POLICY BRIEF 2023:4

Youth as partners in the green transition

Building sustainable communities

Localising Agenda 2030 policy brief series



Nordregio



Source: Sherry Xu / Unsplash.com

Introduction

Many municipalities in the Nordic countries consider youth engagement a crucial strategy for building attractive and inclusive communities in line with the UN 2030 Agenda and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The latter affirming that young people have the right to influence policymaking that affects them and participate meaningfully in societal development. The EU also lends its full support to youth engagement, stating that "Equipping young people, including those with fewer opportunities, with the knowledge and skills needed to live sustainably and become active citizens is essential for building a sustainable future" (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Nevertheless, young people often feel excluded, with only two in ten young people in Sweden believing that they can influence local decision makers (Mucf, 2021). To ensure meaningful child and youth participation, municipalities must establish effective participatory structures, maintain positive attitudes toward children and young people, develop necessary skills and competences, and purposefully select methods and tools for engagement (Nordic Welfare Centre, 2023).

This policy brief is based on one of Nordregio's Localising Agenda 2030 webinars from 26 April 2023 (link to a recording can be found on the last page of this brief). It highlights specific tools and processes employed by Nordic municipalities and NGOs to ensure systematic youth engagement and follow-up at the local level. During the webinar, municipal representatives from Gladsaxe in Denmark, Hafnarfjörður in Iceland, Tierp in Sweden and Korsholm in Finland presented their tested tools and insights, along with two Swedish NGOs: Future Minds and Youth 2030 Movement. The examples in this policy brief on how to involve young people in local development generally target children and young people aged 0-25, and in some cases up to 29 years of age.

Two central questions were addressed during Nordregio's webinar: how to ensure that young people can genuinely influence decisions that affect them; and how to conduct inclusive follow-up work.

Key learnings: youth involvement in practice

Municipalities seeking to enhance child and youth engagement in local decision making and sustainability work need to consider several crucial aspects:

- **Empower young people by providing knowledge and tools, encompassing both formal and informal learning structures.**

Empowering young people requires furnishing them with knowledge on sustainability issues and tools to facilitate their participation in local development. Formal school education, informal learning, physical activities and digital learning initiatives are all important components. Additionally, enhancing educational opportunities for teachers and youth workers to address sustainability is crucial. For example, Korsholm municipality and NGO Future Minds have developed non-formal learning programmes to boost sustainability knowledge and skills among students and educators alike.

- **Develop inclusive processes and practices to strengthen the engagement of diverse groups of young people, including underrepresented and vulnerable groups.**

The youth engagement process should be inclusive and non-discriminatory. Engaging with rural areas and schools facing challenges, as well as collaborating with NGOs specialising in various thematic areas, is critical for reaching diverse groups of young people. Factors such as access to information, socioeconomic status, educational background and geographic location can influence young people's level of engagement. For instance, Youth 2030 Movement focuses on rural municipalities and aims to engage with young people who are less likely to participate. Meanwhile Gladsaxe municipality has initiated activities targeting children in foster care.

- **Sustain the youth dialogue process on a regular basis.**

Ensuring that youth engagement occurs regularly and is integrated into the formal procedures and structures of municipalities is essential. Local youth councils have been established in Nordic countries to provide platforms for young people to engage with municipal decision makers and influence local youth policies and decision making. In Norway and Finland, having a youth council is now mandatory under municipal law. Tierp municipality has a digital youth panel via an app called "Young in Tierp", which is aimed at enhancing young people's involvement in the local community.

- **Ensure follow-up by decision makers.**

Decision makers should inform children and young people about how their input influenced decisions and ensure that promises made during consultations are kept. For example, in Tierp municipality, decision makers report to young people on what steps have been implemented (or not) since the last dialogue meeting. Youth coordinators hired in the municipalities as part of the Youth 2030 project ensure that local decision makers move from idea to action.

