



HEAR THE VOICE OF THE YOUTH!

**26 wishes from young people
for decision-makers**





Pamphlet about the final statements of the Digiraati discussions held by the Finnish Red Cross Youth Shelters.

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What is Digiraati?

DIGIRAATI.FI IS ONE of the democracy services maintained by the Finnish Ministry of Justice. The purpose of the service is to provide all people under the age of 29 with a channel to influence matters and an opportunity to make their voice heard in issues important to them.

The discussions are anonymous and comply with the rules for a safer space. The key thoughts are compiled on the Digiraati website as a public final statement.

Digiraati discussions can be held by ministries, municipalities, wellbeing services counties, other authorities or civic organisations, for example. The adoption of Digiraati discussions is supported by the Centre of Excellence for Participation and Koordinaatti, and discussions have been held by the Youth Academy, Red Cross Youth Shelters and SOS Children's Villages, among others.

Digiraati discussions of the Red Cross Youth Shelters

The Finnish Red Cross Youth Shelters offer young people and their loved ones help in five municipalities and online across the country. Youth Shelters provide young people with help, such as temporary accommodation and support for becoming independent and offer discussion support both for young people and their family and friends.

Digiraati is one of the volunteering and civic activity options offered by Youth Shelters, and Digiraati discussions have been held since autumn 2020.

Digiraati discussions are, in particular, intended for those whose voice would not otherwise be heard in society and who are not familiar with social influencing. The discussions are primarily guided by trained volunteers and interns of Youth Shelters.

If you are interested in holding Digiraati discussions or hearing more about the Digiraati discussions of Youth Shelters, please contact Satu Rantakärkkä at satu.rantakarkka@redcross.fi.



Read more about Youth Shelters:

www.redcross.fi/get-help-and-support/youth-shelters

 @nuortenturvis

 @nuortenturvis

 Youth Shelters, Red Cross

Read more about Digiraati:

Digiraati.fi

 @digiraadit

Young people's thoughts to help with decision-making

"I also think that the future will hold many interesting challenges and that I want to be involved in considering and developing our new future direction :)" – YOUNG PERSON WHO PARTICIPATED IN A DIGIRAATI DISCUSSION

IN THIS PAMPHLET, we have compiled the most important messages from all of the Digiraati discussions held so far by the Red Cross Youth Shelters. The discussions have given us much information about young people's thoughts, wishes and requirements. We have compiled them in a single publication to allow you, who make decisions affecting young people's lives, develop services for young people or meet young people, to take them into account in your work.

Young people have the right to be heard in decision-making. Hearing their voice helps us understand the challenges that young people face and make sustainable choices that support equality. Themes that often repeat in the discussions include experiences of loneliness, insufficient services and bad encounters or, in the worst case, being ignored. Nevertheless, each Digiraati discussion has brought up hopes for a better future and proposals on how things could be improved – and, most importantly, young people's wish to be involved, belong to communities and influence matters important to themselves and others.

The young participants show solidarity. They wish for everyone's wellbeing and highlight the importance of various minority group's rights. The right to influence matters does not belong only to those who can formulate their thoughts well. Young people want and require support for influencing.

Youth Shelters set out to hold Digiraati discussions because we also wanted to offer opportunities for participation and influencing to young people who cannot get their voices heard in other ways. From the start, we have wanted to provide young people with an opportunity not only to be heard but also participate in organising Digiraati discussions as preparers, communicators and discussion leaders.

We adopted our young clients' wishes regarding online influencing as our guideline. Above all, this influencing must be safe, meaningful, easy and, preferably, anonymous. Anonymity is important, as not all young people are able to participate in person, and the threshold for putting your face and name to the thoughts you share is too high. This may be contributed to by young people's experiences that their voices do not matter or that they have previously not been heard or have been ignored.

The topics of Digiraati discussions have mostly come directly from young people. Young people often want to discuss topics such as loneliness and mental health services but also climate change and democracy. It is important that we do not only give young people an opportunity to speak when we think that the topic concerns their lives. Young people must participate widely in social discourse because it is difficult to come up with a topic that does not concern their present or future.

