is sometimes a challenge. According to DCYA (2011, p.19), young people want everyone “working hard with consideration for others and enthusiasm for our issues”. Refreshment at meetings was also noted as being really important (DCYA, 2011c). The need for better organisation of meetings and setting realistic goals continued to be an issue noted by young people at the 2013 Networking Events (DCYA, 2013). Concerns were raised by CNN who meet less than once a fortnight, with young people saying they feel they need to meet more often in order to get to know each other better, make progress with their topic and have better communication both internally and externally [in terms of promotion and awareness] (DCYA, 2013).

However, as evidenced earlier in this dissertation, the regularity of CNN meetings around the country improved incrementally under the Development Fund. When asked at the 2013 Networking Events about what is working well in their Comahirle na nÓg, participants noted that “many CNN are meeting more regularly and this is

very positive: in particular the CNN who meet every second week" (DCYA, 2013, p. 3). The same report also notes that young people felt their CNN had made progress "including more people from all different parts of the area" and that they "get lots of new opportunities to participate in various things by being a member of their local CNN" (DCYA, 2013, p. 3).

It is observed that organisational issues remain a challenge evidenced by the fact that at the 2016 Networking Events, when asked about the things they would like to improve in CNN, young people noted the following:

- Better attendance.
- A more focused and less disruptive atmosphere.
- Have meetings more regularly.
- Scheduling and time-keeping.
- Food.
- A more organised agenda. (DCYA, 2016, p. 4).

## **Transport**

The first evaluation report (McEvoy, 2009) identified lack of transport as a significant challenge noted by young people. It notes that in more rural-based CNN, it is often the case that there is no transport available to young people to get to meetings (McEvoy, 2009, p.34). McEvoy (2009) notes that in some areas, young people worked with their CNN Coordinators to overcome these challenges and cites good practice in three CNN, who opted to host their meetings on a regional or electoral area basis. In all these counties, transport is a significant issue for young people and hosting the meetings in different locations allows more young people to participate in the structure.

The issues raised by young people in McEvoy (2009) and the good practice examples became priority issues for the OMC and key areas of development by the Participation Officers in their support and development work with CNN Coordinators. As a result, many more CNN began operating local and regional meetings. However, despite the fact that many CNN hold regional and local meetings to facilitate participation in the structure, it continues to be an issue in some locations (Pobal, 2016). "If transport and better attendance were better time wouldn't be wasted on repeating what happened at the last meeting to members who had missed meetings due to bad transport" (DCYA, 2011c, p. 19).

## **6.4 Influencing change on topics of importance to young people**

As noted in Chapter 5, two key issues emerge under this theme: the importance of young people being given the space to identify issues that are important to them and their peers and make positive changes on those issues; and the need to have sufficient time to make positive changes on their issues.

Speaking in focus groups, young people said they want to have a connection with decision-making bodies, which can result in making an impact on decisions in the

local community (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy, 2010). However, some young people reported that they do not always find these committees to be interesting. In some cases, the young people found the meetings “boring and stuffy” and had no interest in continuing to participate (McEvoy, 2011, p. 37). The Report notes that research needs to be conducted on what makes meetings youth-friendly and how agencies can be encouraged to put this into practice and on how young people can be most effective on these committees.

Young people value when they “are really listened to” and their ideas are “taken on board” (McEvoy, 2009, p. 29). However, they report frustration when their ideas fall on deaf ears or they have no idea what happens to their views. Because of young people’s concerns about this, one City Council asks those who want to consult with the CNN to ensure that their information is relevant to the age profile and interests of the group and to “provide comprehensive details of how the CNN delegates’ views or ideas were used” (McEvoy, 2009, p. 27). Despite the challenges noted above, the increase in the links between CNN and local decision-making bodies resulted in 61% of CNN ranking their impact as ‘very influential’ in changes made on the issues they were working on, with a further 32% assessing their impact as ‘somewhat influential’ (McEvoy, 2011, p. 2).

McEvoy (2009, p.9) noted that young people in focus groups complained about a lack of time to achieve their goals on the topics of importance to them. McEvoy (p. 20) notes that young people want a longer term to achieve their objectives and that those elected for a two-year term of office complained less about a lack of time. According to McEvoy, the CDB officer in one such area reports that this extended term of office resulted in improved participation. The Report notes that in 2008, only 29% of CNN operated a two-year term for members and recommended that a two-year term of office be adopted by all 34 CNN (McEvoy, 2009, p. 40). This recommendation continued to be made in McEvoy (2010) and McEvoy (2011). By 2015, all 31 CNN were operating a two-year membership term (Pobal, 2016). The impact of young people in seeking a two-year term of office to make changes on the topics of importance to them was highly significant. They were listened to and their views were acted upon. It can be argued that all four interlinked elements (space; voice; audience; and influence) of Lundy’s (2007) model for implementing Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child were implemented on this issue.

## **6.5 Effective engagement with decision-makers**

On the issue of engagement with decision-makers, Ackermann et al (2003, p. 25) discuss the *enhancement of adult-child relations* as a positive outcome for participatory community projects, particularly as the young people develop their own interpersonal skills and engage in ongoing dialogue with adults in their community and can enjoy enhanced status within their communities.

Speaking about the role of young people engaging with decision-makers, Martin Keeney, Co-ordinator of Donegal CNN said:

“the young people often attend municipal district meetings and meet with the councillors, but there is a very established set of rules and the young people couldn’t become part of the discussion or ask questions. The young people decided they wanted to engage in proper discussions with the politicians in a less formal manner as well as attending the formal meetings. Now there are two meetings a year between the CNN and councillors, one is formal and one is an informal workshop”.

Commenting on the involvement of young people in CNN, Martin, et al. (2015, p. 111) comment:

“One of the most positive impacts is that children and young people are given access to decision-makers in a number of local and national forums. Three-quarters of current participants felt that they have the opportunity through CNN to meet and talk to people in power, such as journalists, Local Authorities and business representatives”.

Despite this positive finding, it is evident that frustrations and challenges persist, but young people are increasingly getting the chance to engage with decision-makers, which is something they want. The effectiveness of this engagement can be improved by measures such as those noted by Martin Keeney in Donegal, but it is clearly a difficult issue, which will be addressed later in this dissertation.

## **6.6 National developments relevant to CNN**

It can be observed from the themes explored above, that most of the issues raised by young people were relevant to their local CNN. However, national issues arose at two of the Regional Networking in 2011 and in 2016.

The first Regional Networking events for members of CNN took place in April of 2011. The views of young people were very similar to subsequent Networking Events on issues such as the organisation of meetings, commitment of members, frequency of meeting and engagement with decision-makers (DCYA, 2011c). However, the report notes that the strongest issue emerging from the events was that young people wanted CNN to be more strongly known as a national structure. The top recommendation across the four events was: “All 34 Comhairli should meet once a year” (DCYA, 2011c, p.18).

From the review of reports, evaluations and other documents, it can be observed that the possible reason for this recommendation was that there had never been a national event focussing on CNN as a national structure. The views expressed by the young people and recommendations in the report (DCYA, 2011c) mark a highly significant moment in the history of the development of the structures established to enable the realisation of children’s agency rights, which are outlined below.

Following the feedback from the first Networking events on the request by young people for a national profile for CNN, the DCYA Participation Support Team held a “Stall the Ball” meeting to review the operation of CNN and DNN. The minutes of this meeting record that the DCYA team developed a draft plan for the following five years aimed at responding to the recommendations from young people and to the changed landscape since the inception of CNN and DNN. The plan (DCYA, 2011d) was approved by the partnership of non-government organisations with which the DCYA worked, with the proviso that it should be kept under review, with regular consultation with young people and adult organisers of CNN and other key stakeholders. The main objective of the plan was to place a stronger national focus on CNN and to rebrand DNN as the national forum for bringing CNN together, to respond the suggestions of young people outlined above.