- **Develop partnerships with diverse actors in the municipality and young people.**

Collaboration with a range of stakeholders, including municipalities, industries, academia and civil society, is crucial for enhancing local capacity, exchanging knowledge and ensuring sustainable results for children and young people. Building a broad network of partners that work together to empower and engage youth in sustainable development helps develop durable and effective solutions. Cross-sectoral and multi-actor partnerships are also integral to the successful and inclusive implementation of the Child Friendly Cities Initiative and align with the key principles of NGOs Future Minds and the Youth 2030 Movement.

- **Make youth engagement a fundamental part of democracy.**

Youth participation should be viewed as a democratic requirement rather than a project-based initiative. For youth participation to contribute to more resilient and inclusive communities and societies, it should be addressed as a systemic issue, rather than a specific initiative.



Source: Liselotte van der Meijs / imagebank.sweden.se

Nordic examples of youth engagement

Various approaches and methods are employed by municipalities and NGOs in the Nordic countries to promote the engagement of children and young people. This overview highlights the examples presented during the webinar.

Tierp municipality, Sweden

Tierp municipality (21,000 inhabitants) has recently introduced two initiatives aimed at engaging young people and making better use of their knowledge and insights. As part of its strategy to tackle local social sustainability challenges, Tierp has focused on improving access to health services and social activities in the municipality. These efforts target several SDGs, such as Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3).

A five-step dialogue on mental health

Given that mental health is an important concern for many young people, Tierp municipality initiated a project dedicated to mental health and wellbeing. The initiative aims to increase mental health literacy, involve young people in identifying and implementing preventive measures and evaluate the effectiveness of such interventions. The ultimate goal is to develop improved methods for addressing mental health issues while empowering young people.

The dialogue process employed in Tierp was developed by the NGO Tillia and consists of five steps:



Figure 1. A five-step process to foster a dialogue on mental health in Tierp municipality. It was carried out from March 2022 to March 2023.

1. **Initial workshops in schools**: The first step involved organising workshops in local schools, engaging 15-30 students per session. The workshops began with a broad discussion about wellbeing and mental health, gradually narrowing down to pinpoint specific actions for improvement.
2. **Formation of a youth expert group**: A group of young experts was then created to ensure that the ideas, opinions and suggestions captured during the workshops were accurately understood and incorporated into a report.
3. **Report writing**: The third step involved writing a report and sharing the findings with various stakeholders in the municipality.
4. **Policymaker engagement meeting:** The fourth step was to hold a meeting with local policymakers to discuss the report's findings. That meeting led to both short-term and long-term commitments from decision makers to act.
5. **Follow-up**: Three months after the meeting, the participating policymakers were requested to provide a written follow-up to the young people, outlining what actions had been taken (or not) since the last meeting.

Among the specific suggestions raised by young people were improvement in the school environment and school meals, better adult understanding of mental health issues, ideas for leisure time activities and improvements in public transportation and healthcare services, especially for young people.



Source: Tierps kommun 2023

Introducing the app "Young in Tierp" featuring a digital youth panel
Launched in spring 2023, the "Young in Tierp" app features a calendar of events and a directory of activities and youth friendly meeting places, as well as information about school meal options. Additionally, it offers guidance on where to access psychological and social support services. Besides providing information, the app aims to actively engage young people in local governance by encouraging them to submit their ideas on community improvement. Moreover, it includes an integrated digital youth panel, where young individuals can take part in brief surveys on various topics, such as climate initiatives, and influence local decision making. These surveys help inform municipal authorities about youth perspectives on key issues. The app was developed in collaboration with a company that also distributes it to other municipalities.

Gladsaxe municipality, Denmark, and Hafnarfjörður municipality, Iceland

Gladsaxe, with a population of approximately 70,000, and Hafnarfjörður, with about 30,000 residents, work strategically with youth engagement by aligning it with their broader SDG agenda. Both municipalities have also become part of UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative to foster an environment that is favourable to children and youth involvement.

