NOT JUST WORDS

Kummissarju għat-Tfal
Commissioner for Children

The Office of the Commissioner for Children was set up in terms of the Commissioner for Children Act of 2003, to promote the welfare of children and the compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as ratified by Malta, and such other international treaties, conventions or agreements relating to children as are or may be ratified or otherwise acceded to by Malta.

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ENSURING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN ARE HEARD AND HEEDED

AN OVERVIEW OF CHILD PARTICIPATION ACTIVITIES

by the Office of the Commissioner for Children in the school year 2024/25

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MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER

I am very proud to hereby launch this new publication. As its title suggests, words are more than just words. This applies also to the name of my role, where we tend to focus too much on the two longer words, 'Commissioner' and 'Children', even though the kernel of the title's meaning is arguably in the short word in the middle that binds them together.

'For' implies purpose, service and dedication. The Commissioner for Children is called to put the best interests of children before and above everything else and, more importantly, to get all stakeholders whose work impacts children directly or indirectly to do the same.

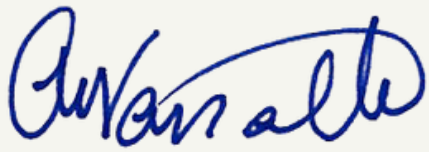
But for all the purpose, services and dedication put into one's work for children, and for all the benefits that can accrue from such work, children can, ironically, be and feel left out if, at the outset, those who work for them are deaf to their words and blind to their actions.

In any field of adult endeavour for children, the best methods and interventions are those that start from what children say and do spontaneously. Conversely, when adults overlook these and try to impose a rigid regime of action on them, children invariably end up feeling alienated from what they are doing, with adverse effects on their well-being.

I think that many of the problems we are facing with children today, such as school absenteeism, academic underachievement and antisocial behaviour, stem from the fact that even though as a society we do a lot for children, we do not pay enough attention to what they say and do of their own accord.

This is why child participation is not only an important part of the work of my Office. It is the very essence of our work as a children's rights institution. Our role is not to offer services for children, but to empower children by listening to them and by empowering service providers and policymakers to listen to the children they work with.

This latter word, 'with', is, I believe, latent in the title of my Office. As Commissioner, I am and work for children but equally I am and work with children. I trust this report, which describes the Office's work with children over the past scholastic year, will bear this out.



Antoinette Vassallo
Commissioner for Children

INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF CHILDREN'S VOICES

The physical act of children sounding their voice, which involves contracting their lungs and diaphragm to push air up through their vocal cords and vocal tract, sounds like a great deal of effort. In fact, it is the easiest and most natural thing for them to do, so natural that it is the very first thing they do when they are born.

The primal cry of children at birth is not simply a reflex action. It is their maiden act of speech, albeit a non-lingual one, through which they make known their pressing need for comfort and protection in the challenging new world they have just entered. As their strident calls are answered by their caregivers, they slowly but surely learn to wield their voices ever more subtly and skillfully to communicate what they need, feel and think to the outside world.

This means that the voice of a child is not simply a means of expression, but, more importantly, a catalyst for change. For example, children who use their voice to communicate that they are hungry, are calling on their caregivers to give them food. In so doing, their voice has a disruptive and creative force. It disrupts preexisting conditions that stand in the way of their being fed, and triggers a chain of events that leads to their hunger being satisfied through the provision of food.

This simple example illustrates a crucial point. Children consciously and actively use their voice to claim their rights, be it their right to food, shelter, education etc. They do so in the intuitive knowledge that their rights are not going to be handed to them on a silver plate, but that they must advocate for them, that is give voice to their rights.

But why should children need to speak up for their fundamental rights, which are guaranteed to them by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child? In truth, from a historical and a practical perspective, children's rights do not originate in the Convention but in children themselves.

Historically, the consensus that led to children's rights, and to human rights in general, was the result of conflict, in which the powerful ringing voices of those whose rights were unrecognised played a decisive role. The fact that the consensus around children's rights is crystallised in the Convention does not mean that these rights are automatically conferred on children. Children must give voice to the rights enshrined in the Convention. The Convention is alive and active only insofar as children or those speaking and acting on their behalf advocate for it.

For a long time, children were seen as little more than passive recipients of protection and provision. Their active participation was the last of the three Ps of their rights to be recognised. Children's rights advocates, like the Office of the Commissioner for Children, know that just as the life of a child starts with a cry, so too must their work start by allowing the voices of children to reverberate and be heard wherever and whenever power is being exercised.

HARNESSING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN

Sit back, stay quiet, let them speak! At a first superficial glance, child participation seems a much easier thing to do than the onerous and resource-intensive task of protecting children or providing for them. But these three blunt commands cannot work because they assume that: a) child participation is a simple process, b) the role of adults in child participation is mostly passive.

There are five reasons why these assumptions are false, each of which corresponds to one of the stages in the process of helping children use their voice effectively as an instrument of power. These stages draw on the Lundy Model of Participation[1].

