



# HELSINKI

news

1 / 2013

## Building good life for young people



Maria Pohjonen / Youth Department

### **Youth work in Helsinki focuses on empowering young people and on social interaction in peer groups.**

Helsinki commemorated the city's bicentennial as the capital of Finland in 2012 with a year-long programme to celebrate the city's past and future. The year peaked in a special bicentennial appropriation of 10 million euros for the future: the sum will be spent to improve the lives of the city's young people through new educational and work opportunities as well as better overall well-being.

The Finnish government has also turned eyes to the youth, building up efforts to fight social exclusion, which threatens young people by shutting them out of secondary education or by denying them work. The new governmental programmes of the Youth Guarantee seek to provide a place in secondary education for all young people on the completion of compulsory education, and either education or work for everybody under 25 and every graduate under 30.

Securing the wellbeing of young people is one of the core responsibilities of the public sector in Finland. This responsibility

“Our work is steered by a radically humanistic world view.”

*The audience cheers performers at a youth festival in Helsinki where young artists and bands perform in front of their peers.*

is prescribed in a special youth law. Helsinki fulfils the mandate with a strategic plan on children's and young people's wellbeing. The City's strategic arm to implement the mandate is a City department dedicated to youth work.

“Helsinki's youth work focuses on building good life for young people,” says **Tommi Laitio**, Director of the City of Helsinki Youth Department. “We do this by strengthening the social inclusion of young people, by creating meaningful experiences for them, and by allowing them to feel that they are competent and valuable members of society.” The department's focus is on peer-group based activities for young people.

“We focus on the possibilities of all young people, not only the individuals who are experiencing problems in their lives,” Laitio points out. He diverts attention away from seeming failures of some individuals, which may be evident as social exclusion, and focuses attention on the failures of society instead.

“Our work is steered by a radically humanistic world view,” Laitio affirms. That world view stems from the foundations of the Finnish welfare society, which is a society built on equal opportunity. Laitio declares, “Our overall challenge today is to renew the promise of equal opportunity for our youth.”

## Cultural activities on young people's own terms

**The Happi activity centre allows young people to take charge.**



Ari Matinmikko / Youth Department

**Cultural activities are a powerful form of youth work. "Through cultural pursuits, young people can answer the fundamental question of youth: Who am I?" says Happi Director Ulla Laurio, citing cases of therapeutic, liberating experiences by troubled young people at Happi. "By assuming various roles through visual arts or drama, young people can often deal with their emotions far better than by other means."**

A photography studio proudly displays young people's visualisations of their lives and society. The Narri stage for young amateur actors and playwrights provides a venue for a dozen groups to immerse themselves into the world of drama, producing all aspects of plays themselves. Helsinki Freedom Records is a non-profit rap and hip-hop focused recording community that gives opportunities to emerging young talent. Aspiring journalists at an editorial office produce reports for the main Helsinki newspaper and the Finnish Broadcasting Company with guidance from professional journalists, while others produce programmes for the Web in fully equipped radio and TV studios.

*A drama group performs at a youth theatre festival.*

All operations – and many more in the fields of arts and culture – are part of the City of Helsinki Youth Department's Happi activity centre for the youth and young adults.

Happi allows young people to take charge. All activities are organised by the users themselves with minimum staff involvement.

Happi's Game Room is equipped with rows of PCs and consoles that both allow gamers to play in a social context and help to raise a new generation of gaming experts. Hosting a game development club, the Game Room encourages young people to create new games with guidance from professionals. They are able to test commercial games during the product development phase and give feedback to the developers.

The latest addition to Happi's operations is a stand-up comedy school.

## Ruuti gives power to young people



Kimmo Brandt

*Helsinki's youth leader Tommi Laitio.*

Two youth centres in Helsinki empower their customers – local young people – by allowing them to decide on the use of the centres' budgets for activities. This participatory budgeting constitutes a democracy pilot project that

is part of Ruuti, a system and process to make young people heard in the Helsinki City administration and to turn young people into active participants in Helsinki's democratic decision making. Ruuti is meant for everybody aged 13–20.

Still in an experimental phase, Ruuti is evolving into a strong tool to empower Helsinki's youth. "Our goal is to make Helsinki a city where young people can influence the state of affairs and, as a result, take ownership of their lives and society," comments Helsinki's youth leader **Tommi Laitio**.

Ruuti works on many levels. It provides an online forum for young people to present ideas and discuss them. Young people can join activity groups which work for a cause or to a concrete goal; for example, one group active at a City Youth Department-owned domestic animal farm advocates animal rights, while another group promotes active lifestyles by testing various sports.

Ruuti has a core group of 20 delegates, who work with City decision makers to advance the ideas presented and developed online. The delegates are elected annually by ballots mailed to every 13- to 17-year-old in Helsinki. Major annual meetings bring together young people and decision makers to discuss ideas further. [www.ruuti.net](http://www.ruuti.net)





The Knit 'n Tag happening in summer 2012 was one of the Helsinki Youth Department's street art projects that were part of World Design Capital Helsinki 2012.

## Youth work goes online

The principle of Helsinki's youth work is to go where young people spend their time and to speak to them through their means of communication. Today that principle puts youth work online.

