



Youth councils in the Nordic region; Strengthening Democratic Participation and Youth Involvement

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Current problems democracy and participation are facing

- Polarization is increasing, leading to divisions in society and weakening social cohesion.
- Regional inequality is growing, especially between larger cities and smaller municipalities.
- Young people show a strong interest in social issues, but often lack accessible and meaningful ways to participate in politics or civic life.
- Democratic self-confidence among youth is low; many young people do not feel confident, informed, or empowered enough to engage in democratic processes.
- Internal security, national defence, and societal resilience are facing new challenges due to global instability and domestic tensions. Strengthening democratic institutions, civil society, and social trust is essential to building long-term resilience.

Youth councils promote participation and democratic education

- Youth councils enable participation where it matters most — within formal democratic structures. They ensure that young people's voices are heard not only in symbolic forums but directly within municipal and regional governance processes.
- They support the development of active and competent citizens by offering young people real-life experience in democratic decision-making, critical thinking and responsibility.
- Youth councils improve the quality of local decision-making by bringing in fresh perspectives, highlighting youth-specific concerns, and ensuring policies reflect the diversity of the population.
- While not the only tool for youth participation, youth councils are a proven and effective method that complements other forms of civic engagement and ensures structured representation within public institutions

**Youth councils in the
Nordics – what is the
current situation?**

Legal status of youth councils in the Nordics

Finland – Youth councils are mandatory on local and regional levels

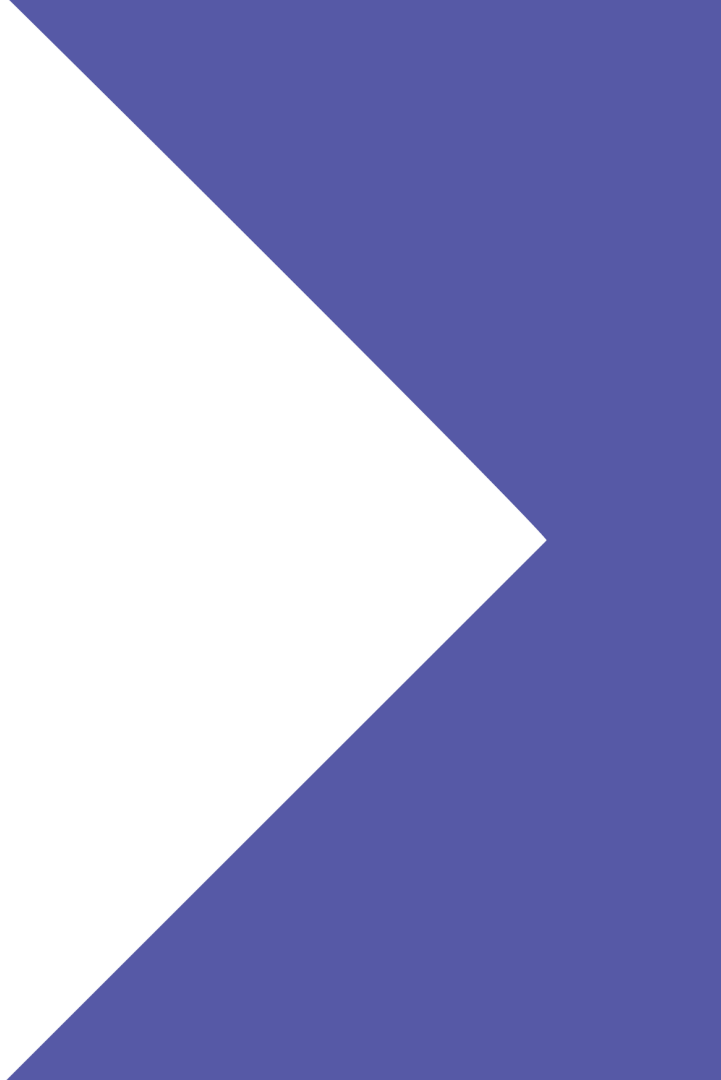
Sweden – Youth councils are optional

Norway – Youth councils are mandatory on local and regional levels

Denmark – Youth councils are optional

Iceland – Youth councils are optional

Youth councils in Denmark



Case: Youth Councils in Denmark



The issue

- **52% of young people aged 16 to 25** have "low democratic self-confidence."
- **66% of young people aged 16 to 25** have an opinion about the direction in which Denmark and the world should develop.
- **9% of children aged 12 to 17** feel that politicians listen to their opinions and views.
- **6 out of 10** children aged 12 to 17 believe that politicians do not sufficiently involve children and young people in decisions that affect them.