This pamphlet contains messages from young people on five themes: loneliness, low-threshold services, non-discrimination, becoming independent and influencing matters. Each section includes direct quotes from Digiraati discussions and facts about the themes. You can read the sections in order or start from the one that interests you the most. The pamphlet also offers information on Digiraati and Youth Shelters, as well as a commentary that examines the thoughts of the Digiraati participants in light of current youth research.

A print edition of this pamphlet has been published in Finnish and an electronic edition has been published in Finnish, Swedish and English. They are available at: bit.ly/kuule-nuorten-aani.

Youth Shelters and several other organisations hold Digiraati discussions all the time. A final statement is written about each discussion, summarising the discussion with the young people. The final statements for each discussion are available (in Finnish only) at digiraati.fi.

Thank you to the Centre of Excellence for Participation, ALL-YOUTH research project and all of the organisations and people who are working with us to improve Digiraati's reach and make it an even better and more equal place for young people to participate and influence matters. I would like to thank the Ministry of Education and Culture for funding Digiraati and the Ministry of Justice for developing the Digiraati service.

Above all, I would like to thank the young people, volunteers and interns who have participated in the Digiraati discussions. Without you, no Digiraati discussions would have taken place.

Satu Rantakärkkä,
Developer of Voluntary Work,
Youth Shelters, Red Cross



Participation as a right and source of wellbeing for young people

The right of the child to be heard is supported by legislation such as the Constitution of Finland (1 June 1999/731, section 2), the Youth Act (1285/2016, section 24) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12).

THE STARTING POINT of digiraati discussions is that each young person has the right to have their own unique voice heard in their communities and society. This right is undeniably grounded in law and international conventions. Not only do young people have the right to participate in communities important to them in the way they want, this is also a human need and a particularly important dimension of wellbeing during youth (Rättilä & Honkatukia 2022).

Listening to young people and taking them seriously in issues that are important to them means both implementing young people's rights and building sustainable wellbeing. Sustainable wellbeing refers to a comprehensive implementation of the basic needs and rights of livelihood, being heard and appreciated, and meaningful participation. Wellbeing is sustainable when these dimensions of human wellbeing are in balance and implemented fairly in communities and societies and, ultimately, with consideration to the sustainability of the entire ecosystem.

This pamphlet is a demonstration of how much young people have to say about current matters in society, regardless of whether they concern the rights of minorities, shortcomings in health and social services, cuts in education or the mitigation of climate change.

Many of the messages from young people express criticism. They reinforce the understanding of current intertwined social issues that have also been identified more widely. A great deal of work is still needed to resolve these issues in order to realise the right of every young person to a sustainable future and wellbeing.

The importance of social relationships during youth is highlighted in the young people's commentaries. On the other hand, relationships involve a variety of struggles and difficulties. (Honkatukia et al, 2020.) Unfortunately, many young people are familiar with exhaustion, loneliness and being discriminated against. The young people who have participated in the Digiraati discussions talk about the discrimination they experience based on their gender, expression of sexuality, ethnic background or abilities, for instance (Salmi & Suurpää 2023).

Being excluded and loneliness are tough experiences for many young people, with potential far-reaching impacts. The Digiraati participants describe how loneliness has caused sadness, depression, a distorted self-image and doubt about the justification for their existence. Young people may be afraid of being discriminated against in advance, which may stop them from pursuing the matters that are important to them or seeking support when they need it (Mietola et al 2022). The fear or experiences of discrimination may lead to isolation from important communities, society and its important services.

Many of the Digiraati participants feel that they do not receive enough support for these issues from their parents, teachers and other adults (Kallio et al 2021). The services for young people are fragmented, and young people have access to far too few school nurses, welfare officers and psychologists, for example. The threshold for seeking help may sometimes be too high, with

the young person feeling a lot of pressure to succeed and being ashamed of not coping alone. Young people also need a variety of recreational facilities where they can meet their peers and make friends.

The strong message put forward by the young people is that it is important for the various operators in society – from health and social services to the police, educational institutions and organisations – to understand young people’s need to belong and the significance of good social relationships for growth, entering adulthood and wellbeing. Not all young people have equal opportunities or resources to establish and maintain community relationships, but they are all entitled to receive help with strengthening their social relationships. This right belongs to both underaged people and those above the age of 18.

