

CHILD PARTICIPATION IN THE CITY OF VIENNA – DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD AND YOUTH STRATEGY



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Graphics: Stadt Wien / Wiener Kinder- und Jugendstrategie

Child participation

Child participation can be defined as:

‘Children (individually and/ or collectively) forming and expressing their views and influencing matters that concern them directly and indirectly’¹.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child conceptualises participation as related to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as rights to information (Article 17) and freedom of expression, religion, conscience, assembly, and association (Article 13 and Article 15). What does that participation look like concretely at the level of a local authority? How can local government officials or politicians realise this right?

Learning objectives

At the end of the training session, the participants will

- understand that child rights are human rights and how a rights-based approach differs from other approaches;
- relate the realisation of child rights to the actions and decisions of local decision-makers;
- identify common barriers and enablers, specifically surrounding practical and ethical issues, when a local government creates the spaces and processes for children to exercise their right to have their opinions listened to and taken into account;
- be equipped with some tools to support the realisation of children’s rights in their local authority, and more specifically, their right to express their opinions and have those opinions listened to and taken into account; and,
- start thinking about ways to apply the learnings of this case study to their local authorities.

¹ UNICEF, [Conceptual Framework for Measuring outcomes of adolescent participation](#) (2018)

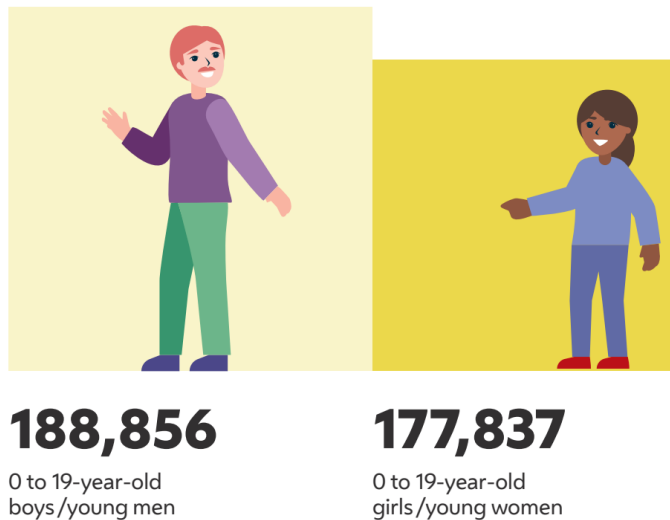
Case description

Vienna, Austria's largest municipality, is both a federal province and the country's capital. In 2021, it had a population of nearly 2 million people, of which approximately 366,693 were children². Once an ageing city, Vienna has been growing for the past years; it experienced the fastest population growth of any European city in the last decade and in 2018, every fifth Viennese citizen was younger than 19 years old, making Vienna Austria's youngest federal province in demographic terms.

"VIENNA IS THE YOUNGEST FEDERAL STATE IN AUSTRIA. WE DON'T JUST WANT TO BE THERE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, WE WANT TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THE CITY WITH THEM."

—MICHAËL LUDWIG, MAYOR OF VIENNA

NUMBER OF CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE BETWEEN 0 AND 19 YEARS 2019



In 2014, the Vienna Municipal Council adopted the declaration “Vienna – City of Human Rights”³. In 2019, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Municipal Council decided to find a way to honour this commitment of being a City of Human Rights and to make the declaration more operational for children. It decided to develop a Child and Youth Strategy, which would be developed with participatory methods together with the children of Vienna.

Jürgen Czernohorszky, Executive City Councillor for Education, Integration, Youth and Personnel, declared in the preface of the strategy:

“The participation of children and young people is no privilege, but a right. Children must be heard and their views must be considered in all matters that affect them. This right to appropriate participation is included in the Austrian Federal Constitution and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, whose 30th anniversary was celebrated in 2019.”⁴

² [Werkstadt Junges Wien](#), 2019

³ “The City of Vienna pledges to act as a guardian and defender of human rights by striving to respect, protect, fulfil and be accountable for human rights in all of its areas of competence. Based on this approach, the City of Vienna actively supports its citizens in asserting and upholding their human rights by providing adequate framework conditions and using them as a basis for its actions”. Retrieved from the website: [Vienna - city of human rights \(wien.gv.at\)](https://www.wien.gv.at/humanrights/)

⁴ [The-Vienna-Children-and-Youth-Strategy.pdf \(wien.gv.at\)](#)

Some of the factors that motivated the decision to develop this strategy were the following:



- **The right to be heard and to have your opinion taken into account is a fundamental right of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

Austria adopted a Federal Constitutional Law on the Rights of Children in 2011, which incorporated some aspects of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into the Constitution. As a consequence of the adoption of this law, the Austrian Constitution recognizes the right of children to be heard in decisions that affect them. This provision also applies to local decision makers and city councillors felt it was better to be pro-active about involving children in the decisions of the city rather than wait for a complaint to be made in courts as this is now a right applicable in Austrian courts.

