



**Policy Brief**

# **Participatory Policy Making with Young People in Tallinn**





## Introduction

This policy brief builds on the outcomes of the pan-European research project UPLIFT which puts young people's voice at the centre of the policy-making. Some of the key findings of the research and practical initiatives carried out in Tallinn are presented here, focusing on the policy recommendations for how to improve services and support networks, and summarising some of the crucial aspects to support effective participatory and reflexive policy-making.

Overall, young people in vulnerable life situations tend to be poorly informed about their opportunities with regard to educational and labour market options, and they are often unaware of the various related services and programs targeted toward them. Young people have usually not been involved in the design of services or policy creation. Yet, engaging young people in local policy co-creation processes can be achieved with modest resource inputs – and have a substantial impact on their lives and prospects, with positive effects on the employment of young people.



### The UPLIFT project

How do young people experience and adapt to inequality? The UPLIFT project aims to understand related patterns and trends, with a focus on housing, education and employment in 16 urban areas across Europe. The project's partners, with young people and their communities, have developed a methodology that involves young people in the creation, implementation and monitoring of policies seeking to reduce inequalities (piloted in four out of the 16 urban locations: Amsterdam, Barakaldo, Sfântu Gheorghe and Tallinn). For each of the 4 pilot locations, this process has resulted in a so-called reflexive policy agenda. UPLIFT's objective is to come to a new, sustainable, participatory policy process, where young people are actively contributing to policies that directly influence their life chances.

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## Key findings in Tallinn

**The lack of early detection of young people's problems is one of the major shortcomings in Tallinn schools that leads to early school leaving.** Currently and formerly vulnerable young people spoke in our interviews and workshops about schools insufficiently addressing (or even ignoring) their learning difficulties, mental and physical ailments, school bullying cases and other serious issues that do not allow young people to thrive in school. The practitioners working with young people, as well as policymakers, were equally concerned that the schools do not have enough personnel to treat each student as a person and detect students' problems early enough to prevent the growth of chronic mental health issues, different addictions, maltreatment, bullying and early school leaving as a result. Some have additional needs or mental health conditions requiring early diagnosis and support. Young people benefit when they have parents, teachers or other professionals who can advocate on their behalf.



*And I can't imagine how I graduated from basic school because, in the 9th grade, I just didn't go to school for about five months. /.../ I have trouble concentrating all the time because, well, I was diagnosed with ADHD. But, well, I didn't know that at the time, I just thought I was extremely stupid - Oliver, 17*



*I was under such a heavy study load and there were so many students with me, and then I started to realise that it doesn't suit me. I need a more personal approach from the teachers - Kevin, 19*

**The lack of awareness of different career choices and the inability to choose the school and speciality after graduating from basic school may lead to interrupted education paths.** According to interviewed specialists, it depends on the school administration how much and whether career counselling is provided to students. They were concerned that it may often lead to situations, where young people, who would need the counselling the most (e.g., young people from families, who are unwilling or unable to discuss their career choices or teach them how to write a proper CV, for example), are the ones who miss the professional career counselling. Young people confirmed this in workshops by telling us that a career counsellor visited their school only once and the students, who were not at school that day, missed the chance for any career counselling at school.



*This [acquiring a high school education] did not occur to me that much; rather it was my parents who thought of it - Kevin, 19*

**The lack of awareness of the youth work and social work services targeted towards vulnerable young people means that they are deprived of the help that is out there.** Frequently, young people and their families are not aware of the different services and support networks that exist. Successful navigation from education into the labour market can occur when young people are aware of the different opportunities and support structures. The Estonian youth work sector provides varied services, activities, projects and programs to young people to support their educational outcomes and career options, many of which are especially focused on vulnerable young people and NEETs in particular. However, young people who were participants in our study as well as those who took part in the workshops, were often not aware of this.

**Accessing different services requires a lot of agency on the part of the young person to find the specialists they need.** Young people in need of help are sometimes left on their own when looking for help; at least, this is how young people perceived their situation in many cases. Considering the state of many young people with mental health issues, they have little chance to get the help they need if they do not have a family member or some other kind of support person to help with finding adequate services or programmes for them.



*My problem was that I first wanted to know what services they [health institutions] offer that could be part of my rehabilitation plan. Do they even have a psychologist with whom I could talk about my trauma experience? /.../And then most of these centres don't respond to emails... call them or go there, which is basically impossible for a lot of people. You just can't do it, you have such a block. In one place, I was told directly that I was too difficult a client for them - Monika, 28*

**The problems of “good students” (mostly girls) are often unnoticed or ignored in schools.** The vulnerability of “unproblematic good girls”, who are usually considered unlikely candidates to be particularly vulnerable or potential NEETs, was probably the most unexpected finding of our interviews with young people. The possibility that academically high-achieving girls may have serious problems and may not feel particularly good at school, has been largely ignored by specialists and policymakers. However, it is not only about not feeling well in school, as ignoring these problems may lead to difficulties later in the world of work or cause them to leave school unexpectedly earlier than anticipated.



