

Youth Voices in Active Recreation and Sport

Listening to young people's voices
can make your physical activity
offerings more successful.

The following guidance has been designed to help you and your organisation *involve young people in your mahi*.

Here you'll find recommendations and considerations, examples of good practice, and advice from sector organisations and rangatahi.

"One organisation has put on boxing classes, yoga classes, self-defence classes, about five different classes. They've fallen over – not because they're not a good idea, but because the ideas didn't come from the youth. So, if they [young people] come up with the ideas, then they sell it, and they bring their friends and then it just ends up working."

- COUNCIL COORDINATOR

Introduction

Sport New Zealand Ihi Aotearoa believes physical activity can play a vital role in creating better outcomes for rangatahi in Aotearoa. There is an opportunity for young people to have more agency in shaping these outcomes. As we develop the sport and active recreation system to meet the needs of rangatahi, it's essential that we listen to young voices.

Why? Involving young people in decisions that impact them makes them feel empowered and included, and this increased sense of belonging means they are more likely to stay engaged in physical activity in the long term.



About the Author

My name is Olivia Clare and I am in my second year of the Sport NZ Ihi Aotearoa Graduate Programme. I am 22 years old, and it has been a privilege to undertake this mahi and represent young people's voices. Through my own experiences, the Graduate Programme and this mahi, I have seen just how important it is that young people's views and experiences are heard and understood by decision-makers in the sector. I want to thank the organisations and particularly the young people who spoke with me and shared their experiences and insights. I hope readers find this document helpful and thought-provoking as they embark on their youth voice journey.

Advice from young people

"We have a treaty of how we want to be as a group when the group first comes together."

- 14 YEAR-OLD

"If you shut them down, they won't engage again."

- ALUMNI, 22 YEAR-OLD

"Give as much as you take."

- ALUMNI, 23 YEAR-OLD

"Don't be tick box."

- 15 YEAR-OLD

"Listen to the young people. I've been involved in so many organisations, where they're like we wanna support youth, but we actually don't listen to what they're gonna say or their ideas are too radical, which is so frustrating."

- ALUMNI, 24 YEAR-OLD

"It can't be tokenistic – you have to follow it up with action, give them power, pay them to do the work, make them an integral part of the organisation."

- ALUMNI, 23 YEAR-OLD

"Tell us what we can actually influence or change and what we can't so then we know from the start and won't get disappointed or mad if something doesn't happen."

- 16 YEAR-OLD

"How are these young people going to benefit from working alongside you?"

- ALUMNI, 22 YEAR-OLD

"What is the purpose of why you want it before you even start – do you really want it or is it trendy?"

- ALUMNI, 23 YEAR-OLD

"Talk to them as though they are the same level and not below you."

- 16 YEAR-OLD

"Show us proof you used our voices and are taking us seriously."

- 16 YEAR-OLD

"Sometimes we do sticky notes which makes it easier, so people don't have to say it in front of everyone, but they still get to say what they think."

- 14 YEAR-OLD

"It will help the organisation do better."

- 13 YEAR-OLD

"Don't go in with your own ideas – start blank."

- 14 YEAR-OLD

"I like that we have a relaxed, safe environment so that we can say what we want to say."

- 14 YEAR-OLD

"Always ask for feedback on improvements that could be made and do what you can."

