Review of innovation and good practice: Planning Template

Case study template for a project or initiative that involved children and/or young people (CYP) in decision-making

> Please write your case study as a story. The questions are there as a guide - not all questions may be relevant to your case study.

1. Project information

Tell the story in a way that makes it clear that two rounds of focus groups were conducted in September/October and November.

Questions	Response (based on survey response)
Name of project or initiative?	Students' Experience of Remote Learning and Returning to School 2020 – A Department of Education Initiative
Project details (name and email contact)	A Department of Education Initiative, led by the Department's Inspectorate Contact details: yvonne_keating@education.gov.ie; padraig_macfhlannchadha@education.gov.ie : suzanne_conneely@education.gov.ie; charlene_brazil@education.gov.ie
Background to the project / initiative	Schools were closed due to COVID-19 restrictions for significant periods in 2020. During this time, students were taught remotely by their schools. Once restrictions were lifted in Autumn 2020, students returned to school where new arrangements were in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The Department wished to learn about students' experiences of remote learning and returning to school during this challenging time in 2020. It was for that reason that the Inspectorate undertook research with children and young people.
Why you consulted/engaged with CYP?	The purpose of convening the focus groups at that time was to listen to and understand children and young people's experiences of being back at school with a view to: ● Informing policy decisions and the provision of further guidance and supports for schools, teachers and pupils/students ● Recognising good practice in schools through the lens of pupils' and students' experiences of being back at school ● Realising the Inspectorate's commitment to student voice and the principles of the Lundy Model of Child Participation - Space, Voice, Audience and Influence.
On what aspect of the work of your organisation, (or the work of another organisation) or a local/national issue were you looking for their views?	The Department was anxious to learn about students' experiences of remote learning and returning to school in 2020. The Inspectorate wanted to understand how children and young people had experienced the period of school closure and to hear their ideas about measures to support continuity in their learning. This information was needed to help the Department and the Inspectorate to support schools in their work to provide continuity of learning for all students.

Setting in which you engage with children/YP (e.g. school, youth club, residential care, hospital ward etc)	**Primary and post-primary schools** Two phases of focus groups were conducted – one in September/October 2020 and one in November 2020. **September and October 2020** Three primary and three post-primary schools participated in the September/October 2020 period. The schools included DEIS Band 1 schools, rural and urban schools, small and large schools, single sex and co-educational schools. All primary focus groups and one post-primary focus group took place onsite in the pupils'/students' school; the remaining two post-primary focus groups, which were with senior cycle students, took place in an online environment. **November 2020** Focus groups were held in eleven schools in November 2020. Six primary schools and five post-primary schools participated. A combination of DEIS Band 2 schools, Irish-medium schools, rural and urban schools, small and large schools, single sex and co-educational schools were included. All focus groups during this round took place onsite in school settings.
Who were the children/young people (e.g. school students, young people in care, young people involved in youth service etc)?	The children and young people who participated in the initiative were as follows: ● Children attending primary schools ● Children and young people attending post-primary school/alternative education settings ● Children and young people living in economically or socially disadvantaged areas
Who facilitated the engagement with the children/young person? (Role of the person e.g. teacher, social worker, youth worker, external facilitator etc.)	Inspectors from the Department of Education Inspectorate facilitated the engagement with the children and young people.
Who acted on their views? (role of the decision makers)	The Inspectorate collated and analysed the findings from the focus groups and published the findings on www.gov.ie . The findings from the focus groups were brought to the attention of the Minister for Education and relevant Department divisions, including those responsible for the development of policy, guidance and supports for schools during school closure and reopening phases. The findings were also disseminated publicly through publication on www.gov.ie .
Were CYP involved in the design of the consultation (e.g. was a youth advisory group established or consulted to codesign the methodology/questions or to pilot the methodology?)	Yes. Inspectors trialled this type of engagement with groups of post-primary students in an online environment during the first school closure period. Further, the question set used in the November 2020 phase of engagements with students included additional questions arising from the engagements with students during the September-October 2020 phase; essentially, the views and ideas of the children and young people participating in the first phase shaped the additional questions used in the second phase.