Case: Youth Councils in Denmark



Status on youth councils

- Mandatory senior citizen councils but not youth councils
- 60 out of 98 municipalities have a youth council
- Structures are vulnerable to change, depending on the current political and financial situation of the municipality

Case: youth councils in Denmark

Development over time

1984: 0 youth councils

Minister on Internal Affairs, Britta Scholl Holberg, recommends all municipalities start local youth councils

1985: 34 youth councils

1986: 76 youth councils

1987: 41 youth councils

1988: 27 youth councils

1994: 8 youth councils

DUF concludes that the municipalities have not transferred enough competencies to the youth councils and that the cooperation has been too challenging

1996: 20 youth councils

Youth councils come together and form U-nettet (now NAU, The Network of Local Youth Councils)

2000: 40 youth councils

2001-2006: ca 50 youth councils

2007: ca 30 youth councils

Structure reform: Denmark goes from 275 municipalities to 98 municipalities

2019: ca 70 youth councils

In 2015 NAU works with the Minister of Culture on the UR2015-project focused around starting new youth councils

2022: 40 youth councils

COVID19 hits and a lot of the youth councils have no activities and therefore die out

Case: youth councils in Denmark

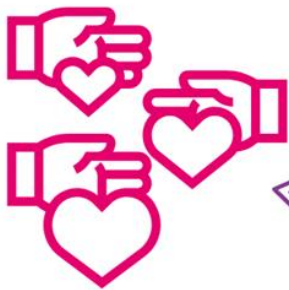
Effect

- Focus on defending rights rather than on driving change
- Youth participation varies by municipality, making it unequal depending on where young people live.
- No formal rights within the municipal structure – for example, no guaranteed right to attend or speak at council meetings, no hearing rights on specific subjects, no rights to make initiatives

The well-functioning councils have power

- Youth Council of Viborg, got all their recommendations approved in the municipalities new development plan of 2025.
- Copenhagen Youth Council secured DKK 4.8M for better sexual education and establishment of the municipal project “Green Primary School” (DKK 1.5M for a taskforce and an action plan)