*I deal with this [mental health problems] and I have developed a lot in this area in the last years and made great progress in order to increase perhaps such stability in myself and in my life. Which I feel that I never knew how to do when I was young - Kristina, 23*





## Recommendations

### Better dissemination of information, advice and support services

Young people are able to navigate the gap between their current situations and their ambitions when they have a good understanding of what choices they have and what kind of services are available to them. Advisory services can be made better accessible to young people by:

- providing more career counselling in the basic schools (incl. one-to-one counselling)
- providing young people in vulnerable life situation information about the different opportunities offered to them by the youth work sector (incl. youth services directly contacting young people who are at risk of dropping out of school)

It is crucial to **improve the channels for how information about services targeted to vulnerable youth** by the local authorities and other institutions reaches young people – the services that may somewhat compensate the support and attention that the vulnerable youth groups have not received either at school and/or at home. The general information campaigns may not be effective; according to the interviews with youth work experts, vulnerable young people need more personalised approach to find the services they need. Experts see the social services of local governments, who have the information about young people, in a central role here and recommend bringing different youth services under one roof in youth guidance centres.

Furthermore, professionals working with young people also need support navigating the varied landscape of services provided by different stakeholders. Teachers and other specialists at schools need easily accessible information about the methods to notice and prevent young people's problems at school as well as about the institutions that can help in case of problems that need professional intervention.

The first step could be:


- providing better access to training/study materials, programs, and training to teachers and other specialists in schools on students' special needs and on school bullying.

In order to prevent early school leaving, the early detection of young people's problems is vital. As important as providing teachers and other specialists in schools with information about the different interventions is, it is not enough if the school personnel is overburdened. Therefore, the next suggestion calls for institutional changes in schools:

- provision of more individualised learning programs and more flexible learning paths. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to decrease the number of students in the classroom or to hire more assistant teachers;
- increasing the number of school psychologists and other specialists. In order to achieve this, there is a need for national policy interventions including more specialists being trained by the universities and providing motivating salaries for specialists.

Despite career counselling, it can be difficult for young people to decide what they want to do after graduating from basic school, especially if they have experienced learning difficulties in some subjects and they do not feel very confident in school. Some vocational schools have started to provide a year long program, which provides young people information about the different specialities and career choices. Furthermore, through short term practice placements, they can also find out how a certain speciality and work environment suits them. However, only a small number of vocational education centres in Estonia offer young people who have failed to continue their studies in regular vocational education programs, an opportunity to partake such a year long program. In order to reduce the number of young people who do not continue their education after graduating the basic school, young people need:

- more opportunities taking a selection year at a vocational school or an adaptation year at the vocational rehabilitation centre.



## How to involve young people in policy formation

Participatory policy making takes as its starting point the position that policy can only be responsive to the needs of individuals, households or communities if it is transparently developed, implemented and monitored in cooperation with its intended beneficiaries.

The UPLIFT project extends this to a process of “Reflexive Policy Making”, which becomes embedded on an ongoing basis. RPM aims to change the approach of policy designers and increase the capabilities of young people in order that they can generate changes together.

During the process young people are empowered to be able to enter into policy discussion with policy makers and implementers. The process is supported by facilitators who help build trust and common understanding among both young people and institutional stakeholders.

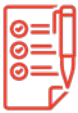
The UPLIFT project has produced a range of materials to help local groups undertake Reflexive Policy Making processes. You can find out more about the process in our additional [policy brief](#), and on each of the key stages in our [Guidebook](#), along with training materials and videos on [our website](#).



## Stages in the participatory policy creation process



**A mindset and commitment** - Policy co-creation is a deep process which requires commitment from all stakeholders and a willingness to challenge traditional power dynamics.



**Preparation** - Planning with stakeholders about objectives, roles, resources and capacity.



**Creating a youth board** - In collaboration with a range of organisations, using supportive and inclusive methods, a diverse Youth Board is recruited.



**Narrowing the focus and scope** - Young people and institutional stakeholders identify the policy areas for action. The decision about the scope has implications for the way in which the co-creation process is organized and the expected outcomes.



**The co-creation process** - Capacity building, trust building and creative activities underpin successful co-creation. Involving a specific youth facilitator is key to an equal, safe and empowering process for all participants.



**Towards a policy agenda** - The stage at which the institutional and systemic realities must be navigated to identify what can be achieved in practical terms.



