



Policy Brief

Strengthening Youth Diversion Across Europe
Lessons and Recommendations from the **BRIDGE** Project

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
BRIDGE	Building a Resourceful International Youth Diversion Group for Exchanging Best Practices across Europe (Erasmus+ KA210-YOU)
CoE	Council of Europe
CRC Committee	Committee on the Rights of the Child
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
EU	European Union
GC	General Comment (an official interpretative document issued by a human rights treaty body, in this context by the CRC Committee)
RSJ	Council for the Administration of Criminal Justice and Protection of Juveniles (Raad voor Strafrechtstoepassing en Jeugdbescherming, the Netherlands)
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly

Key Definitions

Child - A natural person below the age of 18 years, in accordance with Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Child in conflict with the law - A child who is alleged as, accused of, or recognised as having infringed criminal law.

Youth diversion - Measures, programmes or interventions that redirect children away from formal criminal proceedings at any stage prior to or during criminal proceedings, where appropriate and in accordance with the best interests of the child.

Diversion System - The legal, policy and institutional arrangements through which diversion is organised, including its objectives, legal basis, eligible participants, responsible actors, available interventions and implementation mechanisms.

Restorative justice - An approach for addressing harm or the risk of harm through engaging all those affected in coming to a common understanding and agreement on how the harm or wrongdoing can be repaired and justice achieved, with the assistance of an impartial third party, where appropriate.

Conditional diversion - Diversion that requires the child to successfully complete specified conditions or interventions, after which prosecution is discontinued or the case is dismissed.

Unconditional diversion - Diversion in which no further legal conditions are imposed after the decision to divert, although voluntary support or interventions may still be offered.

Criminal proceedings - Judicial proceedings initiated by the competent prosecuting authority before a criminal court.

Recidivism - The commission of a subsequent criminal offence following an earlier arrest for an offence. Unless otherwise stated, the term does not imply a specific legal or statistical definition.

Best interests of the child - A primary consideration in all actions concerning children, as established by Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Procedural safeguards - The legal rights and protections afforded to suspected and accused persons throughout criminal proceedings, including access to legal assistance, information, participation and fair treatment.

Victim - A natural person who has suffered harm, including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss which was directly caused by a criminal offence.

Young Adult - A natural person between the ages of 18 and 24.

Executive Summary

Across Europe, diversion is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of child-friendly justice. International and European standards, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 24, the Council of Europe's Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice and Directive (EU) 2016/800 on procedural safeguards for children who are suspects or accused persons in criminal proceedings, encourage states to respond to children outside formal criminal proceedings wherever appropriate. Research similarly indicates that well-designed diversion can reduce reoffending while avoiding the stigma, labelling and disruption to education, family life and future opportunities that may accompany formal criminal proceedings.

Despite this broad consensus, access to high-quality diversion remains uneven. European jurisdictions differ considerably in their legal frameworks, eligibility criteria, procedural safeguards, available interventions, professional capacity and community-based services. Diversion is often limited to particular categories of offences, first-time offenders or the earliest stages of proceedings, limiting the number of children in conflict with the law who may benefit. Even where legislation provides for diversion, insufficient resources, limited professional specialisation and fragmented support services are common challenges preventing diversion from operating effectively in practice.

The BRIDGE project, *Building a Resourceful International Youth Diversion Group for Exchanging Best Practices Across Europe*, was established to support comparative learning between diversion systems. Through a partnership between *Stichting Halt* in the Netherlands, *Foróige* in Ireland and *Terre des hommes Hellas* in Greece, the project combined comparative legal and policy analysis with interdisciplinary professional exchange and the participation of young people with lived experience of diversion. Its purpose was to determine which shared principles, promising practices and experiences can improve diversion across different legal, institutional and cultural contexts.

The comparative analysis illustrated the distinct strengths of the three systems. Ireland demonstrated the value of flexible, community-based diversion with the support of long-term youth work delivered through cooperation between youth workers, families, schools, Gardaí and community organisations. Greece's legislation offers a broad range of educational, restorative, therapeutic and community-based diversion measures that can be imposed by the prosecutor and tailored to the circumstances of the child and the case, although further investment is needed to translate recent legal reforms consistently into practice. The Netherlands illustrates the advantages of a specialised and nationally coordinated diversion programme, while also showing the limitations of restricting diversion largely to minor offending and the pre-prosecution stage. Together, these experiences show that effective systems may take different forms but depend on common commitments to children's rights, procedural safeguards, developmental needs, professional quality and social reintegration.

Drawing on international children's rights standards, contemporary research on diversion, the findings of the BRIDGE Needs Assessment, professional exchange and informed by the views of young people with lived experience of diversion, this policy brief presents seven recommendations:

1. **Embed diversion as the preferred response to children in conflict with the law.** Diversion should be available wherever appropriate and consistent with the child's best interests, victims' rights and public safety. Eligibility should be based on proportionate, individualised assessment rather than rigid exclusion criteria based solely on offence type or previous offending. Reforms should broaden access while preventing net-widening and unnecessarily intensive intervention.
2. **Guarantee robust procedural safeguards throughout diversion programmes.** Children should not have to surrender their rights in exchange for avoiding prosecution. Diversion must be voluntary, transparent and supported by child-friendly information, informed consent, protection against self-incrimination, appropriate and timely legal aid and opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision-making.
3. **Develop educational, developmentally appropriate, community-based, and individually tailored programmes with opportunities for restorative justice.** Diversion should combine accountability with education, support and positive development. Interventions should reflect children's maturity, strengths, needs and circumstances, remain proportionate, strengthen their ties to their local communities and provide opportunities for restorative justice where appropriate and voluntarily agreed to by those involved.
4. **Invest in implementation capacity and specialised child justice professionals.** Legislation alone cannot deliver effective diversion. States must provide sustainable funding, accessible community-based services, clear implementation structures and initial and continuing specialized training for all professionals working with children in conflict with the law.
5. **Strengthen multi-agency cooperation and continuity of care.** Offending behaviour frequently intersects with difficulties involving education, family relationships, mental health, trauma, poverty or social exclusion. Diversion should therefore, where it serves the child's best interests, connect children with coordinated support from justice agencies, schools, health care, child protection, youth work, municipalities and civil society before, during and after the intervention.
6. **Empower meaningful child participation and shared decision-making.** Children should be recognised as active partners rather than passive recipients. They should be empowered to influence their own diversion pathway and goals where appropriate. Young people with lived experience should also contribute to the development, implementation and evaluation of diversion policy, programmes and the training of professionals.
7. **Invest in continuous learning, evaluation and European cooperation.** Diversion systems should be monitored using a broad range of outcomes in addition to recidivism, including wellbeing, education, procedural fairness, victim satisfaction, social inclusion and reintegration. Comparative research, professional exchange and a permanent European Youth Diversion Network are crucial to support sustained learning and improvement.