**Structural and
democratic community**



**New political initiatives and
local political ownership**

Youth Councils



**Strengthens democratic
self-confidence**

Youth councils in Finland

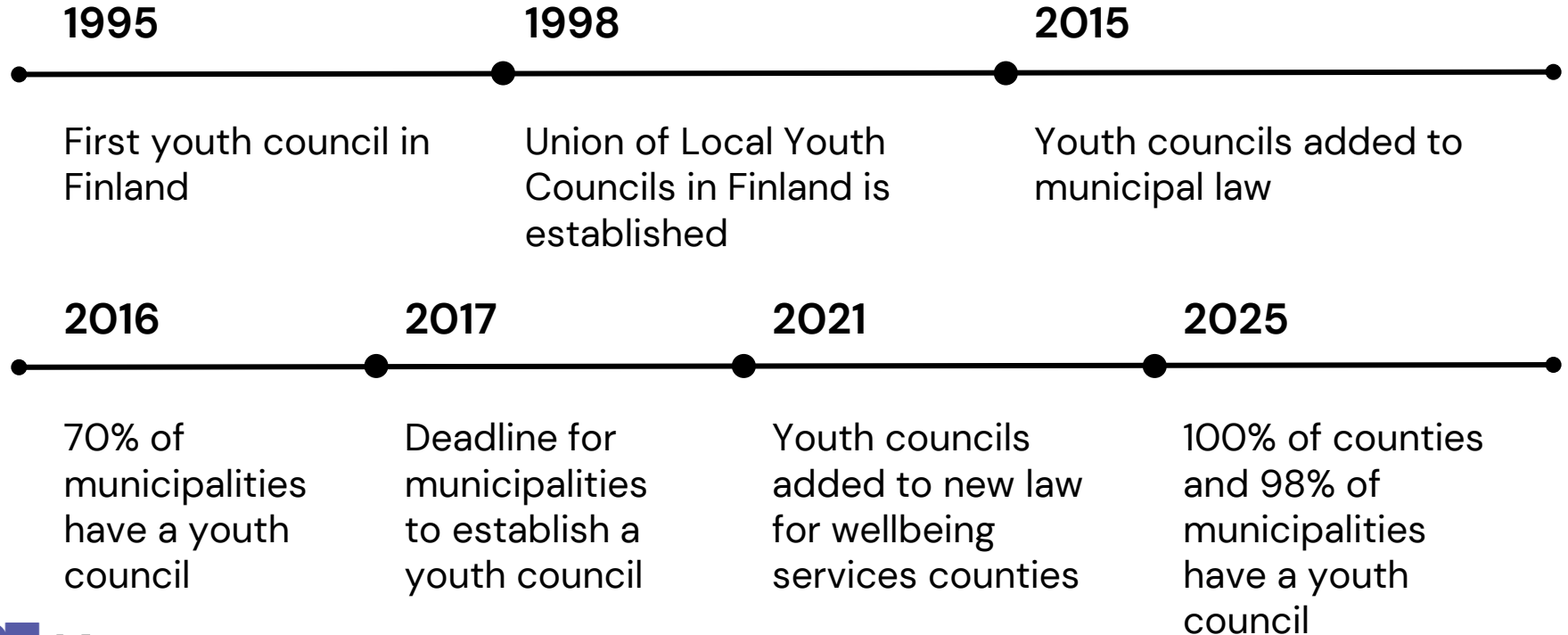
Case: youth councils in Finland



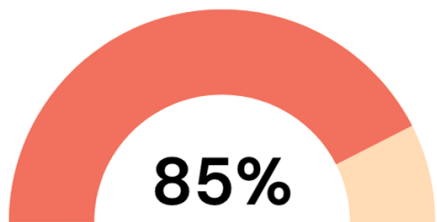
Status

- Mandatory youth councils, elder councils and disability councils in municipalities and counties
- 98% of municipalities have a youth council
- 21/21 counties have a youth council
- Structures are established in most municipalities, but there is still room for improvement

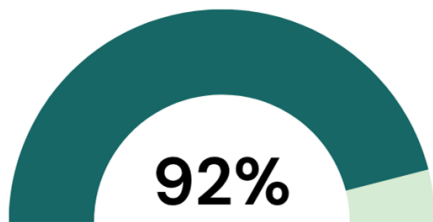
Case: youth councils in Finland



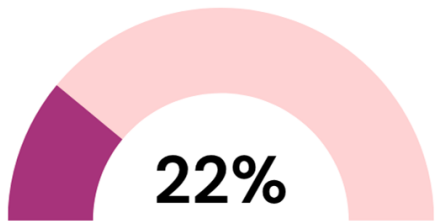
Rights of youth councils in municipalities



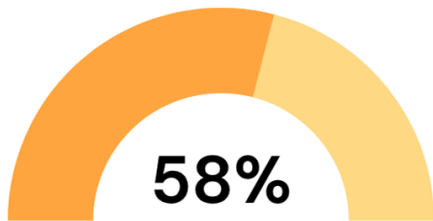
youth council has the right to speak and attend in the municipal council



youth council has the right to speak and attend in a committee or equivalent body



youth council has the right to speak and attend in the municipal executive board



youth council have the right to make direct initiatives in the municipal council

- **75% of youth** in youth councils felt they have influence in their municipality
- **96% of youth** in youth councils felt they have at least some influence in committees

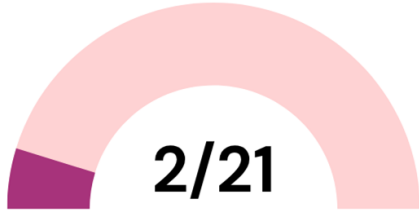
Rights of youth councils in wellbeing services counties



youth council has the right to speak and attend in the regional council



youth council has the right to speak and attend in a committee or equivalent body



youth council has the right to speak and attend in the regional executive board



youth council has the right to make direct initiatives in the regional council

- **90% of youth** in youth councils felt that they had influence in the county decision making
- **94% of youth** in youth councils felt that they could influence decision making by representing youth in committees and other governing bodies of the counties