The key components of the plan (DCYA, 2011d) noted in the minutes of the meeting were as follows:

- “A national DNN event will be hosted every second year.
- A national CNN showcase event will be hosted every alternate year.
- Regional CNN networking events for young people will be hosted in April every year.
- The focus of DNN 2011 will be on ‘how to improve the work of CNN’.
- The DNN Council will be re-named CNN Executive.
- The CNN Executive will continue to work for two years on progressing the top issue voted at Dáil na Óg.
- The CNN showcase event objective will be: a national event, showcasing the work of CNN and workshop discussions. The Minister will host and adult decision-makers will be invited.
- The tag line on the DNN logo will be revised to read: ‘Bringing Comhairle na nÓg Together’.

Meeting notes from the DCYA record that the planning committee for the first CNN National Showcase included young members of CNN who were involved in all decisions about the event.

The first CNN National Showcase was hosted in November 2012 (DCYA, 2013b), by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and was also attended by An Taoiseach (Prime Minister). 500 teenagers from the 34 CNN attended and each CNN had a dedicated stand to showcase their work on important issues for young people. A wide range of national and local decision makers attended to view their stands.

The Showcase has become a biennial event, as noted in DCYA, (2015, p. 33):

“The CNN National Showcase is held every alternate year to showcase the work of the 31 CNN to decision-makers. It is hosted by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and funded by the DCYA. The 2014 National Showcase was

held on 20th November to celebrate the work of CNN and to mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. At this event, the 500 young participants voted that the aspect of their lives on which they most need a voice in decision-making was to have a stronger voice in their education, including on policy, curriculum, subject choice and in the running of schools. The event was attended by An Taoiseach [Prime Minister], Enda Kenny, TD, and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr. James Reilly, TD".

According to Martin et al. (2015, p. 103) the Showcase event raised awareness and consolidated the position of CNN in the policy making imagination, but securing direct influence on policy will be part of a longer and more gradual process. It bridged the gap between the local and the national, and it made the participants feel that they are important contributors to a national movement (Martin et al., 2015, p. 103).

This Study also found that the new ideas and confidence gained by individual CNN members from attendance at the Showcase are already having an influence on the work of local CNN. This may lead to indirect effects on local communities through enriched local activities and also potentially a greater voice for young people (Martin et al., 2015, p. 103).

However Martin et al. (2015) point out that a potential weakness of the Showcase event was the low attendance of local decision-makers. Adult participants suggested that this was due to a number of factors, including budgetary and time constraints, particularly for representatives from outside Dublin (p. 103).

As noted at the top of this chapter, national issues were also addressed at the 2016 Networking Events (DCYA, 2016). In this instance, the issues were brought to the young people by the DCYA Participation Support Team, who sought their advice on suggestions for running effective AGMs. The report (DCYA, 2016) notes that their top suggestions have been included in the revised CNN Toolkit, to be published in the Autumn of 2016. Young people were also asked to share their ideas about the forthcoming CNN National Showcase in November 2016 (DCYA, 2016).

## **6.7 Conclusion**

The developments outlined above show considerable evidence on the range of ways that young people influenced the development of CNN at local level: in determining the kind of space they want in which to realise their agency rights; in getting the chance to engage with decision-makers; in advising on the locality and type of meetings; and in having a two-year term of office to achieve their goals and make a difference.

In terms of their influence on national developments, despite the limitations of the Showcase noted above, the decision by the DCYA to completely revise the national participation structures illustrates the very strong influence of young people in

bringing the local activity of CNN to a national stage and strengthening the structure of CNN.

Sinclair (2004) points to the need to involve children at all stages of the process with constant checking back with them and where possible gaining information from several points of reference. It can be argued that the above developments met this standard and may well be at the forefront of good practice internationally.

## Chapter 7

### **The contribution of CNN today to promoting and ensuring agency in delivering international child rights commitments**

Lansdown (2006, p. 3) argues that Article 12 is about children as '*active agents*' in exercising their rights and that their active agency may be understood as '*participation*', even though participation is not explicitly mentioned in the text of the Article. Commenting on the importance of youth participation, Checkoway (2011, p. 340) argues that it recognises the potential of children to share perspectives and to participate as citizens and actors of change. However, criticisms of youth council structures are manifold and question their real value and impact noting that children's councils may function as "prisoner insider groups" and lose their critical edges (Faulkner, 2009). In addition, there is widespread international recognition of the need for training of professionals involved in supporting or enabling children's participation in decision-making. In 2011, the Council of Europe conducted in-depth Strategy reviews on child and youth participation in three countries. The findings from the Strategy review conducted in Finland noted the need for better training of professionals working with and for children, including, teachers, legal professionals, healthcare workers, police officers, social workers, NGO representatives and municipal, regional and national civil servants (CoE, 2011).

This chapter will explore the contribution of the CNN structure to promoting and enabling children's rights to agency, with reference to published critiques of youth council structures. It will thematically analyse the contribution of the CNN structure as it is today in delivering children's agency rights.

#### **7.1 A thematic analysis of the contribution of CNN as it is today in delivering children's agency rights**

As has been illustrated, the structure of CNN has undergone significant development since its inception in 2002. There is strong evidence that changes and improvements to the structure and its operation at national and local level were informed by feedback from children and young people and through promoting good practice (McEvoy, 2009; McEvoy, 2010; McEvoy, 2011; DCYA, 2011d).

As noted in Chapter 4, Ireland's dedicated Children's Participation Strategy (DCYA, 2015) adopted the principles from the Council of Europe's Recommendation on participation in decision-making of children and young people under the age of 18 (CoE, 2012), which requires the use of these good practice principles at local and national level.

According to McEvoy (2009) CNN members are positively impacted by their experience and believe that their contribution is making a difference in their local community. Young people commented that the CNN helps in counteracting the stereotyped negative image of young people in the media and in the community.



The most recent CNN Annual Report (Pobal, 2016, p. 4) notes that as part of their funding arrangement, all recipients of the Development Fund are required to report on activities and expenditure for the annual funding period to Pobal, under eight headings, which include:

- Addressing the Key Topics Identified by Young People
- Consolidating and Influencing the Status of CNN in local strategies, structures and organisations

The focus on addressing the key topics identified by young people and consolidating the influence and status of CNN in local strategies, structures and organisations are evidence that the objective of the Fund is that CNN will become a structure that delivers on children's agency rights. But is this objective borne out in reality?

In answer to this question, the contribution of CNN in promoting and enabling agency rights to children and young people is thematically explored below under four key themes, which were selected on the basis of the review of evaluations, reports, the broader literature and the interviews conducted for this dissertation. The achievements and challenges under each of the four themes will be analysed. The themes for analysis are:

- A space for realising agency rights
- Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people
- Effective engagement with decision-makers
- Structures that support CNN

## **7.2 A space for realising agency rights**

A prerequisite for the meaningful engagement of children and young people in decision making is the creation of an opportunity for involvement in a space in which children are encouraged to express their views (Lundy, 2007, p. 933). Lundy argues that the space offered to children to participate must be safe, inclusive of a diverse group of young people and be a space in which they can talk freely. It is important that the views of a diverse range of children are sought and that participation is not just afforded to the articulate and literate (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004, p. 137).

The CNN Annual Report (Pobal, 2016) states that DCYA supports and sets standards for CNN, as the recognised national structure for participation by children and young people in decision-making in all 31 local authorities. The Report (Pobal, p. 3) also states that funding to local authorities is provided to run an effective CNN as: "A firmly embedded structure and key consultative/participative forum for children and young people in each local authority area; and an effective mechanism for children and young people to improve their own lives in partnership with adult stakeholders". In setting this objective, the funders (DCYA) clearly expect CNN to be conducted as

a meaningful space for the realisation of children's agency rights. So, are the CNN operating as such a space?

