PENAL REFORM INTERNATIONAL

Protecting Procedural Rights of Children in the Digital Age



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SUMMARY

Protecting Children's Procedural Rights in Digitalised Justice Systems

A guide to the pilot solutions tested in Ireland, Romania, Spain and Ukraine

PPRO-Child project
Project 101160525 • JUST-2023-JACC-EJUSTICE
October 2026

Terre des hommes Helping children worldwide.

Tierra de hombres
Ayuda directa a la infancia desamparada

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About the summary edition

This guide is also available as a shorter summary edition, designed for readers who want the essential problem, solution and result from each country without the full detail of the country chapters. The summary edition follows the same order as this guide — introduction, the four countries, then recommendations — and draws its country snapshots directly from the first, third, and fourth sections of each country chapter, plus the recommendations in section 7.2.

Summary: why this guide matters

Remote hearings are now part of everyday criminal proceedings involving children across Europe. Used well, they can spare a child a long journey, a hostile courtroom or a face-to-face encounter with the alleged offender. Used badly, they leave children unable to hear, unsure of what is happening, cut off from their lawyer and alone in front of a screen. Between 2024 and 2026, the PPRO-Child project worked in Ireland, Romania, Spain and Ukraine to find out where children's procedural rights were most at risk and to test practical solutions with the institutions and professionals who deal with children every day. Their starting point was the standards set by Directive (EU) 2016/800 and the project's 10-point plan: remote hearings limited to procedural and administrative matters, the child's informed consent, a prior individual assessment, confidential access to a lawyer and checks on the child's understanding.

In each country the same path was followed: a rapid needs assessment and a national roundtable to identify the risk, a Child Advisory Board of young people with lived experience to keep children's views at the centre, co-design workshops with professionals to build a solution, and a pilot to try it out. The four solutions differ, but they share one message: the safeguards children are entitled to in a courtroom must not disappear when the hearing moves onto a screen.

Ireland

The problem. All remote hearings involving children suspected or accused of a crime in Ireland take place from Oberstown Children Detention Campus, yet no operating procedure had been designed for them. Children's rights in remote hearings depended largely on chance. Where an individual judge or solicitor communicated well, the experience was positive; where not, nothing in the system made up for it. Children rarely spoke to their solicitor before or during the hearing, often could not see who was in the courtroom and were not always sure what had been decided.

The solution. A formal Remote Court Hearings (Videolink) Procedure at Oberstown Children Detention Campus. It sets out what staff must do before, during and after a hearing: preparing the child several days in advance, making sure the child can see and hear the court, debriefing the child afterwards and facilitating contact with the solicitor. A judicial checklist asks judges to use language children understand and to check that they have understood — the two changes the young people unanimously asked for.

The result. The procedure has been adopted into Oberstown's governance, approved twice by its internal boards and placed under national inspection. Implementation training brought practical problems to light and resolved them before roll-out. The President of the District Court committed to using the judicial

checklist, and a redesign of the remote hearing rooms is now with the Office of Public Works. Evidence of the effect on children in live hearings will come from Oberstown's own monitoring.

Romania

The problem. There is no common procedure for hearing children remotely. Young people described online hearings as cold, rushed and intimidating: they often could not hear, had no private moment with their lawyer, had other people in the room and were not told what the procedure involved. Equipment, spaces and professional training vary widely across courts, prosecutor's offices, police stations and detention centres.

The solution. A Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the remote hearing of minors — victims, witnesses and suspects alike — before the police, prosecutors and courts. It starts with a structured assessment of whether a remote hearing suits the child, lists warning signs that should stop or change it, and guides professionals through preparation, the hearing itself and aftercare. Its core commitments are the child's informed consent, continuous support by a psychologist or legal specialist, and a secure platform that lets the lawyer, the psychologist and a trusted person join at the same time. The SOP was co-designed by judges, prosecutors, police, child protection services and NGOs, reviewed by the Child Advisory Board, and accompanied by a training curriculum and a checklist for judges and prosecutors.

