

# Review of Youth Voice Groups (Youth boards and councils) in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

A report prepared for Auckland Council

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**Prepared by**

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# Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

## Purpose and context

Auckland Council is committed to ensuring that children and young people can participate meaningfully in civic life. The Thriving Rangatahi Plan<sup>1</sup> includes a focus on civic participation. The plan sets out several ways that Auckland Council will ensure that children and young people have a voice in the big decisions for Tāmaki Makaurau and are empowered to lead on the issues that are important to them.

One way that this has occurred is through investment by local boards in youth councils and boards. These groups provide rangatahi aged 14 to 24 with opportunities to connect, lead and influence local decision-making through a mix of independent and host organisation-supported models, with support from council staff.

This is the first formal review of the effectiveness of local board-funded Youth Voice investment across Auckland. The review aimed to understand the current model of investment in youth councils and boards (referred to in this report as ‘Youth Voice’, or ‘Youth Voice groups’), identify what is working well and what could be improved, assess engagement with elected members and make recommendations for future success.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the review gathered data through a literature scan, focus groups with 12 Youth Voice groups, 16 interviews with host organisations and Auckland Council staff and a survey with 22 elected member responses across 12 local boards. Fieldwork ran between June and August 2025.

The research was supported by an advisory group consisting of members of council’s Social and Economic Research and Evaluation team, and key staff

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<sup>1</sup> [Thriving Rangatahi – Auckland Council’s plan to help children and young people thrive in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland](#)

in Community Wellbeing as well as the Governance and Engagement department who work closely with local boards, including a former Youth Voice group member.

## What's working well

Youth Voice delivers significant benefits for rangatahi and local communities when well-supported and was consistently described as a powerful leadership and participation platform that builds skills, confidence, connection and civic literacy. Across all stakeholder groups, these strengths were reflected in four areas of practice that were consistently evidenced. These are discussed below.

### **Youth-led ownership creates meaningful and motivating participation**

When rangatahi have the freedom to set priorities and make decisions, their agency, purpose, commitment and confidence are enhanced. Adults play a supportive role by offering guidance and safety while prioritising rangatahi.

### **Youth Voice builds leadership, capability and clear pathways**

Participation in Youth Voice helps rangatahi develop transferable skills such as teamwork, public speaking, and critical thinking, which enhance civic literacy and prepares them for leadership roles.

Stakeholders observed clear pathways from Youth Voice to tertiary education, employment, and community leadership, indicating that investing in youth capabilities delivers long-term benefits for individuals and communities.

### **Connection and belonging underpin sustained engagement**

Youth Voice serves as both a governance mechanism and a community space where rangatahi build friendships, feel valued and experience whanaungatanga. This sense of belonging fosters sustained engagement and well-being. Activities and events allow rangatahi to express their

identities, connect with peers and contribute to their communities. Creating youth-friendly environments, such as holding meetings in community spaces, enhances engagement and inclusion.

### **Strong systems support enables confidence, continuity and impact**

Youth Voice thrives when supported by a coordinated network of hosts, Specialist Youth Advisors, Engagement Advisors, Community Brokers and local boards. This comprehensive approach offers young people advice and practical support, enabling them to navigate council systems confidently. Strong relationships enhance Youth Voice's role in local governance, providing continuity and empowering rangatahi to meaningfully influence local decisions.

## Barriers and challenges

The review identified several barriers and challenges that limit the consistency, equity and impact of Youth Voice across Tāmaki Makaurau. These are discussed below.

### **Inconsistent engagement, visibility and influence limit impact**

Youth Voice groups vary in their engagement and visibility with local boards. While some rangatahi frequently interact with elected members, others have limited opportunities, impacting their sense of being heard in decision-making. Many young people contribute their time and ideas without seeing their input reflected in decisions. The absence of a structured framework for Youth Voice in governance leads to inconsistencies, leaving some groups feeling marginalised rather than integrated into local decision-making.

### **Unclear purpose and competing expectations create confusion and inefficiency**

There is a lack of a shared understanding of Youth Voice across the system, leading to various interpretations such as leadership development, a platform for youth input, community-building, or events programming. This ambiguity creates misalignment and confusion among young people, hosts

and council staff regarding roles and success criteria, affecting their confidence and clarity.

### **Short-term and uneven resourcing undermines stability and capability**

Youth Voice faces challenges due to short-term contracts and varying funding levels, ranging from \$10,000 to \$40,000, yet expectations of delivery and support are often similar. This disparity limits resources for host organisation coordination, event support, and wellbeing, constraining what young people can achieve. Additionally, low funding hinders the attraction and retention of skilled youth workers and undermines the sustainability of support structures for Youth Voice.

### **Challenges in capability and safe environments**

Stakeholders identified capability and safety gaps that hinder the meaningful and confident participation of rangatahi in governance processes. While Youth Voice offers opportunities, complexities in council processes and adults' uneven understanding of how to engage young people often leave them feeling unprepared. Rangatahi seek clearer guidance and preparation for consultations and protocols. Inconsistent adult capability can result in tokenistic engagement. Enhancing civic literacy for youth and training for adults is vital for respectful practices. Additionally, youth need safe governance environments, as some feel intimidated in formal settings. Strengthening safety practices and culturally responsive engagement can help young people contribute effectively to local decision-making.

### **Gaps in equity and representation**

Youth Voice groups often lack diversity, with underrepresentation of Māori, Pasifika, disabled, rainbow and lower-income rangatahi. Barriers such as transport costs and reliance on schools hinder participation. Some rangatahi felt alienated in meetings where they didn't see themselves or feel culturally understood. Stakeholders emphasised the need for sustained relationships, resources and inclusive practices to ensure meaningful representation, as current participation is uneven and undermines the credibility of Youth Voice.

## **Difficulty in sustaining Youth Voice participation**

Young people discussed the challenge of balancing volunteering with school, work, and family responsibilities, emphasising the impact of transport and safety barriers on their ability to participate regularly. Stakeholders noted that sustainability improves when groups have shared frameworks, structured onboarding, and mentorship, but the recent reduction in staffing capacity has affected the ability to provide regional collaboration, shared learning, and training to build capability.

Continuity is a challenge due to turnover among youth and staff, leading to a loss of knowledge and relationships. Stronger handover systems, alumni involvement, and tuakana-teina<sup>2</sup> approaches could help new members build on past work, rather than starting from scratch. This would support Youth Voice to remain connected and future focused. However, many young people expressed a lack of guidance from previous members, highlighting the need for a structured way of passing on knowledge.