2. Giving space, voice, audience and influence to children and young people (CYP)

SPACE

Tell the story of the space or setting in which you sought the views of children or young people, and include any relevant information on the questions below:

Questions	Response (based on survey response)
How were CYP made to feel safe to express their views?	Adherence to COVID-19 regulations, to health and safety guidelines and to the schools' COVID protocols was paramount in the organisation of the focus groups. The Inspectorate's guidance for Supporting the Safe Provision of Schooling (SSPS) visits and the Inspectorate's Safe Return to Onsite Work protocols were also followed to ensure the safety of focus group participants, school personnel and the inspectors. In line with best practice for working with children and young people, and in recognition of their right to choose to participate or not, schools were requested to ensure that both pupil/student assent and parental or guardian consent were received in advance of meetings. Two inspectors engaged with the pupils/students in each focus group. Interacting with remote meeting platforms and broadband issues were challenging for the organisation of the two remote focus groups. "Trial runs" were carried out with the co-operation of the school and some issues were identified and addressed. The schools attempted to optimise broadband capacity by restricting access for teachers and children for the duration of the focus groups. Thanks to the preparatory work and planning, apart from a small number of minor technical issues, the meetings proceeded smoothly.
How early in the process were they involved in the decision making?	Children and young people were involved from the start of the process. Inspectors had trialled this type of engagement with post-primary students in an online environment during the school closure period. The themes guiding the focus groups were shaped by the participant children and young people.
How did you involve those directly affected by the topic e.g. how did you recruit/select participants?	School principals were requested to nominate a representative and inclusive group of participants for the focus groups. Criteria for selection included: ● Positive engagement during schools closure ● Lack of, or poor, engagement during schools closure ● A range of achievement levels ● All school programmes, for example, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), Transition Year (TY).
How did you make the process inclusive and accessible?	Interestingly, some of the restrictions associated with COVID-related preventative measures resulted in a better environment for the focus group and enhanced levels of engagement. For example, the decision to divide into junior and senior focus groups, in both primary and post-primary schools, was to some extent dictated by social distancing requirements and the need to respect bubbles and pods. This provided a better way of interacting with a smaller number of participants in each group, typically about six, and a greater likelihood of capturing shared experiences among the participants.

	To facilitate the widest range of voices to be heard in the focus groups, participants were encouraged to share the experiences of their friends and classmates, where appropriate and relevant.
How did you continue to involve CYP throughout the decision-making process?	In November 2020, the key discussion topics used in September and October 2020 were used again. A number of additional discussion topics were included in November 2020 in response to the suggestions of the November 2020 participants. Some examples of the particular issues raised by participants in November 2020 are illustrated in the following points: ● Pupils and students wanted to be involved in shaping the themes of the discussions and requested that they be asked to provide feedback on areas that directly involved them. For example, they wanted to be asked directly about how they were finding the safety routines and rules at school and what they thought about COVID-19. Those who spoke about this made reference to the fact that it should not be left to third parties to speak on their behalf all of the time ● Some primary school pupils advised that they wanted learning to be more fun ● For some pupils/students, public transport was a cause of anxiety and contributed to making the school day longer. In November 2020, the focus group participants also requested that additional specific questions be asked and inspectors facilitated such requests. One such example included, 'Do you feel safe in school?' While participants overwhelmingly agreed that they felt safe, the request for the inclusion of COVID-related questions, together with the extensive commentary by pupils and students about COVID procedures during many of the focus group sessions, were indicative of the significant impact that the pandemic and the associated safety arrangements were having on pupils and students.

VOICE
Tell the story of how you gave CYP a voice in decision-making, and include any relevant information on the questions below:

Questions	Response (based on survey response)
How did you inform them about the topics on which you wanted their views?	Children were provided with child-friendly information in advance and an advocacy worker or staff member worked through this information with them.
How you informed them about level of influence they could have on decision-making?	Children and young people were informed in advance how their views would be shared and how they would inform the decisions being made in the Department in relation to educational provision during the pandemic and the supports for children and young people in schools.
How were CYP supported children to give their views and be heard? (What methods were used to get their views?)	Each focus group was carried out using the same key discussion topics supported by a small number of guiding questions. The time allocated to specific areas and the details of the questions addressed differed between groups depending on the interaction between the inspectors and the participants, in line with focus group best practice. The focus group process sought to reflect on the experience of school since re-opening. The broad areas were: Back to school; Schoolwork and learning. <u>September 2020</u> **Back to school** • How did you find going back to school for the new school year?

