



## NEWSLETTER 2 | November 2025

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### **Empowering Young Carers across Europe: “OUR VOICES” Project’s First Steps**

In the first newsletter we announced the launch of the “OUR VOICES” project, which is a new EU-funded initiative that aims to make sure Young Carers (YCs) are truly heard. YCs are children and young people under 18 who care for a parent or relative, often facing challenges that affect their education, wellbeing, and future opportunities. Through “OUR VOICES,” organisations from Italy, Sweden, Bulgaria, Belgium, and Slovenia, and the European organisation Eurocarers are joining forces to create real opportunities for YCs to take part in decisions that shape their lives. Officially launched in April 2025, the project will run for two years, starting with mapping existing participation mechanisms before testing new tools to help YCs engage more actively in schools, local communities, and even at the EU level. The ultimate goal is to build a fairer, more inclusive Europe where young carers are recognised, supported, and empowered to speak up and influence the policies that matter to them.

### **Mapping the existing participation mechanisms**

Throughout the summer, the OUR VOICES project partners worked on identifying and mapping existing participation mechanisms in each partner country (Work Package 2). This was done through a rapid realist review of both grey literature (GLR) and scientific literature (SLR). First, we established inclusion criteria, which covered scientific articles, research reports, and textbooks for the scientific literature, and government publications and policy briefs for the grey literature. All documents were reviewed in each partner country’s national language, and in English for EU-level materials. Both reviews included data published between 2010 and 2015, available in full text, with a known author. The geographical coverage of the SLR review encompassed the EU-27 Member States, the UK, and EFTA countries (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, and Liechtenstein). For the GLR, coverage focused on the EU level, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Slovenia, and Bulgaria. The review included studies involving children under 18 years old, addressing participation mechanisms and the inclusion of vulnerable groups of children, as well as identifying current practices, challenges, and gaps. After completing the rapid realist review, quantitative data were extracted separately for the SLR and GLR in each partner country.

## What are the main activities of OUR VOICES project?

### Scientific literature review

The SLR was conducted by two scientific partners of the project - University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), who was also the leader of this work package and Linnaeus University (Sweden). A method of Rapid Realist Review was used to study scientific publications in the SCOPUS and MEDLINE databases, published in English language, between 2010 to 2025. Publications that included children younger than 18 and studies addressing participation mechanisms and the inclusion of vulnerable groups of children, with a focus on current practices, challenges, and areas for improvement, were included in the review. In addition to young carers, children as next of kin (CNK), children living in precarious family situations, children with disabilities, children with a migrant background, and other vulnerable children were included in the review due to limited number of studies focusing on young carers specifically. Eligible scientific articles (including narrative reviews, scoping reviews, systematic literature reviews, and meta-analyses), research reports, and textbooks, from EU-27 Member States, the United Kingdom, and EFTA countries (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, and Liechtenstein) were included in the review.

The initial search resulted in 1074 records, however after the duplicates were removed we began with screening 726 records and during the screening process 702 records were excluded due to various reasons (e.g. wrong outcome/population/study design/geographic coverage/type of record). During the MMAT analysis, one additional article was excluded, and another was removed during the analysis. In total, 22 studies were included in the final review. The scientific literature review consisted of two main components - quantitative analysis of SLR records and thematic analysis of SLR.

### Grey literature review

The GLR was conducted by all partners in their national languages, as well as in English for European-level documents. All partners searched for policy or research reports (including doctoral dissertations in national languages and in English) and annual reports of national and regional participation mechanisms such as Children's and Youth Councils, other council-type structures focused on specific thematic issues, Children's or Youth Parliaments, and structures or mechanisms facilitated by the Ombudsperson for Children's office. From an initial pool of 318 records, 99 were included in the final review.

Throughout all stages of coding, we focused particularly on identifying gaps and disparities in child participation mechanisms concerning young carers, children as next of kin, children living in precarious family situations, and other groups of socially vulnerable children. This was achieved by analysing recurring themes, patterns, and trends across the collected literature. The grey literature review consisted of three main components: Country Profile Analysis, Quantitative Analysis of GLR, and Qualitative Analysis of GLR.

