



Policy Platform: Youth Participation in Decision Making **Youth Coalition of the ACT**

The Youth Coalition believes that young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect them and the life of their community. Participation gives young people the opportunity to have a say about what is important to them, allows them to make their 'own' decisions about their lives, increases self-confidence and skills, and empowers them to be a full and valued part of the community.

The Youth Coalition is strongly committed to the concept of meaningful youth participation in service delivery and policy development, in recognition that young people have the right to have a say in decisions affecting their own lives. Young people's participation in decisions that affect them and the life of their community is valuable and has a range of positive outcomes for young people and those who engage with them.

Benefits of youth participation for organisations and communities include: bringing new perspectives; ensuring programs are responsive and effective; community capacity building; promoting inclusive and cohesive communities; and developing social competence and social responsibility.¹ Participation should be meaningful and this can only occur when young people are adequately informed and supported in their involvement, their contributions are valued, they believe the work they are doing has a purpose, and they see changes occur and are provided with feedback.

Young people often experience a range of systemic barriers to their engagement and participation, which include: age discrimination (at an individual, community and societal level); limited access to opportunities; and inadequate resourcing to support meaningful youth participation. Youth Coalition consultations on this issue highlight that many young people do not feel engaged with decision making at a local or national level and describe a disconnect between what young people think themselves and what decision-makers believe young people 'need'.

Young people also feel that governments do not support genuine youth consultation, either in the methods used, or in taking expressed views seriously. They report feeling that governments only engage with young people who are highly educated or already actively engaged with community consultative processes. Young people identified that they would like a greater say in issues that affect them directly, such as health and education funding and delivery. The Youth Coalition believes that young people should be have opportunity to provide input and engage on all issues, not just those deemed to be 'young people's' issues.

In the 2012 *Rate Canberra* survey conducted by the Youth Coalition, young people identified whether they felt they were valued by the ACT community. 44% were unsure whether they were valued. The remaining respondents were equally divided, with 28% saying 'yes' and 28% saying 'no'. Nearly half of young people's open answer comments related to the negative stereotypes they felt related to them. There

was a particularly strong focus on young people's beliefs that the ACT community considered young people to be seen as troublesome, not allowed to be involved in decisions, and that their opinions were not as important as the opinions of adults.²

Youth participation requires a commitment from across government, services and other stakeholders, to adequately resource the process in order to build a culture where young people are able to contribute in valuable and meaningful ways. Without adequate resources and commitment to the implementation of youth participation policies and practices, services are at risk of engaging young people in tokenistic ways.

The Youth Coalition supports the ACT Government's commitment³ to developing a 'Child Friendly City' for children and young people. This defines young people's participation as 'promoting children and young people's active involvement in issues that affect them; listening to their views and taking them into consideration in decision-making processes'.⁴ However, the Youth Coalition notes that meeting the nine building blocks of a Child Friendly City requires ongoing, dedicated and adequate funding.

A number of theoretical models of youth participation have been developed in Australia, most notably Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation,⁵ which outlines a series of options for youth participation. The Youth Coalition also supports the work progressed by other organisations in Australia, including the *Where are you Going With That* report,⁶ *Taking Young People Seriously* Handbooks,⁷ and *Young People in Decision-Making* Toolkit.⁸

To complement and progress these key resources in an ACT context, the Youth Coalition advocates for the development and implementation of a project that would specifically support diverse programs and services to identify, develop and implement youth engagement and participation strategies, policies and procedures within and between their services. An example of such a project is *Citizen Me: Engaging Children and Young People in Your Organisation* developed by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People.

Commitments

1. Advocating for ongoing, dedicated and adequate resourcing to support youth participation, including the development of a 'Child Friendly City' in the ACT.
2. Advocating for young people to have equitable access to participate in their communities.
3. Promoting participation strategies that engage young people in supportive and meaningful ways.
4. Advocating for the resourcing of a dedicated project in the ACT to support diverse programs and services to identify, develop and implement youth participation strategies, policies and procedures.
5. Advocating for the active involvement of the full range of young people in designing, planning and evaluating all youth policy and service delivery frameworks.

6. Advocating for the active and supported participation of young people in their individual care planning and case management.

¹ Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association (2008) National Youth Participation Strategy Scoping Project Report.

² Youth Coalition of the ACT (2012) Rate Canberra 2012: Findings from the Survey of Young People aged 12-25 in the ACT.

³ Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (2009) ACT Young People's Plan 2009 – 2014, ACT Government, Canberra.

⁴ UNICEF (Accessed 2010) Child Friendly Cities.

⁵ Hart, R (1997) Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence.

⁶ Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (2010) Where Are You Going with That: Maximising Young People's Impact on Organisational and Public Policy, New South Wales.

⁷ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2009) Taking Young People Seriously Handbooks, Victoria.

⁸ Wierenga, A (2003) Sharing a New Story: Young People in Decision Making, Foundation for Young Australians, Victoria.