1 It cannot be assumed that children go into child participation already having something to say. In terms of the Lundy Model of Participation, children need the space to form their views. This means that the place, time and format of child participation must be safe, bespoke, inclusive, child-friendly and infused with children's rights. In other words, those conducting child participation need to create and maintain a space wherein children can find their voices, or, better still, their inner voices, that will alert them to any challenges to and opportunities for their rights and thus shape their views.

2 Once children have something to say, it is not certain that they can and will utter it. Children must be given the voice to express their views, as per the second stage of the Lundy Model of Participation. This means they must be empowered to sound their voices from a place of rights whenever their inner voices are awakened to a challenge or an opportunity. The role of proxy children's rights advocates here is to support children to become forthright, articulate and persuasive in how they use their voices to speak up for their rights.

[1] Created in 2007 by Professor Laura Lundy, the Lundy Model of Child Participation is the most widely used model of child participation. It is based on four key concepts: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence. https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/case-studies/childrens-participation-lundy-model.html

3 It is not true that if enough children voice the same rights, the additive force of their voices will move the levers of power. Children must be supported to blend their voices so that they can speak up for the rights of other children, who can in turn advocate for theirs. Children's rights organisations have a key role to play here in creating the appropriate environment for children to organise themselves into cohesive groups that can speak with one voice that is representative of all the voices within.

4 Even if children team up to speak with one voice, they risk not being heard unless, as the Lundy Model of Participation postulates, they have an audience to listen to their views. This implies the ability of children to project their voice in the right places, that is where decisions are made, in the right way. Organisations that work with and for children must help direct and modulate the voice and message of children to and according to the decision-makers. In so doing, they must take care not to distort or dilute the content and authenticity of children's voices and messages.

5 Even a well-modulated voice and message may not carry the influence to take the views of children on board (the fourth and final stage of the Lundy Model of Participation) if those to whom they are relayed are not attuned to the wavelength of children's voices. Children's rights organisations need to use their leverage to make decision-makers more receptive to the voices and perspectives of children by training them to listen to children.

This report thus analyses the child participation activities conducted by the Office between October 2024 and June 2025 as per the five above-outlined stages of child participation. The actual content of the views expressed by children is presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 1 CREATING A SPACE FOR CHILDREN TO FIND THEIR VOICES AND FORM THEIR VIEWS

In terms of space, child participation activities differ according to how (format), where (place[2]) and when (time) they happen. In this respect, it is possible to identify 4 kinds of space created by the Office to enable the participation of children:

Focus groups in schools during school hours

In the penultimate year of a 4-year plan to visit and hear children in all localities in Malta and Gozo, the Office conducted 13 focus groups with students aged 7-15 years in as many schools between March and May 2025 (see table below), bringing the provisional tally of schools thus visited to 59. Setting up a space for hearing children within the everyday environment of a school is advantageous not just from a logistical point of view but also in terms of inclusiveness and outreach, since participation takes place with a very broad cross-section of children, and safety, since children find themselves in an environment they are already used to.

Creating a bespoke space within such an environment can be a bit more challenging since schools are designed and geared for learning rather than participation. The focus groups were not solely about school-related issues, nor did they have a preset agenda, with children being encouraged and made to feel free to voice any view, experience or concern they wanted.

[2] In terms of place, the space in which child participation is conducted is almost never standalone but is often part of a broader environment. For example, when an organisation visits a residential institution to hear the children living there, the room where the children are heard, as private as it may be, is part of the institution. This means that a space, no matter how carefully it is set up, can be conducive to child participation only insofar as the wider place is itself safe, child-friendly and inclusive.

SCHOOL	CLASS	DATE
Luqa Primary	Year 5	25th March
St Albert College, Valletta	Year 7	25th March
Xgħajra Primary	Year 6	4th April
St Michael Foundation	Year 10	7th April
Gudja Primary	Year 3	8th April
Għargħur Primary	Year 4	8th April
Mqabba Primary	Year 6	9th April
St Paul's Bay Primary	Year 5	11th April
Senglea Primary	Year 6	9th May
Sannat Primary, Gozo	Year 5	13th May
Xewkija Primary, Gozo	Year 6	13th May
Kerċem Primary, Gozo	Year 4	14th May
Fgura Primary	Year 6	19th May

Meetings throughout the year at the Office premises

The Office hosted the Children's Advisory Board (CAB) several times during the reporting period. This can be seen in the composition of the Children's Advisory Board (CAB), which counts an equal number of girls and boys. The board was designed in this way not to tick the diversity box but to ensure equality of opportunity. The fact that the composition of the board was relatively stable over the reporting period ensured a greater depth and breadth of response since the children involved were and became keener and more adept at giving voice to their views and concerns.

Hosting child participation activities in the Office premises imbued child participation with children's rights like no other setting could. The meetings were held not in the closed space of an office-like room but in the much more spacious and child-friendly room. Since the Office was playing host to the child participation event, it arguably had more control over environmental variables and could thus guarantee a higher degree of safety.

