

Sofia Young People's Report 2016



Eurochild

Putting children at
the heart of Europe

This report was commissioned by the Council of Europe for the launch
of the new Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2016-2020



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This report was commissioned by the Council of Europe, drafted by Darren Bird, coordinated by Eurochild and National Network For Children and designed by Davide Rambaldi, Eurochild.

The views expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Council of Europe.

1. Introduction

In December 2015 the Council of Europe put a call for expression of interest seeking support by NGOs and/or consultants in the Conceptualisation, preparation, organisation and follow-up of a child participation process in its high-level conference in Sofia, Bulgaria. The new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child was to be adopted by the Committee of Ministers in early 2016, with the Strategy being officially launched at the conference.

Working in partnership Eurochild, the National Network for Children (NNC) Bulgaria and Darren Bird (an International Child Rights Consultant), responded to the call with a proposal.

On 2 March 2016, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a new Strategy for the Rights of the Child for the period 2016-2021. This Strategy was launched at the high-level conference “Reaching the Heights for the Rights of the Child” in Sofia, Bulgaria.

The Council of Europe places the participation of children at the core of its children’s rights agenda. To maintain this objective, especially with regard to its new Strategy, the Council of Europe put in December 2015 a call for expression of interest seeking support by NGOs and/or consultants in the conceptualisation, preparation, organisation and follow-up of a child participation process in its high-level conference in Sofia.

Eurochild, a European non-governmental umbrella organisation specialised in children’s rights and well-being, responded to the call and entered in partnership with the National Network for Children (NNC) in Bulgaria and Darren Bird, an international Child Rights Consultant. Together they elaborated the child participation process and invited 10 young people across Europe to come to the High Level Conference in Sofia.

This report gives an overview of how the young people participated to the Council of Europe Conference but also presents the groups’ views and conclusions of the themes and ideas discussed during the conference. Children participating in a high level conference was unprecedented for the Council of Europe.

What is the Council of Europe?

The Council of Europe is the continent’s leading human rights organization. It comprises 47 member states, 28 of which are members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

The Council of Europe transversal programme “Building a Europe for and with children” was launched in 2006 in response to a call to mainstream children’s rights into all policies, for coordinating all child-related activities and for eradicating all forms of violence against children.

Who are the Partners?



Eurochild
Putting children at
the heart of Europe

Eurochild

Eurochild is a network of organisations working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. It influences policies, builds internal capacities, facilitates mutual learning and exchanges practice and research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the foundation of all its work. Eurochild is in particular focused at EU policies within the EU and the rest of Europe, as well as the Council of Europe policies, in particular it Children's Rights Programme.

Eurochild's key priorities are to strengthen children, families & communities – reinforcing various services that support families and promote children's well-being and ending institutional care; investment in children; mainstreaming children's rights in all EU policies and instruments and giving a voice to children and young people. These priorities are achieved by advocacy and policy work as well as research. To achieve its strategic priorities Eurochild works with its members across Europe and aims to build capacity of national child rights coalitions and networks to better harness the potential of EU influence to promote children's rights.

National Network For Children (NNC)



NATIONAL NETWORK FOR CHILDREN

The National Network for Children is an alliance of 141 civil society organisations and supporters, working with and for children and families across the whole country. The promotion, protection and observation of the rights of the child are part of the key principles, that unite us. We do believe that all policies and practices, that affect directly or indirectly the children should be developed, applied and observed, taking into account the principle of the best interests of the child and with the active participation of children and young people themselves. We are led in all our activities by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a key document that lays down the philosophy, the values and the way of work of the Network.

NNC was created in 2003 as a non-formal alliance of NGOs. In 2006, it was officially registered as a public non-profit organization. Since 2007 the Network has been responsible for the local implementation of the international programme PROCOPIIL, focusing on the prevention of child abuse and, co-financed by the Foreign Ministry of France. Since the summer of 2009 the NNC has been working on the "I Have Rights" project for better child rights protection in Bulgaria, financed by OAK Foundation and UNICEF. NNC plans plan and implements advocacy campaigns in order to guarantee the rights of children and improve the well-being of Bulgarian families and children. NNC works in active partnership with the NGO sector, businesses, institutions and individuals with the active participation of children. Its' expert team develops informed policies about children and family. NNC is also actively working on the consolidation of all non-profit organisations, working with children and families, as well as for improving the communication and exchange of experience and good practices. Another key priority is the creation of a working and open citizenship network on child and family-related topics.