As noted in Chapter 6, (DCYA, 2016, p. 4), young participants highlighted some of the strengths of CNN as:

"A voice for youth; We work well together and listen to one another; Good teamwork and creativity; Everyone gets a chance to speak and everyone's voices are taken into account; Friendship and working together; Making a difference; A place for freedom of expression and creativity; Changing the world and eating pizza".

The same report notes some of the challenges of the structure as a space for realising agency rights. When asked about the things they would like to improve in CNN, young people noted:

- "A more focused and less disruptive atmosphere.
- Have meetings more regularly.
- Improve our influence with the county council and in schools.
- A more organised agenda.
- Clearer deadlines for projects" (DCYA, 2016, p. 4).

Commenting on the positive aspects of CNN as a space to realise their agency rights, young CNN members made the following comments in a focus group conducted for this dissertation:

"It's like a judgement-free zone. It's like a safe space that you can voice your opinion, no matter what." [Teenage girl]

"Like, to want to become involved in the CNN, you need to have a certain mind-set that you want to make a difference, you want to help. It means nobody in CNN being judgemental or thinking less of other people's opinions or stuff like that." [Teenage boy]

"We didn't have to do a speech to get into our CNN, but there's a fairly big group of us so if you have a fear of public speaking, you're going to have to face it to actually talk with the group." [Teenage girl]

"We get different opportunities and life experiences if that makes any sense without sounding too cringey or stupid, but like, it depends on what you're doing in the CNN. Like, if you're a talkative person, they'll send you off to things where you have to talk, and then if you're better at writing, they'll get you to do, like, an article." [Teenage boy]

Willow (2010, p. 46) argues that the benefits of participation identified by children themselves include, new friendships, knowledge, understanding, confidence and access to arenas that would previously have been inaccessible to them.

The Irish study conducted by Martin et al. (2015, p106) found that “youth participants are very positive about the structured environment provided in these spaces [Comhairle na nÓg]. They enjoy their participation experience and many feel that they have fun during their activities, which enable them to feel listened to and respected”.

A challenge raised by young people in the focus group conducted for this dissertation is the lack recognition of the value of CNN in their schools:

“It’s probably more because, like, in our school, with CNN, they don’t promote it. There was a group of us, about sixteen of us, just kind of organised the bus and we just went to the AGM just to see what was going on. It’s made out to be something small and kind of insignificant in our school, but like, when you go to it, you realise how much bigger it is and that you can make a difference.” [Teenage girl]

Since the inception of the Development Fund in 2007, a concern was noted in all independent evaluation reports about the tendency of some CNN Co-ordinators to conduct the CNN as a youth club rather than as a structure to realise agency rights. Commenting on this issue, Martin Donohoe, Senior Participation Officer said:

“The main reason is that a lot of the personnel involved as CNN co-ordinators come from a youth work background, so their experience is in youth clubs and youth activities. We don’t have people that are specifically trained in the area of child and youth participation.”

Commenting on the same issue, Don Tuohy, Administrative Officer, Waterford City and County Council said: “Some people join CNN thinking it’s a little bit of a youth club and there has to be a balance in relation to getting the activities right and getting the outcomes right”.

The importance of effective adult support is widely cited in the literature. Although children can be powerful and effective advocates for their own rights, given appropriate access to information, space and opportunity, their youth and their relatively powerless status mean that they can only sustain this role where there are adults to facilitate the process (Lansdown, 2010, p. 16).

### **7.3 Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people**

A key measure of the effectiveness of youth councils is the extent to which they bring about change in the lives of young people. Youth councils across Scotland report changes being effected by young people’s participation. For example, in Dumfries and Galloway a Youth Strategy Executive Group was formed to work in partnership with other young people, to voice young people’s opinions, to be noticed and heard and to deal with Youth Bank funding. Another example, Fife Youth Forum, states it has made impacts through countering negative stereotypes of young people and helping the community. However, it is harder to find evidence to

substantiate these claims (McGinley & Grieve, 2010, p. 256).

In the Irish context, there is evidence that real change can be substantiated. The Funding Request Form and key criteria for the CNN Development Fund seek evidence that children and young people have identified topics that are important to them and that a work-plan has been developed to pursue those topics (Pobal, 2016). Martin Donohoe, Senior Children and Young People's Participation Officer gives an example in a CNN where mental health was identified as the topic of most importance to young people at the AGM:

"One CNN developed a phone app for mental health services in the county, which was a challenging thing for a group of young people because it took a lot of work. They got it over the line and it had a massive impact because it was one touch to get to a service that you required. It was a really strong piece of work that had a massive impact".

Commenting on influencing real change for young people, Martin Keeney, CNN Co-ordinator in Donegal, said:

"Some CNN members felt that there were still very negative attitudes on LGBT issues in their schools. They decided to run events in their schools in a particular week. The first year only 6 out of the 26 post-primary schools in the county agreed to participate. They realised the challenges still out there on LGBT awareness and homophobic bullying. The events that happened in the six schools did positive messaging, got students involved and took photos and they went online. The feedback was so positive that the following year, some of those barriers started to come down. So the second year they did it, there were 16 schools out of the 26. It was a real learning curve for them. Many of the LGBT young people would have never before seen any kind of positive message in their school environment. The young people were trying to create an environment within schools where "It was OK to be gay" and stand up against homophobic bullying and [stand up] for your gay friends or LGBT friends. The young people learned that it can be a quite a long-term process to achieve something".

Reporting on the fact that things do not always work out after the first attempt in seeking agency, one of the reports gives the following example:

"If things do not work out on the first attempt or by using one methodology, there is great merit in trying again, perhaps with a different methodology. This tenacity is well demonstrated by one CNN project aimed at ensuring that all schools had an anti-bullying policy in place. Having failed to get any engagement with their requests for feedback on anti-bullying policies in schools on two occasions, CNN members eventually got the schools to engage with them on the third attempt. However, all of these attempts took

time and this project, which eventually resulted in a really positive outcome, actually took place over two years" (McEvoy, 2011, p. 33).

Don Tuohy spoke on this issue by saying:

"The mental health work done by CNN three years ago, was instrumental in getting the cross-border Pride of Place award, which is very prestigious. That piece of work put the youth mental health issue on the city and county council agenda and on the local HSE's [Health Service Executive] agenda, because they were advocating for services for young people."

The literature is frequently critical of youth councils noting that, while young people perceive personal benefits from participation in youth councils, the impact of participation in youth councils in bringing about change in young people's lives more generally is a contentious issue (McGinley & Grieve, 2010, p. 258). However, this is not fully borne out in the Irish context as illustrated in the CNN Annual Report (Pobal, 2016). According to this report, under the Development Fund, CNN are obliged to complete an annual report of activity. In this report CNN were asked to specify what changes were achieved in relation to the key topics identified by young people in 2015.

The table below (Pobal, 2015, p. 18-19) lists some of the more quantifiable changes and outputs as a result of the work carried out by CNN, as detailed in the annual reports.