## **Recommendations**

Nine recommendations for change were developed in collaboration with the project advisory group. Together these provide a roadmap for strengthening Youth Voice as an equitable and connected system. In the body of the report, each recommendation is expanded with further detail to support understanding and implementation.

- 1. Co-design a regional Youth Voice framework** that sets out a shared purpose, core functions, expected outcomes and consistent ways of working.

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<sup>2</sup> Tuakana-teina is a Māori concept describing a reciprocal learning relationship where a more experienced or knowledgeable person (tuakana) supports and guides a less experienced person (teina). Rooted in whanaungatanga (relationships) and manaakitanga (care), it emphasises mutual respect, cultural connection, and the sharing of skills, knowledge, and wisdom to foster growth for both parties.

2. **Embed Youth Voice within local board plans** by including commitments that outline how Youth Voice will contribute advice and recommendations into decision-making processes.
3. **Strengthen system-wide expectations for equity and representation**, with practical tools to support Youth Voice groups, hosts and local boards to reach and include Māori, Pasifika, disabled, rainbow, migrant, working and out-of-school rangatahi.
4. **Develop a Youth Voice schools partnership strategy** to strengthen recruitment pipelines and identify youth leaders beyond high achievers.
5. **Resource practical supports that remove participation barriers**, including transport, accessibility, flexible participation options, culturally responsive facilitation and Te Tiriti grounded capability and system support.
6. **Establish clear role definitions, safeguarding standards and shared expectations** across the Youth Voice system, supported by co-designed, flexible induction and training.
7. **Develop and implement youth-safe governance guidance** across all local boards and council environments, setting standards for safe, respectful and empowering engagement.
8. **Embed consistent communication and feedback processes**, alongside ongoing capability building for both rangatahi and adults.
9. **Strengthen the evidence base for Youth Voice** through targeted research and exemplar case studies.

In early 2026, the project advisory group will work together to develop an action plan that clarifies areas of responsibility.

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## 1. Introduction

Auckland Council's strategic direction places strong emphasis on ensuring communities, including rangatahi, can participate meaningfully in civic life. The *Ngā Hapori Momoho / Thriving Communities Strategy* states that for Tāmaki Makaurau to thrive, “*all Aucklanders can participate and take collective action to meet common goals*” and that participation strengthens belonging, connection, and wellbeing. The strategy highlights a need to strengthen community voices and explicitly identifies empowering young people and improving democratic and representative decision-making as community priorities.

The *Thriving Rangatahi Plan* reinforces this direction, noting that “*children and young people are interested in sharing their voices and participating in the decisions for Tāmaki Makaurau that will impact their lives and their future*,” and that their ideas, leadership and creativity are valuable contributions to civic life.

One way this commitment has been enabled is through local board funding. A multitude of activities are funded by local boards under the broad ‘youth voice’ umbrella. These are usually youth-led groups that support engagement with young people in the local board area and then feed results to the local board. Some groups are more structured than others, especially youth councils and youth boards, which are the focus of this review. Some receive funding directly, while funding for others is received by an organisation who then in turn fund the youth council or group.

Prior to this review, the effectiveness of this local board funded youth voice investment had never been formally investigated. The Community Wellbeing department at Auckland Council was keen to understand what is working well and what can be improved, to ensure the resources invested on youth voice activities are enabling robust and cost-effective outcomes. In mid-2024 they requested the Social and Economic Research and Evaluation (SERE) team at council to assist in setting up this research and selecting a research provider. Auckland Council commissioned Point and Associates (Aotearoa) Ltd to undertake this review which occurred between March and November 2025.

The purpose of this review is to understand the effectiveness of the current model of local board investment in youth voice groups.

The objectives of this study are to:

- Review whether local board funding agreements are being delivered and monitored
- Identify what is working well and what could improve with regards to support by Auckland Council staff to youth voice groups and host organisations
- Identify what is working well and what could improve with regards to youth voice groups' relationship with elected members
- Make recommendations for future investment in youth engagement.

The research was supported by an advisory group consisting of members of council's SERE team, and key staff in Community Wellbeing as well as the Governance and Engagement department who work closely with local boards, including a former Youth Voice group member. The group provided guidance throughout the project to ensure the research approach, methods, and interpretation of findings reflected both council priorities and youth perspectives. Advisory group members contributed to refining the research design, supporting access to Youth Voice networks, host organisations and elected members, and reviewing emerging themes.

This research project went through an Auckland Council-led ethical review process, following best practice guidelines (Review Number 2025-03).

This report provides insights and guidance for Auckland Council staff, local board elected members, host organisations and community partners who support rangatahi participation. It also speaks to Youth Voice groups themselves, ensuring their experiences and aspirations are reflected, and offers direction for council strategy, policy and planning teams responsible for system improvements. More broadly, the findings may be useful to youth-sector organisations and funders seeking to strengthen youth engagement and inform investment in rangatahi-led participation.

## 1.1 About local board funded Youth Voice groups

At the time of review, there were 16 youth boards and councils across Tāmaki Makaurau that were funded by local boards to support rangatahi involvement in local governance. Resourcing for Youth Voice groups is not uniform, as local board funding levels are determined separately by each local board. These groups provide structured opportunities for young people aged 14-24<sup>3</sup> to develop leadership capability and participate in local board processes. Across the 12 groups, the number of young people involved varies, group sizes range from around 7-10 rangatahi through to larger groups of approximately 25-30 members. While the vast majority of young people involved in Youth Voice groups lived and attended school within the same local board area, some rangatahi either lived or were schooled outside the board boundaries.

Host organisations play a central role in supporting Youth Voice groups. They provide day-to-day coordination, pastoral care, administrative support, and practical guidance to help rangatahi plan and deliver initiatives. Hosts also manage logistical tasks such as organising meetings, overseeing budgets, assisting with recruitment, and ensuring groups meet the expectations outlined in funding agreements. In hosted models, contracts are signed between Auckland Council and the host organisation, who then work closely with rangatahi to deliver the agreed outcomes.