Anchoring children and youth engagement in municipal strategies, aligned with SDGs
Gladsaxe has integrated the SDGs into its municipal strategy for 2018-2022 and 2022-2026. This strategy comprises six cross-sectoral goals, one of which is "Children and Young People Shaping the Future". This goal is consistent with several SDGs, including Quality Education (SDG 4), Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11), Climate Action (SDG 13) and Partnerships for Action (SDG 17).

In Hafnarfjörður, the municipal strategy is also aligned with the UN Global Goals, with an emphasis on the wellbeing of residents. Becoming recognised as a child friendly city by UNICEF is an important policy priority for the municipality.

Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI)

In 2019, both municipalities joined the UNICEF-led Child Friendly Cities Initiative. This initiative sets out to support municipal governments in their efforts to build child friendly cities by integrating the voices, needs and rights of children and young people into municipal policies, programmes and decisions. CFCI promotes real involvement and influence of children and young people in municipal processes and activities (UNICEF, 2022).

To align its efforts with CFCI, Gladsaxe has developed a model addressing various areas of engagement and interaction with children and young people.



Figure 2. A model for implementing CFCI in Gladsaxe municipality. Source: Gladsaxe municipality, 2023.

- The outer circle represents involvement in the local community. The goal is to empower children and young people to be active citizens by participating in the development of Gladsaxe as a sustainable city. This can be achieved through their involvement in projects, campaigns, municipal political processes and leisure activities in local communities.
- The next circle focuses on involvement in their daily lives, including day care centres, schools and educational settings where children spend a significant share of their day.
- The innermost circle represents involvement in the individual's life. While the municipal authority has limited influence over this circle – as it is primarily rooted in family settings – efforts are being made to ensure that the most vulnerable children and young people have their voices heard within the system.

All departments and units within the municipal organisation have explored ways to modify their approaches in these three areas to better listen to and involve children and young people.

In Hafnarfjörður, the Youth Council is closely tied to the CFCI project. The Youth Council members play a significant role by participating in the municipal steering committee meetings with representatives from the entire administration, and then shares insights with their schools. They gather feedback and input from peers and communicate it to the committee, creating a feedback loop.

Specific activities implemented within the framework of CFCI

In Gladsaxe:

- Conducting safety walks in challenged areas
- Improving conditions for children in (foster) care.
- Dedicating the Gladsaxe Day 2023 to Children and Youth Shaping the Future and inviting young people to contribute to the Gladsaxe Day programme
- Organising public debates between children and politicians.

In Hafnarfjörður:

- Implementing gender studies and sex education in schools based on children's feedback.
- Allowing children to submit ideas for municipal improvements through the "Better Town for Children" initiative.
- Establishing a Youth Assembly and Youth Council that propose changes to the town council.



Figure 3. Timeline and key steps steps in the implementation of the CFCI in Gladsaxe. Source: Gladsaxe municipality, 2023.

Korsholm municipality, Finland

Korsholm municipality is home to approximately 19,500 residents. One of the main strategies to implement the local Agenda 2030 objectives is through the empowerment and engagement of children, youth and teachers, and by using schools as platforms for sustainability education and innovative initiatives for change.

Empowering youth through education about sustainable development
The municipality implements two projects aimed at students ranging from preschool to upper secondary school. They focus on educating the younger generation and turning them into agents of change who can encourage sustainable lifestyles among their peers and parents. In addition, the projects set out to equip teachers with the knowledge and tools needed to address sustainability issues. A dedicated team of teachers meets regularly to develop a "learning path to sustainability", outlining the subjects and topics to be covered at various educational levels. Moreover, the projects strive to enhance collaboration with external stakeholders, including NGOs, neighbouring municipalities and industry partners.

Climate teams as change agents in schools
One of the outcomes of these educational initiatives is the formation of "Climate Teams" or so-called "Sustainability Agents" in each participating school. Guided by the team of teachers, these Climate Teams inspire their classmates to propose and implement viable local solutions to improve sustainability. The municipality provides financial support for such initiatives.

