

Policy Position on the European Commission's Proposed EU Youth Strategy (Post-2027)

Empowering Young People Through Local Democracy, Multilevel Governance and Community Leadership

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(Malta)



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Executive Summary

The Local Councils' Association welcomes the European Commission's initiative to develop a renewed EU Youth Strategy beyond 2027. Europe faces unprecedented challenges, including declining trust in democratic institutions, rapid technological change, demographic shifts, housing affordability, climate change, mental health concerns and growing social fragmentation. These challenges require a renewed commitment to youth participation and democratic renewal.

The LCA strongly believes that the success of the future EU Youth Strategy will depend on recognising local and regional governance as the foundation of democratic participation. While European and national institutions establish strategic objectives, it is local and regional authorities that transform these objectives into meaningful opportunities for young people.

The future Strategy should therefore strengthen multilevel governance by recognising Local Councils, Regional Authorities and National Associations of Local Authorities as essential partners in designing, implementing, coordinating and evaluating youth policies.





Democracy Begins at Local Level

Local councils are the democratic institutions closest to citizens. They are where young people first interact with elected representatives, experience public services, volunteer within their communities and learn that democracy is built through participation rather than simply through elections.

For this reason, the Local Councils' Association believes that municipalities should be recognised as strategic partners in the implementation of the future EU Youth Strategy.

However, successful implementation also requires effective cooperation between all levels of governance.

The Association proposes a strengthened multilevel governance model whereby:

- The European Union establishes strategic priorities, promotes cooperation and provides financial support.
- National Governments develop legislation, national policies and financing mechanisms.
- Regional Authorities coordinate inter-municipal initiatives, provide technical support, facilitate regional youth projects and strengthen cooperation between neighbouring municipalities.
- Local Councils engage directly with young people through democratic participation, community projects and local policymaking.
- National Associations of Local Authorities act as strategic partners by representing municipalities, coordinating capacity-building, disseminating good practices, facilitating international cooperation and ensuring that local realities inform national and European policymaking.



Regional Authorities – Coordinating Territorial Youth Governance

Regional Authorities play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between national policy and local implementation. Their territorial perspective enables them to coordinate initiatives that extend beyond the boundaries of individual municipalities while ensuring that local priorities remain at the centre of policy delivery.

The future EU Youth Strategy should recognise Regional Authorities as key facilitators of inter-municipal cooperation by:

- coordinating regional youth action plans and ensuring coherence across municipalities;
- facilitating joint youth projects that maximise resources and encourage collaboration between neighbouring Local Councils;
- providing technical assistance, professional expertise and administrative support, particularly to smaller municipalities with limited capacity;
- promoting the sharing of specialised services, infrastructure and facilities for the benefit of young people across an entire region;
- coordinating regional consultations and structured dialogue with young people on issues of common concern;
- supporting regional volunteering initiatives, cultural exchanges, sports programmes and environmental projects that foster a stronger sense of regional identity and active citizenship;
- collecting and analysing regional data to support evidence-based policymaking and evaluate the impact of youth policies;
- acting as intermediaries between national government and Local Councils to ensure effective implementation of European and national youth initiatives.

By strengthening regional governance, the European Union can encourage economies of scale, reduce duplication, improve service delivery and create stronger partnerships between municipalities.

Local Councils – The First Point of Democratic Engagement

Local Councils are the level of government closest to citizens and the first democratic institution with which most young people interact. As such, they play a unique role in nurturing democratic values, encouraging civic participation and responding to the everyday needs and aspirations of young residents.

The future EU Youth Strategy should recognise Local Councils as the primary institutions responsible for translating European youth objectives into tangible local action through:

- establishing and supporting Local Youth Councils and Children's Local Councils as permanent democratic structures;
- creating regular opportunities for structured dialogue between young people, elected representatives and local administrators;
- involving young people in participatory budgeting, local planning, environmental initiatives, cultural programmes and community development projects;
- promoting volunteering, social inclusion and intergenerational solidarity within local communities;
- supporting initiatives that enhance mental wellbeing, healthy lifestyles, digital inclusion and active citizenship;
- encouraging young people to participate in local decision-making throughout the policy cycle, from identifying community needs to evaluating public services;
- providing accessible and inclusive public spaces where young people can meet, learn, innovate and contribute to community life;
- fostering partnerships with schools, youth organisations, civil society, local businesses and other community stakeholders to create integrated local participation ecosystems.