	•What helped you to feel comfortable about coming back to school? •What was difficult about coming back to school? •Were there other things that would have helped? **Schoolwork and learning** •What is it like being back doing school work in school? •What is happening in lessons to help everyone to learn and do schoolwork? •What is difficult about learning and schoolwork now that you are back in school? •Are there things that would make it better? **What did we forget?** • Can you think of anything that has been forgotten? •Is there anything that should be done differently? •Anything else that should be happening to help you learn and get on well in school? November 2020: **Looking back** • Can you remember what it was like when you had to leave school in March? How did you feel? • Can you remember what was it like to do school work at home? **Back to school** • How did you find going back to school for the new school year? • What helped you to feel comfortable about coming back to school? • What was difficult about coming back to school? • Were there other things that would have helped? **Schoolwork and learning** • What is it like being back doing schoolwork in school? • What is happening in lessons to help everyone to learn and do schoolwork? • What is difficult about learning and schoolwork now that you are back in school? • Are there things that would make it better? **What did we forget?** • Can you think of anything that has been forgotten? • Is there anything that should be done differently? • Anything else that should be happening to help you learn and get on well in school? The main topics and the supporting questions were addressed through discussing what was working well, and identifying the challenges for the children and young people. At the sessions, there were physical activities for everyone to engage in and get to know each other. There was space for one-to-one discussion to ensure everyone's views were heard, as well as group discussions to facilitate wider engagement and sharing of views.
How were CYP supported to raise things that matter to them?	In line with the focus group methodology, the feedback from focus groups did not reflect a linear path through a pre-defined sequence of questions and topics. Rather, focus group participants engaged in an organic and reflective process that was guided by the main discussion topics which considered experiences of being back in school and learning in the changed environment. Observations and reflections emerged through this process.

	The final discussion topic looked at the question of "What did we forget?" In general, most items noted in this area fitted comfortably within one or other of the main discussion areas. That said, all participants appreciated the opportunity to reflect on what they had already shared during the meeting.
What topics/issues did they raise?	The children and young people advised inspectors that they wanted to be involved in discussions and requested that they be asked to provide feedback on areas that directly concerned or involved them. For example, they requested that they be asked about how they were finding the safety routines and rules at school and what they thought about COVID-19. Those who spoke about this highlighted the importance of directly seeking their views on these matters rather than relying on third parties to speak on their behalf. The children and young people demonstrated a heightened awareness of the rules associated with COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on their experience of school. Pupils and students shared valuable insights into the teaching approaches that best supported their learning. They also shared valuable suggestions about how their learning and well-being could be supported at school in the pandemic context. In particular, they highlighted the importance of collaborative and practical work and the need for the school to involve them in decisions that affect them.

AUDIENCE

Tell the story of how you made sure that there was an audience (decision-makers) for their views and include any relevant information on the questions below:

Questions	Response (based on survey response)
How did you involve the decision-makers who are responsible for influencing change (other than yourself)? (please provide details)	The views of the children and young people were shared by the Inspectorate with relevant sections of the Department and with officials on Department groups that had oversight of educational provision at this time, made decisions on the supports for schools and led the development of guidance materials and resources for schools.
How did you (and/or other decision-makers) show your commitment to listening to, and acting on children and young people's views? (please provide details)	The reports published on the engagement with students and on their perspectives on the return to school period helped to inform the development by the Department of Education of the additional guidance and supports provided to schools during 2021.
How did you develop a report or record of their views? (please provide details)	The reports on the engagement with the children and young people are publicly available. There are two published reports and they can be found at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/.
How did you check back with the CYP that their views were accurately represented? (please provide details)	Following the focus groups, inspectors checked with the participants if their views under the key themes for discussion were accurately recorded. Inspectors also clarified the particular points that the children and young people wanted to feed back to decision makers.
How did you involve them communicating their views to the decision makers? (please provide details)	The children and young people were advised of how their views and perspectives would be shared with decision makers through the publication of the report on the Inspectorate's engagement with them and the discussion of the key points and learning arising from the engagement at meetings of the Inspectorate with other sections of the

	Department and education stakeholders. The involvement of children and young people in communicating their views more directly is an aspect that the Inspectorate is considering for further development.