**Table 2: Actions and changes achieved by key topic**

Topic	Action(s)	Change achieved
<b>Cyber safety/bullying</b>	A group of 49 young people got together to highlight the dangers of oversharing of personal information on social media. (Clare)	✓ A new tool was developed for engaging young people, youth groups and the general public on the dangers of oversharing information on social media.
<b>Transport for young people</b>	Launched a media campaign for a car free day to highlight the issue of transport and the environment. Promoting public transport as a cheaper and greener method of travel for young people. (Galway City)	✓ Galway City Council Transport Unit and An Taisce worked with the CNN and held a car free day on 22 <sup>nd</sup> September 2015 for all schools in Galway City
<b>Youth facilities /services</b>	CNN members set up a lobby group and met with key agencies with the aim of setting	✓ The lobby group met with Headstrong – The National Centre for Youth Mental Health

	up a Jigsaw project in the city which operates a network of programmes across Ireland designed to make sure every young person has somewhere to turn to and someone to talk to. (Dublin City)	✓	which manages the Jigsaw Programmes nationwide with the HSE. The key decision makers have given a commitment to provide a Jigsaw service in Dublin City with CNN identified as a key stakeholder for the needs and resource assessment when setting up this service.
<b>Relationships and sexuality</b>	A film was produced highlighting a range of issues covered under the topic of Relationships and Sexuality which were explored in a creative way given the sensitivity of this topic. (Clare)	✓	The film is being used as a resource for educators in the area and promoted as a resource made by young people for young people.
<b>Young people in care/homelessness</b>	Meeting held with Túsla – The Child and Family Agency to look at ways to address the issues of homelessness and young people in care.(Louth)	✓	Input into a new drop-in service established for young people in care or facing homelessness to discuss issues with their peers and social workers.
<b>Enterprise</b>	A film and DVD produced to promote youth enterprise. (Offaly)	✓	DVD produced and used by the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.
<b>Mental health</b>	A total of 30 CNN organised and hosted events as part of the 'Let's Go Mental' campaign to highlight the issue of mental health among young people locally and nationally.	✓	A number of initiatives were run including media campaigns, radio interviews, activities promoting the concept of 'Five-A-Day for your Mental Health', based on an initiative run by Headstrong.

Also on this issue, Martin Donohoe says:

"This year Donegal CNN did a lovely piece of work that had a massive impact for kids in the county. At the AGM young people complained that

competitive mainstream sports were the only form of sports available in their schools and that many young people wanted other sports options. The CNN started a programme called 'Shake It Up Sports' which they brought to primary school kids to introduce them to non-conventional sports, that they had a chance to enjoy and thrive at. They were really good events and a massive number of kids got to attend these events around the county".

#### **7.4 Effective engagement with decision-makers**

The quality of participation is measured not only by its scope, such as the number of people who attend a number of activities, but also by its quality, such as when people have real effect on the process, influence a particular decision, or produce a favourable outcome. The issue is not necessarily whether the effort is youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational, but rather whether people have some effect (Checkoway, 1998).

The importance afforded by the Irish Government to effective engagement between the CNN and key decision-makers is noted in the CNN Annual Report (Pobal, 2016, p. 4-5):

"Correspondence was issued by the DECLG to all CEO's of Local Authorities in June 2015 and simultaneously by the DCYA to all Directors of Services. These letters highlighted a need for clarity on the role of CNN in the new structures established under the Local Government Reform Act 2014 and a need to ensure the involvement and participation by CNN in all relevant Local Authority structures, in particular: Local Community Development Committee's (LCDCs), the Public Participation Network (PPNs) and local economic and community plans (LECP's)."

The Report (Pobal, 2016, p. 5) also notes that "over half (18: 58%) of CNN who were consulted by their local County or Town Council gave input on the LECPs and local development strategies".

Commenting on the importance afforded by local authorities to the CNN at a focus group of members of CNN, a teenage girl from Mayo said:

"Our [town] Council does kind of regard CNN as like, relatively important. They do consultations with us before they're embarking on some kind of a project or some kind of a campaign that would affect young people or help young people or it might potentially be a detriment to young people. They would kind of see what we think and then they would use our recommendations".

Martin Keeney, CNN Coordinator from Donegal spoke about the process of young people becoming the involved in a strategic policy committee in the county:

"One of the most interesting developments over the last year has been an established link to the strategic policy committees, which from a local authority point of view are really where the power sits. They have huge

influence over development of policy within the county in relation to a whole range of areas from cultural issues to housing issues to transport and other issues. We have been keen for some time to develop a proper established link between the CNN and strategic policy committees."

Speaking about young people and adults working effectively together, Martin Donohoe Senior Participation Officer commented:

"Galway County [Council] invited the CNN to become involved in the Galway 2040 initiative. It was a real example of young people working together with adult decision-makers in their county on their joint vision for 2040. It worked really effectively in terms of developing a respect between the adults and the young people. The young people recognised their own, ability to influence change but also their own responsibility in terms of making their county a better place".

On the same issue, Martin Keeney said:

"The young people felt that there was a revamp needed to a lot of the road safety adverts that were being broadcast in the county [Donegal]. They were very old and very stagnant and there were adult voices all the time. So to be fair to the Road Safety Committee in the county, they actually took it on".

According to Keeney, the young people produced a series of five different radio adverts on a range of road safety issues and the local Road Safety Committee backed the production and broadcasting of the adverts. Keeney said:

"The feedback was incredible. The young people did a lot of research and developed ideas that they felt would impact. Last year they [radio ads] were selected for a Leading Light Award through the Road Safety Authority".

In a study by Adu-Gyamfi about young people's participation in policy formulation in Ghana, it was found that the political entity could potentially dissolve children's councils that "do not play by the rules of the game" (2013, p. 1770). This risk does not seem to be borne out in the evidence of the achievements recorded about many CNN.

However, challenges do exist in young people engaging with adult decision-makers as noted by Martin Donohoe:

"The whole area of effective engagement with decision-makers is problematic and a massive challenge. We have done a lot of work on bringing CNNs to sit at the right tables so that they are impacting on decisions and bringing about real change. Work needs to be done with adult decision-makers, because often the young people are not taken seriously by the adults that they engage with".



Don Tuohy, Administrative Officer, Waterford City and Council commented on the level of influence of the CNN within the Local Council: "I would say that it's limited, I would say that the council hasn't pushed that whole area to any great extent in relation to looking for consultation [with the CNN]".

However, Tuohy also commented on the added value of the CNN to the Local Council [Authority]: "There's very positive media coverage always in relation to the CNN locally. So working in tandem with CNN, there's certainly a very positive spin off for the council."

Commenting on the lack of respect for young people for young people involved in advising on policies and services, Martin Donohoe added:

"I've seen a lot of examples of where adult decision-makers are not respectful towards young people. The classic example is when meetings have to happen at certain times of the day or in certain places to suit the adult decision-makers. The facilitation of young people being in a position to attend is often not given respect and value. You realise that the young people's opinions and voice within those decision-making bodies are simply not respected in the proper way. I think we need to work with adults on how to incorporate the voice of young people in their services, strategies, policy development and to properly respect that. And the only way that will come about is if they see the potential of it".

## **7.5 Structures that support CNN**

The roles and tasks of adults with regard to children's participation projects are manifold. They play a key role in supporting children in their work and ensuring that approaches are child friendly. Adults play a key role at the beginning of projects, for example, by finding partners, establishing networks, coordinating the project and ensuring that organisational arrangements are in place (Kränzl-Nagl and Ulrike Zartler, 2010, p. 169).

The practice of employing staff as a key support in co-ordinating and running CNN grew exponentially since 2007 (McEvoy, 2010; McEvoy, 2011; Pobal, 2014; Pobal, 2015; Pobal, 2016). The other key local support cited in these reports is that of an effective Steering Committee of local adult decision-makers and young people.

Speaking in a focus group, young people made the following comments about staff that co-ordinate their CNN:

"Whatever we need, we can get because we have Louise, our lovely co-ordinator/facilitator, so she always ends up getting whatever we need anyway". [Boy, Dublin City]

"Like, our, director of services, Neil, he gives us loads of money and loads of resources all the time, and anything we want to do within the community, he

always supports us, and if you said anything, there's never a "No." Like, we would never get a "No." It's always, "Oh yeah, no problem." [Girl, Mayo]

"They always just let us do whatever we want and they always, like, promote it the best way they can for us so they are really helpful." [Girl, Cork City]

Don Tuohy, Administrative Officer, Waterford City and County Council spoke about the importance of a good co-ordinator and the difficulties with staff turnover:

"One of the biggest issues for me was getting the right co-ordinator. We run it directly ourselves or, in as much as we can. To do that properly, you need the right co-ordinator who you can work with and most importantly, who the young people can work with. So when we lost Jamie, it took a number of months before we could get the right person and that's always going to be a challenge."