During autumn 2023, these teams will take part in hackathons, facilitades by Future Minds to develop innovative solutions to local challenges. Examples of specific solutions introduced in schools include: the establishment of swap rooms to promote recycling and reuse of materials and clothing; artistic decoration of recycling bins to attract usage; and the dissemination of practical tips for reducing consumption of energy, water and materials.

Engaging youth in municipal governance
To further a culture of participation, the municipality is committed to organising regular dialogues between young people and municipal leaders. These meetings serve as a platform for youth to express their concerns, offer insights and engage directly with the decision makers and processes affecting their community's future.

Main benefits of youth participation in local decision making

- **Knowledge raising.** Increased awareness of youth perspectives among policymakers; such awareness in turn may influence municipal priorities and actions.
- **Enhanced decision making.** Including youth perspectives in political decision making ensures a more comprehensive view of local needs and enhances accountability and inclusiveness of policies.
- **Fostering active citizenship.** Youth engagement helps to empower changemakers and future leaders by equipping them with the necessary tools and knowledge.
- **Creating more vibrant rural areas**. Engaging young people may create a stronger, more connected community, where young people are more likely to stay and contribute to its economic resilience and growth.
- **Innovation and creativity.** Young people often bring innovative ideas and unconventional solutions to local sustainability challenges.

Future Minds: catalysing sustainable development through youth empowerment

Through its educational programme on sustainable development, Swedish NGO Future Minds serves as a resource for training teachers and engaging students in solving local sustainability challenges. The organisation facilitates collaboration between secondary schools and representatives from the municipality, local businesses, NGOs, and academia and arranges a variety of events, including sustainability hackathons.

The educational programme is structured around three core modules:

1. **Knowledge**: equips students and teachers with knowledge, tools and educational materials on sustainable development.
2. **Outreach**: organises events, activities, hackathons, and study visits to municipalities and businesses to provide real-world context to students while helping businesses to future-proof their ways of working.
3. **Expertise**: offers assistance and mentorship to graduate students undertaking research projects or group assignments on sustainability issues.

Hackathons to develop solutions to local challenges
A cornerstone of the work performed by Future Minds is to run hackathons. Participating municipalities and businesses present real-world sustainability challenges to participating secondary schools and they get to choose the cases that they find most interesting and devote some time to preparation. During the hackathon, students transition from comprehending the root of the problem to generating potential solutions. Then they fine-tune a selected idea and pitch it to the case owner for potential implementation.

Hackathons offer a multitude of benefits for municipalities:

- **Youth engagement**: hackathons serve as platforms for engaging youth in real-world problem solving and enable natural dialogue between young people and municipal leaders.
- **Joint problem solving**: hackathons create an environment where municipalities and youth work together to find practical solutions to sustainability challenges.
- **Visibility**: hackathons allow municipalities to showcase their initiatives, thereby educating the next generation of leaders.
- **Future residents**: by engaging young people in developing solutions to sustainability challenges, municipalities are also preparing them to join the local workforce and strengthening their ties with the local community.

Youth 2030 Movement: youth inclusion for stronger democracy

Youth 2030 Movement is a Swedish NGO that strives to break down barriers between young people and decision makers. Its mission is to foster a more inclusive democratic system in which young people play an integral role, while also changing societal perceptions of power and age. To achieve these aims, Youth 2030 focuses on co-creating solutions with young people and decision makers and advocates for national systemic changes, such as lowering the voting age. As of 2022, the organisation was active in 27 Swedish municipalities, primarily in rural areas.

Youth Up North is one of Youth 2030's key initiatives. It aims to find solutions for more vibrant rural areas together with young people, to reverse negative demographic trends and build stronger community bonds with young people. Through collaboration with civil society organisations, local businesses and municipal bodies, new methods for youth engagement have been developed and implemented. Young people identified problems that needed to be addressed; the solutions were co-created between decision makers and young people. Central to this work has been to create meeting places to enable direct interaction between young people and decision makers and build solid structures for strengthening youth influence.