Implementing these recommendations requires coordinated action. National governments should establish diversion as the preferred response wherever appropriate, strengthen

safeguards, broaden access responsibly and invest in implementation and integrated support. The European Union should continue developing shared standards, financing research and innovation, enabling professional exchange and supporting long-term European cooperation. Youth justice organisations and practitioners should critically evaluate their services to ensure the delivery of personalised, rights-based interventions, work across organisational boundaries, provide children with opportunities for meaningful participation and contribute to ongoing evaluation and advocacy efforts.

The central lesson of the BRIDGE project is that diversion is more than an alternative to prosecution and punitive responses to child offending. Where implemented well, it can offer a fundamentally child-friendly response to children in conflict with the law: one that combines accountability with the protection of rights, repair of harm, healthy development and (re-)connection with families, schools and communities. It is therefore paramount that states embed diversion in penal legislation and ensure that every child in conflict with the law may access high-quality diversion in practice.

Why Europe Needs Stronger Youth Diversion.

Across Europe, diversion is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of child-friendly justice. International legal standards encourage states to respond to children in conflict with the law outside formal criminal proceedings wherever appropriate, recognising that unnecessary exposure to the justice system may undermine children's development, increase stigma and hinder children's long-term reintegration, future perspectives, and desistance from offending. Yet despite this broad consensus, diversion is implemented extremely unevenly across European jurisdictions. Significant differences exist regarding legal frameworks, eligibility criteria, procedural safeguards, intervention design, professional standards, and the availability of community-based support.

The **BRIDGE project** (*Building a Resourceful International Youth Diversion Group for Exchanging Best Practices Across Europe*) was established to strengthen European diversion by facilitating mutual learning between European diversion systems. Through a partnership between Stichting Halt (the Netherlands), Foróige (Ireland) and Terre des hommes Hellas (Greece), the project combined comparative legal analysis, interdisciplinary exchange between professionals and experts, youth participation and transnational dialogue to identify promising practices and opportunities for policy development on the national and European level.

This policy brief translates those findings into practical recommendations for national governments, European institutions, justice professionals and organisations in youth justice and the pedagogical civil society. The brief identifies shared principles, set out by international legislation and standards, that strengthen child-friendly diversion while respecting differing legal traditions and institutional contexts.

The recommendations build upon three complementary sources of evidence:

- international children's rights standards and contemporary research on diversion;
- the findings of the comparative analysis conducted in the BRIDGE Needs Assessment;
- lessons emerging from the practice of and exchanges between BRIDGE participants and interviews with young people with lived experience of diversion.

Together they provide a set of guidelines for the EU, the governments of its Member States, and youth justice and pedagogical civil society organisations and professionals to collectively strengthen and establish diversion as a rights-based and child-centred response to children and young people in conflict with the law.



Recommendation 1

Embed diversion as the preferred response to children in conflict with the law

In a child-friendly and rights-based youth justice system, diversion should be the preferred response to children in conflict with the law wherever this is appropriate and consistent with the child's best interests, the rights of victims and public safety. By avoiding unnecessary exposure to judicial proceedings that may stigmatize and potentially cause children harm, diversion measures provide an opportunity to promote accountability, support healthy development, connect children in need to the appropriate support services, while strengthening their ties to family, school and community life.

Despite growing international recognition of diversion's merits, its accessibility differs greatly for children across Europe. In many jurisdictions, diversion is restricted to specific offence categories, early stages of criminal proceedings or first offenders, restricting access for groups of children who could equally benefit from an educational and developmentally appropriate response outside the boundaries of the youth justice system. Strengthening diversion therefore requires broadening its accessibility while ensuring proportionate, individualised measures compliant with procedural safeguards and children's rights.

International standards consistently recognise diversion as a cornerstone of child-friendly justice and encourage states to respond to children outside formal criminal proceedings wherever appropriate. Article 40(3)(b) of the UNCRC requires States Parties to promote measures for dealing with children without resorting to judicial proceedings wherever appropriate (United Nations, 1989). In GC No. 24, the CRC Committee expands on this principle by identifying diversion as the preferred response for children in conflict with the law and encouraging States to make diversion available across offence types and at multiple stages of criminal proceedings. The Committee also emphasises that decisions regarding diversion should be based on children's individual circumstances rather than rigid legal criteria such as offence type or previous offending alone (CRC Committee, 2019). These principles are reinforced by the CoE's *Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice*, which promote justice responses that are accessible, age-appropriate, participatory and responsive to children's rights and needs while minimising unnecessary contact with formal criminal justice systems (Council of Europe, 2010).

A growing body of research suggests that diversion performs at least as well as, and often better than, formal criminal justice processing in reducing reoffending, although outcomes vary according to the population, programme design, outcome measure and quality of the underlying research (Petrosino et al., 2010; Smith & Paddock, 2026; Wilson & Hoge, 2013). Recent evidence focusing specifically on first-time entrants generally indicates lower rates of recorded reoffending following diversion than formal processing and suggests that, for this group, less intensive interventions may sometimes produce better outcomes than more extensive programmes (Smith & Paddock, 2026). Formal justice involvement has also been linked to labelling, stigma and

adverse consequences for educational attainment and employment, which may contribute to continued offending into adulthood (Bernburg & Krohn, 2003). By limiting unnecessary contact with the formal justice system, diversion can help avoid these consequences while allowing children to remain connected to their families, schools and communities.