Unlike the focus groups, the meetings of the CAB are called to hear out and seek advice from the children on specific issues that the Office would be dealing with in the course of its work. Among the issues the CAB met to give its take on were sexual exploitation and abuse of children, and the Malta Vision 2050, that is what they would like to see in Malta in the next 25 years. The Board's thinking and feedback on the latter issue was prompted by the following questions:

- What new jobs do you think Malta should have?
- What services in Malta do you think could be improved? What would make buses, hospitals, or schools better for everyone? And is there a new helpful service which you want to have?
- What skills would you like to learn to be ready for the future?
- How can Malta protect and care for nature and historic places and at the same time create comfortable places?
- Do you have a wish, a dream, or an idea to make Malta a better place?

The Office also organised a 2-day meeting of the European Network of Young Advisors (ENYA) to get the perspective of children aged 13-15 on issues related to their right to physical health.

Live-ins in a retreat house in summer

The Office organised two live-ins, called Rights4u, for children aged 13-15. The events were held over three days in the quiet relaxing setting of the Manresa Retreat House in Gozo during the school summer holidays. This allowed both the children and those listening to them to be free from distractions and to immerse themselves in children's rights issues through a varied programme of participation, education and social activities that were organised and led by Office staff and supported by a number of psycho-social educators. The experience was truly formative for the children who took part in terms of their interest in and commitment to children's rights advocacy. On the other hand, safety was more challenging since the children were not known to the Office nor to each other beforehand.

Child participation activities were centred on mental health, especially with regards to the digital environment, which was the main theme of the live-in. This was articulated in the following questions:

- What does mental health mean to you?
- What challenges your mental health, including the challenges and stigma you meet online and offline?
- What emotions do you experience when your mental health is challenged?
- How do you cope with these challenges? What support systems are available to you?

Online questionnaires within a time window

The Office created a most inclusive space for child participation by disseminating an online questionnaire to all Rights4u participants to get their take on a future Malta. Safety was guaranteed by way of the anonymity of the questionnaire. The questions were worded in the most child-friendly language possible to ensure they were understood correctly and answered. The questions were the following:

- What does “a good quality of life” mean to you personally?
- What kind of country would you like Malta to be when you’re an adult?
- If you could change one thing about Malta to make it a better place for children and young people, what would it be?
- What does a “green future” look like to you?
- How can we improve our towns and villages to make them better places for children to live and play?

CHAPTER 2 ENABLING CHILDREN TO SOUND THEIR VOICES AND EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS

How were the voices of the children who took part in the child participation activities set into motion in and by the spaces the Office provided? This chapter lays out the views expressed by children in terms of their quantity and type and the mediums children used to convey them. The content of the views aired by children is analysed in chapter 4.

Number of participating children and views expressed

Over 300 children participated in the focus groups held in schools. 90 children took part in the live-ins, 12 children participated in the ENYA meeting and the CAB was composed of 12 members. There were 72 children who submitted responses to the online questionnaire.

Providing a numerical account of the views expressed by children is important as it gives an idea of the degree to which children participated. However, there are two caveats to this. Firstly, such an account cannot be complete as in some cases it captures the unique views expressed by children during a given participation activity but not the number of times the same view was expressed by different children nor the number of children who expressed at least one view. This notwithstanding, the number or average of unique views expressed is a good indicator of the quantitative output of a child participation event. Secondly, one must bear in mind that children were not passive when they were not expressing a view but were probably forming their own view while listening to the views of others.

A grand total of 163 views were generated by the focus groups conducted in schools, with an average of 12 views per focus group. These figures need to be evaluated in relation to the duration and the number of participating children in each focus group, as detailed above. The CAB meeting yielded 45 views on what a future Malta should look like, whilst the online questionnaire returned 365 views on the same subject. On mental health, the Rights4u live-ins produced a total of 78 views.

Types of views expressed

Almost all the views expressed by children were an invitation to undertake some form of action to improve things for the good of children or society. In this respect, the views differed according to whether such an invitation was directed to common citizens, whom the children called upon to correct or refine their habits and behaviours, or decision-makers, whom the children exhorted to provide new or improve existing benefits, facilities and services.

The views also differed according to whether the change or action invoked by the children was individual, capable of being undertaken by the individual alone, or relational, that is concerning how individuals or groups relate to one another.

Mediums of views expressed

It needs to be said that the mediums available to children to convey their views were generally not part of the design of the space, but an act of choice on the children's part as to how they felt more comfortable and effective putting their views across.

The medium most used by children, notably but not only in the focus groups, was speech. This is not surprising as speech is the most natural, immediate and direct medium for conveying one's thoughts. However, many children committed their views to writing, possibly because they felt more at ease writing their views than voicing them, but also because writing has a much wider reach in both space and time than does speech, whose effect, however strong it may be, is limited to the here and now. Ultimately, the spoken views of children were also recorded in writing by Office staff, but the children's own writings of their views are much more powerful precisely because, thanks to their childlike forms, they are unmistakably theirs.

