Formal Mechanisms of Consultation

The consultation of children and young people in Finland has a solid legal basis as it is included as a guiding principle in the top-level national legislation. According to the Constitution, public authorities shall promote opportunities for the individual to participate in societal activity and influence the decisions that concern him or her. It also states that democracy entails the right of the individual to participate in and influence the development of society and his or her living conditions. The Youth Act highlights the fact that young people must also be given opportunities to take part in the handling of matters related to local and national youth work and youth policy. Furthermore, young people shall be heard in matters concerning them.

The Local Government Act states that all residents of a municipality should be given the right to take part in discussion forums and resident panels, for example in planning and developing services regardless of their age. All residents who are at least 15 years old may also submit a referendum initiative. The role of the local council is to ensure that there are diverse and effective opportunities for participation.

All residents despite their age have also the right to submit initiatives on matters concerning the municipality’s activities. The Local Government Act also states that “the action undertaken as a result of an initiative must be notified to those who submitted the initiative.” For young people, the process
of submitting an initiative for the municipality is supported by the online youth initiative channel – ‘Ideas of young people.fi’ (Nuortenideat.fi [4]). The service is developed in co-operation with young people and actors working with them (e.g. youth councils and youth organisations and schools). The development process is organised by the Ministry of Justice [5], the Ministry of Education and Culture [6], and National centre of expertise for youth information and counselling – Koordinaatti [7]. The service, among others, corresponds to the strategic goals of the Youth Act and the national youth work and policy programme.

The youth initiative service was launched in 2015 as a part of the online democracy platform for all citizens. In addition, organisations working with young people can use the service. Actors such as municipalities, non-governmental organisations, associations, schools, young people’s participation and influence groups can utilize the service as a part of their work. It is a low-threshold service in which young people can share ideas about how to develop their living environment, discuss and comment on ideas, follow certain topics, respond to queries published by organisations or young people and track how the ideas are being processed. Furthermore, the online democracy service is a national tool for democracy education and it aims to promote the development of young active citizens. The service also includes a platform where young people can practice writing initiatives with the support of an adult. This service and the young people’s ideas, initiatives and decisions are transparent for everyone.

At national level, consultation (kuuleminen [8]) is an established part of the ministries' legislative drafting processes [9]. In accordance with the instructions and guidelines of the Ministry of Justice for legislative projects concerning youth policy and policies affecting young people, the representatives from youth organisations, youth research community and other relevant stakeholders are appointed to a preparatory body by the Ministry of Education and Culture [6]. Stakeholder consultations are carried out to hear to hear opinions from all the relevant target groups. In consultation with the stakeholders, both traditional listening methods - such as written comments - and modern information and communication technology are used. Some of the stakeholders are also heard in Parliament at the Committee debate.

**Actors**

**Youth Actors**

At national level, the Union of Local Youth Councils (in Finnish) and national student unions (for more information, visit: Youth Wiki/Finland: 5.3 Youth representation bodies [11]) are the main actors that represent young people during the consultation processes.

According to the Youth Act [12], the State Youth Council [13] is a consultative body attached to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which has expertise in young people’s living conditions. Most of its members are nominated by national youth and youth work organisations.

There are also civic organisations that promote children’s and young people’s rights and their possibilities to participate and be heard. Additionally, the Ministry of Education and Culture listens to these organisations during its youth consultation process. The representation of youth in these processes is often coordinated by the Finnish National Youth Council Allianssi [14], which is a registered organisation for promoting the interest of Finnish young people, youth organisations and youth work in national and international arenas.

One of the key values of the Finnish National Youth Council Allianssi is to promote youth participation and make young people’s voice heard. It participates in several different expert bodies and working groups of the central authorities. It also offers expert services and information for youth
organisations, youth workers and young people to develop the possibilities of youth participation and its impact.

**Specific target groups**

The Ombudsman for Children [15] has its own consultation system where the primary aim is to taking into account of the opinions of young people from different cultural backgrounds or those with special needs when planning welfare services.

The National Council on Disability VANE [16] is a cooperative organ for authorities, disability organisations, and organisations for relatives of disabled people. It closely follows decision-making in society, issues statements and promotes the real implementation of human rights for disabled people. The Council works in close connection with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health [17]. (for more information, visit Youth Wiki/Finland 4.2 Administration and governance [18]).