- 13 YEAR-OLD

Research method

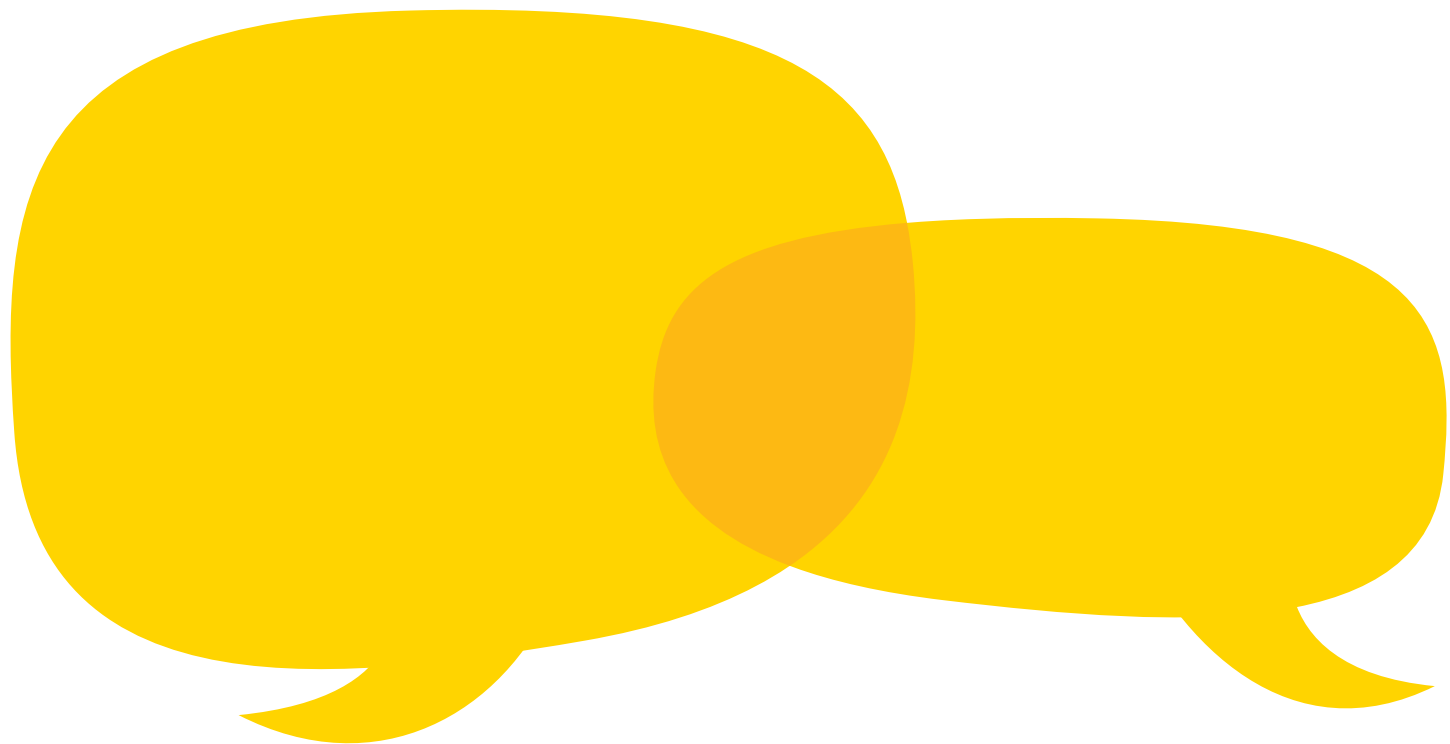
In 2022, Sport NZ conducted a stocktake of youth leadership programmes and opportunities for young people to be involved in decision-making in our sector. While only a small number of organisations offered formal youth leadership programmes, many had mechanisms for listening to rangatahi voices, and many more were interested in engaging young people in the future. We then conducted in-depth interviews to gather and record the insights of six physical activity organisations, who take a variety of approaches to including young people in their mahi.

This document is the result of those interviews. It supports and provides guidance to organisations that want to engage in authentic youth voice processes. It includes practical considerations for organisations, examples of good practice and advice from sector organisations and young people.



Research method

About the interviews



Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six organisations, and a selection of young people who participate in their programmes.

- An Active Recreation Organisation
- A National Sport Organisation
- A National Disability Sport Organisation
- Two Non-Government Organisations/ Youth Organisations (which incorporate/ deliver physical activity)
- A Kaupapa Māori Organisation

Open-ended questions were asked to encourage conversation to flow. These included:

1. What type of youth-voice engagement does your organisation use?
2. How have young people impacted the decisions your organisation makes?
3. What are some challenges you have faced?
4. What have you changed within the organisation to be inclusive of young people?
5. What advice would you give to other organisations?

Questions to young people included:

1. How did you become involved with the organisation?
2. What is your favourite thing about being involved?
3. How does the organisation engage with you?
4. Do you feel like you are heard by the organisation?
5. What advice would you give to other organisations?