Young people also make important observations about unequal opportunities to receive support. For instance, issues concerning discrimination are recognised better in some educational institutions and communities than others. Similarly, the sense of belonging is weaker among young people who have sought help for issues such as mental health and substance abuse issues than among other young people, regardless of whether we look at relationships with friends and family or the sense of belonging in school or recreational communities. Young people who have sought help also have less trust in society than other young people, and experiences of loneliness are more common among them. (Suurpää et al 2023.)

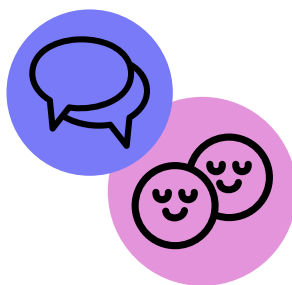
Young people on the cusp of adulthood are required to have the ability to quickly transition to an independent life, even if they lack the strength and resources. Currently, many young people seeking support feel that they are

treated as problematic individuals or people who do not fit into the mould if their path to adulthood is winding and does not follow the normative life path. Young people wish to be treated by society, services and their local communities as complete persons with the right and opportunities to succeed in life, regardless of their background and life situation. Each young person has the constitutional right to lead a safe life and receive care.

During Digiraati discussions, the young people talk about their personal experiences and other young people's experiences that they have observed in their daily life. Despite expressing criticism, these stories also have a positive purpose that promotes wellbeing. Digiraati discussions are one way to strengthen young people's right to participate in social discourse and find solutions just as they are, from their own perspective. At best, these discussions are necessary dialogue between generations and part of the efforts to involve young people in an appreciative way. They can reinforce young people's trust in their own future and the future of society and Earth.

Päivi Honkatukia,
Professor of Youth Research,
Tampere University

Leena Suurpää,
Manager of Finnish Red Cross Youth Shelters



More low-threshold services for young people – now

“I’m mentally and physically exhausted. I’m alone. I can’t cope. Where can I find help?”

YOUNG PEOPLE REQUIRE more and better health and social services. One thing that came up repeatedly in the Digiraati discussions was a need for low-threshold services – without long waiting times and provided 24/7 where young people are. Unfortunately, many young people are familiar with exhaustion, loneliness and being discriminated against. Too often, they are forced to cope with these issues without help.

The triple crisis caused by climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine is evident not only in Digiraati discussions but also many research results. For example, the 2021 School Health Promotion Study found that the wellbeing experienced by young people and their satisfaction with life has worsened. Meanwhile, the loneliness and symptoms of depressions they experience have increased ([National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2022](#)). Wellbeing is lower than average among young people who belong to gender and sexual minorities or have a foreign background or reduced mobility in particular ([State Youth Council, 2023](#)).

The Digiraati participants were familiar with seeking help, but long waiting times to services and a lack of information on providers of help often pose a challenge. They even have to wait in line for low-threshold services, such as chats. A need to access help without requiring a referral or diagnosis is highlighted in the answers.

“Preventive services should be increased to prevent every situation from escalating to the point where welfare officers and others are in trouble with their appointments and workload.”

Exhausted young people do not know how or have no energy to seek the services they need. The Digiraati participants propose that low-threshold services be increased, made available 24/7 and be provided at places such as schools and youth centres, where young people already spend time. The young people would also like their parents, teachers and other adults to provide more support.

The young people also identify shortcomings in school health care, as they feel that the number of public health nurses, psychologists and welfare officers is too low. With regard to preventive services, they propose that each student attend a mandatory appointment with the welfare officer, for example.

“Prioritise mental health services for young people and young adults. If we can tackle issues early on and prevent them from being prolonged and becoming chronic, it will also ultimately cause less costs.”

75 %

of young people feel that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Among non-binary people, 86% felt this way.

(Panula et al 2023)

35 %

of students at higher education institutions feel mentally stressed, which is evident in symptoms of anxiety or depression or both.

(National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021)

10 %

of young people with depression said that they received efficient and effective treatment for their illness throughout the depressive episode.

(Finnish Central Association for Mental Health, 2022)

This section also draws from [Mitä kuuluu nuorille, Kojo 2022](#).

1.

Increasing low-threshold services available without a waiting list and providing them where young people already spend time, such as schools and on the internet. The need for support may also occur at night, which is why help must be available around the clock.

2.