Darren Bird



Darren Bird is an International Child Rights Consultant with experience in Children's Rights and Child Participation. For over ten years, Darren worked as Chief Executive of Funky Dragon: the Children and Young people's Assembly for Wales. This was the first and only charity in British history to ever have under 18's as trustees. During this time the organisation reported to the United Nation's Committee on the Rights of the Child with the "Our Rights, Our Story" report, which contained the views of over 15,000 children and young people. These views covered participation, health, education, information and children's play. He now works as a consultant and is involved with many international child participation activities, including the Children as Actors Transforming Society (CATS) annual worldwide gathering of children in Switzerland.

The Proposal

To support a team of 10 young people delegates from across Europe to fully participate in the conference.

What the proposal asked from young people:

1. They wish to attend and fully participate in the Conference in Sofia.
2. They join a team of 10 young people to:
 - Help facilitate a workshop during the event
 - To develop the idea of rapporteurs and enact it during the conference*
 - Give a small 5 minute talk/speech on their work, an issue or their organisation

*The role of rapporteur and how it should work was discussed by the young people and they chose what roles they would take during the conference

What the proposal offered to young people:

1. The opportunity for a young person and accompanying adult (if required) to attend the Sofia conference from the 3rd to the 7th April.
2. Travel, food and accommodation costs for both will be fully covered.
3. Training on what we will do in the workshop and how we will form rapporteurs teams.
4. Support prior to the event through online group meetings.
5. Support in developing speeches prior to the event.

2. What is the Sofia Strategy?

The new Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016-2021) is the third children's rights Strategy of the Council of Europe. Bearing in mind the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the European Convention on Human Rights, and other Council of Europe legal standards, this new plan identifies five priorities for all 47 member states to guarantee the rights of the child:

1. Equal opportunities
2. Participation of children
3. A life free from violence
4. Child-friendly justice
5. Children's rights in the digital environment

The Strategy has been developed in an intergovernmental and truly participatory process with the involvement of governments, international organisations, civil society, experts and children.

The Strategy clearly defines expected impact and outcome under each priority area, so performance can be evaluated at regular intervals. The first evaluation will take place in three years' time.



3. Who were the young people delegates?



Elena Georgiou

Cyprus (Cypriot Children's Parliament)

I'm Elena Georgiou, a sixteen year old teenager from a tiny island, called Cyprus. I have a very hectic schedule due to the fact that I want to be an architect, but at the same time as an outgoing, creative and powerful teenager I am, I participate in different organisations, which are related to Children's Rights.

I am the President of my country's Children's Parliament, an institution that consists of 56 children around Cyprus with as main aim the participation of children in taking decisions about issues related to them. We deal with issues regarding the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and propose measures for the full implementation of its provisions on a Pancyprian basis.



Fahima Elmi

The Netherlands (Augeo)

I'm 15 years old and I'm from the Netherlands. I'm a member of the Youth Taskforce (on violence against children) established by Augeo foundation. The Youth Taskforce is an independent Dutch organisation for children and young adults to join the discussion about effective ways of tackling violence against children.

Our three main subjects are: child abuse, bullying and (problematic) divorces. I am a member of the Youth Taskforce because I think it is important that we listen to the views of young people because it does matter what we (the young people) have to say and we should not be forgotten. Therefore, I hope to make my voice heard as much as possible!



Jane Hayes-Nally

Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs)

16 years old. I am from County Cork, which is located at the very south of Ireland. I am part of the National Executive of the Child and Youth Councils. This executive is comprised of one member from each of the 31 youth councils across the country.

We meet once a month and discuss issues of national importance to young people. Jane has been involved in the development of the Irish children's participation strategy.



Lily Cheung
Ireland (Department of
Children and Youth
Affairs)

17 years. Lily is part of the National Executive of the Child and youth Councils. Lily has been involved in the development of the Irish children's participation strategy.



Mia Marta Ruus
Estonia (EUCW)

Mia Marta Ruus, 14, representing the Youth Council of the Estonian Union for Child Welfare. The organisation gives young people around Estonia a chance to participate and talk about the problems we think are important. Different opinions and backgrounds are represented and we try to raise awareness on the rights of the child with everything we do.