In some cases, children used the pictorial medium to reinforce their written views. This choice stemmed not from a lack of confidence in their writing skills but from children's natural affinity to visual art as a very powerful vehicle for conveying strong and important messages.

CHAPTER 3 HELPING CHILDREN BLEND THEIR VOICES AND CONSOLIDATE THEIR VIEWS

A very interesting dynamic of the child participation spaces described in chapter 1 was the different ways in which the different views expressed by children met. To use a musical metaphor, the meeting of children's voices resulted in various degrees of consonance and dissonance. The spaces were inclusive not only because they actively accommodated all children, irrespective of their identity, status or background, but also because they were able to hold a wide diversity of views, even a divergence of views, within them. This means that, within these spaces, divergent views and dissonant voices were not suppressed but actively listened to by the Office staff running the space, who always encouraged the children to be open and listen to all voices, however different from their own. This led not only to a better acceptance and understanding of all the voices heard but also, in some cases, to the synthesis of opposing views.

At the same time, there were differences in how the spaces managed divergent views and dissonant voices:

- In the focus groups and workshops, any residual divergences of views were left unresolved, both in the course of the discussion and in the final content report. This is because these spaces were designed to showcase and convey the whole gamut of children's views.
- Even though the CAB was formed for the first time in 2022 to give the Office a permanent advisory body made up only of children, what sets it apart from the other child participation spaces and structures managed by the Office is not so much its permanence as its unity. This means that the board is called to speak with one voice, so that on any single issue it is consulted on, the Office receives not the views of the Board members but the view of the Board. This means that in the meetings of the Board, the Manager, who moderated the meetings, worked with the children to reconcile differences so that all views, however different, were reflected in the final coherent position of the CAB. This reconciliation was achieved primarily by encouraging children to listen to each other, especially when views were not aligned. As a last resort and on rare occasions, a majority vote was called to decide how the Board would advise the Office on the issue at hand, with all members of the Board supporting the advice that had been decided.

  Three years on from its foundation, the voice of the CAB has grown strong and distinct enough to not only advise the Office but to make itself heard quite independently on specific children's rights issues. This can be seen in the statement the Board released in the wake of the first Council of Europe Conference for Ministers responsible for Social Policy, Family and Children's Rights that was held in Valletta in July 2025 to celebrate the first 15 years of the Lanzarote Convention.

CHAPTER 4 HELPING CHILDREN PROJECT THEIR VOICES TO THE RELEVANT AUDIENCES

The CAB drafted the report with their feedback on the Malta Vision 2050, which the Office then shared with the Office of the Prime Minister, which had issued the vision document. This chapter calls upon the various Ministries, which are the relevant and ultimate decision-making entities in Malta, to listen to the views expressed by children, which are hereby presented for their close and sensitive attention.

Office of the Prime Minister

Children expressed their wish to see more accountability exercised on and by politicians and those holding public office. Their appeal for more effective mechanisms for child participation can also be read as a call for an additional child-led counterbalance of power. Children also want Malta to become less chaotic and more efficient in its public services.

Ministry responsible for the Environment and Urban Planning

Children could not have said it more clearly and convincingly. They want to live in an environment that is alive much more with the beauty of nature than with the dull sound and sight of cranes and construction sites. The delicate balance between the economy on one side and heritage and the natural environment on the other side has tipped too far to the former side. It's time to restore this balance and ensure sustainable development by heeding children's call to preserve the natural and historical environment in Malta, let it thrive and make it more accessible.

In terms of preserving nature, children said they want to stop seeing trees felled and to see better protection of natural spaces and historical structures from vandalism and a better integration of these into new buildings. Children also want to see less water, which is arguably the most precious resource of a dry country like Malta, being wasted.

Children also said they want to live in an environment that isn't only greener but also cleaner. To this end, they called for more and better measures to reduce the volume of polluting vehicles and industrial activity by making their cleaner alternatives, notably electric cars, more affordable and, as in the case of bikes, more available, through more and better bike lanes. Children also want to see a lot more of the waste generated by households and businesses reduced, reused or recycled rather than left to litter our streets and beaches. To achieve this, children would like to see more separation of waste, more bins, and the phasing out of plastic.

Children also want to see a stronger investment in local agriculture. Children also called for stronger efforts to protect our sea and the life that thrives within it by combating overfishing, the illegal dumping of waste at sea and the outflow of sewage into the sea.

To increase the presence of natural life, children want to make Malta greener through stronger efforts to sow more plants and trees in our towns and villages and to help them grow especially in those built environments where they are most lacking. Within these environments, they called for more sustainable buildings.