Mental health examinations must be included in health check-ups, and a mandatory appointment with a welfare officer must be organised for all students.

3.

More healthcare professionals are needed in school and student healthcare.

4.

Exhausted young people do not know how or have no energy to navigate the service maze. They want to surround themselves with safe adults who can identify the young people's need for support early on and help them access help.

5.

Adults working with young people require training on how they can guide young people to mental health services and the types of services available.

Loneliness causes illness

“Loneliness is very stressful; it makes you overanalyse things more and compare yourself more to others. It eats at your soul and joy of life from within.”

AT THE DIGIRAATI DISCUSSIONS, the young people describe, in a heartbreaking way, what loneliness feels like: sadness, depression, a distorted self-image and, at worst, like you should not exist. The young people say that loneliness causes physical health issues, makes it difficult to maintain a routine and increases substance abuse. When prolonged, loneliness makes it difficult to establish new relationships as a result of increased mistrust towards others.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased loneliness among young people, and young people have had difficulties returning to their former social relationships in the aftermath of the pandemic. Distance communication has not replaced meetings in person. (Kekkonen et al 2022.) Based on the Digiraati discussions, feelings of loneliness have become prolonged particularly among young people who were already lonely before the pandemic.

“It’s been difficult for me to return to ‘normal life’. My life situation changed during the pandemic and I found myself becoming distanced from my friends. So now, even though I could meet up with people in a more normal way, I very rarely go anywhere or meet with anyone.”

The Digiraati participants consider loneliness among young people to be a structural issue in society. Its causes include things such as narrow-mindedness, racism and discrimination. Young people who do not fit the social norms may easily be left alone.

Adults who work with young people have the opportunity and obligation to prevent loneliness. Young people wish that adults would take responsibility for the groups they form at schools and recreational settings in particular and help young people get to know each other. Outreach youth work in particular is considered to be important, as it reaches those who are too afraid to participate in activities.

For their part, young people above the age of 18 require low-threshold facilities where they can meet with others without spending money. For instance, recreational activities may be too expensive for unemployed people, preventing them from forming relationships with their peers. The Digiraati participants call for equal recreational opportunities in general.

They say that in an ideal society everyone is accepted as they are and those in a more disadvantaged position are taken better into account. This would lead to a society where no one is forced to suffer from loneliness.

The exceptional circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to young people and young adults who do not speak Finnish or Swedish as their first language to experience significantly more loneliness and dissatisfaction with life, relationships and free time than Finnish- and Swedish-speakers. (Helffer et al 2023)

1/3

15–24-year-olds feel that they are excluded at least once a month.

(Finnish Red Cross, 2023)

1/3

students at higher education institutions feel that they are not part of any group related to their studies.

(National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021)

- 6.** **Young people must be told that they are enough just as they are.**
- 7.** **Adults are responsible for helping young people form groups and connect with their peers when it is difficult for the young people to get to know others at school or recreational activities, for example.**
- 8.** **Safe and discrimination-free meeting places, such as youth centres, can reduce loneliness and help young people get to know different types of people.**
- 9.** **Outreach youth work is important because it reaches young people who are otherwise too afraid to participate in meetings.**
- 10.** **Equal recreational opportunities are important. Young adults over the age of 18 do not necessarily have the resources to participate in recreational activities, making it difficult to meet new people.**

No one is born to discriminate

EVERY YOUNG PERSON deserves to be treated with respect, an open mind and without discrimination. It is important for the adults who interact with young people to be safe, understand minorities and know how to intervene in discrimination and racism. Young people must be able to feel that talking about discrimination makes a difference.

One Digiraati participant offers the insight that no one is born to discriminate. For instance, schools play a major role in what is taught about non-discrimination and minorities – and how teachers' knowhow can be improved. Digiraati participants call for workshops, training and visits by experience specialists. They are also concerned about regional differences in education. Equality and non-discrimination must not be forgotten even in small municipalities.

“Few young people want to hurt others on purpose. That’s why when discrimination does occur, there must be a competent adult present who can recognise the situation, explain to the young people why their actions or words are hurtful and make sure that the message gets across.”

Both good and bad experiences can make a lasting impact on a young person's life. The Digiraati participants call for adults to understand diverse gender and sexual identities when dealing with young people.