The importance of youth voice

Sport New Zealand's 2021 [Voice of Rangatahi](#) survey told us that young people want to make their voices heard in decisions about their physical activity opportunities. While many rangatahi want to be more physically active, there are a number of barriers, both real and perceived, that prevent them from engaging in existing opportunities.

By including rangatahi in our thinking, planning and decision-making, we're more likely to achieve the outcome we want – more young people active their way, more often.

What's more, giving young people opportunities to express their opinions and shape the programmes they and their peers participate in helps them grow and develop, and has positive impacts on their wider communities.

DID YOU KNOW?

Youth voice and participation is also a human right, embedded in the UN Articles on the Rights of the Child.



Defining positive youth development

Positive youth development is an approach to working with young people. It means supporting rangatahi to grow and develop the skills and connections they need to reach their potential.

The [Ministry of Youth Development](#) defines positive youth development as supporting young people to gain a:



Sense of contributing something of value to society.



Feeling of connectedness to others and to society.



Belief that they have choices about their future.



Feeling of being positive and comfortable with their own identity.

There are many different ways that we can support positive youth development. At Sport NZ, we use the **Mana Taiohi** principles to guide our approach.



Offering young people enriching experiences: Mana Taiohi

As we involve young people in our mahi, we have a responsibility to not only listen to and engage with their perspectives, but to offer them high-quality and mana-enhancing experiences in return.

Mana Taiohi is a bicultural, principle-based framework created by [Ara Taiohi](#), the peak body for youth development in Aotearoa. It centres on a set of interconnected and holistic values that acknowledge the innate mana of young people, and lays out how we can work with young people to enhance their mana.

To uphold or enhance someone's mana means to show them respect, recognise the value they bring by being themselves, and allow them to assume agency in decisions that affect them.



Offering young people enriching experiences: Mana Taiohi



According to the framework, young people draw their mana from four sources:

Mauri

their life spark, values, beliefs, skills and talents

Whakapapa

their histories, genealogies, culture and heritage

Hononga

their connections to people, land or whenua, spirituality and the digital world

Te Ao

their world, influenced by social and economic contexts and dominant cultural values.



As organisations, we can enhance that mana in four ways:

Whanaungatanga

taking the time to build and sustain authentic relationships

Manaakitanga

acting with kindness and ensuring a welcoming environment that supports wellbeing

Whai Wāhitanga

providing opportunities for rangatahi to actively contribute and assume agency

Mātauranga

providing access to rich and diverse information that is useful and timely.

The Sport NZ website offers more information about the Mana Taiohi principles, training opportunities and Sport NZ's partnership with Ara Taiohi.
[Learn more about Mana Taiohi](#)

Mechanisms of youth voice

Levels of youth engagement

Often the word “co-design” is used to describe all forms of youth engagement – but in fact, co-design is just one way of listening to rangatahi. Physical activity organisations can involve young people in decision-making in many ways, from surveys to dedicated youth boards.

The table outlines a number of ways to include young people in decision-making and describes the power and influence that each gives its participants.

“There can’t be a hierarchy during the codesign process.”

– COFOUNDER, PROGRAMME MANAGER



Mechanisms of youth voice: Levels of youth engagement



More time
required
from young
people and
adults



Less time
required
from young
people and
adults

LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT

Doing with – an equal and reciprocal partnership.

Doing for – engaging and involving rangatahi.

Doing to – rangatahi as passive recipients of a service.

Non-participation

DESCRIPTION

Co-production – Working in equal partnership with rangatahi. All decisions are either shared or made by young people, who contribute and develop their leadership skills in the process.

Co-design – Involving rangatahi in programme design and making sure they have opportunities to influence decisions throughout the process.

Engagement – Rangatahi have regular opportunities to contribute their thoughts and opinions. They might influence some decisions.

Consultation – Inviting rangatahi to share their thoughts and preferences on issues and options while a project is being developed, or after it has already been developed.

Informing – Informing rangatahi about something that has been developed for them, and explaining the decisions that have been made.

Educating – Educating rangatahi on the benefits and rationale of a programme that has been designed without their input.