Restrictive eligibility criteria based solely on offence seriousness or previous offending may exclude children who could benefit from diversion. Evidence reviews caution that eligibility criteria should not be overly restrictive and indicate that offence type alone generally provides insufficient grounds for categorical exclusion, although the gravity and individual circumstances of an offence remain relevant (Kilkelly, 2023). Based on a scoping review of 68 studies, Mercer et al. (2026) recommend reconsidering the restrictiveness of eligibility criteria and improving clarity about how diversion is defined and operationalised. Eligibility decisions should therefore not be based solely on categorical exclusions but should allow for an individualized assessment of the child's circumstances, needs and the appropriateness of diversion.

Developmental research indicates that neurobiological and psychosocial maturation continues into the twenties, although there is no single age at which brain development becomes complete (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). This has prompted growing interest in developmentally informed approaches for emerging adults. In San Francisco, Augustine et al. (2022) found that felony diversion was associated with significantly lower felony rearrest rates within two years among transitional-age defendants aged 18-25. This finding applied across the Collaborative Court programmes studied and not only to the Young Adult Court. While further research is needed, these findings support continued exploration of diversion for emerging adults where appropriate.

Expansion must also avoid net-widening. That is, diversion should replace formal processing rather than impose structured interventions on children or young adults who would otherwise have received no response or a less intrusive response. Diversionary measures should consequently remain proportionate and no more intensive than necessary (Smith & Paddock, 2026; Mercer et al., 2026).

The BRIDGE Needs Assessment demonstrates that broadening access to diversion can be achieved through different legal and institutional models. Ireland provides diversion across a relatively wide range of offences through the Garda Youth Diversion Programme, supported by community-based Youth Diversion Projects that offer flexible educational and developmental support. Greece demonstrates the value of a broad range of available diversion measures, including educational, restorative, therapeutic and community-based interventions, allowing prosecutors to tailor responses to the child's individual needs, the circumstances of the offence and the wider context of the case. By contrast, the Netherlands has developed a highly specialised and nationally coordinated diversion system centred on the short-term Halt intervention, but access remains largely restricted to minor offending and the pre-prosecution stage (de Bakker et al., 2026).

Comparative discussions throughout the BRIDGE project concluded that many European jurisdictions ought to strengthen diversion by broadening eligibility across offence categories, age groups and different stages of proceedings. Doing so will require replacing rigid exclusion criteria with individualised assessments based on children's developmental needs. Participants also identified emerging adults (18-23) as a promising group for future development,

recognising growing evidence that developmental maturity extends beyond the age of 18. Any expansion, however, should be accompanied by safeguards that promote obtaining legal aid, limit coercion, prevent disproportionate intervention, maintain programme quality and ensure equitable access.

Diversion ought to become the preferred response to children in conflict with the law wherever this is appropriate and consistent with the child's best interests, the rights of victims and public safety. Access should be based on proportionate, individualised assessment instead of strict eligibility criteria linked to offence type or previous offending. Future reforms should broaden access while preventing net-widening, maintaining programme quality and, where supported by national legal frameworks and developmental evidence, exploring diversion opportunities for emerging adults.

Recommendation 2

Guarantee robust procedural safeguards throughout diversion programmes

Diversion should never require children to sacrifice their procedural rights in exchange for avoiding formal criminal proceedings. While diversion aims to reduce children's contact with the justice system, it must remain voluntary, transparent and firmly grounded in children's rights. Every child should receive clear and age-appropriate information on what diversion entails, be protected against self-incrimination, have access to appropriate legal advice as well as legal representation and support, and be allowed to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process affecting them. Because diversion by definition takes place outside formal court proceedings, there is a serious risk that procedural safeguards receive less attention than they would during prosecution. Expanding diversion therefore requires equal investment in ensuring that children's rights and safeguards are protected throughout every stage of the diversion process.

Directive (EU) 2016/800 establishes minimum procedural safeguards for children suspected or accused in criminal proceedings, including the rights to information, legal assistance and effective participation (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2016). Although diversion by definition takes place outside formal judicial proceedings, these safeguards remain just as important. The CRC Committee reinforces this principle in GC No. 24, stating that diversion should only be used where children's rights are fully respected, participation is based on the child's free and informed consent, and children receive timely legal or other appropriate assistance (CRC Committee, 2019). Similarly, the Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice emphasise that all interactions with children should be accessible, understandable and adapted to their age, maturity and individual circumstances (Council of Europe, 2010).

Procedural-justice research does not examine diversion programmes specifically, but it demonstrates that people are more willing to accept decisions and comply with legal authorities when they consider those authorities legitimate and the procedures used to be fair (Tyler, 2006). This demonstrates that legal safeguards are not just a principle but a key determinant of effective diversion. Children who understand the process, perceive decision-making as fair and feel respected by professionals are more likely to engage constructively with diversion, comply with interventions and develop trust in justice institutions (Tyler, 2006; Fagan & Tyler, 2005). Within youth justice proceedings, effective participation requires more than a child's physical presence. Children must be able to understand the process and its possible consequences, express their views and communicate with professionals using language adapted to their age and developmental capacities (Rap & Weijers, 2014).

Recent findings from the Netherlands illustrate why these principles matter in diversion practice. The RSJ reported that the young people often did not have a complete understanding of the diversion intervention before accepting it. It also identified gaps in access to subsidised legal aid for some children referred directly to Halt by police officers or prosecutors. Moreover, the Council

warned that requiring children to admit an offence when prosecution and an entry in judicial records remain the alternative (i.e. offering conditional rather than unconditional diversion) may place pressure on them, creating tension with the presumption of innocence and the requirement of genuinely voluntary consent (RSJ, 2025). These findings reinforce the need to provide clear information, verify each child's understanding, ensure meaningful participation and genuine consent – preferably through unconditional diversion – and make appropriate legal assistance readily accessible throughout the diversion process.