Young people are often at a sensitive stage when dealing with health and social services professionals, which is why sensitivity is particularly important. Young people do not want others to make assumptions about things such as their sexual orientation in advance. During the Digiraati discussions, it turns out that young people avoid talking to a professional if they feel that talking openly could lead to making excuses.

Familiarity with LGBTQIA+ vocabulary, i.e. vocabulary related to gender and sexual minorities, and understanding the emotions related to the young person's life situation are considered to be important.

Young people establish and maintain online relationships that are just as important and real to them as other relationships. On the other hand, meetings online can also be confusing and frightening. Adults should keep up with trends with an open mind. Low-threshold online and sexual education is required in order for young people to understand their rights and obligations. The Digiraati participants called for more inclusive and approachable sexual education to be included in curricula.

"I've personally felt bad if someone has talked to me like I'm somehow different from others. This has also sometimes made me feel like I don't belong, which I don't generally feel strongly. When I was young, the feeling of not belonging surfaced whenever some adult in a position of authority implied that I'm not one of the 'ordinary young people'."

62%

of young people think that Finland's future should be built on equality and non-discrimination.

(Eronen et al 2022)

18%

of young people think that discrimination has a negative impact on well-being. Especially young immigrants and young people with disabilities or reduced mobility brought up their experiences of discrimination.

(Eronen et al 2022)

23%

of young people belonging to more than one minority group have experienced discrimination.

(State Youth Council, 2023)

11.

Adults, such as teachers, authorities and employers, must know how to interact with a young person who tells them about experiences of racism, discrimination or harassment, for example.

12.

Young people and adults who work with them require concrete tools to address discrimination, harassment and racism. For instance, young people think that workshops and visits by experience specialists could help.

13.

Equality and non-discrimination must be taught equally, regardless of the size of the municipality.

14.

Young people want to be treated without prejudice, taking into consideration the different life situations of young people. For example, knowledge of LGBTQIA+ vocabulary and sexual education in the curriculum would improve adults' knowhow.

15.

Online encounters are everyday life for young people, but they still cause nervousness, for example. Adults must be interested in how relationships that are established online affect young people.

Young people are left too alone on the cusp of independence

YOUNG PEOPLE OVER the age of 18 feel a pressure to become independent, have difficulties finding their own path and are concerned about learning practical things. The transition phase between childhood and adulthood involves many major decisions, such as applying for a place of study, moving to your own home and establishing your own everyday routines there. The Digiraati discussions highlight society's high expectations about finding a job, for example, even though young people may never have received guidance to find the right profession for themselves.

Young people often have to make decisions about their life early on and independently. At worst, excessively high internal expectations and performance pressures from outside lead to exhaustion. That is precisely why many young people need reliable parties to help them apply for various types of subsidies, for example.

"[...] I'm a bit of a lost case and there are so few helpers and so many people who need help. And I suppose I could help myself, but I just don't get anything done, and I don't quite know where to start."

In today's world, growing up requires more knowhow than in the past, and learning it requires time and support. The support network formed by close and safe adults is valuable but often insufficient. For instance, financial management skills can be weak if they are not taught at home. The young people mused that schools could support young people better in adapting to a new place and in establishing new relationships.

Young people belonging to gender and sexual minorities are particularly vulnerable. In the Digiraati discussions, it comes up that some people are forced to become independent too early because they are not accepted as they are at home, for example. Support from their family is not a given for them. Rainbow youth are also afraid of discriminatory, negative attitudes that can affect their access to housing, for example.

“Generally speaking, rainbow youth are at greater risk of social exclusion when compared to young people in general, so if becoming independent is challenging in general and no support is available, rainbow youth are more likely to suffer and become socially excluded.”

Because of structural discrimination, other minorities may also find it difficult to find their own path. For example, an EU project by the Ministry of Justice (Hoppu 2022) found that a young person belonging to an ethnic minority may feel like society expects them to pursue a certain line of study and career path. The dependence of people with disabilities on their parents and administrative decisions, for example, reduces their capability to become independent.

Despite everything, becoming independent means a wonderful time of freedom, particularly for rainbow youth, as it allows them to build their everyday lives as they want. It strengthens their ability to express their own identity and accumulate experiences of success in the adult world.



