



Tips for engaging with young people

Youth Participation Kit: Organisations

Resource 6

There are many things to consider when setting up and running a youth participation initiative. This resource sheet covers some of the key things to consider for the best chance of success.

Understanding young people's needs

Participating in the community creates great outcomes for young people, however it can also be a stressful and frustrating experience. The following points provide suggestions to make the experience enjoyable for young people.

- Provide meaningful inclusion and avoid tokenism. Make it clear to young people that your organisation and its staff appreciate the time that young people have given up to provide feedback and to participate. Ensure all contribution is appreciated and valued, even for contributions as small as a 10-minute online survey! Young people sometimes feel that their participation is just about making an organisation look good.
- Consider opportunities for handing over control and allowing young people to do their own thing. This may be difficult to manage but could produce amazing results. When the young people see that their actions are critical to the success of a project, they show more commitment and have a greater sense of achievement when it has been completed. Being in control allows young people to work with their own strengths and gives a greater sense of satisfaction.
- Take time to explain the role of young people in your organisation and how they are going to make a difference. Make the effort to explain the outcomes of feedback provided by young people, as evidence that their comments were followed through.



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- Make sure that the ideas and suggestions made by young people are given the same weight as others. It is frustrating for a young person to see their idea trivialised or stolen. This does not encourage creativity or meaningful contribution.
- Young people need to have relationships with adults that reinforce their value. This means that these relationships must be built on equality and respect. Young people typically feel disempowered by their age and inexperience and may be hesitant to ask for information and resources for fear of being seen as incompetent. Provide them with adequate resources and information. They will feel valued, respected, more confident and effective in their participation.
- The [Occupational Safety and Health](#), [Privacy](#), and [Equal Opportunity](#) laws set requirements for organisations around engaging with volunteers and service users. An organisation has a responsibility to keep young people safe and to protect them as far as possible from harm.
- Young people don't always understand how organisations work, or how decisions are made. They may find processes frustrating and slow moving, and this may need to be managed by keeping young people informed. Minimise processes where possible and manage young people's expectations where it isn't. You should always try to respond to the ideas put forward by young people in a timely manner.
- The words you use when talking to young people (and when talking about their ideas) will shape how the young people perceive your commitment to their participation. For example, it is important to avoid referring to them as "kids" or "teens"; try to say: "young people", "youth crew" or use the name of their group.
- For long-term involvement, young people will need ongoing training and support. This will help them to be more effective in your organisation, as well as improving their own skills and experience. Providing training, even informal training where young people share skills with each other, is always valuable. Similarly, there should be a staff member at your organisation who the young people can go to for advice, to talk through issues, or to raise any concerns. You need to choose the right person for this job to make sure the young people are as likely as possible to go to them if they need help.

Promoting innovative thinking

Young people are often willing to stretch their imagination and challenge everything. This makes them the ideal drivers of innovation, which is about developing and implementing new, creative ideas.



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There are a few things that can help to foster creative thinking:

- Give young people total control of the processes and the project.
- Make the environment fun and inspirational for creative thinking.
- Give young people details of the goals of the project, resources available and any important background information they need to consider, then ask them to start brainstorming.
- Keep young people involved in the project during development and implementation by providing regular feedback and encouragement.
- Consider using techniques like those described below, which can be used in one-off or ongoing initiatives.

These are some specific techniques that can be used to encourage creative and innovative thinking:

- **Deliberative consultation**

Deliberative consultations are a process whereby young people are given pre-reading material on an issue. They are then better informed to discuss the issue at a meeting and come up with a solution. This approach allows young people to push the limits of what can be done within the organisation's set boundaries. It also facilitates those 'aha!' moments when a brilliant idea pops into someone's head out of (what seems like) nowhere.

- **Design workshops**

A workshop is held where relevant stakeholders provide young people with the information they need to know about an issue. The young people are then given the opportunity to design a solution as creatively as possible. For example, they might use magazines to create a collage, annotating it to explain what is appealing from the images selected, or work in groups to create a diorama-style scene with children's toys to show how a new service might work and then explain their scene to the organisation.