Tokenism – Rangatahi appear to have a say but in reality, have little to no input or decision-making power.

Decoration – Rangatahi ‘decorate’ an event or project, attending in a very limited capacity with no role in decision making.

Manipulation – Adults pretend that rangatahi have participated. Adults ask for feedback that is then ignored or used for their own gain.

EXAMPLES OF RANGATAHI ROLE

- Making decisions at every stage from design to delivery.
- Leading multiple aspects of a project.

- Attending ongoing meetings to discuss ideas and develop solutions together.
- Leading some aspects of a project.
- Seeing their ideas reflected in the final outcome.

- Attending meetings to give feedback and share their views. This feedback is often reflected in changes the organisation makes.

- Responding to a survey.
- Attending a one-off event, focus group, or interview to share thoughts.

- Making decisions at every stage from design to delivery.
- Leading multiple aspects of a project.

- Reading a newsletter about a physical activity programme.

- Being asked to represent the ‘youth voice’, but not being given the time or ability to consult their peers.

- Reading a script written by adults about “why young people do not engage in active recreation” at a conference.

- Giving ideas that are not reflected at all in a final product, which adults claim has been influenced by young people.

Mechanisms of youth voice

Using the framework in your organisation

Engaging rangatahi authentically **takes time and commitment** – racing to the top level without making sure you have the support and resources you need is likely to be detrimental to the experience of your young participants.

A useful first step is to identify what level of youth engagement your organisation is currently operating at, and then look at some of the things you could do to reach the level you're aiming for.

It's also important to understand that a lower level of engagement like consultation, when done well, will still be better than no engagement at all.

And remember – all youth voice opportunities should recognise and enhance the mana of young people, allowing them to collaborate with adults on any decision-making.



Mechanisms of youth voice

Types of youth voice

Whatever level of rangatahi engagement is right for your organisation, defining the labels you use for groups will give young people and those who work with them a shared understanding of their purpose and function.

The table describes some structures that are commonly used to involve young people in an organisation’s work – but keep in mind that levels of engagement can vary within these. For example, it’s possible to have a youth board that operates only at the “tokenism” engagement level. A case study later in this report demonstrates how a youth council can be part of co-production or design.

This table is not hierarchical, and no structure is necessarily better than any other. The most important thing is that everyone involved shares an understanding of the role, purpose and powers of rangatahi in your organisation.

TYPE OF YOUTH VOICE	DEFINITION	POWER
Youth board	A group of young people that meet regularly to discuss and make decisions on the immediate and long-term priorities of an organisation. They have full decision-making power, and sometimes work alongside an adult board.	Full decision-making power ●●●
Youth board member	Elected member/s of an organisation’s board that are equal to the other (adult) board members.	Full decision-making power ●●●
Associate/intern/aspiring director or board member	Member/s of an organisation’s board that do not have voting rights. This is often a learning and development opportunity.	Influence only ●○○
Youth council	A group that regularly provide their opinions, ideas and feedback on matters put forward to them by an organisation. They may bring things to attention they feel are important to their peers. They may lead a specific project.	Some decision-making power ●●○
Youth commission	Same as a youth council, but they only come together for the length of a project.	Some decision-making power ●●○
Youth advisory group/board	Regularly provide their opinions, ideas and feedback on a specific matter or project.	Influence only ●○○
Focus group	Provide opinions, ideas or feedback. Engagement is usually a one-off, or for a specific project.	Influence only ●○○
Feedback	Includes surveys, feedback forms and voting forms.	Influence only ●○○
Informal feedback	Casual conversations with young people, or social media engagement (for example, Instagram polls, comments on posts).	Influence only ●○○



Engaging young people in your organisation – practical advice and considerations

Engaging young people in your organisation – practical advice and considerations

1. Find your “why”

Establish the reasons why you want to involve young people in your work. For example, you might want to appeal to more young people, offer them governance experience, or find out whether your programmes are addressing rangatahi needs.

Finding your why can help you define the purpose of your programme – that is, the outcomes the group will seek to achieve, like publishing a youth strategy or giving feedback on an existing initiative. You do not need to know exactly all the tasks the group will complete but thinking about this can help inform the level and form of engagement you want to encourage.