Also addressing some of the challenges in the high turnover rate of CNN Co-ordinators, Martin Donohoe, Senior Participation Officer, said:

"The majority of people that are working professionally with CNN are doing so on a basis of seven hours to twelve hours in the week. So, the turnover rate of co-ordinators is quite high because people get full-time jobs or the other half of their job takes over and they move away from CNN. When you get a new co-ordinator, you're facing the challenge of starting over with someone new, who may have very little relevant experience."

Speaking about the lack of understanding about meaningful participation of children in decision-making, Donohoe went on to say:

"I'm not saying that every CNN co-ordinator needs to be full-time, but if their work was fully about child and youth participation, it would deliver a better product. But, there are no full-time jobs or very few jobs in the area of participation. So if someone is working on a part-time basis supporting the CNN and the rest of their work is youth work, there's a massive danger of the CNN being run like a youth club."

A CNN Steering Committee, comprised of adult decision-makers and young CNN members, is one of the criteria under the Development Fund as a key mechanism to support the work of CNN (Pobal, 2016). The benefits of Steering Committees as a key support in enabling CNN to be a mechanism for the realisation of agency rights were outlined in Chapter 4.

In his capacity as Senior Children and Young People's Participation Officer, Martin Donohoe noted the benefits of a Steering Committee in one instance:

"In one CNN with a strong Steering Committee, the community and enterprise division of the local authority is very strongly represented and two

senior councillors also sit on that committee all year round. The councillors are nominated by the Chamber and they advise the Chamber on how the local authority can assist the young people on their issues."

Commenting on the challenges associated with Steering Committees, Donohoe said: "a lot of key decision-makers do not take CNN seriously and do not accommodate personnel to attend the Steering Committees. So this continues to be a challenge".

## **7.6 Conclusion**

Difficulties in realising agency are repeatedly noted in the literature (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Faulkner, 2009; Landsdown, 2010)).

It is interesting to note published evaluations or reviews of local child and youth councils from other jurisdictions proved difficult to find, although some literature on specific engagements between young people and decision-makers was found, which is referred to below. This may be because such structures are overseen and managed at regional or cantonal level, unlike the Irish situation, where the oversight is national. As noted earlier, there is considerable criticism of youth councils as structures that have limited impact (Faulkner, 2009; McGinley & Grieve, 2010; Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). However, this view is not supported by Martin et al. (2015) who found that the involvement of young people [from CNN] on Strategic Policy Committees has meant that decision-makers who would normally have little contact with children and young people are now working with them in a formal setting. Children and young people are being given opportunities to be directly heard in forums where their needs are discussed, places where their voices would traditionally have been excluded.

These findings are supported by Marshall et al. (2015), who explored children's and young people's face-to-face participation in public decision-making in the UK. The study concluded that direct contact enabled both sides to humanize the participation process. Policymakers understood the lived experiences of their decisions more fully, and children reported that their positions were taken seriously.

The findings from the above studies and from this dissertation are applicable internationally and the lessons learned and documented in Ireland could be used as good practice guidance on the standards, funding, governance, organisation and operation of effective child and youth councils at local or regional level. In this context, it should be noted that Ministers in all 47 countries in the Council of Europe approved the Recommendation on participation in decision-making of children and young people under the age of 18 (CoE, 2012), which provide comprehensive good practice principles that are applicable to child and youth councils. The Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool (Council of Europe, 2016) was subsequently developed to provide specific and measurable indicators with which States can begin to measure progress in implementing the Recommendation.

## Chapter 8 Conclusions and Recommendations

### 8.1 Introduction

This dissertation explored how children's agency rights became prominent in Irish public policy and analysed the effectiveness of CNN as a mechanism for realisation of UNCRC agency rights. It investigated the practice standards, funding, governance, support for and operation of the CNN structure in meaningfully enabling the voice of children and young people to be heard by adult decision-makers with influence. It also focusses on the effectiveness of the CNN structure in enabling children and young people to have a voice on and participate in decision-making on issues that affect their everyday lives.

A review of the historical context of children's rights in Ireland in revealed that, following criticism by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its Concluding Observations on Ireland first report, the Irish Government developed its first National Children's Strategy in 2000. Under this Strategy, a National Children's Office (NCO) was established in 2001 as a dedicated Government agency with a Junior Minister to lead on its implementation (DOHC, 2000). The findings note the very significant impact of the Concluding Observations on Irish public policy as noted in Chapter 4.

Further findings in Chapter 4 illustrate that children's agency rights held a prominent place in the Strategy. Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy (NCS) stated that *"children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity"*. Under Goal 1, local and national structures for the voice of the child were established to give expression to Article 12 of the UNCRC. CNN (child and youth councils) were established in the 34 local authority areas of Ireland to give children and young people (under the age of 18) a voice in the development of local services and policies. In a move that was found to be very progressive at the time, a dedicated Unit was established in the NCO to take the lead national role on implementation of Goal 1. Over time, evidence-based policy, improved structures and best practice to deliver on children and young people's participation were developed.

The National Children's Office became the Office of the Minister for Children and the Office and subsequently the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, culminating in becoming a full Government Department in 2011. A strong finding is that throughout this period, there was no dilution of the commitment to oversee implementation of Goal 1 of the National Children's Strategy or any reduction in the budgetary allocation to this area of work. Indeed, increased funding was allocated in 2007 to enable more strategic and sustained support for the development of the 34 CNN.

## **8.2 Findings on the supports and governance for CNN to become an effective mechanism for the realisation of agency rights**

As has been illustrated throughout this dissertation, the structure of CNN has undergone significant development since its inception in 2002. There is strong evidence in Chapter 5 that changes and improvements to the structure and its operation at national and local level were informed by feedback from children and young people and international good practice. At the end of the first three years, the Fund was deemed by an independent evaluator to be delivering on its objectives and had become a regular part of the annual budget of the Citizen Participation Unit. It is a key finding here that good practice in exploring the impacts of participation is rare in the literature (Sinclair, 2004, p. 114; Kirby and Bryson, 2002).

It was found that the key developments that led to a strengthening of the CNN structure were the establishment of the CNN Development Fund in 2007, the establishment of the Children and Young People's Participation Support Team in 2009, and the publication of the CNN Toolkit to support the organisers of CNN in 2011. The effectiveness of the support, information and training provided by the three regional Participation Officers as part of the DCYA Participation Support Team was noted in many reports as outlined in Chapter 5. The publication of the CNN Toolkit, drawing on national and international good practice, was found to be a highly effective support for driving improvements in the operation of CNN.

This dissertation found that the above developments are evidence of the ambition by the Irish Government to strengthen the capacity of CNN as a mechanism to enable the participation of children and young people in decision-making at local level. It then explored the impact of this ambition.

## **8.3 Key findings and recommendations**

Findings on the impact of the CNN Development Fund and recommendations on strengthening the capacity of CNN as a mechanism as a mechanism to deliver agency rights of children and young people are explored below under themes used in the dissertation:

- The operation of CNN
- Membership of CNN
- A space for friendship and inclusion
- Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people
- Effective engagement with decision-makers
- Support for the CNN Programme
- National oversight and developments

As noted in 7.6, the findings from this dissertation are applicable internationally and a number of recommendations relevant to the establishment, organisation and operation of effective child and youth councils at local or regional level the international context are outlined in 8.11.

## **8.4 The operation of CNN**

As evidenced in Chapter 5, the evaluation reports of the first three years of the Development Fund noted that CNN had become a more systematic and structurally robust programme. By 2013, the vast majority of CNN reported that there had been an outcome from young people's participation in the structure. Many reported that young people felt listened to, had made a positive contribution, had learned a lot about the decision makers who affect their lives and felt more confident in themselves to contribute this way in future.

Chapter 5 also highlighted that young people wanted their CNN to be youth-led, with a greater involvement in the running of meetings and setting the agenda. There are mixed findings on this issues and the need for better organisation of meetings and setting realistic goals continued to be an issue noted by young people. However, the regularity of CNN meetings around the country improved incrementally under the Development Fund and young people felt their CNN had made progress.

