

**Building a child-friendly Europe:
turning a vision into reality**

**Conference on the Council of Europe Strategy
for the Rights of the Child 2012-2015**

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**Speech by President Keith Whitmore
Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
Council of Europe**

Your Highness,
Ministers, Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

Just like national governments, local and regional elected representatives have a responsibility to ensure that children are regarded and treated as fully-fledged citizens, that their rights are protected, and that they can enjoy life both inside and outside their homes.

This is why the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is firmly committed to building a Europe for and with children, working in partnership with national governments and other stakeholders. This is why we have been actively contributing to the Council of Europe programme for the promotion of children's rights and the protection of children from violence.

Tragically, in spite of the Council of Europe's actions to build a non-violent Europe respectful of the rights of all citizens, we are still witnessing a widespread scourge of abuse and violence, including sexual violence, against the most vulnerable and defenceless members of our society – children.

If anyone can do something about this, local and regional authorities can. This violence and sexual abuse are happening in our neighbourhoods, behind closed doors, shrouded in secrecy and protected by privacy.

This is why the Congress has made an active stand on the matter and fully supported, in 2009, the Policy Guidelines on National Integrated Strategies for the Protection of Children against Violence. In October 2009, we adopted policy recommendations to local and regional authorities on how to contribute to the Guidelines, stressing the need to develop child protection strategies at territorial level. We put forward specific proposals geared towards setting up local and regional mechanisms and action plans, ensuring coordination with national governments and other agencies, and establishing quality management systems for child care services as well as benchmarks for agencies, among others.

We are continuing that active stand with our new Strategic Action Plan, which covers the local and regional dimensions of the ONE in FIVE Campaign of the Council of Europe to stop sexual violence against children.

Drawing on our 2009 recommendations, the Action Plan aims to raise awareness at local and regional level, promote a multi-stakeholder approach and encourage local and regional authorities to develop coordinated multi-disciplinary structures and mechanisms to tackle sexual violence against children. The Plan addresses the challenge of implementing community-based strategies and investing in better local services that respect children's rights and respond to the needs of children and families.

Our hope and ambition are to develop a culture whereby towns and regions are more child-friendly and enable children and young people to participate meaningfully in the development of safe communities free from sexual violence. In this regard, we work closely with the European Network "Cities for Children", which today brings together more than 70 municipalities from 32 countries.

As our first steps in implementing the Action Plan, we held a debate during the Congress session last October on the fight to eradicate sexual abuse of children, and appointed a Thematic Rapporteur on Children. Next February, we will organise a seminar on the role of local and regional authorities in preventing sexual violence against children, and will begin preparing a report on the subject.

Ladies and Gentlemen, you can rest assured that the Congress, as an active partner in the Strategy for the Rights of the Child, will continue in the battle to rid Europe of violence of all sorts against children, and to make our cities safer places where our children can grow and flourish.

Thank you.