Youth Participation Kit

Regularly Involving Young People at Your Organisation

Involving young people in your organisation on an ongoing basis is a great way to harness their ideas and energy, and to ensure your services meet community needs. A variety of models exist for doing this.

Young people’s input can help organisations develop more effective policies, programs and services, and increase the organisation’s relevance to young people.

The young people involved will learn valuable strategic decision-making skills and understand how organisations work. This can help them in their personal lives, as well as allow them to explore future career options. Working with an organisation is also empowering, giving young people opportunities to build their confidence and self-esteem.

Youth reference groups
Youth reference groups comprise young people with an interest in a particular issue. The group usually provides advice to the organisation on their area of interest, and may also lead or be involved in projects such as consultations (see resource 4), events or developing resources such as strategies, policies or promotional materials.

Reference groups are useful when an organisation has a commitment to a particular issue, for example mental health. To be successful, the organisation must commit to listening to the reference group and giving them meaningful ways to contribute.

Reference group membership requires a significant commitment from the young people involved, and also provides them with opportunities to develop skills and learn about how organisations are run. Having a reference group can help you to establish good relationships with young people in the community and encourage future youth participation. Members of the reference group may also become great ambassadors for your organisation in the community.
When running a reference group, you should consider:

- Creating a terms of reference or charter, in conjunction with the reference group. This is a good way to show young people that your organisation is serious about hearing their views, and also provides an opportunity for the group to establish some ground rules for how they will operate.

- Allocating specific roles, responsibilities and tasks to group members gives them an opportunity to contribute and develop skills. It will add to the group’s accountability, including following up on actions agreed at meetings. It also helps young people to record their contribution, which is useful for their resumes.

- Providing training and other support to reference group members is a good way to develop young people’s skills, and their ability to make the most of their roles.

### Youth advisory committees

Youth advisory committees (commonly known as YACs) are similar to youth reference groups, but are usually focussed around a geographical area and run by local governments. YAC members contribute to decision-making that affects young people and the community. YACs also organise local events and activities for young people to increase youth participation and engagement in the community. Some local governments make resources available for their YAC to pursue and deliver activities.

The Department of Local Government and Communities can provide advice and information to local governments about YACs.

### Offering board positions to young people

As board members, young people can contribute to an organisation’s strategic directions, offering new perspectives and ideas. They may also bring a different skill set that an organisation can benefit from. For example, young people are often more aware of new and emerging technologies and social trends than other community members.

If your organisation provides services to young people, having young people on the board can help to ensure service delivery is relevant. Board participation also helps young people learn how decisions are made and how organisations work. Through this process they will feel valued and that they are making a valuable contribution to their community.

When engaging young people on boards, keep in mind that:

- In a legal sense, all board members have equal responsibility and liability for the board’s decisions. Young people are often not aware of a board’s functions or of the level of legal responsibility, and should be informed of this at the outset. The organisation also needs to be committed to supporting young people in their board role.
• Training will be crucial to helping young people understand their board role and the wider picture of running an organisation. Where possible, provide the opportunity to attend training courses as soon as the young person joins the board, or even before they formally sign up. The Australian Scholarships Foundation often offers scholarships for board member courses, which may be suitable for young people.

• Young people may not have experience in formal settings such as the boardroom. Ensure they are provided with relevant information that is written in accessible language (avoid using jargon, technical language or acronyms), and make the meetings as welcoming as possible.

• Advising young people in advance of what to expect, how things work and what processes are used will help them to feel less intimidated and more willing to contribute.

• Consider appointing an experienced board member as a ‘buddy’ or mentor to young board members, to give them guidance and to answer questions they may not be prepared to ask at formal board meetings.

• Young people’s schedules can be inflexible and you may need to work with the board to schedule activities around educational and extracurricular commitments.

• Consider providing transport or reimbursing travel expenses, as some young people may face challenges getting to and from venues.

• Treat young people with respect and value their contribution.

The case study in resource 2 provides more information about young people on boards.
Case Study: Youth Focus Youth Reference Group

The Youth Reference Group (YRG) is a group of young people who provide advice to Youth Focus to ensure that the organisation delivers quality services to young people. Members act as advocates for youth mental health internally and in the community, run their own projects and events, and attend training workshops. They are also often consulted by other services and researchers to share their expertise. The group meets once a month.

Youth Focus actively supports the YRG members. They have a comprehensive application and interview process to ensure that the young people who become members will be able to participate fully. This process includes an online application, interview, attendance at a trial meeting, a commitment to the group for at least one year, and signing Youth Focus policy documents. Staff also work with individual members to create an annual ‘Wellness Plan’, which involves setting goals for participation in the group, making plans for personal development opportunities, and planning how Youth Focus can support the young person’s ongoing wellness to ensure their emotional, social and physical health is looked after.

YRG members see lots of benefits from their involvement:

“Everyone has an opinion on everything these days, but getting out and doing something with your opinion feels great.”

“When we get a response [from Youth Focus or external groups] about where our feedback has gone it reinforces that we’re working in a real partnership, it’s not just tokenistic.”

“When people see the YRG on my resume they’re really interested. Being involved has given me lots of useful skills, like learning to talk professionally.”

You can find out more about the YRG on the Youth Focus website.