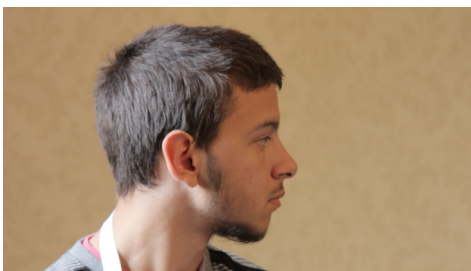
Nermina Delic
Bosnia and Herzegovina
(SOS Children's Villages)

Nermina Delic was born on January 28th 1999 in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, been raised in SOS Children's Village in Gračanica, since the age of nine months. She is now an excellent student of second grade of Constructual and architect high school in Tuzla. She is very smart and involved in many school projects as well as activities outside formal education and her teachers and professors know how to appreciate her effort. In 2013, her painting won the first place on World day prevention child abuse and in 2014, she had an independent exhibition in "Peace flame house" in Tuzla. Nermina participated in a Student exchange project in the year 2015, spending some time in Germany: She is involved in jewellery making, modelling, painting but not just as a hobby – she also, participates in exhibitions. Speaking three languages (her native language, Italian and English), she has been involved in different activities organized by SOS Children's Villages, such as the Youth day being active and speaking on behalf of her peers on the needed improvement of quality care for young people. She actively participates in different activities organized by SOS Children's Villages and other youth NGOs to improve her skills and represent young people from alternative care.



Nick Vijn
The Netherlands (COC)

My name is Nick Vijn, a 17-years old, enthusiastic, creative and happy youngster from Wervershoof, The Netherlands. Besides a fulltime study for 'Manager Flower-retail' I am a volunteer at Jong&Out. Jong&Out is for and by youngsters under 19 years, easy accessible meetings are the centre point of the organisation. My function is coordinating and motivating the web and PR team. As I think visibility of LGTB-youngsters is important at school, I started a Gay Straight Alliance. A GSA is a group of students and teachers who come up for the LGTB-youngsters at school. Together we organise events like Purple Friday (a day when everyone wears purple clothes to show that they are solidary with the LGTB-people at school), International Day Of Silence (IDOS) and Coming Out Day.



Plamen Dimov
Bulgaria (NNC)

15 years, Plamen comes from one of the smallest towns in Bulgaria and he is chairman of the youth club in the Municipal school board in Bolyarovo. He is also an active member of NNC's youth network Megaphone.



Yoana Zaharieva
Bulgaria (National Children's Council by SACP)

Yoana Zaharieva, 15, deputy chair of the Children's Council by the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP), Bulgaria. The Children's Council works as a consulting body by the chair of SACP and its main objective is to represent the children's point of view on issues concerning the children's right to protection and participation in the national social and political life. Besides being part of the Children's Council I am a member of an "Interact" club as well as of a "Module UNO" club. I speak English and German and am interested in literature and sports.



Zgjim Gashi
Kosovo (World Vision)

I am Zgjim, 17, from Kosovo. I am a high school student and I volunteer for World Vision's Project "Kids for Peace". When I was younger I was a member of the Peace Clubs and now I volunteer to organise and facilitate activities and events which bring together children from different ethnical communities and backgrounds. We make activities for protecting children's rights, investing in children and by all of this, we make peace between children in Kosovo. I am peaceful, tolerant and I like diversity, life with full of colours is beautiful.

4. What was the young people's role?

As well as participating in the conference the young people took on roles as Moderators, Speakers and Rapporteurs. They also had the opportunity to meet key dignitaries and participants by themselves.

Rapporteur

Session 1

- Upholding the rights of children on the move: learning from the “refugee crisis”
- Child-friendly justice: hearing children in judicial procedures
- The right to be heard: taking child participation to a new level

Session 2

- Children's rights in the digital environment: designing a coordinated approach through national strategies
- Radicalisation of children: finding the rights-based approach
- Taking monitoring results forward: follow-up to the Lanzarote Committee's first implementation report

Session 3

- The UN study on violence against children +10: progress and challenges in Europe
- Public spending and the rights of the child: child budgeting
- Non-discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) young people

All of the young people worked together to feedback their thoughts, what they had learnt and what key messages they had taken from the session. The feedback took place on the morning of the second day and at the end of the second day. From the applause and acclamation received during and on the completion of the reporting back sessions, we can assume they were well received.

Speeches

During the High-Level Conference a number of the young people made speeches, either to the entire conference or in smaller breakout sessions.