In terms of making the natural and historical environment more accessible, children said they should be free to spend time in and with nature, including its faunal components, like butterflies, wherever and whenever they want. Their call for greater accessibility extends to the urban environment, where children crave being and playing in spaces, like land parks and water parks, that are open, equipped with the necessary amenities, like public conveniences, and age-appropriate, with spaces for younger children and other spaces that are tailored to the needs of older children. In short, children would like to see more of these spaces included in the country's urban planning system.

Ministry responsible for the Digital Environment

A healthier and more child-friendly physical outdoor environment helps children maintain the right balance between their mental engagement with the online world and their physical presence in the offline world. This precarious balance, which tends all too easily to tilt to the side of the online world, was a recurring point in the views and concerns expressed by children, who showed they were keenly aware of the socially isolating effect of spending too much time online, such as by doomscrolling.

Children called for a better online-offline balance by making children and parents more aware of the risk of problematic use of internet and the consequent risk of neglecting one's physical and social developmental needs, and the need to disconnect.

Spending too much time online is bad for children not only because it fosters dependency and robs them of precious time to do things offline that are important for their well-being, but also because it exposes them more closely to the myriad threats that lurk in the digital world. Speaking from experience, the children touched upon many of these threats, such as adverts targeting children, inappropriate games and content online, cyber-bullying, body shaming, social media comparisons and the accompanying

feelings of envy, jealousy and inadequacy, and the thirst for external validation from likes and other positive reactions. They also voiced their concern that the use of AI is making these and other threats more serious and insidious.

In the face of these threats, children called for stronger mechanisms to keep children safe online, notably age verification for apps, parental controls on devices, better reporting on social media platforms, and privacy controls. More so, they stressed the need to equip children and parents with the necessary technical skills to use these mechanisms to protect their safety, and, more generally, to help children and support parents in aiding their children to develop the self-esteem and strength of character that will shield them from many of these threats by making them use the internet more wisely and mindfully.

Children also highlighted the need to encourage the development of and exposure to positive content online, such as age-appropriate games, apps that help them structure and track their tasks, online support channels like kellimni.com, and wise sayings and quotes that make them reflect. Children also called for unpatronising child-friendly information that can help them navigate both the online and offline environments more safely and effectively.

Ministry responsible for the Local Government

Children confessed they did not feel safe moving around and playing in the towns and villages in which they live. This suggests that children feel safe only or mostly when they are indoors at home and that the difficulty they find to keep a healthy online-offline balance may stem not only from the addictive nature of the internet. Unless children are and feel safe navigating the local road network, they cannot live and thrive in their locality without depending on their parents to transport them about in the locality, which makes the roads even less safe.

Children have called for more local autonomy, which would allow local governments among other things to take road safety in their locality more seriously. This means protecting the safety of pedestrians, especially but not only where children are more likely to be navigating the roads on foot or on a scooter or bicycle, namely near schools and playgrounds. Children said they would love to walk to and back from school or the playground. This would be good for their physical and mental health but also for the entire community as it would help to alleviate the density of and pollution from vehicular traffic in their locality.

But for this to happen, roads must be made safer. To this end, children called for better upkeep of roads for smoother and less slippery road surfaces that are less prone to flooding; better signage in roads, like traffic signs or zebra crossings, for motorists to give way to pedestrians; more traffic calming devices, like the so-called sleeping policemen, for motorists to slow down near schools and playgrounds; more bicycle lanes; and a more conspicuous police presence to enforce traffic laws around these sensitive areas.

LISTEN.
LISTEN...

As if children's feeling unsafe walking in their locality was not bad enough, children do not feel optimally safe using public playgrounds, which they complained are poorly maintained, poorly secured and surveilled, poorly designed for them to enjoy themselves in a safe manner, are often damaged from misuse by older children, who have no other place to hang around in, and in some cases poorly sited. Children thus called for the regular maintenance of public playgrounds to be prioritized; for cameras and adequate fencing and boundary walls to be installed; for the design of playgrounds to meet the play needs and desires of children of different ages, such as by installing play structures like trampolines and better quality slides and swings; for safe, inclusive and fun bespoke social and recreational areas for teenage children to be provided; and for traffic to be diverted from the precincts of playgrounds or for these to be sited away from traffic. In terms of design and siting, children called for playgrounds to be made more accessible to children with disabilities and more opportunities where these children can enjoy themselves to be created.