- **Appreciative inquiry**

This is a creative technique that builds on what is working well, instead of focusing on what is not working. Participants look first at how similar issues have been successfully addressed, which becomes the inspiration for imagining creative solutions to other issues. Stories are shared and a single proposition is formed by the group. This can then become the focus of future workshops, in which the proposition is developed into a strategy.



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Working with social media

Social media is an ever-evolving medium and provides valuable tools for working with young people. Most young people access social media platforms regularly and do so from a range of different devices. Businesses and organisations also use social media regularly as it is free to use, provides fantastic two-way communication opportunities with the community, and allows contact with people who may be difficult to reach in-person due to geography, accessibility or language barriers. In addition, the ability for young people to quickly and simply share information they find on social media with their friends and networks makes it a powerful resource when used effectively.

Social media can be a great tool for contacting young people, but it can also be a way to engage young people in your organisation's work. Some organisations hand over some or all of the responsibility for running their social media channels to young people, to ensure the content is appealing to their intended youth audience and to give young people a meaningful way to contribute.

Planning your social media strategy

To use social media well, you will need to have a strategy. The strategy will explain:

- Your goals for social media use (e.g. inform community about initiatives, seek feedback from service users about potential changes, develop affinity with your brand).
- The 'voice' you will create for the page. This includes the 'look and feel' components and will guide your choices of content and language.
- A rough guide to the kind of content you will post. Some organisations create a daily guide to plan the week and make use of social media trends such as '#tbt' ('throwback Thursday', where you post old photos).
- Procedures for who will post content and when.
- The rules for use, which you should post somewhere on each channel's page to tell users how you expect them to engage with it. This is particularly important as there are some people out there who use social media to bully people or 'troll' (starting arguments with people just to be a nuisance).
- Procedures for moderation of the channel, including allocating an individual to check all comments and respond, in line with the rules for use.
- Summary of the resources to be allocated to the strategy, including staff hours.
- Plans for evaluating the usefulness and effectiveness of your efforts. Most platforms now provide 'insights' functions which you can use to measure your channel's performance.



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- Plans for reviewing the strategy to keep up with emerging trends and new platforms.

You should seriously consider engaging young people in the development of this strategy (either through a one-off consultation or consulting an existing youth resource at your organisation), especially if you intend for young people to run the channel.

Tips and tricks

The 'most popular' social media platform is always changing, and organisations need to adapt their strategies accordingly. However, there are some tips organisations can use that apply across all social media platforms.

- If you want your page to speak to young people, you must ensure that the content you post is informed by young people. Use their advice to keep up with trends and understand things like memes and hashtags.
- Hashtags are like hyperlinks to an index which contains all posts which contain that hashtag on that platform. For example, if you make a post containing '#sunshine', anyone who clicks/taps on #sunshine will be taken to a page showing all of the posts containing '#sunshine'. You can use this to your advantage – you may be able to make posts including a hashtag that is popular with your target audience (as long as your post is relevant) as a way of reaching a new audience, or you can ask attendees at an event to use a particular hashtag so that they can see what others at the event are up to.
- To keep people interested, your page or your feed must be updated regularly with relevant and meaningful information that engages people's attention. Some social media sites prioritise posts depending on how frequently you post updates, so you need to post regularly in order for your audience to see your content.
- Take the time to understand the channel being used. Some platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr) use a 'newsfeed' model where what a user sees depends on the type of content, frequency of posts, and how much the individual has engaged with posts previously, while others use a 'timeline' model which presents posts chronologically (such as Instagram and Snapchat). Similarly, each platform tends to have its own theme which you will need to understand (for example, Snapchat is very informal whereas Twitter tends to be more professional). Understanding these factors will help you shape your strategy.
- Social media is a two-way communication tool. You need to allow comments if you want people to engage with your channel, and you must ensure that you moderate the site appropriately and respond to any queries or questions promptly.