## What we have found?

The goal of the SLR was to identify participation mechanisms available to YC, CNK, and other vulnerable children, as well as to highlight gaps and challenges related to these mechanisms across Europe. Broadening the inclusion criteria to other groups of vulnerable children (beside YC and CNK who are a target group within our research project) proved useful, as we identified several transferable participation mechanisms that can be applied to YC or CNK. It is interesting that in several articles included in the review, children were not included as participants, even though child participation was the main topic of the article. Instead, those studies focused primarily on parents or practitioners' views of child participation, while children's voice was often not adequately represented. Most of the articles (9) originated from Sweden, following by UK (3), Netherlands (1) and Ireland (1) and 8 articles included in the review were theoretical and covered a variety of different fields – law, education, social work,

research, etc. Additionally, although most participation mechanisms in the articles included in the SLR were regarded as sustained practice, they were often vulnerable to political, resource, and organisational challenges. A particularly worrying finding is that most of the participation mechanisms in SLR (except one) risk being ineffective or tokenistic, as the dialogue is often dominated by adults (most often professionals or/and parents), resulting in children often being unheard, overlooked, and find it difficult to express their voices. Most participation mechanisms identified in the SLR lacked formal complaint procedures through which children could raise concerns or challenge their treatment.

We have identified several systemic barriers to meaningful participation of YC, CNK and other vulnerable children, such as, lack of:

- accessible information and representation,
- focus on child perspectives,
- formalised procedures,
- adequate models for participation,
- effective support;
- individualisation and
- follow-up on outcomes of participation.

Additionally, assumptions being made about children's vulnerabilities, abilities and maturity, equating of attendance with participation; and sharing of power between adults and children presented important barriers to meaningful child participation.

On individual level we have identified three important barriers:

- gatekeepers,
- intersectionality and;
- specific challenges that are experienced by YC and CNK (such as stigmatisation, fear of interventions by social services and lack of time (due to caring obligations) as well as information).

The strength of our review is also in the identification of prerequisites for meaningful participation of YCs and CNK, which include the **need for systemic organisational and policy support, approaches** that are **adapted to the individual abilities and circumstances of YCs/CNK** as well as an important role of **trusted, sympathetic and knowledgeable adults** who are able to support and facilitate meaningful participation.

The GLR analysis revealed significant disparities in child participation across sectors and countries. Across Slovenia, Italy, Bulgaria, Sweden, and Flanders, child participation frameworks exist but vary widely in implementation and inclusivity. Slovenia and Italy have established rights-based systems, yet participation depends heavily on local resources and political will, with young carers lacking legal recognition in Slovenia, and in Italy unsupported and recognised only on a regional level. Bulgaria faces the most severe structural barriers, with high poverty, weak implementation, and minimal recognition of YCs or meaningful child participation. Sweden, despite strong welfare and education systems, also lacks formal YC recognition, while Flanders demonstrates legally embedded participation but relies largely on NGO initiatives. Across all contexts, participation remains mainly consultative, with limited collaborative or child-led practices. Children with disabilities, migrants, and those in precarious situations are frequently excluded, and younger children are underrepresented. Information is mostly adult-oriented, and complaint mechanisms are inconsistent and rarely child-friendly. Although the EU provides a strong legal framework through instruments like the *Charter of Fundamental Rights* and the *2021 Strategy on the Rights of the Child*, national implementation remains fragmented. To move beyond tokenism, **countries must ensure systemic recognition, inclusive accessibility, and feedback mechanisms that empower children**, especially the most marginalised, to meaningfully influence decisions affecting their lives.

## What is coming next?

The fourth work package (WP) of the OUR VOICES research project is now underway. In this part of the project, we will produce comprehensive training materials related to Young Carers, designed for professionals such as educators, social workers, health care providers, youth workers and voluntary workers/representatives from non-governmental organisations. These materials will cover:

- the unique challenges facing Young Carers
- identification mechanisms
- effective support strategies
- participation mechanisms
- self-advocacy strategies
- techniques and guidelines for creating young carers' friendly establishments.

In the coming months we will create a training program drawing from already existing training materials, with input from all partner countries and organisations in the OUR VOICES project.

Physical workshops or online sessions in each partner country will be organised. Moving forward, we will design a workshop to facilitate an interactive learning experience for participants. Evaluation mechanisms will be employed to assess the effectiveness and impact of the training programs.



For more information and updates on OUR VOICES project, please visit

<https://ourvoicesproject.eu/>

and follow us on major social media using the hashtag

**# OURVOICES\_PROJECT\_EU**



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