The BRIDGE project consistently found that procedural safeguards, due to the extrajudicial nature of diversion, run the risk of becoming an afterthought, regardless of jurisdiction. While legal frameworks increasingly rely on diversion to respond to child offending, participants observed that child-friendly communication, informed consent and access to legal aid continue to vary considerably between jurisdictions and justice actors. Young people participating in the project described how the quality of explanations, opportunities to ask questions and involvement in decision-making significantly influenced how fair and meaningful they experienced diversion to be.

Rather than identifying a single model of good practice, the BRIDGE comparison highlighted different areas of strength. Ireland demonstrated particularly strong examples of child-friendly communication and voluntary participation due to providing unconditional diversion without coercion, while Greece's recent legislative reforms have strengthened the legal framework for procedural safeguards. The Netherlands provides a structured and nationally consistent diversion procedure but continues to struggle with questions surrounding informed consent and access to legal assistance, the latter of which is often considered to be at odds with providing a speedy response to minor offending, which is also in the child's best interest. Across all three jurisdictions, participants agreed that expanding diversion must go hand in hand with strengthening procedural safeguards, ensuring that children's rights remain central throughout the diversion process (de Bakker et al., 2026).

Diversion should always be accompanied by robust procedural safeguards that fully protect children's rights throughout the process. Every child should receive accessible information, appropriate legal support and genuine opportunities to make informed decisions about their participation. Where possible, unconditional diversion should be provided to avoid coercion and protect the presumption of innocence and children's ability to give their genuinely voluntary consent.

Recommendation 3

Develop diversion programmes that are educational, developmentally appropriate, community-based, and tailored to individual needs with opportunities for restorative justice

Guaranteeing age-appropriate and evidence-informed content of diversion programmes is paramount. Measures should not simply divert children to an alternative procedure but provide them with meaningful opportunities to take responsibility for their behaviour while supporting healthy development, strengthening protective factors and relationships and addressing the underlying factors that contributed to offending. High-quality diversion therefore combines accountability with education, support and youth work, and opportunities for restorative justice. Children in conflict with the law are a diverse group with different protective factors, (criminogenic) needs and circumstances. Effective diversion cannot rely on standardised interventions alone. Instead, responses should be proportionate, developmentally appropriate and tailored to each child's individual situation, while remaining as non-intrusive as possible.

International children's rights standards consistently emphasise that youth justice ought to promote children's rehabilitation and reintegration over punishment and deterrence. Article 40(1) of the UNCRC requires States to treat children in a manner that promotes their sense of dignity and worth, reinforces respect for the rights of others and supports their reintegration into society (United Nations, 1989). The Beijing Rules encourage diversion supported by community programmes and provide for a broad range of non-institutional responses, including guidance and supervision, probation, community service, counselling and placement in educational settings (UNGA, 1985). The Riyadh Guidelines adopt a broad, child-centred approach to prevention, calling for policies that promote children's successful socialisation and integration through families, communities, peer groups, education and employment, while addressing the social conditions that may contribute to offending (UNGA, 1990). The CRC Committee makes the relationship between diversion and restorative justice explicit in GC No. 24. It identifies mediation, conferencing and other restorative processes as appropriate components of child justice and recognises family conferencing, reparation to victims and other restorative options as possible community-based diversion measures. Such processes must fully protect children's procedural rights and be based on their free and informed consent (2019). The Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice similarly require children's best interests to be a primary consideration and call for attention to each child's personal situation, well-being and specific needs. Proceedings and interventions should be adapted to children's age, maturity and level of understanding. The Guidelines encourage alternatives to judicial proceedings, including mediation and diversion, where these serve the child's best interests. Their explanatory memorandum expressly identifies family mediation, diversion and restorative justice as positive developments from which children should be able to benefit, provided that these processes do not obstruct access to justice and preserve equivalent procedural safeguards (Council of Europe, 2010).

Developmental research shows that adolescence is characterised by continuing cognitive, emotional and psychosocial maturation, as well as heightened developmental plasticity. It is therefore a period of both vulnerability and opportunity, during which developmentally appropriate interventions and supportive environments may positively influence children's developmental trajectories (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Steinberg, 2014; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

Meta-analyses indicate that diversion generally produces lower rates of recorded reoffending than conventional justice-system processing, while formal processing may itself increase delinquency (Petrosino et al., 2010; Wilson & Hoge, 2013). The evidence also suggests that intervention intensity should be matched to children's level of risk and need: low-risk children may benefit most from a warning or other minimal response, whereas more structured support may be appropriate for children with greater needs. Reviews therefore caution against unnecessarily intensive interventions and poorly defined diversion schemes that may contribute to net-widening by drawing children into structured programmes who would otherwise have received no or only a minimal response (Wilson & Hoge, 2013; Mercer et al., 2026).

Community-based diversion can be particularly beneficial because it allows children to remain connected to their families, schools and communities while receiving support within the environments that shape their development (Lipsey, 2009). A systematic review found that local police-led diversion modestly reduced subsequent offending among low-risk children compared with formal processing (Wilson et al., 2018). Evidence on structured programmes is more mixed: Schwalbe et al. (2012) found no significant overall effect across all diversion programmes, but reported more favourable outcomes for well-implemented, family-based interventions. A quasi-experimental study similarly found lower reconviction, felony conviction and subsequent justice-system placement among children completing a family-focused community programme than among matched children receiving residential services (Ryon et al., 2017). These findings suggest that while children benefit from a response in their community setting, this response must be proportionate, well-implemented and provide support tailored to children's needs and circumstances. For low-risk children, diversion should therefore remain light-touch and should not impose services that are unnecessary.

Other studies also provide promising evidence for incorporating restorative approaches into diversion where appropriate. Processes such as victim-offender mediation and restorative conferencing can create opportunities for children to acknowledge the harm caused, hear the perspectives of those affected and participate in determining how that harm might be repaired. Reviews of restorative conferencing have found higher victim satisfaction and some reductions in repeat offending, although findings vary across programme types and study designs (Sherman & Strang, 2007; Strang et al., 2013). A meta-analysis focused specifically on restorative diversion programmes for young people similarly found a small but significant overall reduction in recidivism (Wong et al., 2016). Restorative processes must be voluntary, carefully facilitated and attentive to the rights, needs and safety of both children and victims, otherwise they risk secondary victimisation. From a neurobiological developmental perspective, adolescence and emerging adulthood (approximately ages 12 to 25) may constitute an important window of opportunity for restorative justice because the brain is still undergoing significant development. Hence, Nauta-Jansen and Oldenhof argue for early and individually tailored use of restorative

interventions, ideally following a first offence, while recognising that suitability must be assessed case by case (Nauta-Jansen & Oldenhof, 2025).