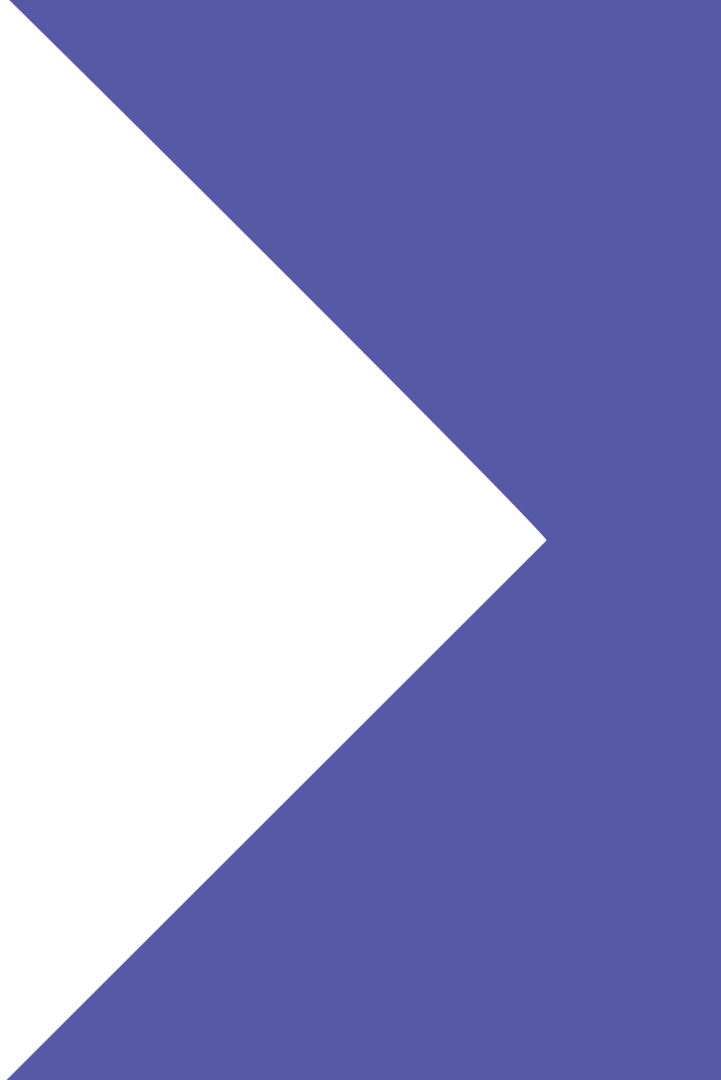
Case: youth councils in Finland

Effect:

- The law gives youth councils a solid foundation and arguments to have effective means and resources for influence inside the municipal and county structures
- Most youth councils can focus on supporting local decision making and advocacy of the youth, but some still have to fight for their rights locally, because there is no monitoring of the law and no national coordination for how a youth council should work
- Youth councils are a solid and recognized part of Finnish democracy and youth participation



Cooperation between youth councils in the Nordic countries



Our Nordic cooperation

- We have created policy recommendations, about organizing local youth councils in the Nordics.
 - To achieve a uniform youth council model for the Nordic countries, we recommend for example: A law about mandatory youth councils to all municipalities
- We have presented them to the Danish Parliament and at the NORDBUK meeting of the Nordic Council of Ministers.
- We organized a joint summit for Nordic youth councillors in 2024 funded by Norden 0-30 under Nordic Culture Point.



“We want the Nordics to lead by example and implement **the Nordic model for youth councils**, to show commitment to youth participation and to **ensure young people equal opportunities regardless of where they live**”

- *From the joint statement: “Our vision for the youth councils”*

The M&M's Panel Discussion

- How has being involved in youth councils influenced our lives?
- What opportunities or experiences have you had through youth councils that you wouldn't have had otherwise?
- Any questions from the audience?

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