The findings in Chapter 5 note that young people reported transport challenges in getting to meetings. As a result, many more CNN began following good practice examples around the country and operating regional and local meetings. However, despite the fact that many CNN hold regional and local meetings to facilitate participation in the structure, it is found that transport continues to be an issue in some locations.

A challenge raised by young people in a focus group conducted for this dissertation was the lack recognition of the value of CNN in their schools

### **Recommendations**

- Attention needs to be paid to the development of the work programme for each CNN, with effective meeting plans and realistic goals.
- Measures should be put in place in each CNN to ensure that transport to meetings does not limit the participation of young people.
- Effective mechanisms need to be adopted at local level for promoting CNN in schools.

## **8.5. Membership of CNN**

The discussion under 5.2 illustrates that the membership of CNN has grown steadily since the inception of the Development Fund in 2007. 4,176 children and young people attended AGMs in the 31 local authority areas in 2015. Two membership difficulties have been consistently noted; the challenge of attracting 12-15 year olds to CNN and that of attracting seldom-heard young people.

### **The involvement of 12-15 year olds**

It was reported in 5.2 that the criteria for funding of CNN include evidence of the inclusion of children and young people from the age of 12. The first evaluation report

noted that considerable numbers of Comhairlí were populated by young people over the age of 15. The challenges in recruiting 12-15 year-olds continues to be an issue, but some improvements were noted in 2015, with a total of 30 of the 31 Comhairlí reporting that they worked to improve participation of young people aged 12 to 15.

### **Recommendations**

- Direct contact with managers or principals of local schools and youth groups needs to be made to ensure that they offer 12-15 year olds the opportunity to become involved in CNN.

### **The involvement of seldom heard young people in CNN**

The challenge of involving seldom heard children in decision-making was noted in 5.2 and CNN shares this challenge. Bell et al. (2008) found evidence which suggests that directly targeting the involvement of seldom heard young people in mainstream participation structures can increase the likelihood that they will become involved in them. As illustrated in 5.2, mechanism for directly targeting seldom-heard young people were adopted to address this issue. It was noted that the performance indicator was amended to ensure that children and young people would be recruited from youth services and clubs as well as from schools, which supports the role of seldom-heard young people in CNN. The development of local partnerships with agencies such as youth services or other organisations engaged with seldom heard young people was shown to be effective in ensuring broad access and recommended as a measure for all CNN. A steady increase was reported in the participation of seldom-heard children and young. All CNN were reported to be making a significant effort to be inclusive, with a total of 155 organisations worked with in seeking the involvement of seldom heard young people by 2013. In addition, many CNN were found to put an emphasis on the inclusion of delegates either from outside the mainstream education system or from groups and communities that might be more marginalized. However, it is found that this issue continues to be a challenge.

The above developments highlight the efforts being made by all 31 CNN to involve seldom heard children and young people. Such efforts should be sustained as the benefits of participation by marginalised children and young people have been described as resulting in their improved self-esteem and assertiveness, feelings of empowerment and access to information and skills (Prout et al., 2006; Willow, 2010; Head, 2011, p. 544.).

### **Recommendations**

- Continued efforts need to be made by CNN to involve seldom heard children and young people.
- Efforts need to be made to ensure that the CNN is relevant and interesting to seldom heard children and young people.

## **8.6 A space for friendship and inclusion**

This theme was developed because of the number of comments from young people on their positive experience of CNN and their wish for it to be a space for friendship and inclusion as discussed in 6.2. Participants commented on the friendships they developed with a more diverse range of people than their normal social circle. They also experience a range of positive impacts in areas of personal development, social development, skills development and career direction. The importance of such inclusive spaces is noted in the literature, particularly in challenging negative attitudes towards people from other backgrounds and traditions, leading to increased acceptance, tolerance and awareness of discrimination (Ackermann et al., 2003, p. 20).

It was highlighted in 6.2 that among the strengths of CNN, young people noted: "A voice for youth" , "Good teamwork and creativity" , "Everyone gets a chance to speak and everyone's voices are taken into account" , "Friendship and working together" , "A place for freedom of expression and creativity" , "Everyone is different and that is class!"

The participation spaces created by the DCYA were shown to respect young people both as community members and as citizens in their own right. In particular, youth participants were very positive about being listened to by their peers, being able to bring ideas and problems from young people in their area to CNN and being respected and listened to by adults they came in contact with through their participation activities.

It is the strong finding of this dissertation that CNN provides a welcoming and inclusive space for young people and one study found that over 95% of youth participants would recommend membership of CNN to other young people (Martin et al., 2015).

### **Recommendation**

- All CNN need to continue to listen to and act on what young people want from the structure.

## **8.7 Influencing change on topics that are real and important to young people**

Two significant issues emerged under this theme – those of space to identify issues and time to make changes on those issues. These issues were discussed in 6.4.

### **Space to identify issues**

Conditions of funding since 2009 required every CNN to hold an Annual General Meeting (AGM), to which children and young people are invited from schools, local youth clubs and other projects in order to identify the topics of importance to young people in the locality.



The evidence cited in 6.4 illustrated that CNN members are positively impacted by their experience and believe that their contribution is making a difference in their local community. However, evaluation reports cautioned that young people want to make a difference and achieve change locally. From 2010, steady progress was reported in identifying issues of concern to young people and spearheading positive changes on those issues. Continued progress on identifying and making changes to topics that are important to young people was recorded. By 2015, CNN around the country were engaged in an impressive range of activities, including raising awareness about youth mental health, conducting campaigns to challenge prejudice of marginalised groups within the community and developing information packs and tools as resources for young people, teachers or youth workers.

### **Recommendation**

- All CNN Coordinators should continue to ensure that the topics identified are coming from young people themselves.

### **Time to make changes on issues**

As noted in 6.4, young people prioritised their wish for a two-year term of office to complete their projects and make a difference. McEvoy (2009) recommended that a two-year term of office be adopted by all 34 CNN for the members of the CNN committee. At that stage only 29% of CNN had a two-year term. By 2010, 84% of CNN were operating a two-year term of office for committee membership and by 2015, all 31 CNN were operating a two-year term. This very significant progress illustrated evidence of good participatory practice in allowing a more extended period of time for young people in CNN to work on the projects they select, which often require more than one year to achieve outcomes. Despite the two-year term being fully adhered to, it was noted that challenges still remain in the development of achievable work-plans that allow young people to make progress on their topics.

### **Recommendations**

- CNN Coordinators need to develop robust work plans to enable young people to make achievements on their topics
- CNN Coordinators should learn from good practice in other CNN and support young people to persevere when things don't work out the first time

## **8.8 Effective engagement with decision-makers**

Successes and difficulties in engagement with decision-makers were reported in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. It was noted that such difficulties are highlighted in the literature.

In 6.5 it was noted that young people said they want to have a connection with decision-making bodies to impact on decisions in the local community. Tangible impacts such as the establishment of a youth café using the views of Dublin City CNN and library developments in Kerry based on the views of the CNN were illustrated.

Mixed findings were reported on the issue of effective engagement with decision-makers. By 2010, CNN was becoming more embedded in the Local Authority system and less dependent on individual champions. However, key challenges were noted in ensuring that CNN remains a key area of work in the structure and strategic plans of the Local Authorities. Despite these challenges, it was reported in 6.5 that in 2010, the increase in the links between CNN and local decision-making bodies resulted in 61% of CNN ranking their impact as 'very influential' in changes made on the issues they were working on, with a further 32% assessing their impact as 'somewhat influential'.

It was highlighted that a major impact of the work of CNN is that it is often considered the main contact point for any consultation with children and young people by Local Authorities in Ireland. The same study found an increased awareness of young people's issues, which could be viewed as raising the status of children and young people within their own communities. An interesting finding reported is that the majority of youth participants feel that while people in power do listen to them, they are less confident about whether their views influence the decisions made by people in power.