- **Voting age lowered from 18 to 16 in Austria in 2007.**

The electoral reform which led to lowering the voting age to 16 was a top-down process. The reform was accompanied by several measures for the youngest voters, such as awareness-raising campaigns, and ‘civic and citizenship education was implemented as a mandatory cross-curricular educational principle’.⁵ The Vienna municipal Council considered that it was vital to provide opportunities for them to start experiencing the democratic process to prepare for their voting rights.

One of the objectives of developing this strategy was also to continue to reinforce a community where children and young people are valued community members and actively contribute their time, ideas and perspectives to civic life.

“They can contribute their experience, their ideas, their thoughts how we could further improve the city.”

Peter Kraus, City Councillor

- **Still, many children in Vienna would not be able to vote when they reached 16 years old.**

In 2021, 29.5% of all people living in Vienna were not allowed to vote because of their citizenship status; among young people aged 16-19, it was as high as 30.7%⁶. The municipal council also based its decision to develop a strategy on the idea that it was important to provide these people with an opportunity to actively experience democracy was equally important for them and for the future of the city. The project of developing a child and youth strategy focused on issues of active citizenship and engagement in public life at the municipal level, through means other than voting in elections.

The City of Vienna had the experience of citizen participation but not with the scale and open-ended nature that the Council had in mind. The mayor asked [Wekstadt Junges Wien](#), a small department in charge of child and youth participation activities within the municipality, to coordinate the development of this ambitious project. Bettina Schwarzmayer, who leads this expert team said:

“Politicians were unusually brave to allow the agenda-setting 100 percent by the target group”⁷.

⁵ [What happens when the voting age is lowered to 16? A decade of evidence from Austria : Democratic Audit](#)

⁶ [Facts and figures on migration 2021 - Viennese population \(wien.gv.at\)](#)

⁷ [How Vienna involves children in shaping the city - Cities Today \(cities-today.com\)](#)

Discussion questions

Imagine that you are in charge of developing this strategy. In this new position, it might be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

Rationale:

- The municipality has a department for citizen participation, which might ask you questions like these: *Would the municipality give a fair or unfair advantage to children and young people by consulting them? What about other citizens?* What would you answer to that department to be allowed to go ahead with the consultation process with children and young people?
- Some of the city councillors might feel that they are accountable to the citizens who voted for them. Those councillors would consider those citizens as the ones whose needs and opinions should be taken into consideration first and foremost. How would you respond to those arguments?
- How important is it for children to prepare for exercising their rights, such as their voting rights?

Design:

- Considering that children are not a monolithic group, how could the consultation process inform a strategy that would ensure that all groups of children, even the most vulnerable, were reached? Are some children too young to be involved? How could the tools and methods used for developing and implementing the strategy be adapted to the different age groups?
- Which other stakeholders should be involved in developing the strategy for it to be a success? With whom can you partner?
- How do you collect input on sensitive issues, such as mental health or violence? What is the most appropriate method?
- Which child protection rules do you need to put in place to ensure that the children can take part in activities related to the development of the strategy while remaining safe?
- What if the children and young people make unrealistic or expensive proposals? Imagine how you would deal with those proposals.

Follow-up:

- What would give the strategy the best chance at being something the local councillors could fully stand behind and adopt?
- If the strategy is adopted, will it bring to life the proposals of the children and young people? How can the city ensure that the document does not stay on a shelf unused? How could you make sure that the measures are followed up on?
- If the strategy is adopted, what practices could be employed to ensure that the participatory process and the dynamics created by the consultation are not lost after adoption?
- What other solutions could have been designed to develop a strategy for children and young people?

Case reflections and potential endings



The consultation process was launched in February 2019 after holding extensive stakeholder interviews with agencies, associations and enterprises that work with young people in Vienna. A workshop concept was designed to ensure a child- and youth-friendly approach. A metaphor was developed to explain the purpose of the project: the aim of the consultation process was **to perform a “service check” on the City of Vienna.**

To ensure the support of the different stakeholders, the following governance structure was built into the project:

- **Advisory Council of departments and NGOs working directly with children:** that council oversaw the operative steering and guiding, for example designing the workshop toolbox.
- **A thematic Supervision Group** for each of the 9 Goals, with stakeholders from the respective field to benefit from the expertise and specialised knowledge of those stakeholders who work in those thematic areas.
- **Interdepartmental Steering Group:** that group represented the 7 executive City Councillors. The involvement of this group throughout the project ensured the smooth adoption of the strategy by the Municipal Council of Vienna.

The Council organised 1,309 workshops with 22,581 children and young people between the ages of 4 and 19 (51.7% male, 48.2% female, 0.1% other). For children and young people with disabilities, 56 workshops were organised. In the workshops, the children answered the following questions:

- What works well in Vienna?
- What doesn't work so well in Vienna?
- What are the most pressing issues for the city?
- In what kind of Vienna would you like to live?

