

Young people's involvement in implementing the world's first LGBTI+ youth strategy

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

1. How the topic was identified

The vision guiding the world's first LGBTI+ youth strategy, the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018–2020 (the Strategy), is underpinned by the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020 (BOBF), and originated within the 2016 Programme for Government for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), formerly the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). The Strategy aims at helping all LGBTI+ young people to be visible, valued and included. The participation and inclusion of young people was central to its development and the implementation of its actions. Young people participated in this process with meaningful purpose, resulting in tangible outcomes.

To ensure young people's centrality in the creation and development of the Strategy, a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) was established in collaboration with BeLonG To and the National Youth Council of Ireland. The YAG provided critical insight into the strategic planning process from the perspective of young people in Ireland. The group consisted of 14 young people who advised on the Strategy's development process on an ongoing basis, with a particular emphasis on youth consultation. Three representatives from the group also sat on the Oversight Committee (established to assist in overseeing the development of the Strategy). In addition to contributing their own views, the YAG also assisted in the planning and delivery of seven youth consultation events held in different locations around the country, the results of which are included, along with the results of a nationwide youth survey, in the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy – Report of the Consultations with Young People in Ireland*.

After the creation and development of the Strategy was complete, a decision-making processes regarding its implementation was conducted, in which the contribution of young people was integral. This was facilitated through participation in a Youth Forum.

Following good youth participation practice, the DCEDIY established an interim Youth Advisory Committee to help plan and design a LGBTI+ Youth Forum. The Forum aimed at representing all LGBTI+ young people; individuals with different backgrounds (ethnicities, sexualities, gender identities) were nominated and recruited from across Ireland. The Forum comprised 25 young people (16- to 22-year-olds) who identify as LGBTI+. The Forum first met in September 2019.

The role of the Youth Forum is to support the implementation of particular actions that the DCEDIY is responsible for within the Strategy. (These actions are outlined under Goal 1: Create a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for LGBTI+ young people, Objective 5: Provide a more supportive and inclusive environment that encourages positive LGBTI+ representation and participation in culture, society and sport, and reduces LGBTI+ stigma.) The actions include developing a welcome sticker, a leadership programme and a biennial youth event celebrating young LGBTI+ people. The terms of reference relating to the purpose and responsibilities of the group were agreed by the members at the first meeting of the Forum. The four key elements of the Lundy Model were used in a collective decision-making process to involve the Forum in the implementation of the Strategy.

2. The young people's participation in the decision-making

There were a number of decision-makers involved in the implementation of the LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020:

- The DCEDIY and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs at that time, and the current Minister for Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth
- Other Government Departments and Agencies that engaged with the Strategy
- Young people on the YAG
- Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs).

3. How the views of young people were sought, and how they affected the decisions

SPACE

- Throughout the development and implementation stages, the views of young people were sought as early as possible within the decision-making process. This was achieved by involving young people in the early planning stages of the strategy for the YAG and including them in the recruitment for the Youth Forum, as well as in its formation and implementation. Once the Forum was established, the terms of reference relating to the purpose and responsibilities of the group were agreed by the members (at the first meeting), making sure that young people were consulted on the agenda for decision-making from the beginning.
- Using the support of LGBTI+ organisations, significant efforts were made to represent all LGBTI+ young people; individuals with different backgrounds (ethnicities, sexualities, gender identities) were nominated and recruited from across Ireland for the Youth Forum. This ensured the involvement of young people who are directly affected by the decisions made.
- Young people's involvement was sustained through continuous interactive consultation at Youth Forum meetings in late 2019 and throughout 2020. Facilitators were friendly and welcoming to the young people at the meetings and used icebreaker games aimed at making them feel more comfortable and familiar in meeting spaces. All other attendees were introduced to the young people so the Forum members were aware of who those individuals were and why they were present. Aiming at creating an inclusive atmosphere, name tags with pronouns were used so young people would feel comfortable sharing their pronouns. Due to the unprecedented events of Covid-19 in 2020, the Youth Forum met mostly online in video conferences during this year. Significant efforts were made to ensure that the process was inclusive and accessible by consistently adapting and developing the methods used to appropriately seek the views of young people. Alternative methods for voicing opinions were provided where possible to increase accessibility for all.
- Polls and voting took place to decide the meeting times, dates and lengths. These tools were used to make sure the meetings were more easily accessible to young people.
- Young people were treated with respect: they were provided with agendas for the online meetings in advance, giving them the opportunity to contribute ideas to the meeting plans. Some initiatives were also entirely youth-led, for example a project creating a video submission for a digital pride festival.
- Young people's safety and wellbeing was also respected: information was provided on external support services available to them in an effort to safeguard young people from harm. Those young people who did not attend meetings (without providing an explanation) or who provided lower evaluation scores than usual, were offered the opportunity to link in with facilitators in smaller group meetings or via email to ensure any issues were addressed appropriately. Support was provided where needed.

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- In addition, child safeguarding procedures were put in place and advertised to ensure young people felt safe. Among other things, these procedures related to: parental consent, access to the child safeguarding statement, the appropriate ratio of staff to young people, guidelines for group work in person and online, the logging of attendance at meetings, and the recording of all meetings.