For Example:

- Plamen and Yoanna spoke about their work and organisations in Bulgaria
- Zgjim spoke of his experience being a refugee
- Nick spoke about his personal experience and his work with the LGBTI communities
- Lily and Jane spoke about the new Ireland Child Participation Strategy

Meeting with High-level Participants

During the event the young people got to meet and question many very important participants these included:

- H.E. Mr Rosen Plevneliev, President of the Republic of Bulgaria Mr Ivailo Kalfin,
- Ms Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, Deputy Secretary General, Council of Europe H.E.
- Mr Nils Muižnieks, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

As well as these, the young people got to meet Ministers from their own countries and senior officials; Children's ombudsman from different countries; Heads of Organisations and others working to support children's rights.

Social Media

During the High Level conference the young people used social media such as Twitter and Facebook to report their messages to the outside world. You can find these using #childrightssofia

Social media allowed young people to convey key messages and moments during the conference to the outside world. The young people felt that this was a valuable tool during the event, as it allowed them to have an impact across Europe and the World, not just the event.



5. Youth delegates evaluation

This section is a summary of some of the young people's experiences during the event, some key learning that they took away from the event and recommendations for future events.

What did you enjoy about the Conference?

- The fact that we got to meet new people
- What I really enjoyed was the fact that all of the young people were so interested and involved in the whole thing
- We had a chance to change the opinion of people and young people
- The chance to fully participate just like the adults
- All the different cultures and ideas (there was no discrimination)
- I like that people were interested in my opinions
- Adults take us seriously
- Darren
- The accompanying adults



“I took a lot of messages. The key messages I took are: Europe needs to unite and cooperate for the refugee children. Every form of violence in children is a crime and should be sentenced.”

“I really enjoyed the conference. I was very happy that we (the young people) were able to participate too. And that we were able to give feedback to the professionals from our perspective. The conference was prepared well. And the session's too, in the sessions the participants could really participate and ask questions etc. Instead of just listen to the speakers. What I really liked was that the people really listened to us and took our opinions seriously.”

“It was such a great experience. I have learned so much, even from the session I wasn't familiar with. Without this chance I had from the Council of Europe I would never be the person I am now.”

“I came back home from the Conference happily because this was one of the best events I have ever participated in. I was really impressed by the people who worked with us, young people. I appreciate Darren Bird's and Lauren's work which made it a lot easier and motivated us.

“It was a great opportunity to have the chance to participate in such a conference. It was nice to see that children's rights were on focus for so many people, from presidents to young delegates, who really had a message to pass. There were many inspiring speeches and presentations and I went back home full of creative ideas and interesting thoughts”

What would you change about the conference?

- The fact that there was little interaction
- More young people
- More time for the sessions
- Try to make it less formal, we are children
- More children from different countries
- Some of the adults didn't go to half the events and not participants.....did not make any sense

“Something that I didn't actually like is the accommodation. I didn't like the fact that young people were divided from other participants in the conference in two different hotels, it's not a problem for me personally. We should have all stand in the same place because this would mean equality. And equality is very important for Human Rights in general.”

What will you take home?

- The positivity
- The guidelines from the Strategy of the Council of Europe
- A lot of good memories
- Memories, adventures, information, speeches
- Lots of cards, rubbers, pens and hopefully the Bulgarian weather
- All the memories I had with the young people and all the others
- All the times we spent together

“I took a lot of messages. The key messages I took are: Europe needs to unite and cooperate for “Session about radicalisation: The education system and also the family of the child had a very big influence on children. We need to use that in a positive way by teaching children what radicalisation is and how you can prevent it.”

“Session about violence against children: Children must know their rights, so that they know that e.g. hitting them is wrong.”

“I learned so much in these few days. I met a lot of people from different organisations and I learned what those organisations do. I think I learned the most in the sessions, the speakers in every session talked about the challenges they were facing and people from other countries talked about their solutions e.g. in the session about child-friendly justice I learned about child-friendly interview rooms. In the session about radicalisation I saw a short film about a girl from France who turned into a radicalist, I knew that radicalisation existed but I never knew that it was so close and that pretty much (almost) every child can turn into a radicalist if they get in touch with it.”

“I learned that in 17 member states it is legal to hit a child but illegal to hit an adult! I learned that and a lot more. But I think we can solve a lot of problems together, some member states had the same problem so I think that every member state needs to work together and share their solutions on every topic so we can solve problems and grow together.”