The BRIDGE Needs Assessment demonstrated that educational, developmentally appropriate interventions can be delivered in different ways. The Dutch Halt intervention provides a structured educational programme that combines accountability with practical learning assignments and restorative elements. Ireland's Youth Diversion Projects illustrate the benefits of flexible, community-based interventions that can be adapted to children's individual goals, family circumstances and wider support needs. Greece has developed a broad menu of educational, restorative, therapeutic and community-based diversion measures, allowing prosecutors to select interventions that best respond to the child's developmental needs and the specific circumstances of the case (de Bakker et al., 2026).

Throughout the BRIDGE Exchange Meeting, participants consistently concluded that the quality of diversion is correlated with the availability of sufficient flexibility to respond to each child's unique circumstances. Youth ambassadors with lived experience similarly emphasised that interventions were most meaningful when they felt relevant to their own experiences and encouraged genuine participation and reflection over compliance. Those that had experience with restorative justice consistently rated it as the most impactful element of their diversion trajectory. Participants therefore stressed that diversion should prioritise personalised support while ensuring that opportunities for restorative justice are available wherever appropriate and desired for all parties involved.

Diversion programmes should aim to combine accountability with educational support, restorative opportunities and personalised, community-based interventions that reflect children's developmental needs, maturity level and individual circumstances. Responses should remain proportionate, build on children's strengths and provide opportunities for positive development while avoiding unnecessarily intensive interventions.

Recommendation 4

Invest in implementation capacity and specialised child justice professionals

Diversion measures can achieve their intended aims only where justice systems have the capacity to deliver them effectively. Legislative reform is insufficient where professionals lack specialised expertise, appropriate community-based programmes are unavailable or implementation is constrained by inadequate resources. High-quality diversion therefore requires sustained investment in implementation capacity, professional competence and accessible support services. Working with children in conflict with the law requires specialised competencies beyond those ordinarily needed in adult criminal justice. Professionals must be able to understand children's distinct developmental, psychological and social needs, communicate with them effectively and respond in ways that protect their rights and promote development, rehabilitation and reintegration. Delivering child-friendly justice therefore requires investment in people and implementation infrastructure as well as legislation and services.

GC No. 24 emphasises that an effective child justice system requires specialised units within the police, prosecution service, judiciary and court system, together with specialised defenders, probation, counselling, supervision and community-based services. It also requires all professionals involved in child justice to receive systematic, continuous and multidisciplinary training. This should extend beyond applicable legal standards to include child and adolescent development, current neuroscience, the social causes of offending, discrimination, youth culture and available diversionary and non-custodial measures. Officials and other actors participating specifically in diversion must receive the necessary training and support (CRC Committee, 2019). The Beijing Rules also call for professional education, in-service training and other appropriate forms of instruction for all personnel dealing with children (UNGA, 1985). The Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice similarly require interdisciplinary training on children's rights and needs, child-adapted proceedings and communication with children at different ages and developmental stages, supported by multidisciplinary cooperation (2010).

Implementation research confirms that programme outcomes depend substantially on how interventions are delivered. Cross-sector reviews identify workforce selection and training, coaching and supervision, organisational leadership, administrative support and fidelity monitoring as important elements of effective implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Within youth justice, meta-analytic evidence similarly indicates that outcomes vary according to the intervention approach, alignment with children's level of risk and need, and implementation quality (Lipsey, 2009; Schwalbe et al., 2012; Wilson & Hoge, 2013). Investment should therefore encompass not only initial professional training, but also continuing development, supervision, quality assurance, inter-agency coordination, programme evaluation and a sufficiently resourced continuum of community-based services.

An important lesson emerging from the BRIDGE project is that introducing diversion in law does not automatically result in effective diversion in practice. Although Greece has significantly strengthened its legislative framework in recent years, participants consistently recognised that continued investment in implementation, professional training and community-based services is necessary before the full potential of these reforms can be realised. Conversely, the Dutch Halt model and the unique specializations of Dutch juvenile lawyers demonstrate the benefits of sustained investment in and clear requirements for specialised diversion and child justice professionals, while Ireland illustrates how long-term funding for Youth Diversion Projects under the Youth Justice Strategy has enabled the development of a nationwide community-based diversion infrastructure (de Bakker et al., 2026).

Across the BRIDGE Exchange Meeting, participants repeatedly emphasised that implementation capacity and professionalism represent some of the greatest challenges facing the future development of diversion across Europe. Strengthening diversion therefore requires sustained political commitment, adequate financial investment and a professional workforce equipped to translate child-friendly justice principles into everyday practice. Participants highlighted the need for more cost-effectiveness research into the return on investment of diversion to provide stronger arguments for government investment in quality diversion measures and professionals.

Investment in effective diversion should extend to the professionals, organisations and community services responsible for its delivery. States should ensure that all professionals working with children in and around the youth justice system receive specialised, continuous training and that diversion programmes are supported by sustainable funding, effective implementation structures and accessible community-based services. Without this investment, diversion risks remaining a legal aspiration rather than a meaningful reality for children.



Recommendation 5

Strengthen multi-agency cooperation and continuity of care

Children's involvement in offending behaviour rarely results from a single cause. Many children in conflict with the law experience difficulties related to education, family relationships, mental health, poverty, trauma, substance use or social exclusion that extend well beyond the criminal justice system. While diversion can prevent unnecessary exposure to criminal proceedings or sanctions, it cannot address these underlying challenges in isolation.