VOICE

- The role of the Youth Forum and the involvement of young people was set out clearly from the beginning of the consultation process. The Forum also agreed on a clear list of topics where input was needed on specific actions for implementation.
- Subject experts from NGOs and Government Departments and Agencies were invited to attend meetings or supply information, to ensure that young people had the information they needed to generate informed views and meaningfully contribute to decision-making. Documents and accessible explanations were also provided to ensure the information needed to form decisions was available.
- Young people were given time to process information and opportunities to address and contribute to decision-making after meetings. This was facilitated by making online apps available between meetings and by inviting and welcoming email communications from young people.
- Regular planning sessions with decision-makers and adult facilitation staff ensured that the focus of the meetings was on achieving the objectives and contributing to the specific topics and actions originally identified by the Youth Forum.
- Good practice participation methodology for children and young people was employed to ensure that the voices of the young people were heard and recorded accurately. A range of over five online applications were used in different digital meetings to support the inclusion of the voice of young people. All the methods used were open ended and exploratory in order to support unbiased contributions from the youth members as much as possible.
- Young people were encouraged to identify further opportunities for their voices to be heard using different media, for example through the setting up of a Youth Forum Instagram page and supporting the creation of the youth-led Dublin Pride Parade video submission for 2020.
- Young people's experience of sharing their voice was continuously evaluated. Their views on the consultation methodology were also monitored from the start to make sure that they had the opportunity to both voice concerns and also identify the methods that made them feel most comfortable in terms of expressing themselves. Facilitators responded to this feedback to make young people feel comfortable and regularly improved the accessibility of the methods available for providing feedback and inputting views. Alternative methods were also offered wherever possible.
- Young people were informed that their participation was voluntary at the recruitment stage, and reminded verbally at meetings later on. In addition, when the Youth Strategy Term was extended young people were given the opportunity to opt in or opt out of continued participation in the extended period. This was done to highlight the voluntary nature of participation in the Youth Forum.

AUDIENCE

- Key decision-makers were involved throughout the process; the Department staff directly responsible for decision-making played a central role in planning and attending meetings throughout.
- Other decision-makers attended the meetings to seek the views of the Youth Forum. This gave Forum members an opportunity to contribute to decision-making related to the broader Strategy in addition to the actions identified within the role of the Forum. Forum members were always consulted, and offered meetings with the relevant decision-makers (e.g. the National Library of Ireland, a National Advisory Committee and a representative for LGBTI+ issues on the Oversight Committee for BOBF). If the Forum did not express an interest in meeting with a particular decision-maker this was respected by the DCEDIY.
- Steps were taken to make sure that the young people knew who their views, opinions and feedback were being communicated to. This was communicated to young people verbally. Where possible, team members from the decision-making unit were invited to attend meetings to meet the young people and explain the next steps of the process.
- The DCEDIY showed their commitment to being influenced by young people by returning to seek their views on issues if there were any significant revisions or changes made to plans that they had not been briefed on originally. This ensured that meaningful consultations were held with young people throughout the decision-making process.
- A youth friendly record of the young people's inputs into decision-making was created and distributed by email after every meeting. These emails used accessible language and images and also provided opportunities for young people to follow up on topics and seek further information. Young people could respond by email if they felt that something was missing from these records.
- The decision-makers proved that they were open to listening to feedback from young people by responding directly to evaluations. For example, when the Youth Forum meetings moved online there was feedback from the young people pointing out that the inclusivity regarding pronouns had been partly lost due to the unavailability of name tags. The facilitators and decision-makers responded by changing video conferencing names to include pronouns.
- The adults involved in the core activities of the participation process received in-depth training on good practice in participation and participatory methods for children and young people's input in decision-making.

INFLUENCE

- Through their participation in the Youth Forum, the members influenced decisions made on the design, look and feel, development and implementation of: a welcome sticker, a celebration event (Live out Loud) and a Leadership Programme (<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/9ecaf-live-out-loud/>).
- Young people identified and implemented their own additional actions and activities. For example, creating a video submission for the Dublin Pride Festival 2020 (<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/cf11e-minister-zappone-welcomes-lgbti-youth-forums-participation-in-the-dublin-virtual-pride-parade-young-people-from-the-lgbti-youth-forum-to-contribute-to-the-voices-of-young-people-in-dublin-virtual-pride-parade/>) and a social media presence on Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/lgbti_youth_forum/?hl=en).

- Young people were given both written and verbal reports on what decisions were made and how their views were given due weight within the decision-making process.
- Occasionally there were delays in decisions being made due to unprecedented events related to Covid-19. When this happened, the young people were informed on the progress of the decision-making. The reasons for the delays were explained and new timelines were given to manage the young people's expectations in terms of when decisions would be made.
- Service providers and professionals responsible for aspects of implementation regarding actions that young people had contributed to were invited to meetings. These service providers presented their plans to the Youth Forum for feedback ahead of the actual implementation. Young people were invited to give their views and evaluate whether the service providers, contracted by the decision-makers, were implementing their original vision for the actions.
- Before the young people were asked for their views, the full process of decision-making was explained, including the influence that they could have on the actual decisions. The young people were informed that every effort would be taken to incorporate their feedback but that this may not always be possible due to external factors that also need to be considered by the decision-makers. When it was not possible to implement young people's views exactly, it was clearly explained in meetings and young people were provided with the reasons.
- Young people were provided with evaluation forms after meetings so that they had the opportunity to provide regular feedback. Young people also participated in an externally facilitated workshop that evaluated their participation in the implementation of the Strategy.

4. Lessons learned

- Covid-19 and the transition to online working was a challenge in the implementation of the Youth Forum. Encouraging blue-sky thinking with young people using digital methods of consultation is particularly challenging, especially when operating within tight implementation timelines. Efforts were made to be open regarding questions and methods, however, knowing what we now know, a more open consultative methodology could be explored online.
- More effort is needed to identify if there are accessibility barriers to online participation that could be addressed, particularly the lack of resources that young people may have available to them (e.g. the high costs of phone data, or a lack of devices or suitable spaces to participate from).
- Further development of inclusivity is also needed, in particular mapping pathways for the increased inclusion of young people from different ethnicities.
- Further exploration of the impact of transitioning to the use of online participation methods, for example examining the impact of screen burn-out on attendance, is needed.