



Executive Summary

BRIDGE Policy Brief

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

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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.