Further, there is an opportunity here to engage young people from the very start and involve them in deciding the purpose and level of their engagement. You will still need a clear “why”, and to communicate it to your young team before they agree to come on-board.

“And actually, that’s probably the most important thing to remember, you know, for organisations that are considering bringing together youth voice in whatever form it is. Keep coming back to the why? Why are you doing it?”

– COUNCIL COORDINATOR

“One of the things that we always come back to is what’s the purpose of the Youth Council?”

– COUNCIL COORDINATOR

Engaging young people in your organisation – practical advice and considerations

2. Manage expectations

Setting clear expectations from the beginning ensures everyone is on the same page and can prevent future conflict. Clearly communicating the role and powers that rangatahi will have in your mahi allows them to make informed decisions about whether they want to be involved.

As in the **Mana Taiohi** principles, it's vital to offer **mātauranga** (rich, useful and timely information) and **whai wāhitanga** (opportunities to contribute and assume agency).

“Signal from the beginning: These are our parameters. This is the environment we’re going to be working in, these are the resources that we’ve got, and this is the outcome that we want. What do you think?”

– COUNCIL COORDINATOR

“I let them [the young people] know that not everything they come up with is going to be able to be put into place or put into practice. But I always give them the why and I think that’s really important as well.”

– COUNCIL COORDINATOR

It’s also important to set and manage the expectations of the adults who will engage with the young people. This helps protect the rangatahi and should link back to your organisation’s why and purpose.

“As soon as they [Youth Council] started gaining momentum and getting popular you knew every adult organisation around them wanted a piece.”

– COUNCIL COORDINATOR

Engaging young people in your organisation – practical advice and considerations

3. Find young people to contribute their voices

The best way to recruit young people may be from an existing group of participants in any programmes you offer. If you’re hoping to engage a broader range of rangatahi, you may have to seek out those who don’t currently participate in your physical activity.

OPTION	PROS	CONS
Application process	• Useful when many young people are interested in being involved in your group	• May put people off who don’t believe they are good enough to be involved. This can limit diversity
Shoulder-tapping	• Can involve those you already have trusted relationships with	• Could limit diversity of voices • The group could reflect the unconscious bias of the organisation
Let whoever is keen to be involved	• Often those who put their hand up are committed • Allows you to hear many different voices	• Works better for lower engagement options such as surveys and group consultations • Groups can quickly become too large to function as youth councils or boards • Sometimes does not allow you to engage with new young people
Bring a friend	• Easily increase the number of young people through trusted relationships	• Rangatahi may feel more comfortable in some situations with the support • May limit diversity of voices • Could result in subgroups within the larger group (in- and out-groups)
Bring someone different to you	• Encourages diversity of voices by asking young people to think about including others with varying interests, backgrounds or physical activity levels	• You may need to think about ways to support group cohesion and build whanaungatanga between those who may not know each other well
Leveraging other trusted adults	• Young people may feel safer or more comfortable if they have a trusted person alongside them	• This depends on your existing network and may require you to build relationships with other adults or organisations in your community first

Engaging young people in your organisation – practical advice and considerations

4. Get the right skills and support for your workforce

Consider what support or training you and your staff or volunteers may need to accommodate and support the young people you will be working with. Understanding positive youth development can help to enhance the way staff approach their mahi – even if they do not work directly with rangatahi. Refreshers are valuable, even in organisations that have frequent contact with young people.

For example, the organisations we surveyed had offered:

Mana Taiohi training
for all staff.

Youth development
ethics training
for staff.

Training about
engaging in
conversations with
young people.

Training about passing
on mental health and
wellbeing skills.