The City of Helsinki Youth Department has a spearheading role in working with the youth on the Web, co-ordinating the operations of Verke, which is a national project to develop online youth work. The project's target groups are both young people and adults who work with the youth.

Verke's youth workers meet young people in online communities, seeking to create for the young users safe and positive experiences of these communities. Much of Verke's work focuses on gaming, which is used as a platform to develop online youth group work including gaming cafés, clubs and camps. One of the Verke projects is Hubi, an online community focusing on games, chats and sharing materials. Facebook is an important platform for all Youth Department operations. [www.verke.org](http://www.verke.org)

## Three initiatives to move young people forward

Helsinki's 10-million-euro special appropriation for the youth goes to finance three new concepts.

### *Flexible secondary education to fight social exclusion*

Open Vocational College is a new type of school that fills gaps in traditional secondary education, offering flexible paths for those left out of or otherwise not fitting into other vocational institutions. In Helsinki, 12 percent of 16- to 18-year-olds are not enrolled in any form of further education.

Students can tailor a vocational path to fit their needs, interests and capabilities, picking components from different fields of study. They can obtain counselling in career choices as well as in learning, workplace, social and general life-management skills.

### *Employment for those under 30*

Enrolment in Open Vocational College is usually preceded by a visit to the Future Desk, a service provided by the City of Helsinki for 15- to 17-year-olds to find placement in further education or training. The work of the Future Desk is now continued by a new service, RESPA, targeting 17- to 29-year-old unemployed jobseekers.

About 5,000 Helsinki residents under 30 are unemployed (3.7 percent of the age group). RESPA envisions to help at least 1,000 of them in a year by using all available services and resources to tailor systematic plans to employ them, either directly or through education or training.

### *Good spare time and learning*

Helsinki will conduct a study to investigate the impact of high-quality spare time on young people's wellbeing, learning capacity and likelihood to pursue secondary studies. Four school classes of 13-year-olds will be supported with youth work and opportunities for spare time activities. The target group will be monitored for over two years through the first few months after they complete compulsory education.



## Helsinki Youth Department

- Over 60 youth centres, clubrooms and special activity facilities
- 400 different opportunities for activities
- 5 camp sites and course centres
- 6 skateboarding sites
- Events, courses, camps
- Counselling and support
- Opportunities to participate in decision making
- Online youth work
- Support for youth associations and informal youth groups
- [nuoriso.hel.fi](http://nuoriso.hel.fi)



## Survey explores the lives of Helsinki's youth

Helsinki studies the city's youth with regular surveys conducted at 10-year intervals. The latest survey was conducted in 2011. The findings reveal a broad range of information about the everyday lives of young people in Helsinki.

Young people in Helsinki assess their school performance to be better than they did a decade earlier. The share of those happy with school has remained unchanged at 49 percent; 36 percent report being unhappy. Plans for further education often fail to meet the reality; nearly two-thirds of comprehensive-school students plan to go to universities, but only one-third will.

More than 90 percent spend over an hour per day at screens – gaming, watching TV, on the Internet and on social media. Nearly 84 percent see their peers for more than an hour after school. Time spent with the family has remained nearly unchanged, with 73 percent spending more than an hour with family members daily. Physical activity among young people has increased.

The views of young people have become markedly stricter toward smoking, and they also express increasingly negative attitudes toward drinking and mild drugs. Young people fear more than a decade ago, and all fears related to the future have increased.



Helsinki youth worker Tuomas Nyysönen with a skateboarding class



Photography is one of the most popular creative activities among Helsinki's youth, especially girls.

## City institutions re-organised

A new City of Helsinki vocational school, *Stadin ammattioppilaitos*, merges the former Helsinki City Colleges of (1) Culinary Art, Fashion and Beauty, (2) Social and Health Care, and (3) Technology. The new school is Finland's largest vocational institute.

Helsinki's social and public health services have been reformed by merging the City of Helsinki Social Services Department and Health Centre into one department, and by establishing a new department to manage Finnish-language day care.

## Finland is first in education

A recent study entitled *Learning Curve* conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit for the Pearson education assessment service of the U.K. placed Finland first in a comparison of the education systems of 40 nations. South Korea was in second place.

According to Pearson, common to Finland and South Korea is the high level of teachers and a culture that values education. The rest of the five top countries or regions in the study were from Asia, comprising Hong Kong, Japan and Singapore. The U.K. was in 6<sup>th</sup>, Canada in 10<sup>th</sup> and the U.S. in 17<sup>th</sup> place.

### City of Helsinki Communications Office

P.O.B. 1, Pohjoisesplanadi 11-13  
00099 City of Helsinki, Finland  
Phone +358 9 310 1641

[www.hel.fi](http://www.hel.fi)

Helsinki News is an international bulletin published by the City of Helsinki Communications Office four times a year.

Contact United States and Canada:  
Johanna Lemola, [jlemola@aol.com](mailto:jlemola@aol.com)

United Kingdom: Jarkko Järventausta,  
[jarkko.jarventausta@yahoo.com](mailto:jarkko.jarventausta@yahoo.com)