INFLUENCE
Tell the story of the influence of their views and include any relevant information on the questions below:

Questions	Response (based on survey response)
How did CYP know the level of influence they can have (including any limitations)?	The children and young people were informed in advance of how their views would help to inform policy decisions and the provision of further guidance and supports for schools, teachers, children and young people.
How were CYP's views acted on by the appropriate decision-makers (what happened to their views)?	This information was to help the Department and the Inspectorate to support schools in their work to provide continuity of learning for all students.
How did you give CYP feedback or updates on the development of the service, policy, plan or project on which they gave their views? (please provide details)	In planning the focus groups activity, in line with the Lundy Model and the *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making,* it was decided to take a number of steps to ensure that the key principle of "Influence" would receive due attention. All participants were very keen to be kept in a communication loop with the Department so that they would know about the impact of their feedback. Three feedback strategies were identified for this project: ● Local feedback in school: agreed feedback to the school principal arising from the focus group meeting ● Feedback to the system: feedback around key issues to the Department ● Feedback to focus group schools: feedback to the focus group participants about the impact of the focus groups, in line with the principles of the Lundy Model and the *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making.*
How were CYP given age-appropriate feedback explaining how their views were used and the reasons for decisions taken?	Through both the assent forms and the oral and written feedback to the students, they were informed that the feedback from each focus group will be combined with that of a series of other focus groups to be held with students from schools around the country. It was indicated to participants that short reports would be written for internal use by the Inspectorate while a final report would be compiled to guide the Department's future policy on improving the school experiences of children and young people.
How did you explain the reasons for decisions taken? (please provide details)	Students were informed orally and in writing that the feedback from each focus group would inform short reports for internal use by the Inspectorate while a final report would be compiled to guide the Department's future policy on improving children's and young people's school experience.
How were they enabled to evaluate the process throughout?	There was no formal evaluation –this is something that the Inspectorate will add going forward during its other initiatives with children and young people. As part of the process, inspectors asked focus group participants as part of the meeting to verify that they had recorded the main points of the discussion accurately and that they were satisfied for inspectors to share the information with the Department.

3. The learning for your organisation or project

Questions	Response (based on survey response)
What has been the key learning for your organisation on the process (of consulting with CYP)? (What worked well? Anything you would change?)	The consultation with students has highlighted the importance and value of giving children and young people an open opportunity to share their experiences. There is potential to apply this approach when engaging during inspections with children and young people about their experience of school and learning generally.
What was the key learning for your organisation on the outcomes from the consultation/engagement (of consulting with CYP) (i.e. the end result – how the CYP's views informed the plans for the policy, service, project etc)? (What worked well? Anything you would change?)	One of the main findings from the engagement is the importance of children and young people being in school for the educational and social development and their overall wellbeing. The pupils and students who participated in this project highlighted the value of being back in school on a number of levels, indicating a very strong preference for being in school rather than working from home. They also articulated a new found appreciation for the work of their school and teachers. The findings also highlighted a number of areas for schools generally to consider, and to develop further where necessary, as they strive to ensure that teaching and learning experiences are as meaningful as possible for children and young people in a face-to-face schooling context in pandemic times. In light of the engagement with children and young people during the return to school period, the Inspectorate's student voice project has progressed its work in further promoting the Inspectorate's engagement with children and young people during inspection and has shaped adjustments to the quality framework for primary and post-primary schools, *Looking at Our Schools 2016*.
Finally, what were the benefits of involving children and young people in planning of policy, services or programmes?	The engagement with children and young people provided very valuable insights into primary pupils' and post-primary students' experience of being back in school in September 2020. While the number of schools, pupils and students involved in this project was small, the findings are nonetheless important for the participants themselves, for schools generally and for the Inspectorate and the Department more broadly. One of the main findings from the engagement is the importance of children and young people being in school for the educational and social development and their overall wellbeing. The pupils and students who participated in this project highlighted the value of being back in school on a number of levels. The findings also highlight a number of areas for schools generally to consider, and to develop further where necessary, as they strive to ensure that teaching and learning experiences are as meaningful as possible for children and young people in a face-to-face schooling context in pandemic times. Following the September focus groups, the inspectors were very mindful that changes were needed to the question set. This was influenced by the question inspectors asked 'What did we forget?' For example, the pupils and students noted in September that they wanted to be asked about how they got ready for their return to school and this change of routine. Thus, additional questions were needed in the second phase in November 2020.

Links to any reports etc. Please add hyperlink to any relevant reports or websites etc.

The two reports, *Return to School: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, September and October, 2020* and *Return to School: Report on focus groups with pupils and students, November, 2020* are available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/ .