Youth coordinators hired in municipalities
Within the scope of the Youth Up North project, three participating municipalities (Arjeplog, Dorotea and Boden) have employed young people as youth coordinators. Their task is to enhance youth participation by developing engagement methods, establishing platforms for youth to participate and express their opinions,

as well as implementing youth-centred activities and initiatives. That may also extend to running hackathons and workshops aimed at developing solutions. The focus is on supporting the co-creation of stronger and more vibrant communities, therefore pushing for change of systems from which young people are currently excluded.

Cross-sectoral local steering groups with a clear mandate and decision making power
To ensure the project's success at the local level, a cross-sectoral local steering group has been established in each municipality. The group meets regularly and is comprised of leading politicians, municipal management, the youth coordinator and other relevant decision makers, along with a representative from the Youth 2030 network. This collaboration platform is designed to maintain open dialogue and effectively implement the proposed solutions at all levels of the municipality. For further details and results, please consult the final report of the project (Youth 2030 Movement, 2023).

Webinar insights in brief: checklist for effective youth engagement

1. **Meet them where they are.** Reach out to young people in their natural environments, such as schools, youth clubs, and online platforms where they are active.
2. **Set clear expectations.** When organising meetings or discussions, define clear objectives and agendas. Instead of vague questions, ask for input on specific topics to focus the conversation.
3. **Listen to their needs.** Approach young people with an open mind. Avoid preconceived notions about their needs, concerns, and desires. Actively listen to their perspectives; their insights are invaluable.
4. **Empower them to lead.** Trust young people to take the lead and contribute to the development of solutions. Engage them in activities like hackathons that encourage creative problem solving.
5. **Highlight positive examples.** When discussing topics like climate change, emphasise positive examples and achievements. This can help alleviate climate anxiety among young people and inspire hope.
6. **Make and keep commitments.** Make concrete commitments to young people, and then provide regular updates on the progress of these commitments. Transparency is key to building trust.
7. **Sustain the dialogue.** Continuously engage in dialogue with young people and ensure follow-up on their ideas and concerns. Such ongoing conversation is vital for meaningful youth participation in local development.
8. **Acknowledge diversity**. Do not approach youth as a homogenous group. Acknowledge and address young people who are rarely invited or from marginalised communities, including vulnerable groups and those with fewer opportunities.



Source: Liselott van der Meijs / imagebank.sweden.se

Last but not least, youth voices

How would youth like to be engaged in local development?

Besides collaborating with municipalities and facilitating peer learning, Nordregio hosted a workshop for Nordic youth in May 2023 as part of the *Gen Z Agency project: Mobilising young people to strengthen Nordic rural areas* (financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers). The aim was to gather their views on youth engagement and sustainable living. Below is what the group recommended municipalities to do – reconfirming several previously noted learnings from the webinar:

- **Make youth councils mandatory** in every municipality. Young people should have a genuine impact on decision making by being insiders in the process.
- **Involve young people in the early stages** of local development projects to gather their insights and ideas.
- **Democracy**: consider youth-driven referendums on key issues.
- **Utilise schools as platforms** to ensure all students are engaged and informed about local issues and decision making processes.
- **Include sustainability** issues even in primary school curricula. Boost sustainable innovation in schools through projects and working groups.
- **Encourage eco-friendly initiatives** such as "Green Flag" schools and workplaces.
- **Housing**: seek young people's opinions on housing market development.

References and further reading

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About this policy brief

This policy brief is developed by Nordregio as part of the Nordic Council of Minister's Localising Agenda 2030 in the Nordics initiative. It builds on a series of webinars produced by Nordregio since 2020 to facilitate knowledge exchange and peer learning between municipal and regional representatives, research institutions, and civil society networks working to implement the SDGs. On this website, you will find all Nordregio's previous webinars and reports featuring local Nordic frontrunners on Agenda 2030:
https://nordregioprojects.org/agenda2030local/

See the recording from the webinar behind this policy brief: https://nordregio.org/events/agenda-2030-empowering-youth-for-more-sustainable-communities/

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