Youth Voice groups are supported through funding agreements that are largely consistent across the region. These agreements outline objectives focused on mentoring and upskilling rangatahi, supporting regular meetings and youth-led initiatives, strengthening civic participation, and ensuring meaningful representation of youth populations in each local board area. They also require groups to actively seek effective ways to make visible and respond to the aspirations of rangatahi Māori and other under-represented communities. Measures commonly outlined in agreements include holding

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<sup>3</sup> The terms *youth*, *young people* and *rangatahi* are used in this report to describe participants aged 14–24, while *adults* refer to elected members, host organisations and Auckland Council staff. This language is used to distinguish groups and reflects participant terminology.

regular meetings, delivering a minimum of three to five initiatives annually, presenting to local boards, and developing an annual action plan. Reporting requirements are also standardised with groups required to provide quarterly updates and an annual report back to the local board<sup>4</sup>.

Youth Voice groups deliver a wide range of initiatives, including arts expos and creative showcases, Youth Week events, youth awards, environmental actions such as planting days and sustainability campaigns, wellbeing-focused gatherings, and workshops on leadership, governance, digital skills and social media. These activities allow rangatahi to design and lead projects, develop new skills, and contribute to community wellbeing.

Recruitment and selection processes vary, but schools are the primary recruitment channel, supported by social media, particularly Instagram and peer networks. Many groups operate dedicated “school seats” to ensure representation across schools in the local board area. Most use a formal application process where rangatahi outline their interests and motivations, with applications reviewed by the youth executive or a selection panel. Several groups also run interviews. Membership cycles are typically annual or fixed-term, and only one group currently provides payment to members; the rest are voluntary roles.

Support from Auckland Council is primarily delivered through the Specialist Youth Advisors – at the time of review there were 2.5 advisors supporting all Youth Voice groups. Advisors provide guidance, mentoring and practical tools, support planning and project delivery, connect groups with mentors and networks, and help align youth-led work with local board and council priorities. Engagement Advisors and Community Brokers also assist by strengthening relationships between rangatahi, elected members and council teams. Induction processes exist in some groups, such as team-building sessions and introductions to council processes but are not consistent across the region.

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<sup>4</sup> This review did not explore the extent to which these requirements were met.

In total, 12 Youth Voice groups, their host organisations (where applicable) and local boards participated in the review. These groups were intentionally selected because they offered a mix of geographical contexts and a balance of hosted and independent models. They also included newer and more established groups. This approach ensured representation from a broad cross-section of Youth Voice experiences and contexts across the region, providing a balanced and inclusive foundation for the review findings.

## 1.2 Method

This review used a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a literature scan, focus groups, interviews, and a survey. These methods captured the perspectives of rangatahi, host organisations, council staff, and elected members, providing a comprehensive view.

### 1.2.1 Literature scan

A literature scan was undertaken to analyse academic and grey literature (encompassing various media, resources, documents, and data that diverge from the conventional academic or commercial publishing) exploring the impacts, effectiveness, and mechanisms of youth voice initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand and comparable international contexts. The scan provided insights into best practice models of youth participation, leadership development, and partnership between young people and local government.

### 1.2.2 Data collection methods

Three primary methods of data collection were used: surveys, semi-structured focus groups, and interviews. All participants received an information sheet, consent form, and an overview of discussion topics (see Appendix for further details).

### **a. Focus groups with Youth Voice groups**

As mentioned above 12 Youth Voice groups participated in the review. Focus groups were held with current and recently involved (within the past two years) Youth Voice members. These sessions provided a supportive and collaborative space for rangatahi to share their experiences, ideas and perspectives.

Discussions explored what was working well, the challenges faced, and opportunities for improvement, as well as the perceived impact of Youth Voice on decision-making and community engagement. Participants also reflected on the support provided by Auckland Council staff and their relationships with local boards.

In total, 73 young people participated in the focus groups. Each received a \$50 GiftPay voucher as a token of appreciation for their time and contribution.

### **b. Interviews with host organisations and council staff**

Six interviews were conducted with representatives from host organisations, including Auckland Youth Voice (AYV) which work with multiple Youth Voice groups. In addition, seven interviews were held with 10 Auckland Council staff who support Youth Voice groups or hold relevant strategic roles. The semi-structured interviews followed an interview schedule attached in the appendices.

These discussions provided insights into how partnerships between hosts and local boards function, how well they align with the council's broad youth engagement goals, and the enablers and barriers to effective and sustainable support for Youth Voice.

### **c. Survey with local board members**

An online survey was distributed to elected members across the 12 local boards involved in the Youth Voice review in July 2025. Twenty-two responses were received (a 25% response rate) representing all participating boards. The survey is attached in the Appendix.

The survey explored perceptions of the value and impact of Youth Voice initiatives, including the quality of engagement, communication, and representation, as well as ideas for strengthening youth participation in local governance.

### 1.2.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data from interviews and focus groups. Each Youth Voice group was coded as its own distinct dataset, ensuring the experiences and dynamics unique to each group were retained. Transcripts were coded systematically and grouped into overarching themes that reflected shared experiences and insights. Throughout this report key themes are illustrated with direct participant quotes to provide depth and context.

Survey data were cleaned and analysed to identify key trends and patterns, while open-ended responses were coded and themed to capture additional qualitative insights.

All findings were integrated through a process of coding and thematic synthesis, aligning qualitative themes with survey results. This provided a holistic understanding that combined the depth of participants' experiences with the breadth of perspectives across the region.

Insights were shared with the advisory group in a sense-making workshop to test interpretations, discuss implications, and help shape the final recommendations. This collaborative process ensured that the findings and recommendations were grounded in both the lived experience of Youth Voice participants and the operational realities of council's youth engagement system.

## 1.3 Limitations

While this review provides a comprehensive overview of Youth Voice across Tāmaki Makaurau, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study engaged 12 Youth Voice groups, representing 75 per cent of youth groups currently funded through local boards. Each group was asked to involve 8

to 10 members and, in total, 73 rangatahi participated in focus groups. As participation may reflect the perspectives of more active members, the findings may not capture the full range of experiences of all rangatahi involved in Youth Voice.

The survey of elected members received 22 responses (a 25% response rate) across the participating local boards. While these responses provide valuable insight, the perspectives of non-respondents may differ, particularly across boards with varying levels of Youth Voice engagement.

Despite these limitations, the breadth of data sources and triangulation across rangatahi, host organisations, Auckland Council staff, and elected members provide a strong evidence base for understanding the effectiveness of the current Youth Voice system and opportunities for improvement.