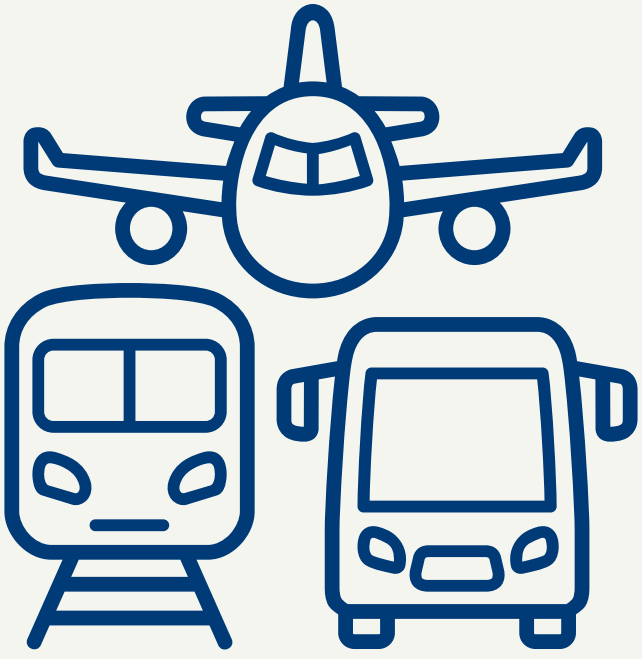
The discomfort children feel walking the streets of their town or village has other causes than safety alone. Children lamented the litter that lines the streets and called for more bins and more awareness. This visual discomfort of littered streets was accompanied by the aural discomfort felt by children living in places like Valletta, where noise pollution from the entertainment industry has become a big nuisance for the city's residents.

While a safer and cleaner local environment would help children feel more at ease in their locality, it would not necessarily make them feel fulfilled and included in the life of the locality. For children to be and feel part of their community, they called for stronger efforts for them to participate in community activities.

Ministry responsible for Transport

Children feel unsafe not only as pedestrians in their locality but also as passengers travelling between different possibly distant localities. They voiced their concern about a multitude of irresponsible behaviours displayed by road users, such as drink-driving, road rage, that sometimes degenerates into fighting, the use of mobile phones whilst driving and crossing roads, the failure to wear seatbelts, and overspeeding, an inadequate upkeep and design of roads, and the ballooning population of private vehicles.

Children thus called for more efforts to ensure that roads are safe, by improving traffic lights and signage, improving the condition of road surfaces and promoting wider use of bicycles and public transport, by making the latter more efficient and accessible to those who need to travel to remote or secluded places. Children also called for efforts to ensure that roads are used safely, by stepping up enforcement against these illegal and highly dangerous behaviours.



Ministry responsible for Education

Many of children's experiences as passengers in road vehicles are from their daily commutes to and from school in ad hoc vans. The number of children using school transport has mushroomed since the service started being offered free of charge by the Government some years back. Children in the focus groups voiced their concern about the less than pristine condition of vans and inappropriate behaviour by school van drivers. Children complained that pick-up times were too early relative to the start times of schools and that vans were often not punctual. Children invariably get on and off school vans carrying very heavy loads in their school bags, which they said was due to a lack of appropriate facilities at school, like lockers, where they can store the books they do not need to take home for homework or study. To curb this problem, they called for frequent bag checks.

As for when children are at school, children had a lot to say about what goes on **inside the classroom** in terms of the environment, form, content and assessment of learning.

Regarding the environment, they lamented that the air was too hot, humid and stuffy in the warmer months of the year. They thus called for better ventilation and the installation of aircons in all classrooms. Since children spend most of their time at school sat in a chair, they would like chairs to be more comfortable. In terms of comfort, children in schools that still have a formal uniform said they would like to be able to wear their P.E. kit when sitting for exams. They also complained that classrooms were noisy, calling for more discipline through better dialogue and communication and less favouritism with students.

Regarding form, children want lessons to be more lively and child-friendly. They thus called for efforts to make lessons more interactive and designed to elicit their creativity and curiosity to learn new things. Children also expressed a desire for more opportunities to team up with friends and classmates to complete class work together, and to engage in and get better at public speaking.

In terms of content, children expressed a desire for lessons at school to impart more **practical skills**, namely home economics, design & technology skills, time management, various literacies, namely those pertaining to finance (including budgeting and tax-related skills), media and AI, and well-being skills like deep breathing for coping with stress. They also identified crucial transverse skills that are currently neglected in civic education, critical thinking and research skills. Interestingly, they also mentioned teaching children effective studying skills as a key metaskill for education. Children would also like to learn about right vs wrong outside the parameters of religion or a particular religion. They thus called for more teaching time to be dedicated to learning about rights and for ethics classes to be offered to all students. They also called for practical ethical skills, like empathy and conflict resolution, to be taught in schools.

Children identified two groups of children who require **special attention at school**, namely gifted children, for whom they said bespoke educational programmes should be set up, and young children, whose social needs should be better catered for at school. On these lines, they singled out children with disabilities, calling for these children to have better access to special devices in classrooms.

Regarding assessment, children lamented the lack of coordination between teachers of different subjects in the administration of School-Based Assessments (SBAs), with some of them voicing a preference for the more organised mid-year examination system, which the SBAs replaced in many schools. As for exams, children called for statemented students to be assigned adapted exam papers.

Children were vociferous also about the kinds of facilities, activities, structures and dynamics they find and expect to find **outside the classroom.**

Regarding school facilities, they said they would like to find and use cleaner toilets. They also called for safer playgrounds, which should be upkept and maintained more frequently, or redesigned altogether, such as by covering them in turf.