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- An internet discussion/feedback page is a great medium to post a survey or ask for feedback or input on a topic or issue. It allows for anonymity and can reach young people who may be geographically isolated.
- Put thought into your brand recognition, across cyberspace and into the 'real world'. Choose something that is easy to search for and try to use the same 'handle' (name) across platforms—be careful though as once you choose a name, some platforms do not allow you to change it.
- While each platform has its own theme and feel, you can often save time by posting the same or similar content across platforms. Some platforms allow for simple cross-posting (for example Facebook integrates posts from Instagram and YouTube seamlessly), or you may like to use apps and online tools which allow you to post to multiple channels at once.
- If you have a database of phone numbers, SMS/text consultation utilising an automated system can target large groups of young people. This is an efficient way of asking for input about an issue, although be wary that it may not be representative of all young people.

Online accessibility for young people with disability

When designing any online space, it is important that it is as inclusive as possible. Young people with disability can have trouble navigating websites or using some social media sites if they aren't designed well. Some simple things you can do to make your site more accessible include:

- providing text alternatives to pictures and videos
- including a caption that describes the image when posting pictures
- including captions on your videos (you may like to investigate [YouTube's subtitles guide](#) or [Easy YouTube Caption Creator](#) for help creating captions)
- providing links to accessible portals, such as [Easy Chirp](#) (Accessible Twitter)
- using high contrast colours and larger text
- using clear and concise text with limited abbreviations.

Doing it right

You may like to visit these social media channels as examples of organisations that have been successful in engaging young people (please note that some may contain explicit language and/or adult themes):

- Reachout.com ([Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#))
- Youth Affairs Council of WA ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#))



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- Foundation for Young Australians ([Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#))
- ABC Heywire ([Facebook](#)).

Case study: Youth Affairs Council of WA

The [Youth Affairs Council of WA](#) (YACWA) is the peak body for young people and the youth sector in WA.

YACWA aims to provide united, independent and active advocacy for the non-government youth sector and young people, supported by the sector and the wider community. Focusing on young people's varied needs at local, state and federal government level, YACWA works to engender and enhance positive community attitudes towards young people.

YACWA's work is driven by young people and their policy work is informed by the voices and needs of young people through extensive youth consultation. They ensure a youth voice is embedded in all aspects of what they do, including membership offerings to young people and two positions on the Board of Directors that are dedicated to, and reserved for young people.

Youth leadership and participation form a core pillar of YACWA's mission. YACWA supports multiple youth-led advocacy bodies and youth networks, empowering young people to connect, influence policy, develop skills and make meaningful contributions to the rights of their peers.

For example:

- The Youth Educating Peers (YEP) Project is a peer-to-peer sexual health education initiative that provides workshops and resources to young people and the youth sector.
- The Youth Educating about Waste (YEW) Project is a peer-led initiative that provides young people with the information and resources to make sustainable reductions to their food, textile, and plastic waste.
- The Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network WA (MYAN WA) is the Western Australian branch of the national advocacy body working to support the rights and wellbeing of migrant and refugee young people.
- The Youth Homelessness Advisory Council (YHAC) is an advisory body comprising young people with lived experience of homelessness, working with government and the housing sector to eliminate homelessness in WA.
- The Youth Pride Network (YPN), the peak body for LGBTIQ+ young people in WA focuses on systematic advocacy and facilitating change to create a society in which young LGBTIQ+ people are fully included, accepted and celebrated by the wider community.



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- Regional Youth Leadership Development (RYLD) is a youth-led, volunteer-run organisation delivering tailored workshops for regional young people on youth empowerment and leadership.

YACWA also actively maintain social media platforms ([Facebook](#), [Instagram](#)) to allow for a more casual dialogue with young people in the community.

“You have to support young people to understand the context and reality of the issues they’re discussing. There’s a difference between listening to young people’s experiences—which is a legitimate form of participation in itself—and then taking the next step to help them to formulate ideas and do the ‘reality checking’ to shape those ideas into practical opportunities to make change.

“This is particularly important with the young people who are the most disenfranchised and disempowered, where you need to have a continued amount of energy and focus to maintain a connection and draw out their contributions. It takes more work, but it has a huge impact in empowering and enriching the lives of those young people.”

“We’re committed to listening to young people—if we’re going to advocate for young people, we need to be guided by them.” – Ross Wortham, Chief Executive Officer, YACWA



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