## 2. Literature scan

This section examines what the evidence tells us about effective youth voice initiatives. It draws on academic research and government evaluations across different levels of government including federal, state and local government, alongside examples of youth boards and councils from Aotearoa, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Nordic countries, and the United States.

The literature shows that formal youth voice mechanisms create both opportunities and challenges. Their effectiveness depends on more than establishing a youth council or conducting consultation activities. Success is strengthened by sustained commitment to inclusive practice, providing safe and accessible environments, and recognising that meaningful participation takes different forms across diverse groups of young people.

This scan synthesises key themes to provide practical insights for councils seeking to establish or strengthen youth voice mechanisms that support meaningful participation by rangatahi and reflect the needs of their communities.

### 2.1 Models and structures

Youth voice initiatives typically operate within three main structural models, which vary regarding how decision-making is shared and agendas are set.

**Government-mandated structures** represent the most formalised approach. For example, Australian federal government operates youth advisory groups across thematic areas such as creative industries and civic engagement (1), while Canada's Prime Minister's Youth Council provides high-level access, with members aged 16 to 24 meeting directly with the Prime Minister (2). While shorter in tenure, the New Zealand government offer a four-month term for youth members of parliament culminating in a two-day youth parliament event (3).

Year round in Aotearoa, many youth councils operate across territorial authorities, typically comprising rangatahi from high schools or applicants

interested in social justice advocacy (4). However, these often operate within council-controlled frameworks where agendas are set by councils, and decision-making authority remains limited to advisory functions.

**Youth-initiated movements** provide a contrasting model where young people set and retain agenda-setting power. For example, School Strike for Climate New Zealand (SS4CNZ) functions as a decentralised, student-led network with regional autonomy (5), while Generation Zero uses collaborative platforms such as Loomio (6) for collective decision-making. These structures illustrate how young people can self-organise outside of adult-designed systems.

**Alternative mechanisms** include co-design processes, such as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (7), and digital engagement platforms that attempt to bridge formal and grassroots approaches.

## 2.2 Critical success factors

Research consistently identifies five critical success factors that distinguish tokenistic consultation from authentic youth voice initiatives that enable meaningful influence and change (8):

1. Clear mandates that define roles and responsibilities
2. Regular access to decision-makers
3. Adequate funding and resources
4. Supportive adult allies with appropriate training
5. Diverse representation through proactive inclusion.

These are discussed in more detail below.

### **Mandates that define roles and responsibilities**

Mandates provide the structural authority necessary for youth voice to be meaningful rather than symbolic. The mandates formalise decision-making power, clarify roles, and provide a stable foundation for youth influence.

Legislative or structural mandates further strengthen youth voice systems. Formal authority, secure resource allocation, and democratic selection

processes enhance legitimacy and inclusion (9,10). Wales's *Well-being of Future Generations Act* (11) embeds requirements for public bodies to involve diverse stakeholders, including young people, in long-term planning, positioning youth voice within institutional accountability.

### **Regular access to decision-makers**

Authentic youth influence depends on consistent, structured access to decision-makers throughout policy and planning processes.

Canada's *Prime Minister's Youth Council* (2) exemplifies this principle, with members aged 16–24 meeting monthly with the Prime Minister during policy development. This model shifts youth participation from intermittent input to ongoing engagement.

### **Adequate funding and resources**

Sufficient, stable funding enables Youth Voice groups to operate, plan and engage effectively. However, the literature highlights that youth participation structures can be vulnerable to political shifts, including changes in elected leadership or organisational priorities. They can also rely heavily on voluntary participation, which, alongside barriers to engagement, contributes to participation fatigue, particularly for young people who are repeatedly consulted without experiencing meaningful influence (12,13).

This can result in reduced investment or the discontinuation of initiatives. The collapse of the UK's *British Youth Council* in 2024 (14), despite representing 500,000 young people annually, highlights the risks of underfunding. When government support was withdrawn, they were unable to continue.

Independent funding models, such as the *Top of the South Foundation*'s endowment-managed *Nelson Tasman Youth Development Fund* (15), also help protect youth initiatives from political cycles.

### **Supportive adult allies with appropriate training**

Supportive adults play a critical role in enabling youth leadership when they share power, create space for youth autonomy, and understand youth development.

The *Mana Taiohi* framework, developed in Aotearoa New Zealand (16) offers a culturally grounded, values-based model for working with young people, emphasising whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and relational leadership. It guides adults to step back from directive roles and strengthens youth-led decision-making. *Mana Taiohi* now informs professional development for youth workers, coaches and leaders.

### **Diverse representation through proactive inclusion**

Ensuring inclusion within youth voice structures is essential for legitimacy and equity. Proactive strategies are needed to include young people who may face barriers to participation.

Australian youth advisory models prioritise First Nations representation and incorporate cultural mentors (17). In Aotearoa, youth councils informed by Ministry of Youth Development guidance (4) use outreach through accessible venues, relationship-based engagement, and targeted invitations to reach under-represented groups.

## **2.3 Building the foundations**

Achieving these success factors requires aligned structural, process and relationship conditions.

### **Structural foundations**

Legislative mandates, independent funding, and transparent selection processes provide the backbone of effective youth voice systems (18,19). For example, Wales's statutory framework (11) embeds youth engagement obligations.

### Process foundations

Models such as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (7) builds capability and confidence while enabling young people to set priorities. Feedback loops and iterative learning (19,20) help ensure youth voice remains active, responsive and developmentally aligned.

### Relationship foundations

Trust, respect, clear communication, and responsiveness to youth influence profoundly shapes whether youth voice thrives (20,21). Adult allies require training in cultural competency, power sharing, and youth development. Frameworks such as Mana Taiohi (16) help guide this practice.

## 2.4 Challenges and barriers

Despite good intentions, youth voice initiatives often face persistent barriers that limit their effectiveness and sustainability.

Systemic barriers include tokenism (consultation without genuine influence), adult-centric processes designed for adult convenience and resource (18).

Participation barriers prevent meaningful engagement and can be difficult due to:

- Geographic isolation
- Transport limitations
- Scheduling conflicts
- Competing school/family/work demands
- Representation gaps
- Lack of preparation for formal process and
- Burnout when effort does not translate into influence (22).