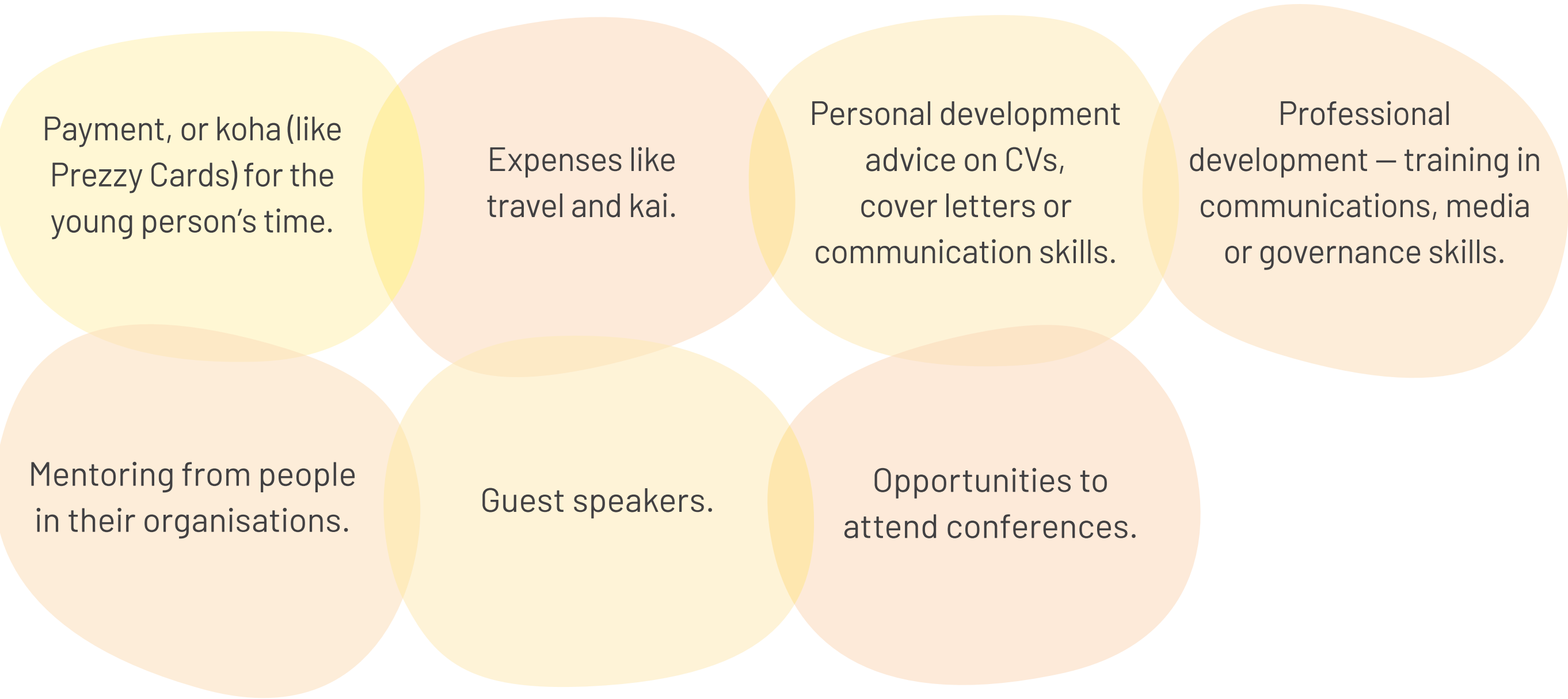
Engaging young people in your organisation – practical advice and considerations

5. Plan how you'll give back



Many young people have busy lives with school, activities, or part-time jobs. Consider what you can offer rangatahi in return for their involvement in your organisation and ask the young people what would be most important or valuable to them.

The organisations we talked to had offered:



Engaging young people in your organisation – practical advice and considerations

6. Prioritise whanaungatanga and manaakitanga

Unless young people feel safe and supported, they will not open up. Following the Mana Taiohi principles of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, you need to take time to build relationships and trust. Whether you do a whanaungatanga exercise at the beginning of your focus group or take time to get to know your youth council members one-to-one, creating meaningful connections will make a world of difference to the insights rangatahi will share with you. Trust is also built through action – you will have to prove to the young people that you are listening by taking action.

“A professional environment can be scary for all of us. So just make sure they feel really comfortable and welcomed and that they are listened to and that you follow through on what you say you’re going to do.”

– COUNCIL ALUMNI

“Young people need to trust that when they come up with something, we’re going to be listening and engaging.”

– CO-FOUNDER, PROGRAMME MANAGER

It’s people, not organisations, who build trust and relationships – keep this in mind when considering who in your organisation will be responsible for youth voice engagement.