The Local Councils' Association believes that meaningful youth participation can only be achieved when Local Councils are adequately empowered, resourced and recognised as strategic actors within the European governance framework.

National Associations of Local Authorities – Linking Europe, National Government and Municipalities

National Associations of Local Authorities occupy a unique position within the system of multilevel governance. As representative organisations of municipalities, they provide strategic leadership, institutional coordination and policy expertise while ensuring that the collective voice of local government is effectively represented at national and European levels.

The future EU Youth Strategy should formally recognise National Associations as strategic partners responsible for:

- representing the interests, experiences and priorities of Local Councils in national and European policymaking;
- coordinating the implementation of European youth initiatives across municipalities and ensuring consistency in delivery;
- providing capacity-building, training and professional development for mayors, councillors, municipal staff and youth participation facilitators;
- developing practical guidance, toolkits and policy frameworks to assist Local Councils in implementing youth participation initiatives;
- facilitating peer learning and the exchange of good practices between municipalities at national and international levels;
- promoting innovation by identifying, documenting and disseminating successful models of youth participation and democratic engagement;
- coordinating research, monitoring and evaluation to assess the impact of local youth policies and inform future reforms;
- strengthening cooperation with European institutions, the Committee of the Regions, ALDA, CEMR and other international organisations to ensure that local perspectives contribute to the development of European youth policy;
- supporting municipalities in accessing European funding opportunities and developing transnational partnerships; and
- advocating for stronger local democracy, subsidiarity and multilevel governance as fundamental principles of European youth policy.

National Associations also play a critical role in ensuring that smaller municipalities, which may lack specialised expertise or administrative resources, are able to participate fully in European programmes and implement high-quality youth initiatives.

By strengthening the role of National Associations, the European Union will reinforce the institutional capacity of local government, promote greater policy coherence and ensure that European youth policies are effectively translated into meaningful action within every community.

These three levels — Regional Authorities, Local Councils and National Associations of Local Authorities — should not be viewed as separate actors but as complementary pillars of a coherent multilevel governance system. Working together, they can ensure that the future EU Youth Strategy is implemented consistently across Europe while remaining sufficiently flexible to respond to the diverse needs of local communities and young people.

The Local Councils' Association believes that National Associations should be formally recognised within the future EU Youth Strategy as key institutions capable of translating European priorities into effective local action while strengthening cooperation between municipalities and higher levels of government.



From Participation to Democratic Leadership

Youth participation should extend beyond consultation.

The Association believes that Europe should move from encouraging young people to express their opinions towards empowering them to become future democratic leaders.

Malta has demonstrated leadership through the introduction of Vote16, granting 16-year-olds not only the right to vote in Local Council elections but also the right to contest those elections. Furthermore, where elected by their community, young councillors are also eligible to serve as Mayor. This reform recognised that democratic participation should begin earlier and that young people are capable of making informed choices, representing their communities, and assuming positions of leadership.

The Local Councils' Association believes that democratic empowerment should not stop at voting. The right to vote should be accompanied by the right to participate, the right to represent, and ultimately the right to lead.

The future EU Youth Strategy should therefore promote a democratic participation pathway based upon four interconnected rights:

- The Right to Vote, recognising early democratic participation through initiatives such as Vote16.
- The Right to Participate, ensuring continuous involvement through Local Youth Councils, participatory budgeting, and structured dialogue.
- The Right to Contest Local Elections, encouraging Member States to remove unnecessary barriers that prevent young people from standing as candidates for local office.
- The Right to Hold Executive Local Office, ensuring that where young candidates are democratically elected, they are equally eligible to serve as Mayor or in other local executive leadership positions, in accordance with national legislation.

Young people should not simply inherit democracy; they should actively shape it, represent it, and be empowered to lead it.