**Practical challenges include** coordination difficulties when multiple organisations engage youth without alignment, evaluation limitations, poor succession planning, narrow engagement scopes, and communication barriers between youth and decision-makers (22).

**Barriers for under-served youth** are particularly acute. Rangatahi Māori face challenges when initiatives don't recognise mātauranga Māori or Te Tiriti o Waitangi (23) obligations. Pasifika youth encounter cultural misalignment when family consultation processes aren't respectful. LGBTQIA+ youth may avoid non-inclusive environments. Refugee and migrant youth face language barriers and unfamiliarity with democratic processes and economic barriers prevent participation when costs aren't covered. These barriers create participation fatigue among young people experiencing repeated consultation without meaningful influence.

## 2.5 Cultural responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness shapes how participation is designed and experienced. In Aotearoa's bicultural context, this includes grounding initiatives in Te Ao Māori from the outset rather than retrofitting Māori perspectives (24,25).

Te Tiriti o Waitangi (23) establishes specific responsibilities for local government in relation to Māori participation, reinforced by the Local Government Act 2002 (26).

*Mana Taiohi* (16) positions Te Ao Māori values as central to relational and ethical youth development. The *Tuia Rangatahi Programme* (27) pairs rangatahi Māori with local board members and mayors, supporting reciprocal learning in governance and tikanga. In 2023, five Tāmaki Makaurau local boards participated in the programme (28).

Indigenous frameworks also illustrate approaches to youth involvement. In Australia, First Nations Youth Advisory groups provide targeted representation for Indigenous young people on areas such as education and employment (17). In Canada, indigenous-specific youth councils (29) operate alongside mainstream structures, aligning with indigenous governance practices while maintaining direct policy input.

Post-COVID innovations include digital platforms that support whānau-centred consultation, enable the use of te reo Māori and uphold cultural protocols. However, the literature also cautions that inequitable access to

digital tools and connectivity can limit participation for some communities (30).

## 2.6 Conclusion

The literature shows that youth voice initiatives can provide meaningful value to both young people and the organisations that engage them effectively. Success relies on genuine partnerships that recognise rangatahi as capable contributors to decision-making, rather than future participants in waiting.

The evidence consistently identifies five critical success factors: clear mandates that define roles and responsibilities, regular access to decision-makers, adequate funding and resources, supportive adult allies, and diverse representation that includes under-served voices. Without these foundations, even well-intentioned initiatives may lead to disengagement and limit the effectiveness of youth participation.

### 3. What's working well

This section presents the findings from our engagement with rangatahi, host organisations, council staff, and elected members with regard to what enables Youth Voice to flourish in practice.

The section is organised by five key themes that were consistently evidenced across the various stakeholder groups who took part in this review. Each theme begins with a high-level summary, followed by deeper insights drawn from each group: rangatahi, council staff, host organisations, and elected members. This structure shows both the shared understandings across the system and the distinct perspectives that shape Youth Voice at a local level.

Together, these findings highlight the strengths of the current Youth Voice system and the conditions that support meaningful, confident, and connected participation for young people across Tāmaki Makaurau.

#### 3.1 Youth-led empowerment and ownership

We consistently heard that Youth Voice is most meaningful (across stakeholders) when young people have ownership over their work and decisions. Youth Voice worked best when rangatahi had the freedom to set priorities, manage budgets and lead their own activities, with adults offering guidance and support in the background.

Young people talked about how much it meant to have autonomy and responsibility within their groups. Being trusted to design and run events, make decisions, and manage resources gave them a strong sense of ownership. They appreciated having flexibility with budgets and projects, which allowed for creativity and responsiveness to what their peers wanted. At the same time, they recognised the importance of staying connected to Auckland Council staff and local boards so their work could influence decision-making while remaining genuinely youth-led.

*“It only works when we run it ourselves, that’s what keeps us showing up.”*

*“A huge part of being a youth group is that the youth can actually lead the group, and when adults actually trust us young people and allow us to take charge, the outcomes that we produce can be surprising in the best way. It empowers us to actually do our mahi to the best of our ability.”*

Most council staff described the strength of youth boards being led by young people. They saw value in rangatahi having ownership of decisions, saying it helped them learn through experience, even when things did not go to plan. Supporting groups to run with their own ideas was seen as a benefit, giving young people space to shape their own approach and set their own priorities.

*“Just letting them be themselves and operate how they wish to... is really beneficial for the youth voice groups.”*

Host organisations talked about their role in supporting youth voice groups. They said their focus was on contracting and reporting, creating safe spaces, and helping young people connect with council systems. Some hosts spoke about the balance between giving rangatahi genuine power and being there as a safety net when support was needed.

*“It’s a mix of... having it run and youth-led but also making sure there is still that connection to the systems that already exist.”*

Elected members talked about the importance of providing funding, spaces and resources that enable youth voice groups to thrive. They described financial support as “*money well spent*” because it allowed young people to design their own engagement and lead their own initiatives.

Youth Voice works best when rangatahi are trusted and supported to guide and shape the work they lead. Youth-led structures create the conditions for meaningful engagement, with adults providing essential scaffolding for safety and system connections. This approach builds capability, strengthens trust and reinforces Youth Voice as a model of authentic youth participation.

### 3.2 Building confidence, leadership, and pathways

From all perspectives, Youth Voice was described as a powerful space for building leadership, confidence and practical skills. Stakeholders talked about how these groups give young people opportunities to learn about decision-making, develop workplace-ready skills and take on leadership roles that reach beyond their immediate contexts.

Young people talked about the confidence and skills they gained through being part of Youth Voice. They spoke about learning to work in teams, speak in public, plan events and write submissions, while also learning how to navigate different perspectives. They valued being able to apply these skills in everyday settings and said the experience helped prepare them for study, work and community leadership. For many, it was their first chance to understand how civic processes work, which they saw as setting them up for future opportunities.

*“All the skills that you would need to be workplace ready anywhere... it’s just all about that learning.”*

*“It showed people the skill of putting on an exhibition... gives them confidence.”*

Council staff described Youth Voice as a leadership training ground where young people grow in confidence, develop civic literacy and learn to complement each other’s skills. Council staff saw the groups as spaces for decision-making, teamwork and self-advocacy, with many observing clear pathways from youth councils into advisory panels, NGOs and community leadership roles.