Considerable progress was reported in recent years and in 6.5 it was noted that 97 organisations presented policies, strategies or plans to CNN nationally as consultative forums during 2015. The Report also notes that over half of CNN who were consulted by their local County or Town Council gave input on the Local Economic Community Plans (LECPs) and local development strategies. Martin Keeney, the Coordinator for Donegal CNN highlighted that engagement with adult committees' works best when young people understand why they are there and what their role is.

Commenting on the challenges associated with young people engaging with decision-makers in Chapter 7, Martin Donohoe, Senior Participation Officer believes that work that needs to be done with the adults who often do not take the young people seriously. Don Tuohy, Administrative Officer from Waterford City and Council observes that the local council has not done enough consulting with the CNN and "needs to raise the flag a little higher in relation to CNN".

It is evident that frustrations and challenges persist, but it is found that young people are increasingly getting the chance to engage with decision-makers, which is something they have called for.

### **Recommendations**

- CNN Coordinators should ensure that when participating in adult committees, young people are clear about their role.
- The DCYA Participation Officers should provide information and training for CNN Coordinators on mechanisms that are effective in young people being taken seriously by the adults with whom they engage.

- The DCYA Participation Officers should provide information and training for CNN Coordinators on good practice in getting respect for young people's input to policies and services.
- Administrative Officers in Local Authorities should put more effort into ensuring that the CNN is consulted and involved in key local policy and practice initiatives.

## 8.9 Support for the CNN Programme

On the issue of supports required for the day-to-day running of the CNN, two key issues emerged in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. One is the need for dedicated part-time staff and the other is the need for a Steering Committee to support the CNN.

### Staffing

Staffing is another area in which there are mixed findings. As highlighted in Chapter 7, participants were a very positive about enjoying the meetings and they felt that the adults did a good job. The young people who took part in a focus group for this dissertation confirmed this positivity as noted in 7.5.

Chapter 5 evidenced that the first evaluation reported that some Local Authorities used the funds to employ part-time workers to drive and improve their CNN and that this was very beneficial. However, a number of challenges were noted, one of which was that many Local Authorities used Development Fund monies to retain workers from youth organisations to work with CNN. It was noted that some of these youth workers were conducting the CNN as a youth club, with a priority on the personal development of young people.

In 5.5, Martin Donohoe, Senior DCYA Child and Youth Participation Officer spoke of the impact of the DCYA initiative to promote the UNCRC in CNN in 2014, in which extra funding was awarded to enable the CNN AGM to focus on promoting and celebrating the UNCRC and children's rights. Donohoe said that this was a pivotal moment for many Coordinators, as the extra funding and guidance helped them to focus on the UNCRC and children's rights.

Both Martin Donohoe and Don Tuohy spoke of the importance of the "right Coordinator" and of the high turnover rate among Co-ordinators. They say that this is mainly because it is a part-time role and staff will frequently move on if a full-time post becomes available.

The need for participation work to be grounded in children's rights is noted in the literature. To improve the status quo, there is a need to develop 'a rights-based approach' to working with young people, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (McGinley & Grieve, 2010, p. 258).

### Recommendations

- The DCYA Participation Officers should provide information and training for CNN Coordinators on the importance of the UNCRC and children's rights as the foundations for CNN

- The DCYA Participation Officers should provide information and guidance to Local Authorities on recruiting Coordinators, including key requirements of the role
- The DCYA Participation Support Team should conduct participation training for all CNN Coordinators
- The DCYA should encourage Local Authorities that are well-resourced to appoint full time CNN Coordinators

### **Steering Committees**

As noted in Chapter 5, there was evidence of a growing tendency in establishing Steering Committees comprised of key local decision-makers in the locality to support the CNN. The failure of some CNN to establish a Steering Committee was highlighted in with a key recommendation on the need for such committees. A significant improvement on this issue was noted in 2010, at which point, 94% of CNN had a steering committee in place (McEvoy, 2011).

A study was cited in 5.5, which suggested that Steering Committees are widely supported. Adult participants were found to be mostly positive about the effectiveness of CNN Steering Committees believing that they increase the effectiveness of their CNN and allow greater access to other professionals and agencies, which increased the impact of young people's participation activities. The benefits of Steering Committees were found to, include: support for the CNN Coordinator to partner with key stakeholders; a stronger engagement by stakeholders with the CNN programme and young people; and organisations representing seldom heard young people can contribute to all aspects of the programme. In 7.5, Martin Donohoe, Senior Participation Officer, noted the benefits of one CNN Steering Committee, where the local authority is very strongly represented, involving both local authority staff and elected councillors.

It was reported in 5.5 that while the vast majority of CNN had Steering Committees in place in 2015, three Local Authority areas have no members of the CNN [young people] sitting on the Steering Committee and this is something that needs to be addressed.

Commenting on the challenges associated with Steering Committees, Donohoe spoke in 7.5 about key decision-makers who do not take CNN seriously and therefore do not accommodate personnel to attend the Steering Committee meetings.

### **Recommendations**

- All CNN should ensure that young people are included in the membership of the Steering Committee.
- CNN Coordinators should use good practice examples (such as Roscommon) to ensure the effectiveness of the Steering Committee.

- The DCYA and DECLG should issue guidance to Local Authorities on the importance of enabling decision-makers to participate in Steering Committees.

### **8.10 National oversight and developments**

As evidenced in Chapters 4 and 5, from the inception of the CNN Development Fund, the Irish Government recognised the need to invest in its nationwide structure established to implement agency rights from the UNCRC. The findings here are that they wanted to develop good practice by appointing an independent evaluator to make recommendations on the effectiveness and impact of the Fund. It is also noted that Ireland's National Participation Strategy (DCYA, 2015) names CNN as the nationally recognised structure that enables children and young people to have a voice in local decision-making.

Strong evidence was presented in Chapter 4 on the leadership of the DCYA in promoting children's rights through: continuous revisions to the funding conditions and criteria for the CNN Development Fund, based on evaluation, verification and good practice; steps to locate the work of CNN within the UNCRC through a major event in 2014; setting up a support team to encourage good practice; and the development of practical resources to support CNN. In addition, it is noted in Chapter 6 that mechanisms were adopted to enable children and young people to influence the development of CNN, which resulted in a complete revision of the participation structures, with a stronger national focus on CNN and the creation of a CNN National Showcase. A study cited in this chapter notes that the Showcase event raised awareness and consolidated the position of CNN, but that securing direct influence on policy will be part of a longer and more gradual process. The same study noted that a potential weakness of the Showcase event was the low attendance of local decision-makers.

The importance afforded by the Irish Government to effective engagement between the CNN and key decision-makers was evidenced in 5.6. Correspondence was issued by the Department of the Environment and Local Government and by the DCYA to CEO's and Directors of Services in Local Authorities in June 2015, asking them to ensure the involvement of CNN in local economic and development plans. However, it is noted in 5.7 that challenges still remain in improving the effectiveness of young people engaging with adult decision-makers.

### **Recommendations**

- The DCYA should build the importance of the UNCRC and children's rights as the foundations for CNN into the funding conditions.
- The DCYA should ensure that child participation training for all CNN Coordinators is a criterion for the Fund.
- The DCYA should work with the Department of the Environment and Local Government to explore making it a statutory requirement for Local Authorities to consult with CNN.

- The DCYA should develop and conduct training on child participation for national and local decision-makers.
- The DCYA should encourage Local Authorities that are well-resourced to appoint full time CNN Coordinators.
- The DCYA should explore international good practice on increasing the involvement of seldom heard young people and disseminate this to CNN Coordinators.
- The DCYA should explore effective ways of getting a greater number of local decision-makers to attend the CNN National Showcase.

### **8.11 Recommendations for the establishment and operation of child and youth councils internationally**

As noted in 7.6, the findings from this dissertation and studies cited therein are applicable internationally. The lessons learned and documented in Ireland could be used as good practice guidance on the standards, funding, governance, support for and operation of effective child and youth councils at local or regional level.