Diversion should therefore be viewed as an opportunity to (re-)connect children with the people, services and communities that support their healthy development. Achieving this requires strong cooperation between justice agencies, education, health care, child protection, youth work, municipalities and civil society organisations, ensuring that children receive coordinated support during and after diversion.

International children's rights standards recognise that children's development and wellbeing depend upon coordinated support across different sectors. The UNCRC places shared responsibility for children's development across governments, families and communities through rights relating to protection, education, health and family life (United Nations, 1989, arts. 3, 18, 24, 28, 39, 40(1)). The Riyadh Guidelines similarly encourage multidisciplinary strategies that strengthen children's connections with families, schools and local communities while addressing the social conditions associated with offending (UNGA, 1990). Likewise, the Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice emphasise close cooperation between justice, education, health and welfare services to ensure that children receive holistic and developmentally appropriate support (Council of Europe, 2010).

Longitudinal research supports the premise that children's offending is frequently intertwined with wider social and developmental disadvantage. McAra and McVie (2010) found that serious offending was associated with a broad range of vulnerabilities and social adversity. They also identified school exclusion as a critical turning point and concluded that formal justice-system contact can impede rather than facilitate desistance for some children. These findings support diversion, minimum necessary intervention and responses that address children's wider circumstances rather than focusing exclusively on their offending behaviour. Studies also suggest that continuity of care following diversion reduces fragmentation between services and strengthens children's opportunities to successfully reintegrate into education, family life and their communities. Integrated approaches combining diversion with educational support, family interventions, mental health services and community programmes are associated with stronger engagement, improved wellbeing and more sustainable desistance from offending (Chuang & Wells, 2010; Case & Haines, 2015).

The BRIDGE project similarly indicated that effective diversion relies on a wider ecosystem of support surrounding the child. Ireland's Youth Diversion Projects demonstrate how community-based partnerships between youth workers, schools, Gardaí, families and voluntary organisations

can provide coordinated and long-term support that extends beyond the justice response. The Dutch model illustrates the benefits of close institutional cooperation between police, prosecution services, municipalities and Halt, as well as the potential for diversion to be a pathway to support in education, mental health care and youth work services through screening and referral. In Greece, participants recognised that continued implementation of recent legislative reforms should be accompanied by stronger multidisciplinary cooperation to ensure that diversion is embedded within broader child support systems.

Young people with lived experience in BRIDGE consistently emphasised that offending behaviour could not be separated from the wider circumstances of their lives. Participants repeatedly described the importance of supportive relationships with families, teachers, youth workers and other trusted adults in helping them move forward. Across the BRIDGE partnership, this reinforced a shared understanding that diversion should not simply divert children away from criminal justice, but actively reconnect them with the relationships, services and opportunities that promote long-term development and social inclusion.

Diversion should form part of an integrated system of care that addresses the wider circumstances contributing to children's involvement in offending. Strengthening cooperation between justice agencies, education, health care, child protection and youth work services is essential to ensuring that children receive coordinated and continuous support throughout their diversion trajectory. By (re-)connecting children with families, schools and services, diversion can contribute to reduced offending but also to healthier development, stronger social inclusion and more sustainable reintegration, as well as to increased feelings of solidarity and social cohesion.

Recommendation 6

Empower meaningful child participation and shared decision-making throughout diversion

Children have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, including decisions made throughout diversion programmes. Meaningful participation goes beyond informing children about decisions that have already been taken. It requires creating genuine opportunities for children to express their views, influence decisions about their diversion pathway and contribute to setting goals that reflect their own needs, aspirations and circumstances.

Participation should not end when an individual diversion programme is completed. Children and young people possess unique lived experience of diversion systems and are therefore valuable partners in improving policy, practice and service delivery. Embedding children's voices throughout the design, implementation and evaluation of diversion strengthens both children's rights and the quality of child justice systems.

The right of children to participate is firmly established in international instruments. Article 12 of the UNCRC recognises every child's right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight according to their age and maturity (United Nations, 1989). GC No. 24 clarifies that this right applies fully in judicial and administrative proceedings and requires more than the formal opportunity to speak: children must be supported to form and express their views and those views must be seriously considered (CRC Committee, 2019). In the specific context of child justice, GC No. 24 requires children to be heard directly at every stage, to understand the available options and consequences and to give free and informed consent before participating in diversion. It also calls for children (particularly those with experience of the justice system) to be involved in evaluating and researching child justice systems. Likewise, the CoE's Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice stress that children should be informed, consulted and heard, with due weight given to their views and decisions explained in age-appropriate language in order to treat them as active rights holders whose views are respected throughout justice proceedings (2010).

Comparative research demonstrates that children's effective participation cannot be assumed merely because they are physically present in a justice process. Based on observations of more than 3,000 cases across 11 European child justice systems, Rap (2013) found considerable differences in the extent to which children were directly heard, received explanations they could understand and saw professionals respond seriously to their views. More accessible and less intimidating settings, direct communication, the avoidance of legal jargon and clear explanations of decisions were identified as important conditions for effective participation (Rap, 2013; Rap & Weijers, 2014). Lundy's (2007) model demonstrates that providing children with a "voice" is insufficient unless they also have a safe opportunity to express their views, an identifiable audience that listens and some capacity to influence the outcome. Hart's (1992) ladder helps professionals distinguish genuine participation from tokenistic or adult-directed involvement.

Kilkelly's (2010) Europe-wide consultation further illustrates how children's experiences can inform the development of justice standards. Together, this literature supports giving children opportunities to meaningfully participate in their own diversion measure and involving children in decision-making on service design, professional training, research and evaluation, while also highlighting the need to remain vigilant of adult-child power imbalances and to explain transparently how children's views have influenced decisions.

The BRIDGE project provided an important opportunity to hear directly from young people with lived experience of diversion. Their accounts illustrated that formal presence or consent does not necessarily amount to meaningful influence. Some experienced the content of their diversion programme as largely predetermined, whereas others valued opportunities to ask questions, identify personal goals and shape the support they received. Although these qualitative accounts cannot be treated as representative of all children's experiences, they provide valuable insight into the difference between being present in a process and genuinely feeling heard and able to influence it.