**Public authorities**

All public authorities are obligated to consult young people in decision-making. The Regional State Administrative Agencies [19](see Glossary) [20] organises training for the local authorities for example for municipal youth workers how to develop the youth participation and the impact of young people in the daily procedure and decision making processes in local level. During one such training session in April 2018 in eastern Finland in the city of Joensuu, the youth workers raised the following themes, being those issues with which they need more support: How to motivate young people to participate? How to develop the interaction between the Youth Council and young people but also the municipality? What kind of ways are there to support youth workers to find time for developing youth participation when their well-being is threatened by an already too heavy work load?

**Information on the extent of youth participation**

Finland’s Human Rights Report 2014 [21] emphasizes long-term measures to promote equality, both nationally and internationally. In the report, among the national priorities is the need to consult and listen to children and young people with disabilities when preparing legislation. This notion is in line with the Council of Europe policy review on child and youth participation [22] that highlighted that marginalised groups (children under 13 years old and all disadvantaged children and young people) are still not able to participate fully in matters affecting their living circumstances in Finland.

Even if there are formal consultation channels and mechanisms for children and young people, several studies and reports have noted that the existing forms do not reach all groups of young people and they are not fully youth-oriented. For example, according to the report made by the Regional State Administrative Agencies [19] (see Glossary [20]), role of young people participating in the evaluation and development of youth services at local level was poorly developed, contrary to the provisions of the Youth Act [12]. Additionally, the 2013 study conducted by the Union of Local Youth Councils (in Finnish [10]) showed that only half of the local youth councils considered the possibility of influencing decision-making as ‘good’ and only 10% said that they had had a real possibility to influence the decision-making in their municipality.

Thus, new ways to promote participation have been developed recently, however there is still a need to do more.

As a part of the Action Plan for Open Government [23], specific seminars regarding consultation and listening to children and young people have been organised. In these seminars, it has been recommended that a general quality procedure should be followed when consulting young people. For example, there should be several different methods used for consultation to ensure extensiveness
in the process. It has also been highlighted that not only is the quantitative amount of participants important, but also that the quality of the process and its impact are significant. A summary of the statements should be composed, describing the major reactions to the proposed measure in detail. The Open Government Handbook offers fact-sheets (tietokortit [24]) on how to improve the quality of the consultation processes with children and young people in public administration. The fact sheets were developed by the Finnish Youth Research Network [25], in cooperation with the Ministry of Finance [26] and the Ministry of Education and Culture. Finland also participates in the Open Government Partnership [27]. (For more information, visit: Youth Wiki/Finland 5.8 Raising political awareness among young people [28]).

During the revision process of the Youth Act (in force since the beginning of 2017) young people and youth organisations were consulted in different ways. The Finnish National Youth Council Allianssi [14] was nominated as one of the members of the legislative working group. The Ministry of Education and Culture [29] also commissioned the Youth Academy [30] to organize a consultation among young people in 2015. The hearing was implemented by organizing eight consultation workshops in different municipalities. The number of youth participants was more than a hundred. The aim was to listen to young people`s opinions and views on a draft version of the Youth Act.

All in all, during the revision process of the Act, everyone had the possibility to share their views through several online surveys, and on social media services such as Facebook and Twitter. Also, regional events were organized to involve both specialists and young people. According to some estimations, 2 500 people were involved in the process. The leading principle has been to maintain and increase the transparency of the legislative process. The report on the consultation with young people on the revision of the Youth Act was taken into consideration as a part of the wider consultation process of the Act. The report describes the views of young people and it is available on the website of the Ministry. Alongside the report, video material has also been produced on the results of the consultation.

Outcomes

The youth consultations are used to integrate young people’s opinions into policy-making, but the content varies. In some examples, young people have participated in defining the content and goals of something like the Youth Act [12] consultation process. On the other hand, young people participate in the evaluation of how the National Youth Work and Youth Policy Programme [31] are realised during the different programme periods as part of an evaluation organised by the State Youth Council [32]. In this context, the aim of the consultation is to invite young people to assess the implementation of the actual programme and to affect the preparation of the next.

The outcomes of the consultations are made available publicly on the websites of the Ministries in the form of published reports and often in more youth-friendly formats. According to the Democracy Policy Programme (in Finnish [33]), in the future the results of consultations will be described in more detail, such as in the Government’s Proposals on the enactment of various laws.

**Large-scale initiatives for dialogue or debate between public institutions and young people**

There are frequently organised so-called Deliberative Discussion Days. They have been organised in more than in 70 municipalities and in several youth or youth work organisations and at least in one national youth centre since 2008. During the forum, young people first evaluate local services and then negotiate the possibility to have some developments and improvements directly with the decision-makers. The method was broadly delivered to youth workers across the country during the project called Developing the Evaluation of Basic Services organised by the Finnish National Youth
Council Allianssi [14] and Finnish Youth Research Network [34].