#### **Recommendations**

- The Recommendation on participation in decision-making of children and young people under the age of 18 (CoE, 2012) should be implemented in all 47 Council of Europe Member States.
- The Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool (CoE, 2016) should be used by all Governments.
- National Government leadership on child participation should be embedded through the development of a national strategy on child participation, which gives child and youth council structures national recognition in influencing policy and service developments.
- National and regional dedicated funding should be put in place for local child and youth councils.
- National or regional standards based on a child rights and youth-led approach should be developed for the operation of local child and youth councils, based on lessons learned and models of good practice from Ireland and other jurisdictions.
- National or regional leadership and support needs to be put in place for local child and youth councils, including an oversight body, participation officers or other practical supports.
- Governments (national or regional) should put in place statutory requirements for Local or Regional Authorities to consult with and enable participation by children and young people in the development of policies and services.
- The lessons and good practice emerging from Ireland should inform the development of effective mechanisms for engagement between child and youth councils and decision-makers

- The challenges and good practice emerging from Ireland should be used in ensuring the involvement of seldom-heard children and young people and those who are under the age of 15 in child and youth councils.

## 8.12 Conclusion

The evidence above illustrates that CNN is a key priority at national level for the DCYA, which uses its influence to work with Government Departments and agencies at national and local level to set standards to build it as a mechanism for implementing children's agency rights. It is also observed that the development of a dedicated strategy on child participation, with commitments from all key government departments and agencies, is highly significant, particularly in view the repeated calls in the international literature for high level political support and action (Lansdown, 2010; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Martin et al., 2015).

It is noted in Chapter 5, that since the inception of CNN, significant improvements have taken place in increasing children and young people's impact on decision-making and affording them meaningful opportunities to participate in civic life. It is also evident that recommendations emerging from ongoing evaluations of CNN have been taken on board and measures put in place to address these recommendations. Good practice standards, funding, strong governance and support have been put in place to underpin the operation of the CNN structure. Issues that require continuous attention are noted throughout this dissertation and include efforts to include seldom-heard young people, a strengthening of engagement with decision-makers and ensuring that CNN are conducted as child rights structures.

Kirby and Bryson (2002) are critical of the fact that there has been limited research examining the differences between the work of adults and young people in situations where young people affected change in their communities. The findings presented in this dissertation do not bear this out in the case of Ireland's CNN structure. A key finding is that the CNN structure has made considerable progress in embedding children's participation in local decision-making and in measuring that progress.

There is strong evidence that CNN is functioning as a structure that enables children and young people to participate in decision-making on issues that affect their everyday lives. The voices of children and young people are being heard by adult decision-makers with influence, but there is evidence that significant improvement is required on this issue.

In conclusion, it is found that measures to increase the effectiveness of the CNN structure as a mechanism for realisation of agency rights go a considerable distance in meeting good practice standards and may well be at the forefront of good practice internationally.

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## **Appendix 1**

## **Interview and focus group questions**

### **Questions for John Collins**

- What was your role in the development of the National Children's Strategy?
- Describe how the voice of the child had such a prominent place in the Strategy
- What was the original vision of the drafters regarding Goal 1 of the Strategy?
- What was the original intention of establishing a Unit in the National Children's Office to lead on the voice of the child?
- What was the original intention of establishing Comhairle na nÓg?
- Why was the mechanism of the City and County Development Boards and Local Authorities selected?

### **Questions for Local Authority Administrative Assistant and Comhairle na nÓg Coordinator**

- What level of importance does your Local Authority assign to Comhairle na nÓg?
- How does the Comhairle na nÓg add value to the work of your Local Authority?
- What level of influence do the young people in Comhairle na nÓg have in your Local Authority?
- Describe how Comhairle na nÓg gives agency to young people?
- In what ways has Comhairle na nÓg made a difference to young people themselves and to their community?

### **Questions for Participation Officer**

- What level of importance do Local Authorities assign to Comhairle na nÓg?
- How do Comhairle na nÓg add value to the work of the Local Authorities?
- What level of influence do the young people in Comhairle na nÓg have in Local Authorities?
- Describe how Comhairle na nÓg gives agency to young people?
- In what ways has Comhairle na nÓg made a difference to young people themselves and to their community?

### **Questions for focus group of young people**

- What level of importance does your Local Authority give to Comhairle na nÓg?
- How does Comhairle na nÓg add value to the work of the Local Authority?
- What level of influence do the young people in Comhairle na nÓg have in your Local Authority?
- Describe how Comhairle na nÓg gives young people a voice and influence?
- In what ways has Comhairle na nÓg made a difference to young people themselves and to their community?



## Appendix 2

## Young person's assent form

### Focus group discussion with Anne O'Donnell

I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group discussion with me on your experience of being involved in Comhairle na nÓg **on 26 July 2016 in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 43 Mespil Road for one hour during the time period from 11.30am – 4.00pm**

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### Background information

My name is Anne O'Donnell and I am the Head of Citizen Participation in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. I am doing a Masters in Children's Rights. The subject of my thesis is on how Comhairle na nÓg gives young people a voice in decision-making. I will conduct a focus group discussion with ten to twelve young people who are members of Comhairle na nÓg on 26 July. This is the same day as the Comhairle na nÓg Showcase Steering Committee meeting, which you are also attending.

I would like to invite you to be part of this focus group discussion. You are free to stop taking part at any time during the discussion without giving a reason. I will not be using your name in the thesis so your views will be anonymous.

I understand that you will be traveling on that day to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the care of the Co-Ordinator of the Comhairle na nÓg.

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### INFORMATION ABOUT YOU

What is your name?

Your address:

Your date of birth:

Your Age:

Girl ☐ Boy ☐ (tick as appropriate)

*Have you any medical conditions, special needs or are there any foods you cannot eat?*

Please read and tick the following if you would like to take part in the focus group discussion:

- ☐ I agree to take part in a group discussion about Comhairle na nÓg with Anne O'Donnell as part of her thesis
- ☐ I have read and understand the information provided

Signed.....

Date.....

## Appendix 3 Parent/guardian consent form

### Focus group discussion with Anne O'Donnell

Your son/daughter is invited to take part in a focus group discussion with Anne O'Donnell on his/her experience of being involved in Comhairle na nÓg on **26 July 2016 in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 43 Mespil Road for one hour during the time period from 11.30am – 4.00pm**

---

### Background information

My name is Anne O'Donnell and I am the Head of Citizen Participation in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. I am doing a Masters in Children's Rights. The subject of my thesis is on how Comhairle na nÓg gives young people a voice in decision-making. I will conduct a focus group discussion with ten to twelve young people who are members of Comhairle na nÓg on 26 July. This is the same day as the Comhairle na nÓg Showcase Steering Committee meeting, which your son/daughter is also attending.

I would like to invite your son/daughter to be part of this focus group discussion. He/she is free to stop taking part at any time during the discussion without giving a reason. I will not be using his/her name in the thesis so their views will be anonymous.

I understand that your son/daughter is traveling to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the care of the Co-Ordinator of the Comhairle na nÓg.

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### DETAILS ABOUT YOUR SON OR DAUGHTER

Name of young person:

Address of young person:

Date of birth of young person:

Contact phone number for child/young person:

Girl                      Boy                      (tick as appropriate)

Other relevant information (please mention any medical conditions, special needs or dietary requirements):

### DETAILS OF PARENT/GUARDIAN/CARE WORKER

Name of parent/Guardian/Care Worker:

Relationship to young person:

Address:

Contact telephone number:

In case of emergency, please contact (if different from above):

Name, address & phone number for young person's doctor:

### Please read and tick the following:

☐

I give permission for the young person named above to take part in a focus group discussion with Anne O'Donnell on 26 July 2016.

☐

I have read and understand the information about the focus group discussion.