



# Regularly involving young people at your organisation

## Youth Participation Kit: Organisations

### Resource 5

Involving young people in your organisation on an ongoing basis is a great way to harness young people's 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. Young people will learn valuable strategic decision-making skills and understand how organisations work. This will help them in their personal lives, as well as allow them to explore future career options. Working with an organisation is also very empowering for young people, building their confidence and self-esteem.

#### **Youth reference groups**

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

This approach is 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.



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Reference group membership requires a significant commitment from the young people involved, but also provides them with great opportunities to develop skills and learn about how organisations are run. Having a reference group also establishes good relationships with young people in the community and encourages future youth participation. Members of the reference group will also likely become great ambassadors for your organisation in the community.

When running a reference group, you may consider:

- Creating a terms of reference or charter document, 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 is a good way for everyone to get an opportunity to contribute and develop skills. It will also add to accountability of the group, including following up on actions agreed at meetings. It also helps young people to record their contribution to the group, which is useful for their resumes.
- Providing training and other support to members of the reference group is a good way to develop the 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 Communities](#) can provide advice and information to local governments about YACs.

## Offering positions for young people on the board

As board members, young people can contribute to an organisation's strategic directions by offering new perspectives and fresh ideas. Additionally, young people are often more aware of new and emerging technologies and social trends than other community members. Young board members bring a different skill set that an organisation can benefit from. If your organisation provides services to young people, having young people on the



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board can help to ensure service delivery is relevant to youth. Board participation also helps young people learn how decisions are made and how organisations work. Through this process they will feel valued and feel like they are making a valuable contribution to their community.

When engaging young people on boards, you should 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. Young people should be informed of this at the outset. The organisation also needs to be committed to supporting young people in the 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 [Institute of Community Directors](#) offers scholarships for board member courses, which may be suitable for young people. Alternatively, the [Australian Scholarships Foundation](#) offers scholarships for young leaders.
- 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 inside 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 in getting to and from venues.
- Treat young people with respect and value their contribution.

The case study in resource sheet 1 has some more information about young people on boards.



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### Case study: [Youth Focus Youth Reference Group](#)

The Youth Focus 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 of Youth Focus policy documents. Staff also work with each individual members to present each young person with an opportunity for personal development, such as public speaking, advocating for other young people, co-design and other mental health education upskilling,, as well as 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 of 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.”



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