In terms of activities, children voiced the desire to do more educational activities outside the classrooms, thereby calling for more outings to be organised and more opportunities for outdoor learning to be created. Existing outdoor educational activities, notably physical exercise and education, should be made more enjoyable and varied, with children given a choice as to the sports discipline they would like to practise.

They also said they would also like to have more time to play in their school clubs during longer breaktimes, and at home through a more balanced amount of homework. The latter would also, especially for older students, who complained of a heavy educational load, give them more time to study. Children said they want to spend more time doing group work with friends outside the setting of the classroom and school.

Regarding structures, children want enhanced safety and accountability through better supervision and surveillance in order to discourage and take action against severe misbehaviour, calling to this end for the installation of CCTV systems. They called for more enforcement to ensure that vapes, cigarettes or alcohol are not sold to children or taken to school, which their earlier call for frequent bag checks can help stem. They would also like to see literacy enhanced outside the classroom though the setting up of book clubs and reading corners to promote reading. They called for mental health services in schools to be improved, such as by offering more and better mental health first aid and psychologist services in schools. Children would also like to see child participation extended and reinforced by setting up and strengthening student councils in all schools.

As far as the social dynamics between students outside the classroom are concerned, the children lamented bullying at school, which they are witnesses if not victims to, and the paucity of resources in schools to combat this ugly phenomenon, with only one anti-bullying professional for the whole of Gozo. Children called for more trained staff and more training of staff to be deployed in schools to carry out anti-bullying work. Their views adumbrated the overall structure of this work, which they said should consist in building self-esteem and assertiveness in children who are being bullied or who are vulnerable to bullying; helping bullies understand and address the root causes of their behaviour; and educating children on how to respect each other and how to resolve conflict through dialogue not violence.

Ministry responsible for Foreign Affairs

Children highlighted the need to pursue peaceful means for the resolution of conflict, which, on the world stage, are in most cases, unfortunately, played out militarily, thus prolonging the conflict and bringing death, disability and displacement to thousands of children. Such a call can be interpreted as a call for Malta to use its constitutional neutrality not only to shelter itself from any involvement in military disputes but also to promote peace, diplomacy and disarmament as the primary means of conflict resolution.

Children also highlighted lack of access to basic healthcare in the poorer parts of Europe, thus calling on Malta to help step up European cooperation to safeguard the healthcare rights of all children in the EU by among other things combating health misinformation.

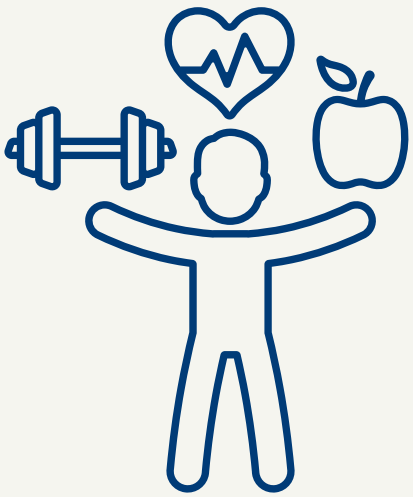
Ministry responsible for Equality and Voluntary Organisations

Dialogue cannot succeed in the resolution of conflict if either side believes it is superior to and has more rights than the other or is given preferential treatment. In the name of equality, children made a candid call for a more inclusive and open-minded society where racist beliefs, attitudes and acts, such as bullying against racially different children, have no place, and a society that is more caring towards those who feel excluded. To this end, children called for more awareness against racism and made an interesting proposal to set up friendship benches in places like schools as a means to help those who feel left out and forgotten to integrate themselves better in the community.

Children also voiced the need to harness children's membership of voluntary organisations as a means of combating social isolation in children.

Ministry responsible for Health

Children voiced numerous concerns relating to public health, such as exposure to smoking, vaping, energy drinks, car exhaust fumes and drug use, which sometimes happen in close proximity to schools, or, as in the case of vaping, are engaged in by children themselves. They also advocated for stronger action to promote healthy behaviours, such as consumption of food containing natural sugars, and engagement in physical exercise at the local level in the form of sports and gamified and culturally diverse leisure activities, through more and better information on all health-related topics. Children also advocated for stronger laws and enforcement regarding the sale, information and advertising of unhealthy foodstuffs, particularly energy drinks and fast food. They specifically asked for regulation on energy drinks for those who are 16+.



Children also manifested some apprehension as to what would happen if they suddenly needed immediate medical care. They thus called for children to have more access to first aid and first aiders, faster access to the ER and for their parents and carers to be better informed and prepared as to how to intervene in the case of a health emergency. Children highlighted the need for access to psychiatric and psychological services for children to be quicker and more available to all children, regardless of their status, whenever they need it. They also called for better quality healthcare against intoxication from energy drinks and caffeine.

Ministry responsible for Home Affairs and Immigration

Children are concerned about illegal activity in the form of gang violence and vandalism they sometimes see unfolding on the streets and where young people hang out. To this end, they called for more CCTV surveillance, community police and other safety measures to discourage such activity and catch those who perpetrate it.