*“They’re good at critical thinking. They’re giving their really good feedback, really good insights.”*

*“A lot of our youth advisory panel<sup>5</sup> members came from youth councils, and you can see the connections.”*

Host organisations talked about Youth Voice as a place where young people grow in confidence, build leadership skills and gain practical experience in public speaking, event planning and relationship management. They described watching shy members become confident leaders, supported by events and awards that gave visibility and recognition. Alumni were seen as an important part of the kaupapa, often returning as mentors or stepping into community leadership roles. Together, these opportunities create strong pathways into study, employment and civic life.

*“I’ve watched people who were just completely like a fish out of water... come to have quite a strong position in leadership.”*

*“The majority of our Youth Voice members that are no longer like in our group [aged out], but they come back to help where they can because they enjoy giving back.”*

Elected members talked about the pride they felt seeing young people step into leadership and achieve visible results for their communities. Some described Youth Voice as one of their board’s most significant achievements, creating long-term benefits as young leaders move into tertiary study, employment and civic roles.

*“Over the years [Youth Voice group] has built up a strong network of young leaders, many who are now in tertiary education.”*

Youth Voice develops individual confidence and skills and also strengthens local civic leadership pipelines. The programme effectively prepares young people to navigate and influence council systems, contribute to community projects and mentor others, creating a self-sustaining leadership ecosystem. This suggests that continued investment is likely to yield long-

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<sup>5</sup> The Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) provides advice on issues important to young people, regional strategies, policies and plans drawing on members lived experiences as young people aged 14 to 24.

term community engagement benefits, well beyond participants' time in the programme.

### 3.3 Building connection, belonging, and community engagement

Connection and belonging was a consistent theme in conversations with Youth Voice groups and stakeholders. These groups were not only seen as governance spaces but as communities where rangatahi could meet peers, build friendships and feel part of something bigger than themselves.

Creating inclusive, youth-friendly environments was described as essential for keeping young people engaged and ensuring Youth Voice continues to feel meaningful and relevant.

Young people talked about events and initiatives as a way to build genuine connections. They said these were not only opportunities to showcase youth leadership or talent, but they were also places to form friendships, strengthen inclusion and meet people beyond their usual circles. For many, the greatest impact lay in the sense of belonging that came from being part of something collective and bigger than themselves.

*“We’re this huge family... when you feel like you belong in somewhere, the mahi you do is much greater.”*

*“When we do an event, it’s about connecting with the community. That’s the main purpose.”*

Council staff said Youth Voice should go beyond governance to foster inclusion, connection and belonging. Some stakeholders talked about how youth-friendly spaces created energy and made young people feel welcome. Others described how moving meetings from formal boardrooms into youth-led hubs or community venues helped increase engagement. They also highlighted the role of youth-led events in bringing diverse communities together and strengthening connections.

*“One of the biggest wins was getting them out of the local board meeting room and into their own space... that energy is very different.”*

Host organisations talked about creating safe and inclusive spaces where diversity is celebrated and young people feel seen. They said youth councils helped bring rangatahi together across schools and communities, and that alumni networks strengthened belonging as former members returned to support new ones. Host organisations also highlighted how Youth Voice contributes to broader community outcomes, with young people actively involved in initiatives such as truancy prevention, community wellbeing and employment pathways.

*“We’ve made a safe space for young people to share and to be themselves, and that’s created stronger voiced people in the community.”*

*“The benefit is I’ve got young people that wouldn’t necessarily ever cross paths with each other.”*

Elected members valued how Youth Voice groups created inclusive, community-focused events and consultations. They saw these activities as important bridges between rangatahi and the wider community, helping to broaden engagement and give visibility to youth perspectives.

*“The youth engagement we recently held to help determine next steps for our youth hub investigation was supported by the youth board, without whom we wouldn’t have reached such a depth and breadth of participants.”*

Youth Voice operates as both a gateway into local decision-making and a space that fosters friendships, inclusion, and belonging. Connection is a key strength of these groups: youth-friendly spaces, shared activities, and events bring diverse rangatahi together and support confident participation. When young people feel part of a community, they engage more fully, contribute with greater assurance, and strengthen civic and community outcomes.

### 3.4 Systems connections and wraparound support

Across stakeholder groups, rangatahi, host organisations, council staff and elected members, Youth Voice was described as most effective when

supported by strong systems connections and consistent wraparound. Effectiveness was assessed by stakeholders in terms of how confidently young people were able to participate, how well they could navigate council systems, and the strength of relationships with decision-makers and the extent to which their contributions influenced local board processes. When rangatahi were well supported by hosts, Specialist Youth Advisors, engaged local boards and council staff such as Community Brokers and Engagement Advisors, participation was more stable, visible and impactful. Conversely, when these supports were absent, young people reported feeling isolated and less connected to decision-making.

Young people told us it made a significant difference when local board members and council staff were visible and accessible. They spoke about how seeing chairs or members at meetings helped them feel recognised and supported. For many, having trusted people present, who listened and followed through made navigating council systems much easier.

*“In terms of communicating with local board members, it works better when they actually come to us.”*

*“The current chair of the local board... shows up and it makes us feel valued.”*

Council staff talked about how Youth Voice groups need more than occasional contact. They said having dedicated roles within council with a strong youth development focus makes a difference. These staff help build relationships, advocate for rangatahi and guide groups through complex systems. Without this support, youth voice groups often felt lost or stuck in council processes. Council staff pointed to strong partnerships with schools and community organisations as key to success. Support from principals and teachers, including time for participation during school hours, enables rangatahi to engage fully. Schools also help identify and encourage youth leaders, creating a pipeline of participants and embedding youth voice more deeply in local communities.

*“Our engagement advisor is trying so hard and keeping it going... it shows how important that wraparound is, because it’s complicated for young people otherwise.”*

Host organisations talked about the importance of shared responsibility across the system. They said it was difficult when they carried the full weight of support on their own and described how much easier it was when council staff and local boards acted as active partners. Hosts saw their role as providing regular guidance, but said long-term sustainability depended on having that wider network around them.

*“Youth know how to connect with youth the best, but the framework works because we [hosts] aren’t doing it alone. The board and council staff are part of it.”*

Elected members valued the role of council staff and community brokers who provided support to Youth Voice groups. Many noticed that groups were at their strongest when local boards worked alongside hosts as active partners.