Finland requires people to become independent at a young age. Young people move away from home at the age of 21 on average. Among EU Member States, the average is 26. (Eurostat 2022)

16.

Instead of pressuring people to perform well, society's structures should allow every young person to find their own path in peace.

17.

Young people need more training in schools in becoming independent, choosing a career and managing their finances.

18.

Low-threshold services focusing on young people becoming independent would provide support during this transition phase. Young people hope for online support networks, chats, social media accounts and Q&A columns, for example.

19.

For instance, regardless of their sexual orientation, every young person must have equal access to housing and employment, among other things.

20.

Young people on the cusp of adulthood would like an information package to be sent to their homes regarding services and organisational activities provided for young people by the municipality, for example.

Young people need opportunities to influence matters

YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES have passed from crisis to crisis over the last few years. The constant exceptional circumstances are exhausting and eat away at young people's faith in the future. Nevertheless, young people do not want to end up in a bubble where everything is said to be fine. They also know what they would like to change in society.

The Digiraati discussions highlight young people's concerns about climate change, minority rights, lack of health and social services and cuts in education. It is the responsibility of decision-makers to ensure that young people retain their faith in the future and are taken into account in decision-making.

"Savings and cuts can be made somewhere less significant than the hopes for the future."

Low turnout at elections among young people has been a cause for concern for a long time. Based on the Digiraati discussions, the main reason for not voting is the difficulty in finding a suitable candidate. The questions included in election compasses feel difficult and no one teaches you how to use the compasses. The young people propose education about elections in schools, including introducing the different candidates and going over the election compasses together.

The young people also regard a lack of democracy skills, the example set by family and friends and the low number of young candidates as obstacles to participation. As examples of ways to attract young people to politics, the

Digiraati participants mention lowering the voting age, support for young candidates and discussion about topics of interest to young people.

“Maybe we should get the decision-makers to say things like, ‘Hey, young people, we need you, please stand for election so that you can be part of the next decision-making team’, because being too afraid to join the ‘veterans’ is also a factor.”

Many people want encouragement that they can and are able to decide on who to vote for as long as they receive better information about the parties and candidates. Disappointment in things such as the climate measures of current decision-makers also makes young people feel that voting is not worthwhile. However, this does not mean that young people are not otherwise active in promoting matters that are important to them. The Digiraati participants mused that small actions have a greater impact on the environment than demonstrations, for example.

Social media is an important channel for participation for young people. Social media services are good for sharing both your own and other people’s

41%

of young people consider climate change and nature conservation to be an important crisis that needs to be resolved in Finland. The top three crises also included the social exclusion of young people and the global political situation.

(Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023)

51%

of young people feel that they have not been listened to enough in decision-making during the pandemic.

(Eronen et al 2022)

opinions, and young people wish that social media influencers would also be involved in election communications. The internet is a natural way for young people to influence matters through various municipal and citizens' initiatives and Digiraati discussions, for example.

“Boldly go and get your voice heard, because we young people make the future and there is strength in us. Even if you feel nervous about putting yourself forward, do it.”

Not everyone has equal opportunities to influence matters – for example, signing a citizens' initiative requires you to be over the age of 18 and have online banking credentials or at least a phone. The Digiraati participants also do not feel comfortable sharing their own opinions on social media, for example.

Nevertheless, a large proportion of the Digiraati participants see the future as bright and full of opportunities. They find hope in their support network, family and the fact that help is available when needed. Equal opportunities to influence matters also support young people's faith in the future and that everyone can live a meaningful life in accordance with their own values.



This section is also based on information from [the Finnish National Youth Council Allianssi](#).

21.

Young people need information, discussion support and peer support to process crises and improve their media literacy.

22.

Young people know what they want, but decision-makers must also help make the changes possible. Young people are interested in young people's matters, climate change, equality, human rights issues and current matters discussed on the news, for example.

23.

Democracy education in schools must be developed. It is important to assure young people that they can and are able to choose the most suitable candidate for themselves.

24.

Young people are underrepresented in political decision-making. Many would like to see the voting age lowered, for example.

25.

Young people want to see other young people stand for election. It is important for political parties to support them in standing for election and carrying out an election campaign.

26.

It is the duty of decision-makers to offer young people equal opportunities to influence matters and, through this, give them hope for the future.

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