The result. Strong buy-in from the professionals and institutions involved, with 20 specialists trained in June 2026 and a direct route into magistrates' training through the National Institute of Magistracy. Proposals for a secure remote-hearing platform and a specialised support service will go to the Superior Council of Magistracy and the Ministry of Justice. The effect on children in real hearings remains to be evaluated through the monitoring built into the curriculum.

Spain

The problem. Children took part in remote hearings without genuinely understanding them. Children deprived of liberty at the Bahía de Cádiz juvenile facility told the Child Advisory Board that they had not understood their virtual hearings, and some had accepted plea agreements (conformidades) without knowing what they were agreeing to, leaving them with a sense of regret and of having been deceived. The needs assessment also pointed to the emotional and communicative toll of digital proceedings, where the conditions for real comprehension are easily lost.

The solution. A short, rights-based checklist for defence lawyers, with a user guide, covering ten dimensions across the phases before, during and after a remote hearing. It was co-designed with lawyers from the Cádiz and Málaga bars and tested with children at the Bahía de Cádiz juvenile facility. The children's priorities — clear language, privacy with their lawyer, feeling free and safe to speak, and being heard — led to a pre-hearing protocol that requires lawyers to check and record that the child understands the charges, the consequences and their rights. On practitioners' advice the checklist was cut from fifteen pages to seven and moved to a simple 1–5 scale, so that it can be used in busy juvenile courts.

The result. The children's own assessment was sobering: they did not feel free to speak or able to understand the judge, and they placed little trust in some of the professionals involved. When one Child Advisory Board session was held online, the children participated noticeably less than in person — a direct illustration of how the digital format itself can weaken a child's voice. The co-design work also produced evidence to ask for change in the system: preparation and follow-up for children are missing, and professionals are under pressure from the system. In training, the tool helped professionals pick up pressure

on the child, academic jargon, incentives and problems of time management. The pilot is still running: the checklist has been sent to forty professionals, and Tierra de hombres España has invited six national bodies, including the General Council of Spanish Lawyers (CGAE), the Prosecution Service, the Ombudsman and ministries, to take it up. Written responses have been fewer than expected, because of the summer period, client confidentiality and the lack of a mandate.

Ukraine

The problem. Children in conflict with the law were poorly informed and poorly prepared for remote hearings: they did not know how the hearing would work, what their rights were, what to do if the connection failed or who the other participants were. Poor sound and image, and lawyers who joined from a different location, added to their stress and limited confidential communication.

The solution. Five practical Memos — checklists for children, their legal representatives, attorneys, psychologists and mediators — explaining how to prepare a child for a remote hearing and what to do during and after it. They were co-designed with the Coordination Center for Legal Aid Provision, improved after feedback from the Child Advisory Board and piloted from March to June 2026.

The result. Most professionals rated the Memos "good" or "excellent" and found them useful both to organise what they already knew and to check their own practice. Children welcomed the guidance and, like the professionals involved, suggested a video format; an animated video for children was produced after the pilot. The Coordination Center could build the Memos into induction training and protocols for legal-aid lawyers, psychologists and mediators, and into its criteria for monitoring the quality of their work with children; how far this goes will depend on the wider justice reform under the National Strategy.

Key recommendations

Taken together, the four pilots point to the following lessons for anyone designing, piloting or adapting a similar solution, and through that, for putting the standards in the project's ten-point plan and policy briefing into practice:

1. Anchor each solution in an institution that can adopt it, plan around its approval process, and train staff before roll-out.

2. Bring in every actor the safeguards depend on, such as lawyers, courts and the authorities that run the technology, as formal partners from the start.

3. Involve children early enough to shape the tool, and give them formats designed for them.

4. Write tools in practitioners' working language and keep them short enough for busy courts.

5. Build monitoring in from day one, covering how professionals use and perceive the tool, and whether children understood and felt free to speak, not only whether procedures were followed.

6. Give pilots enough time, and funding for evaluation, to show their effect on children in real hearings, and on how professionals use them.

7. When transferring a solution, keep the safeguards the same, adapt how they are implemented, and repeat the co-design process with local practitioners and children rather than just translating the tool.