**Policy implementation** - Highly dependent on the local context, communication and engagement is essential to achieve uptake of the policy recommendations.



**Reflection & evaluation** - Throughout the process it is essential to engage in reflexive practice – continually learning and evaluating to inform next steps.







## Participatory policy making in action: Tallinn

Young people with NEET status (aged between 15 and 29 who are not in education, employment or training) constitute about a tenth of all youngsters in Tallinn. Russian-language background and lower education or absence of vocational or higher education tend to be the main risk factors related to the NEET status. NEET youth often face both economic and social exclusion and their life chances tend to be more limited than those of their peers.

The reflexive policy agenda was targeted at improving services benefiting NEETs in Tallinn. Obtaining vocational or higher education creates advantages to achieve a better position in the labour market, and labour market position in turn influences housing market outcomes to great extent. Therefore, the co-creation focused on improving the services related to improving educational attainment and outcomes and access to the labour market.

The **Association of Estonian Open Youth Centres (AEYC)** – a nationwide umbrella organisation of youth centres in Estonia – was coordinating the implementation of the practical co-creation process in Tallinn, while the **University of Tartu (UT)** provided scientific guidance for the process.

The policy co-creation was carried out with the following outputs:

- Guidance material (manual and social skills training programme) has been developed for the providers of services to NEETs. The aim of this material is to improve the provision of individualized services and to better coordinate the services (so that they are more in line with the needs and challenges of the NEETs). For this purpose, a so-called 'Guidebook' on the NEETs support system has been created (an electronic tool is created based on the guide);
- A Logbook has been further developed, including better analytical tools and visualization possibilities (to enable the application of a more individualized case management approach). The database includes opinions of young people from Tallinn about the shortcomings/ perceptions of the existing support mechanisms;
- The electronic platform for mobile youth work has been prepared (Chat), while its implementation is still ongoing. This platform will be used to reach NEETs and other vulnerable youth. Inputs from the co-creation process (interviews and group sessions) have been very useful when building up this platform.

In addition, suggestions and policy recommendations were designed together with young people regarding the redesign of services targeting the NEETs that were then discussed with local and national stakeholders. The development of new services and support measures for NEETs has taken place in close collaboration with young people. In the co-creation with young people, a **new service model** – “Cross-sectoral NEET-status youth support and cooperation model of services for local governments. Description of the future model” – has been produced, validated by the youth.





The co-creation process was conducted in three stages: first, by mapping the situation and needs among young people, and second, together with the representatives of the city government. Then, the inputs were presented to the Tallinn youth council, discussed with them together with the city government, youth centre representatives, researchers, social and educational experts. Jointly the possible support paths (services) were designed. City government employees and policy field experts also participated in some of the youth meetings.

1. First, the situation was assessed and problems were mapped by involving vulnerable youth groups in different city districts, meetings with young people were also held in one of the youth centres. The problem was defined, goals set and the subsequent co-creation process organized;
2. Thereafter the co-creation process continued with the youth board (several meetings took place). During the meetings, 'personas' were designed for the co-creation process based on the information that was revealed during the mapping process, and relying on the experiences of the young people. Each persona had its own path with solution ideas to design services;
3. Meetings were held with various stakeholders in Tallinn and also on the state level. The 'personas' were discussed with these stakeholders and further input was gained. In this phase, the Tallinn Youth Council was involved as well.

The policy-making training for young people consisted of the use of design thinking, where the young people could first map out problems, create a persona and, based on this, create the necessary service, which in turn included a description of the journey of supporting the young person. In particular, meeting formats were in use, both online and offline. An essential part of creating and maintaining cooperative relations with young people has been the involvement of the youth worker of the youth centre at every stage. Their presence (trusted relationship with young people) helped to reach young people more quickly and also ensured the necessary translation.

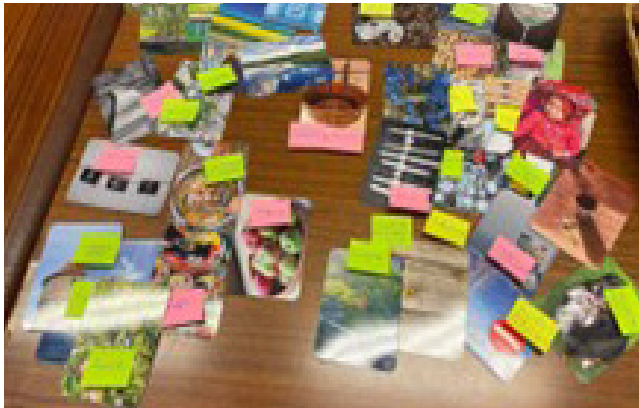
Various methods were used, such as a world cafe, persona creation workshops, round table discussions and small group work (Figures 1). Interactive methods, group discussions and mind maps, were applied that facilitated the creativity during the events (Figure 2). Between meetings, homework was given to the representatives of the Tallinn Youth Council, such as studying national documents aimed at young people and making proposals.