Democracy Starts Before Sixteen

The Local Councils' Association believes that democratic education begins long before young people become eligible to vote.

Through its Children's Local Councils Initiative, the Association has demonstrated how children can actively contribute to discussions affecting their communities while developing civic responsibility, leadership skills and democratic values.

Inspired by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Children's Local Councils provide children with meaningful opportunities to express their views and participate in local initiatives from an early age.

The Association recommends that the future EU Youth Strategy formally recognise Children's Local Councils as a model of European good practice and encourage municipalities across Europe to establish similar structures.

Together with Vote16 and Local Youth Councils, these initiatives create a continuous pathway of democratic participation:

Children's Local Councils – Vote16 – Local Youth Councils – Participatory Budgeting – Contesting Local Elections – Becoming Mayor – Community Leadership – Active European Citizenship.



Participation Must Become Part of Everyday Governance

Youth participation should become a permanent feature of local governance rather than an occasional consultation exercise.

The future Strategy should encourage municipalities to establish:

- Local Youth Councils;
- Children's Local Councils;
- Youth Advisory Boards;
- Participatory Budgeting initiatives;
- Regular structured dialogue between young people and elected representatives;
- Youth representation on municipal advisory committees where appropriate.

Young people should contribute throughout the entire policy cycle—from identifying local priorities to evaluating public policies and services.



Harnessing Digital Innovation Responsibly

The digital transformation presents new opportunities for democratic participation.

The future Strategy should encourage the responsible use of Artificial Intelligence and digital technologies to improve civic engagement, accessibility and transparency while protecting democratic integrity.

Local authorities should be supported in developing innovative digital participation platforms that complement face-to-face engagement and ensure that no young person is excluded because of geographical, social or digital barriers.

Leaving No Community Behind

The future Strategy must recognise that opportunities for participation differ across Europe.

Young people living in islands, rural communities, remote regions and disadvantaged neighbourhoods often face additional barriers to democratic participation.

As an island Member State, Malta understands the importance of territorial cohesion and believes that local and regional authorities require sufficient flexibility and resources to respond to local realities while ensuring equal opportunities for all young people.

Investing in Capacity and Sustainable Funding

Meaningful participation requires sustainable investment.

The Association recommends:

- long-term financial support for Local Youth Councils and Children's Local Councils;
- operational funding for municipalities and regional authorities implementing youth initiatives;
- dedicated capacity-building programmes for mayors, councillors, regional officials, municipal staff and youth workers;
- stronger cooperation between Local Councils, Regions, educational institutions, National Associations and civil society organisations.

Participation should become a permanent public function rather than a project-based activity dependent upon temporary funding opportunities.



Measuring Democratic Participation

The future Strategy should establish common European indicators measuring:

- youth participation rates;
- implementation of youth-led proposals;
- Local Youth Councils established;
- Children's Local Councils established;
- participatory budgeting initiatives;
- diversity of participation;
- trust in local public institutions;
- youth representation within elected local government.

Common indicators will improve accountability while facilitating the exchange of good practices across Europe.





Conclusion

The Local Councils' Association welcomes the European Commission's ambition to develop a renewed EU Youth Strategy that empowers young people and strengthens democracy across Europe.

The Association believes that the next Strategy should place local democracy and multilevel governance at its core, recognising the complementary roles of European institutions, national governments, regional authorities, Local Councils and National Associations of Local Authorities in delivering meaningful youth participation.

Europe should move beyond consulting young people towards governing with young people.

By recognising the value of Vote16, promoting Children's Local Councils, strengthening Local Youth Councils, encouraging participatory budgeting, investing in digital innovation, empowering young people to vote, participate, contest elections and lead, and supporting the coordinating role of Regions and National Associations of Local Authorities, the European Union can create a new generation of active citizens equipped to build resilient, inclusive and democratic communities.

The Local Councils' Association remains committed to working with the European Commission, the Committee of the Regions, ALDA, Member States, Regional Authorities, National Associations of Local Authorities, municipalities and youth organisations to ensure that the post-2027 EU Youth Strategy becomes a genuine framework for democratic renewal across Europe.







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