*“What was significantly better about the [youth council] was the support systems around them. It just worked.”*

*“Some community brokers are amazing... they make the whole thing work better.”*

Strong system connections and consistent wraparound were viewed across stakeholder groups as critical to building the capability and effectiveness of Youth Voice. When rangatahi were supported by hosts, Specialist Youth Advisors, active local boards and council staff, they gained the confidence and knowledge needed to navigate council processes and contribute meaningfully to decision-making. These partnerships provided stability, advocacy and practical guidance, strengthening young people’s skills while enhancing the overall impact of Youth Voice within local governance.

### 3.5 Civic impact and partnerships with decision-makers

A central purpose of Youth Voice is to ensure that the perspectives of young people are reflected in local decision-making. Across all groups, there was strong recognition of the importance of building genuine partnerships between rangatahi and decision-makers. These relationships create opportunities for young people to engage in civic processes, influence outcomes and build trust in local governance.

Young people talked about how empowering it was to meet with elected members. They said these moments made them feel heard and motivated, especially when their ideas were taken seriously. Submitting on legislation, presenting to boards, and co-designing local initiatives gave them a sense of purpose and impact.

*“We have a local board member that comes and sits in and that makes a huge difference for us.”*

*“Local board politicians even come here and listen, and it shows they actually care.”*

Council staff described Youth Voice as a valuable partner in engagement. They said youth groups provided critical insights and feedback, particularly when they were involved early in discussions about issues that affected them. Working alongside young people was seen as an effective way to make consultation more relevant and meaningful.

*“The model for the advisory panels works - that early engagement with them on issues of interest and relevance, using them as a trusted partner.”*

Host organisations talked about the balance between youth autonomy and system connections. They saw their role as helping groups navigate the complexities of governance while ensuring that rangatahi maintained genuine influence. Hosts also described how Youth Voice helps young people develop a sense of civic responsibility and readiness to serve their communities beyond the group itself.

*“In terms of their community civics governance... that’s where they’re learning how to have influence and represent youth voices in decision-making.”*

Elected members described Youth Voice as an effective way to consult and connect with young people. They said youth boards helped them reach deeper into communities and valued the perspectives rangatahi brought to issues such as youth hubs, safety and transport. Some noted challenges in maintaining regular dialogue, but overall Youth Voice was seen as a vital partner in creating inclusive and informed governance.

*“[Youth Voice group] went into local schools and did consultation on the local board plan, even translating the plan so it was youth-friendly and readable.”*

Youth Voice intends to strengthen civic participation by creating meaningful partnerships between rangatahi and local decision-makers. These relationships give young people opportunities to contribute to consultations, present their ideas and influence local priorities, building confidence and trust in governance processes. When engaged early and treated as partners, rangatahi provide insights that deepen community consultation and improve decision-making. This partnership approach supports young people to develop civic capability while helping local boards connect with and respond to diverse youth perspectives.

## Summary box – what's working well

Youth Voice groups across Tāmaki Makaurau are creating strong, meaningful opportunities for rangatahi to lead, connect and contribute to their communities. They work best when young people are trusted to set priorities and make decisions, supported by adults who provide scaffolding, advocacy and system connections.

These groups build leadership, confidence and civic literacy, while fostering belonging and whanaungatanga among diverse rangatahi. Where partnerships between hosts, council staff and local boards are strong, Youth Voice becomes a powerful bridge between young people and decision-makers.

This aligns with wider evidence showing that authentic partnerships, with youth-led and well-supported participation not only develops capable young leaders but strengthens democratic engagement and community wellbeing.

## 4. Barriers and challenges

This section presents the findings from our engagement with rangatahi, host organisations, council staff, and elected members with regard to the barriers and challenges that limit the effectiveness of Youth Voice.

Six key themes were identified, which are discussed below. As in the previous section, each theme is introduced with a high-level summary, followed by more detailed insights from each group: rangatahi, council staff, host organisations, and elected members.

### 4.1 Unclear purpose of Youth Voice groups

When asked to describe the purpose of Youth Voice, stakeholders identified three key objectives: representing youth perspectives, developing leadership and capability and fostering connection and belonging.

Young people said the purpose of Youth Voice is to advocate, connect, and show that youth-led work can create positive change. They described success in achieving that purpose as being heard in decisions, feeling a sense of belonging and building skills and confidence through action. At the same time, they spoke about how confusing it could be when the purpose was unclear. Some joined expecting to influence policy or governance, while others thought the focus would be on running events. For several, the reality was quite different from what they imagined, which left them uncertain about their role or impact. Others said this inconsistency made them feel like decoration rather than decision-makers.

*“Our purpose is... to represent youth and advocate for their voices... the council is sort of like a bridge of communication.”*

*“When a lot of us applied... we all perceived it as different things.”*

Council staff described Youth Voice as an important pathway for developing civic literacy and leadership, where rangatahi learn how democracy works, contribute visibly to local board processes and build skills that open future opportunities in governance and public service. This aligns with the formal

purpose set out in funding agreements, which position Youth Voice as a mechanism for supporting young people to engage in local government decisions, take action on issues that matter to them, build confidence, leadership and wellbeing, and help local boards hear and understand youth perspectives.

Staff also highlighted that unclear expectations often limited impact. Young people were sometimes given topics that were too complex, or they were brought into processes too late to meaningfully influence outcomes.

*“Local boards want youth to care about parks and voting... and yet we’re enabling this model that doesn’t do any of that.”*

Hosts described Youth Voice as a safe, empowering space where young people can grow, connect and influence decisions. They saw success in empowerment, continuity, and authentic participation rather than outputs or events. Many also described being caught in the middle of competing expectations, with young people, council staff and elected members each having different priorities. This lack of shared understanding made it difficult for hosts to plan or know which outcomes to prioritise. Hosts said success was often measured by delivery of events or outputs required by funding agreements rather than longer-term leadership or community impact.

*“The purpose of youth groups is representation and providing a youth perspective to the local board when they make decisions.”*

*“It’s a safe space for young people to bring forward their lived experiences and observations of the community.”*

*“Local boards, council staff, youth councils - everyone has different priorities, and they’re misaligned.”*

Most elected members talked about success in practical, outcome-focused ways. They saw Youth Voice as successful when young people were visibly contributing to local board work, representing youth perspectives and supporting community engagement. Many described successes as participation in civic processes, leadership growth and alignment with board priorities, such as contributing to local board plans, consultations, and

events. Some highlighted connection and relationship building and a smaller number linked success to personal development and confidence.