“The nature of the [youth engagement] role is that the youth will look to them, they will trust them, they will believe in them and once they’ve formed that relationship, you can’t just yank that person out and then shove a new person in. You’ve got to start that whole trust process again. You need a month or two cross-over where the old is turning up with the new to help earn that trust again, and then the old moves on.”

– COUNCIL COORDINATOR

Engaging young people in your organisation – practical advice and considerations

7. Adapt as you go

You need to be open and fluid when working with young people.
Be okay with having to change things as you go – no one gets everything right from the outset!

Adapting to improve rangatahi experience: Examples from organisations we interviewed

Strength in numbers

An organisation had their youth board chair attend their monthly board meetings. After a few meetings, the coordinator realised that it would be a better experience for the young person if they had more support – so they created a second chair of their youth board, and had both rangatahi attend board meetings together. This meant the two young people could tautoko (support) each other in the adult-dominated environment.

“She made us realise that being a board chair is quite a lot of work, especially for one person. So, we have divided the role in two. We’ve got two board chairs at the moment who sit on our board meetings. I think it’s much easier for them to share the load and also share the message. It is quite daunting for young people to sit on a board of an organisation, and I think with having the two, it’s a little more firepower and they can support one another.”

– YOUTH BOARD COORDINATOR

Opportunities for employment

One organisation employed some of their youth council alumni as paid youth council coordinators. The organisation saw the value in giving back to the young people who had worked for them and creating a peer-led youth engagement process.

“The young people who are running the youth council were youth council members themselves...it is really, truly peer-led now.”

– COUNCIL COORDINATOR

CASE STUDY

Adults apply to talk to us

Organisation: Youth Voice Kawatiri Council (YVKC)

Youth voice purpose: To run events, activities, and a hub for youth

Form of engagement: A Youth Council of 18 members, which is open to anyone

Level of engagement: Consulting and co-design

Youth Voice Kawatiri Council is an organisation “for youth, by youth”. It was established in partnership with young people after the Regional Sports Trust and the local council noticed a lack of opportunities for rangatahi in their region.

“We decided first to hold an event to make sure that the youth actually wanted a youth group because the whole point was co-design. We did not want to force a group on them if they didn’t want one.”

– **COORDINATOR**



First, to find out if a 'youth group' is what the young people of the community wanted, the organisations invited any high school students who were interested to co-design and deliver a festival of activities for other young people in the community. Through this event, they collected 237 survey responses from young people about what they would like to see on offer for them.

“They unanimously said they want more activities and events for youth and they unanimously said that they wanted the group to represent their voice going forward and they also unanimously said that they wanted a space, a youth hub space somewhere in Westport to hang out. So, we went ‘OK, that gives us mandate from them to go forward’.”

– **COORDINATOR**

The 15 young people that came forward to plan the first event became part of the ‘formalised’ group that had an adult as coordinator to assist the council members.

The YVKC coordinator realised that the number of other adults attending the meetings meant the young people didn’t feel comfortable to speak up and share their views. They therefore changed the model of their meetings. Where multiple adults had previously attended, only one – the coordinator – took part after this change. After this switch, the council members started to open up and freely discuss issues facing their community.

After a while, the rangatahi came to realise that they were often spending their time talking about issues that adults wanted them to talk about but were not always that interesting or important to them. They developed a process in which adults from the community would submit an application, so they could outline why they wanted to engage with the Youth Council. This meant the Council could choose which adults to engage with based on issues they knew were important to the young people of their town. It stopped adults from other organisations hounding the youth for their voice and ensured the Council's time was prioritised on what the youth in their community needed.

Key take aways

- **Define the purpose** and level of engagement of the group of young people that you're working with
- **Clearly communicate** your purpose and level of engagement with both the young people and the wider organisation
- **Think about positive youth development** – what support do you need and what can you offer the young people in return
- Building relationships is hard and takes time but they are essential – **prioritise whanaungatanga, manaakitanga**
- When rangatahi voices are included, and we **engage with them authentically** our outcomes are better and long lasting

Thank you and acknowledgements

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