Key Recommendations to the Council of Europe for involving children and young people in their activities

- The Council of Europe should involve young people in conferences more often, especially if the conference is about children.
- A group of 10 young people is a minimum size for a big conference like the high-level conference, but ideally more young people should participate.
- When accommodating young people, when they participate in conferences/meetings with adults, the CoE has to aim to treat both children and adults equally and accommodate them in the same hotel. If this is not possible this needs to be clearly explained.
- The rapporteur role gave many opportunities for young people to engage in the conference
- The space for young people to give speeches about their own experience or the projects they are involved in was welcomed and should be offered if done again.
- The break out room for young people became an essential part for them. Here they met high level dignitaries; prepared their speeches; underwent training and just hung out.
- Meeting high level dignitaries was informative and a real pleasure for young people, but should next time if possible be prepared in advance with the young people.
- Make sure that all speakers and facilitators at Council of Europe conferences and meetings where children and young people are involved, are receiving guidelines for speaking and interacting with the children and young people: "Professionals need to talk to children in a way the children understand". All of the speeches were accessible to young people. However, some professionals in the breakout sessions talked in jargon and acronyms, despite being asked not to.
- Make sure that leisure time activities are included in the preparatory programme for the children and young people: the tour of the city was very welcome and gave the young people a chance to see outside of the conference centre.
- Young people return to busy lives. More time should be given after the event for young people to contribute to a final report, before returning home.

Recommendations for Future Conferences



“I would suggest them to involve young people always in events like this, because this is the way how children and youth participation will be real. I think that this is how young people’s voice can be listened directly, by engaging with decision makers. I would say that it would be even better to involve more young people from member states and even from other countries which pretend to be a member of CoE, like my country, Kosovo. This is how young people can be actors of a change and they can share the lessons with other young people in their organisations, communities and home countries in general.” Zgjim

“I recommend the council of Europe to let more young people participate and to give them a big role, like they’d given us in this conference. What I also really liked that even though there was so much to do in such a short time, we still had a tour around the city. What I also really liked was that in the Hotel where the conference was held we had a room for the young delegates (where we had the training), so that when we wanted to be in a quiet place or just wanted a drink we could easily go there. The fact that besides participating in the conference we had time to bond and become good friends with each other was really nice and that nobody placed but big pressure on us but instead motivated us. And that we were given the chance to say on stage what we wanted to say, instead of saying what the adults wanted us to say, so keep that up!”

“Professionals need to talk to children in a way the children understand. And children need to have a place/website where they can ask questions and/or talk to other children who are going through the same”

“It was very nice to be able to contribute to the Sofia conference. I believe that involving children , who have personal experience in a covered from the particular meeting topic could be helpful for finding solutions as they see the particular problem from the insider’s point of view. Thanks to this conference I met 9 more young delegates from different countries in Europe, which was a nice and unforgettable experience for all of us and I would be glad if this becomes a practice.”



6. Appendix I

Nick Fijn's Speech

COC, Netherlands



Dear attendees,

First I would like to thank you all for coming to this session. It's such an honour and pleasure to tell you my story. They say that everyone in Europe is free. They say that we are allowed to be our self. Unfortunately, that isn't possible for everyone. Lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, transgender and intersexual, LHBTI, have much more trouble than their straight peers. LHBTI-youngsters in the Netherlands thinking often about suicide than their straight peers.

My name is Nick Vijn, I'm seventeen years old, I live in the Netherlands and follow a study to become a manager in flower-retail. The reason I do this work for the LHBTI-community is simple. When I was 15 years old and I realised I have feelings for boys I didn't have place to go. I live in a pretty separated village where the topic 'gay' is not the most likable topic. But as a young gay you would like to talk about it with someone. Talking with your parents is not possible, that's why I went online. And I'm not the only one, thousands of youngsters looking for online LHBTI platforms. Some years went by and in February 2014 my mother was diagnosed with lymphoma. My whole world collapsed. The pressure to tell her about my sexuality became bigger and bigger. On the 20 June 2014 I decided to tell her about my sexuality. The day after, 21 June, she died after fighting an unfair battle.

Dutch research showed that more than 80% of the LHBTI-youngsters have the need for meeting other LHBTI-youngsters, just like me. I did not have the courage to say: oh, I'm gay. Luckily I found the website Jong&Out. This is a place where I can be myself without the fear that people would judge me. This gave me a safe feeling.