Participants in the BRIDGE Exchange Meeting similarly emphasised that child participation should extend beyond individual diversion cases to the development of legislation, policy, professional training, programme design and evaluation. Children should therefore be recognised as active partners rather than passive recipients. This requires accessible information, voluntary and supported participation, genuine opportunities to influence decisions and transparent feedback explaining how children's views were considered.

Children should be recognised as active partners throughout diversion rather than passive recipients of interventions. Diversion processes should create genuine opportunities for children to participate in decisions affecting their lives while ensuring that their views meaningfully influence policy and practice. Embedding child participation in diversion is essential to building justice systems that are both child-friendly and rights-based.

Recommendation 7

Invest in continuous learning, evaluation and European cooperation

Building effective, child-friendly diversion systems is a continuous process of learning, adaptation and improvement. As child justice systems evolve, policymakers and practitioners must regularly evaluate existing approaches, respond to emerging evidence and adapt diversion to children's changing needs and circumstances. Continuous and comparative learning is therefore essential to ensuring that diversion remains effective, rights-based and developmentally appropriate.

Although diversion has expanded across Europe, systematic comparison remains difficult because jurisdictions use different definitions, eligibility criteria, intervention models and outcome measures. Cooperation between governments, practitioners, researchers, civil society organisations and young people can strengthen the evidence base, improve implementation and support the development of more consistent rights-based practice while respecting national legal traditions.

International standards expressly recognise the importance of research and evaluation in child justice. Rule 30 of the Beijing Rules calls for research to inform planning and policymaking, periodic review of emerging trends and children's needs, and regular evaluative mechanisms within child justice systems. GC No. 24 similarly urges States to collect disaggregated data on, among other matters, the use of diversion and to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of their child justice systems, including in relation to discrimination, reintegration and patterns of offending. It also emphasises that children with experience of the justice system should participate in evaluation and research. The Guidelines on Child-friendly Justice encourage research, international exchange of practice, periodic evaluation and independent monitoring, with the participation of civil society organisations (UNGA, 1985; Council of Europe, 2010; CRC Committee, 2019).

Research reinforces the need for broader and more consistent evaluation. Wilson and Hoge's (2013) meta-analysis found that diversion generally produced lower recidivism than conventional judicial processing. However, recidivism alone does not reveal whether programmes uphold children's rights, promote positive development or avoid unintended consequences. Mercer et al.'s (2026) scoping review found substantial variation in how diversion is defined, delivered and evaluated. The authors recommend clearer definitions, broader outcome measures and analysis according to the type and timing of diversion (Wilson & Hoge, 2013; Mercer et al., 2026). Evaluation frameworks should therefore examine not only reoffending, but also equitable access to diversion, procedural safeguards, children's experiences and participation, educational engagement, wellbeing, social inclusion and reintegration, and victim outcomes where restorative processes are used. They should additionally monitor programme intensity and duration, implementation quality and possible adverse effects such as net-widening. Data should be appropriately disaggregated to identify inequalities in access and outcomes.

General implementation research further demonstrates that outcomes depend substantially on how programmes are delivered. Effective implementation requires appropriately trained staff, supervision, organisational support, performance assessment and data systems that allow services to identify problems and improve practice. Monitoring should therefore examine both programme outcomes and implementation processes, helping distinguish weaknesses in programme design from weaknesses in delivery (Fixsen et al., 2005; Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

Perhaps the most important achievement of the BRIDGE project has been demonstrating the value of comparative European learning. By bringing together policymakers, practitioners, researchers, civil society organisations and young people from Greece, Ireland and the Netherlands, the project created opportunities to critically examine different diversion systems, identify shared challenges and exchange promising practices. BRIDGE demonstrated that countries can strengthen their own systems by learning from one another and adapting successful approaches to their own legal, institutional and cultural contexts.

Participants across the board expressed a strong desire for cooperation beyond the lifetime of the project. The BRIDGE Exchange Meeting highlighted broad support for continued comparative research, regular professional exchange and the establishment of a permanent European Youth Diversion Network capable of facilitating peer learning, collaborative innovation and evidence-informed policy development. Sustaining these forms of cooperation will be essential to ensuring that diversion continues to evolve alongside emerging evidence and changing societal needs.

Strengthening diversion requires an enduring commitment to evaluation, learning and international cooperation. Governments, practitioners, researchers and young people should work together to assess and improve diversion using independent evidence, lived experience and comparative learning. Shared minimum indicators can enable meaningful European comparison, while additional national and local measures can ensure that evaluation remains sensitive to different legal systems and programme objectives.

From Recommendations to Action

The recommendations presented in this policy brief provide a shared framework for strengthening youth diversion across Europe. Their successful implementation requires coordinated action by national governments, European institutions and youth justice organisations. The following actions identify key priorities for each of these actors in translating the recommendations into policy and practice.

National governments

1. **Make diversion the preferred response.** Embed diversion in legislation and policy as the preferred response wherever appropriate and progressively broaden access across offence types and stages of proceedings. Consider expanding diversion measures to emerging adults who stand to benefit from them.
2. **Protect children's rights.** Guarantee child-friendly information, legal aid, informed consent and meaningful procedural safeguards throughout diversion.
3. **Invest in high-quality diversion.** Develop educational, restorative and individually tailored diversion programmes that address children's developmental needs while remaining proportionate and minimally intrusive.
4. **Build implementation capacity.** Invest in specialised child justice professionals, sustainable funding, implementation frameworks and accessible community-based services.
5. **Create integrated systems of support.** Strengthen cooperation between justice agencies, education, health care, municipalities, child protection and youth work to ensure continuity of care.
6. **Put children at the centre.** Empower children to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their diversion pathway and involve them in improving diversion policy and practice.
7. **Keep improving.** Monitor diversion using broad outcome indicators, invest in research and evaluation, and use evidence to continuously strengthen policy and practice.