The toolbox was provided to schools, kindergartens, after-school care clubs, socio-educational group homes, adult education facilities, youth organizations and other associations working with and for children and young people in Vienna. To support the organisation of the workshops, the team could rely on an existing network of partners.

⁸ PID/Votava

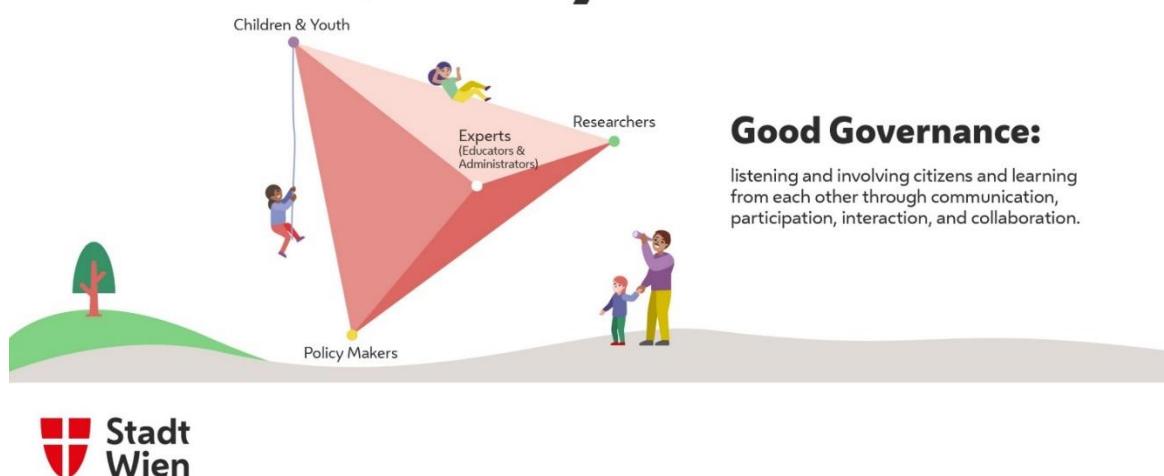
“In Vienna we already had a big network of organisations working with children and youth and they all are pretty committed to designing the city for this target group. All were very open and joined very fast.”

Marina Hanke, City Councillor⁹.

The input from the workshops was analysed by a social science institute.

In a first round, 9 topics that were of most interest to the children and young people were identified. 24 groups were chosen by lottery and invited to send a representative to a children and youth advisory board to discuss and prioritise these results. Objectives for the 9 topics were developed and then all Departments of the Vienna City Administration collected existing measures and developed new ones. Proposals for all 9 topics were then discussed with over 200 children and young people at a conference on the Day of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on 20th November 2019.

Research, Policy & Practice



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The [Vienna Children and Youth Strategy 2020-2025](#) was adopted by the Municipal Council on 28 May 2020 and contains **193 measures divided in 9 chapters corresponding to the 9 topics identified**: Nature and the environment, opportunities and future, health and well-being, community and togetherness, space, participation and opinion, security and safety, mobility and traffic, leisure and culture. Some examples of the measures included in the strategy: to increase the number and accessibility of public toilet facilities, to strengthen media literacy of children and young people, to develop and examine child and youth budgeting as a tool to review all budget estimates for their relevance to children and young people. Some of the recommendations are very precise and some leave more room for interpretation.

The development of the strategy was resource-intensive and lasted 18 months. The municipality coordinated the consultation process, provided the budget for the development of facilitation material, the analysis of

⁹ [How Vienna involves children in shaping the city - Cities Today \(cities-today.com\)](#)

¹⁰ Werkstatt Junges Wien: [PowerPoint-Präsentation \(eurocities.eu\)](#)

results and the development of the strategy paper and related documents. Partners invested a large number of working hours, by facilitating workshops (around 1000 of them were workshop facilitators) and reporting results and measures for all nine topics.

A Child Parliament and a Youth Parliament would monitor the implementation of the Strategy. The Child Parliament would be composed of 225 children from 5 to 13 years old, whereas the Youth Parliament would be composed of 100 young representatives from 14 to 20 years old.

Some of the first successes of the implementation of the strategy included the following:

- Mayor Michael Ludwig hosted a press conference just for children and youth about the city's pandemic response.
- Nine new shelters were built for women victims of domestic violence, with one shelter dedicated to girls and young women.
- €1 million euros were allocated for participatory budgeting geared to 4–19-year-olds¹¹.
- Some of the city districts began developing their own child and youth strategies¹².

A short video about the strategy: [Wien – Stadt der Kinder und Jugendlichen - YouTube](#)

¹¹ [How Vienna involves children in shaping the city - Cities Today \(cities-today.com\)](#)

¹² Vienna is composed of 23 districts, which have their own governance structures.

References

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European Commission, Study on child participation in EU political and democratic life

UNICEF UK, Youth Advocacy Toolkit

UNICEF, Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement

Werkstadt Junges Wien, [Facilitator guide](#)

Werkstadt Junges Wien, [PowerPoint-Präsentation](#)