Jong & Out is website with more than 3500 users and organises physical meetings in 16 locations all over the Netherlands. Jong & Out is for and by youngsters under the age of 19. Easy accessible meetings are the centre point. Jong & Out was founded in 2007 with the help of the COC, the biggest LHBTI-organisation in the Netherlands, when LHBTI-youngsters came with the need to create a place like Jong&Out.

The meetings are not only coordinated by adults, the teens can help too. This way gives them the opportunity to show the adults what they would like to do during the meetings. Jong&Out meetings aren't a care group. The meetings are a fun and safe place to be together. At the physical meetings we make sure that there are a minimum of two coordinators who are above the age of 18. What makes Jong&Out special is that before people can join the website they have to show us their ID. This gives us the chance to make sure that everybody on the site is under the age of 19. Everybody can be who they want to be without being judged. I coordinate and attend the voluntary web and PR team.

Unfortunately, Jong & Out is one of the few organisations in Europe who can give the LHBTI-youngsters a safe haven. I would like to see that changed, because I know how valuable it is for the LHBTI-youngsters to meet people with the same feelings. It's important to be openly yourself.

“

Being a volunteer at Jong&Out wasn't enough for me. I wanted to do more than that. Beside the voluntary work I do for Jong&Out am I a volunteer for the Dutch Red Cross Movement. I am a social helper, I coordinate games on events and I attend with educational work at schools. I meet a lot of youngsters during this work.

I wanted to help LHBTI-youngsters in my own environment. People who I meet and see every day. I decided to do this at school. I decided to start a Gay-Straight Alliance at my school. A GSA is a group of students and teachers (LHBTI and straight) who are working for a safe school for everyone. A fact that students and teachers often don't know is that a lot of students don't feel safe at school. The students experience a lot of stress, getting bad marks and thinking about suicide. That's a big problem. In the Netherlands there are more than 600 schools with a GSA. One of the actions they organize is Purple Friday. The idea of this day is simple; wear purple clothes to show the youngsters who aren't out that you support them. There are more actions like this. The International Day Of Silence (IDOS) and Coming-out day are one of these. When students see they can be who they want to be, it will have a positive outcome: better marks and happy students. Being yourself must be possible for every European student. We want to show these students we accept them for who they are. The visibility of LHBTI-students is very important and valuable.

Love is a human experience, not a political statement.

I will never stop fighting for equality and acceptance. The acceptance of LHBTI-youngsters is growing in the Netherlands. We have special actions to make LHBTI people visible. Schools are obliged to give lessons about LHBTI topics. But we are not there yet. Help me please. Fight with me. I want to ask you to talk with the organisations in your country to create an easy accessible platform like Jong&Out. Let's give Jong&Out a chance to become successful in all of Europe.



7. Appendix II

Jane Hayes-Nally's Report Ireland (Department of Children and Youth Affairs)

The Sofia Conference on the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child 6th to the 7th of April 2016

On the fifth of April, in the sunny, splendid city of Sofia, the “Sofia Strategy” was adopted at a high level conference by the Committee of Ministers at a conference titled “Reaching the Heights For the Rights of the Child”



The Conference was organised in the framework of the Bulgarian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and was hosted by the Bulgarian State Agency for Child Protection and Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

The conference was based on five priority areas;

- equal opportunities for all children;
- participation of all children;
- a life free from violence for all children;
- child-friendly justice for all children;
- rights of the child in the digital environment.



Myself and Lily were joined by Ms. Anne O'Donnell, the head of Participation at the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, who we knew from our time on the executive, and we had a lovely trip to Sofia via the beautiful Istanbul, which I have added a picture of!

As soon as I entered Sofia the large, cream buildings and the wide long streets struck me. It was quite hot: a nice change from the Irish spring!

Monday involved meeting the other youth delegates at the hotel and getting familiar with our roles as rapporteurs in the conference. We were team building and sharing ideas, which I especially enjoyed. On our break we had the opportunity to look around the Balkan Hotel Sofia, which was very grand and has a rich history.

After our final session on Monday we were treated to a tour of the city of Sofia. I saw some amazing things that afternoon and have included what I consider being some intriguing landmarks in the Bulgarian capital.



Around 180 delegates attended the conference, ten of whom were young people from member states. I am honoured to say that I represented Ireland at this conference with my colleague and good friend Lily Cheung from the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive, and got to meet young people from all over Europe, from countries such as Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, the Netherlands, and Kosovo.



The gold-domed Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was built in the early 20th century in memory of the 200,000 Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian and Bulgarian soldiers, who died in the Russo-Turkish War, 1877–1878. It is one of the largest Eastern Orthodox cathedrals in the world. The cathedral's gold-plated dome is 45 m high, with the bell tower reaching 50.52 m.