European Union

1. **Promote diversion as a European priority.** Continue positioning diversion as a cornerstone of child-friendly justice through legislation, policy guidance and implementation support.
2. **Strengthen common safeguards.** Promote shared European standards on children's procedural rights and child-friendly diversion.
3. **Advance evidence-informed practice.** Support research, innovation and knowledge exchange on educational, restorative and developmentally appropriate diversion. Encourage the use of outcomes other than recidivism when assessing effectiveness.
4. **Invest in implementation.** Strengthen Member States' capacity through funding, professional exchange, competency frameworks and technical assistance.
5. **Encourage integrated approaches.** Support cooperation across justice, education, health, social care and civil society through European programmes and partnerships.

6. **Champion child participation.** Promote meaningful participation of children and young people in European child justice policy, programme development and evaluation.
7. **Foster long-term cooperation.** Invest in comparative research, peer learning and support the development of a European Youth Diversion Network to support continuous improvement across Europe.

Youth justice organisations and practitioners

1. **Promote accessible diversion.** Advocate for developmentally appropriate diversion and proportionate decision-making that responds to children's individual circumstances.
2. **Uphold children's rights and procedural safeguards.** Ensure that children understand the diversion process, can participate meaningfully and with informed consent and receive dignified, child-friendly support.
3. **Deliver personalised interventions.** Design diversion around children's strengths, needs and aspirations, while embedding restorative opportunities wherever appropriate.
4. **Invest in professional excellence.** Build specialist expertise through continuous training, reflective practice and evidence-informed implementation.
5. **Work beyond organisational boundaries.** Develop strong partnerships with families, schools, municipalities and community organisations and services to adequately support children's long-term development and refer them where necessary.
6. **Listen to children.** Involve children as active partners in shaping diversion interventions and improving organisational practice. Empower them to exercise agency over their programme.
7. **Share and learn.** Engage in evaluation, research and international collaboration to strengthen diversion through continuous learning and the exchange of promising practices.

Conclusion

Across Europe, diversion is increasingly recognised as an essential component of child-friendly justice. International legal standards and a growing body of research demonstrate that, where appropriate, responding to children outside formal criminal proceedings can reduce unnecessary criminalisation while promoting accountability, healthy development and successful reintegration. Yet the BRIDGE project also demonstrates that recognising diversion in principle is not enough. Realising its full potential requires sustained investment in accessible, rights-based and developmentally appropriate diversion systems.

The experiences of Greece, Ireland and the Netherlands illustrate that there is no single blueprint for effective diversion. Each country has developed distinctive strengths while continuing to face different legal, organisational and practical challenges. Rather than promoting uniformity, the BRIDGE project highlights the value of identifying shared principles and promising practices that can guide national reforms while respecting different legal traditions, institutional contexts and available resources.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that strengthening diversion requires action on multiple fronts. Diversion should become the preferred response to children in conflict with the law wherever appropriate, supported by robust procedural safeguards, educational, community-based and restorative interventions tailored to children's individual needs, specialised professionals, coordinated systems of care and meaningful child participation. Achieving these ambitions further depends on sustained investment in implementation capacity, evaluation and continuous learning.

Perhaps the most important lesson emerging from the BRIDGE project is that diversion should not be understood simply as an alternative to prosecution but an opportunity to meaningfully improve children's lives. When delivered well, diversion provides an opportunity to (re-)connect children with their families, schools and communities, repair harm, strengthen protective relationships and support positive development.

Continued European cooperation will be essential to sustaining this progress. By strengthening comparative research, supporting professional exchange, investing in implementation and fostering long-term networks such as the proposed European Youth Diversion Network, policymakers, practitioners, researchers and young people can continue to learn from one another and collectively advance child-friendly justice across Europe.

The task ahead is to translate this shared commitment into consistent practice. The success of diversion should ultimately be measured not by how many children are redirected from formal proceedings or how little they reoffend, but by whether they experience fair treatment, receive meaningful support, are given opportunities to learn and repair harm where possible and leave the justice system with stronger prospects for the future.

Strengthening youth diversion across Europe

Lessons and recommendations from the BRIDGE project

DIVERSION SHOULD BE THE PREFERRED RESPONSE FOR CHILDREN IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW WHILE PROTECTING THEIR RIGHTS AND PROCEDURAL SAFEGUARDS.

Youth diversion in Ireland, Greece, and the Netherlands



Unconditional, flexible, and community-based diversion supported by voluntary and long-term youth work.



Broad range of educational, restorative and therapeutic measures, tailored to a child's unique needs and strengths.



Specialist, nationally coordinated diversion with a pedagogical, restorative, and social context focus.

Shared foundations: children's rights • procedural safeguards • age-appropriate • professional quality • positive development

Seven priorities for stronger youth diversion

1

Make diversion the preferred response

Broaden access through individualised, proportionate assessment, refrain from exclusion based on offence severity or recidivism, and prevent net-widening.

2

Protect rights at every step

Guarantee procedural safeguards by ensuring clear information, informed and voluntary consent, legal assistance, meaningful participation and protection against self-incrimination.

3

Tailor responses to children's needs

Offer educational, developmental and community-based interventions, with opportunities for voluntary restorative justice where appropriate.

4

Fund effective implementation

Sustain accessible services, clear delivery structures and require specialist, child-sensitive initial and ongoing professional training.

5

Connect systems of care

Coordinate justice, education, health, child protection, youth work and civil society support; before, during and after the child was diverted.

6

Share decisions with children

Treat children as active partners in their diversion pathway, in policy, programme design, training and evaluation.

7

Learn, evaluate and cooperate

- Measure the success of diversion through complementary outcomes, including wellbeing, education, fairness, victim outcomes, inclusion and reintegration, instead of relying on recidivism rates alone.
- Support sustained comparative learning through participating in and contributing to the European Youth Diversion Network.

From recommendations to action

National governments

- Strengthen and broaden diversion
- Embed diversion within a network of support and youth work organisations
- Guarantee safeguards and integrated support
- Expand evaluation criteria to include relevant desistance outcomes

European union

- Advance shared minimum standards and platform best practices through EU instruments
- Fund and support cross-border research, exchange and collaboration on diversion

Organisations and practitioners

- Professionalize and stimulate interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration
- Listen and involve children; evaluate and learn

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