Figure 1 - Meetings with youth boards



At several phases in the co-creation process, there has been interaction between the youth board and the institutional stakeholders. This particularly applies to the last stage of the process when the ideas of the youth board are discussed with the institutional stakeholders.

Figure 2 - Interactive tools applied during the meetings



**For young people**, the co-creation process was meant to provide the opportunity to gain knowledge of the services targeted to young people and the policy process; to be taken seriously and be able to safely express their opinions; to influence decisions about service design and to feel empowered – that is, to feel like they can make an active contribution to the institutional set-up. **For institutional partners**, the aim was to increase their knowledge and understanding of young people’s problems and to create a channel of communication with a group that has specific needs and is not well represented in the current policy-making processes. Overall, we wanted UPLIFT to provide the opportunity for institutional actors to think together with young people, in order to develop policy solutions more attuned to their needs and to show that co-creation can be a sustainable and fruitful method for policy development.

Some examples of the proposals made during co-creation (in addition to the suggestions related to the specific services that were developed like the ‘Chat’):

- Setting up QR codes to public places to guide young people to important info pages about living, studying and working in Tallinn;
- Special ‘Tallinn-focused packages’ could be developed in different languages (Estonian, Russian, English) (e.g., funded by the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund);
- Poster and social media campaigns could be organised by youth workers so that young people would know about the services and youth work in general;
- Youth trustees and youth ambassadors could be set up in every district who convey information to young people.

The main takeaway from this co-creation experience is that the importance of this form of participation seems to be very clear to young people – not talking about young people but with young people about the issues that concern them. The institutional actors also appreciated the value of the knowledge produced during the process, and the increased understanding of youth issues. In our view, the overall impact of the UPLIFT experiment was clearly successful in terms of changing the attitudes of both groups.

Nonetheless, the results also show clear pathways to improve the quality of co-creation processes in terms of communication between young people and policymakers, and in terms of building relations of trust based on clear management of expectations.

While many vested interests have already organized themselves in interest groups that participate in policy decision-making, young people (particularly the ones that are not studying and/or do not have a higher education) are so far underrepresented in this decision-making process.

At the level of the city, the implementation of the results would be more sustainable if the ideas and solutions were further dealt with by the official Tallinn youth council. Due to the legal basis of their activity, they have the right to regularly analyse the activities of the city government, give inputs and represent the needs of young people. Through the project activities, it was possible to bring inputs onto the desk of the youth council from the point of view of young people with NEET status. Therefore, the activities carried out with the project-based youth board can be considered successful.



## Examples from across Europe

A local Youth Board collaborated with the Municipality, housing association De Key, resident organization IWOON and Delft University of Technology in order to shed light on the current housing problems of young people and formulate shared policy approaches and tools to tackle the most urgent problems.

Over two years, the Youth Board developed a range of ideas for tackling the housing shortage, including a virtual platform for young house seekers which is being explored for development, and produced a manifesto for the municipality of Amsterdam which was presented to the Municipal councillor responsible for housing in the city.



### Amsterdam



### Barakaldo

A participatory policy making process brought together young people living in the Municipality, policy makers from the Barakaldo City Council and researchers from Orkestra- Basque Institute of Competitiveness, who collaborated over nine months to improve urban housing policies for young people.

As a result, the stakeholders involved have developed a reflexive policy agenda including four proposals oriented to adapt these policies to the real needs of the youth. Moreover, the process has been oriented towards the empowerment of the young people involved, allowing them to improve their personal skills, such as their knowledge on the topic, their attitudes and behaviours towards civic participation, their general socio-political skills and interest in urban development planning.



### Sfantu Gheorghe

Two groups of stakeholders - a Youth Board (group of vulnerable young people) and institutional representatives - worked on identifying the causes that hinder the access to education for vulnerable young people and how to tackle these. They worked in parallel at first, then in joint groups within the framework of a co-creation process.

During the joint sessions they identified public policy proposals and created an action plan that can be implemented at the local level and can offer solutions to some of the problems identified. Besides these proposals that had been embedded in the Reflexive Policy Agenda, the biggest gains of the activity in Sfantu Gheorghe was that vulnerable young people were empowered to have their voice heard and that the institutional representatives developed a greater understanding of the benefits of cooperation and co-creation.

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## Imprint

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement 870898. The sole responsibility for the content of this publication lies with the authors. It does not necessarily represent the opinion of the European Union.