The actual conference was made up of three sessions. I enjoyed all sessions immensely, but I have included a deep insight into the second session, which influenced me greatly.

For the first session, I was asked to speak about the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive's role in the DYCA Participation Strategy with Lily. We both prepared what we were going to say the night before so we were ready to share our experiences in our group, although I was a little intimidated by the amount of high-level ministers, ombudsmen, and other government officials who had chosen to be part of our group! Below is the speech I gave at the first session.

“My name is Jane Hayes-Nally and I am from County Cork, which is located at the very south of Ireland. Lily and I are both part of the National Executive of the Child and Youth Councils. This executive is comprised of one member from each of the 31 youth councils across the country. We meet once a month and discuss issues of national importance to young people.

The Ministry of Children and Youth Affairs in Ireland consulted the National Executive about the Participation Strategy and asked us to give feedback on it. I remember sitting in that meeting thinking hard about the biggest and most crucial aspects of the lives of Irish young people, and highlighted key issues such as Transport, Education, and schools.

We asked that action plans in the strategy be specific and thorough to ensure accountability from all government departments. We were keen that our voices would be heard and that the problems we described be addressed.

The second part of this meeting involved giving our views on how the child and youth councils could be improved. We wanted these councils to not just continue to enhance the lives of Irish Young people but for the councils to be developed and refined.

Because we voiced our concerns in this area, the councils now serve as one of the groups who must be consulted by the Local Economic and Community Plan before changes are made. The National Executive were delighted to have the opportunity to voice our opinions and to have an input into this strategy.”

Here is my report of the second session, which I have mentioned made a great effect on me. Radicalisation of Children: Finding the Rights based approach. This session was moderated by Ms. Audrey Osler who is a professor at the University College of Southeast Norway, and at the University of Leeds in the UK. I found her to be a lovely lady enjoyed speaking to her before and after the session! We were treated to some highly esteemed speakers; Mr. Bernard de Vos., the Ombudsman for Children's Rights in the French Community of Belgium; Ms. Sevinji Fataliyeva, the General rapporteur on Children in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; Mr. Mario Janecek, who is the Bureau member of the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Terrorism. We also heard from Mr. Pat Dolan, the UNESCO Chair in Children, Youth and Civic Engagement, in University of Galway in Ireland. (I could identify his Irish accent from a mile away!)

This session interested me greatly. The first speaker, Mr. de Vos, shared the testimony of a young Belgian girl who had been radicalised by presenting a five-minute film to us. In it she described how she was radicalised and how she recovered.

This video touched me on a very personal level. After watching it I discovered that the girl (let's call her Mary), was my age when she became radicalized.

The rest of the session focused on segregated schools in Europe, a topic that has been brought to my attention before. There was much discussion on the division of children based on religion, ethnicity, and social class. It was discussed particularly in regards to the school system of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In Ireland, we do not have such “one roof schools” which were mentioned by the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Ms. Gabriella Battaini-Dragnoni, who voiced her endorsement of such schools during the open discussions. Mr. Dolan said that we needed an integrated education system, which respects religious beliefs and personal identity.

I think because this session made me feel many feelings and made me think a lot, I was able to report on it well.

The Third session was very broad. It involved a deep look into the current structures in place for protecting the rights of children. While most of this session I was just trying to comprehend and understand the different measures in place, I did hear one very interesting point from a man named Peter Newell who I discovered afterwards is a very well know gentlemen in the area of prohibiting corporal punishment. He proposed that the Council of Europe create a sort of map of legality across its 47 member states outlining exactly what kind of laws are in place regarding violence against children in general. I thought this was a very good idea and the concept resonated with me. I feel like this would make country’s stances make transparent and see at what stage each member state was at concerning the protection of children. I choose to feed this information back to the conference at the plenary session.

I felt many different emotions at the closing of the conference on Wednesday afternoon. I was upset it was over, and so upset to be bidding farewell to my new friends, but I knew that the impact and the effects these few days would have on me would last a long time, and I remember those warm days in Sofia with my new friends from all over Europe very fondly.

I will finish up with a quote I heard from the Chairperson of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.



“Does a child who was born today in Europe have better opportunities than a child born in 1985? Yes. But not every child.”

Mr. Benyam Dawit Mezmur,

Chairperson of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child





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