Children also voiced their concern about over-population in Malta.

Ministry responsible for Social Policy

Children highlighted loneliness as a growing social problem and phenomenon that is being disguised by the rising presence of virtual companions generated by AI. Children also called for more social housing and more affordable housing. In terms of temporary housing for those children facing a crisis situation, children called for shelters to help those children who have no place to call home. They also appealed for those experiencing poverty to be guaranteed the basic necessities to survive, namely food and water.

Children made a strong call for efforts to protect them and their peers from sexual abuse and exploitation to be stepped up by strengthening:
i)Prevention, through better screening of adults who work with children, better information for and awareness by children;
ii) Early recognition, through more and better awareness by children and their parents/guardians;
iii) Re-offense prevention, through better rehabilitation of offenders;
iv) Victim support, through safe spaces that facilitate disclosure to professionals, and better victim support services.

Children championed the principle that all children are to be treated the same as others, calling for a better recognition of children's rights as human rights, and the same as other children. In accordance with this principle, they called for more support for children who cannot live with their parents, that is children who are or should be in care. More generally, they called for less fragmentation and more centralisation of services for children, the quality of which they would like to see enhanced through more and better training on how to interact with children, especially those with special needs. Children made a distinct call for needs-appropriate awareness-raising tools for neuro-divergent children and support for parents. Children identified their right to participation in the decisions made for them as a key element of this principle and of positive parenting, which they said needed to be promoted further.

Ministry responsible for Employment

The pinnacle of participation for all children comes in their mid-teens when they have to choose their academic and occupational pathway. Children in the focus groups said that before making this all important choice they want to have a clearer picture of the career opportunities these various pathways lead to. They thus called for more efficient and early career exposure. They also said they want to see fairer career opportunities, such as through more gender equality in jobs.

Children singled out jobs related to science, I.T. & AI, and healthcare as the jobs of the future which they envisioned Malta should strive to create for the future.

Parents and Adults

Aside from efforts by the State to promote positive parenting, children called on parents to do more of their own accord to give children what they most need and what parents seem to have little of nowadays, that is their parents' time. Not chronological time that is measured in hours, minutes and seconds, but quality time to seriously listen to without judging, guide and play with their children.

There cannot be quality time for meaningful child-parent interaction if there is little or no free time for either parents or children. In the case of parents, they called for a better work-life balance throughout their children's lives, and for more maternity and paternity leave during the initial critical phase of their children's development. The children highlighted excessive extra-curricular activities as another reason why free time is so scarce, and called on parents to better manage their children's after-school engagements. On the other hand, children highlighted the importance of these activities and hobbies in general as a distraction from the stresses of everyday life offline and online. When there is too much free time or too little of it, children said they end up depriving themselves of sleep in order to play online games. They thus called on parents to exercise more discipline in limiting screen time so as to ensure that children get as much sleep as they need.

Children stressed the need for parents to lead by example in terms of showing respect to others by among other things not using bad language and helping others so that children are encouraged to do the same.

CHAPTER 5 GIVING INFLUENCE ON THE VOICES AND VIEWS OF CHILDREN

There is probably no better way for adults to become used to and good at listening to children than for them to sit around the same table as them and share views and observations with them on various children's rights issues. This is the opportunity that the Council for Children, a legally[3] mandated advisory body to the Commissioner for Children, affords to six professionals, each of whom are appointed by and represent one of as many Ministries, and who sit on the Council together with up to seven other co-optees, who, as per law, "shall, as far as possible be", and as per practice, have always been, children. The numerical parity between adults and children on the Council, which is chaired by the Commissioner, a champion of children's rights and participation, ensures that within this body the voices of children emerge clearly, are heard carefully, and are considered seriously and respectfully.

Thanks to the Council for Children, professionals working in various fields of children's rights not only get to hear what children think on a regular basis, they also relay the views of children to their respective offices, thus helping sensitise them to the voices of children and influence policy and decision-making in the direction of children's views.

The Council met twice within the timeframe of the reporting period. Among the issues discussed in these meetings were child-friendly justice, AI, and the safe use of social media in extra-curricular activities.

[3]Commissioner for Children Act (Chapter 462 of Laws of Malta)

CONCLUSION
AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has showcased the child participation activities conducted by the Office. Its aim was not only to convey the content of these activities to those who have the power to act on and respond to the views and concerns voiced by children, but also to sensitise all those who work with and for children to the importance of doing child participation and doing it well, in accordance with the Lundy model of participation.

May participation, through hard, sincere and sustained effort, be the first of the 3 Ps not just in an alphabetical sense but also in the complex process of working with and for children. There can be no effective protection of and provision to children without their fullest prior participation in everything that concerns them. May the voices of children be our constant guide in everything we do for them.

Thank you to the children for their participation and to the schools for promoting our initiatives.

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