*“Ours is so strong and so multi-faceted that there is no singular purpose. They are super-stars.”*

*“The Youth Voice group in my local board area is tasked with providing young people of all ages representation in local decision making.”*

*“Foster a sense of connection and community with the young people in the [local board area] and run engaging youth targeted events.”*

*“[Youth Voice group] is an extension of the local board and engages youth voices into the development of our Local Board Plan and also delivery of the outcomes in the plan.”*

Stakeholders agreed that Youth Voice holds strong potential to represent youth perspectives, grow leadership and build connection, but the purpose of the groups is not consistently communicated or reinforced across the system. Although funding agreements set out a clear formal purpose of supporting rangatahi to participate in local government, take action on issues that matter to them and strengthen their confidence and capability, this is interpreted differently in practice.

Understandings of success also varied, and these differing expectations created uncertainty for rangatahi about their role and impact.

Misalignment between contractual expectations, resourcing and communication contributed to this lack of clarity. Without a shared and consistently applied purpose, groups found it harder to plan, hosts navigated competing priorities and young people sometimes questioned how their contributions influenced decision-making.

## 4.2 Inconsistent engagement, visibility and influence limit impact

We heard from many that uneven engagement from local boards limited young people's ability to influence decisions. Stakeholders described how these differences shaped young people's experiences. Some boards offered strong support and regular contact, while others were distant or disengaged. As a result, Youth Voice groups operated with very different levels of visibility, influence and impact.

Six of the 12 Youth Voice groups had recent opportunities to connect directly with their local boards, but the frequency and depth of engagement varied. A small number described strong, ongoing relationships where board members attended events, Youth Voice meetings, or community breakfasts and where Youth Voice members presented or ran workshops with their boards. However, many said they had little or no direct contact and wanted a framework for communication, collaboration, and direct engagement with elected members. Rangatahi also said that Youth Voice needs to be visible and better understood. They recommended clearer branding of what Youth Voice groups do and more social media presence.

Young people also said they felt frustrated when their feedback seemed to make little difference. Some described their role as tokenistic, saying they were asked to complete forms or present ideas without seeing any follow-up or change. Others talked about how much it meant when board members showed up to their events, listened and took genuine interest in their views, but said this kind of engagement did not happen as often as they would like.

*"We've given the [engagement] forms out and stuff like last year for example... people signed it, except we never really saw change or like we never actually got acknowledged for the form. They need to get in contact with us because we don't really have contact with them... It's like we're managing on our own without the adults actually hearing us."*

*"It almost feels like that extra support we're getting from [host organisation] is compensation for the support we're not getting from the local board."*

Council staff also noticed inconsistencies in how local boards engaged with youth groups. They said this often came down to the culture of each board. In some areas, they saw strong champions who prioritised youth voice. In others, there was a sense of disconnect and limited relationships, which created unequal experiences for rangatahi across the region. Council staff wanted visible structures for transparency around advice and raised visibility so that youth voice is taken seriously.

They also said that council systems were not always designed with young people's realities in mind. Council meetings are often held during school hours, and some boards did not meet in the school holidays or had venues that were difficult to reach creating additional barriers to participation.

*“Some local boards have never had youth councils and are not particularly interested... some have had them in the past and didn’t find them useful.”*

*“I definitely feel there needs to be things that raise the visibility of young people in council in much more formal ways.”*

We also heard similar messages from host organisations. Some described regular contact through deputations, presentations and meetings, while others said engagement was limited or dependent on individual board members' interest. Host organisations also highlighted the gap between young people giving input and seeing results. They worried that when feedback was not acknowledged or acted on, youth lost trust in the process. Hosts stressed the importance of closing the loop so rangatahi could see how their contributions influenced decisions.

*“This last deputation that we did, we had [Youth Voice group] present to the local board.”*

*“There’s a real gap in hearing youth voice and then making that change... are we closing the loop?”*

Communication and influence were key barriers identified by elected members, with 60 per cent highlighting communication challenges and 55 per cent noting limited impact on decision-making. Many elected members

saw value in creating clear structures for engagement, such as establishing a designated youth liaison role or introducing youth seats on local boards. Regular workshop slots and structured feedback processes were also suggested as ways to embed Youth Voice input into local decision-making. Elected members also highlighted improving two-way communication, including direct emailing, more meetings and elected members being more accessible.

*“We need to go to them more often or at least meet with delegates more often.”*

*“It would be great if we had an elected member youth voice liaison role or a youth seat on the local board! That would have helped a lot!”*

*“A regular workshop slot with the youth board and/or regular structure by which the youth board can provide feedback to the local board on relevant local issues would be ideal.”*

Elected members recognised that engagement was inconsistent and that Youth Voice often lacked continuity. They said that time, access, and safety shaped whether young people could meaningfully participate and inviting rangatahi into governance spaces was not enough if the timing, location, or support structures did not work for them. In the survey of elected members, 63 per cent of respondents said that regular meetings with local board members had been effective in strengthening Youth Voice engagement and participation.

*“Having just one person attend [local board meeting] might not be attractive to young people.”*

*“Sadly, with the lack of continuity, we haven’t managed to get the needed input we’ve desired from youth boards about local government and our community.”*

*“No, unfortunately they [youth voice group] have had almost no engagement with the local board this term. I would have loved them to engage with us through and would really value their input.”*

Inconsistent engagement from local boards was seen as a major barrier to effective Youth Voice. Where boards maintained regular contact, acknowledged young people's input and created accessible pathways to participate, rangatahi felt confident, visible, and able to influence decisions. In contrast, irregular or limited engagement left many feeling unheard, disconnected from council processes and uncertain about the impact of their efforts. These differences created uneven experiences and levels of influence across the region. Strengthening communication, embedding clearer engagement frameworks and improving continuity were viewed as essential to enabling rangatahi to participate meaningfully.

#### 4.3 Short-term funding and uneven resourcing

As part of this review, funding agreements for the 12 participating Youth Voice groups were analysed. Annual allocations for host organisations and independent Youth Voice groups ranged from \$10,000 to \$40,000, with an average grant of around \$20,000. All payments were made as single lump sums. This represents a 300 per cent variation between the lowest and highest grants.

Across stakeholders, there was strong agreement that short-term and uneven funding undermines the stability of Youth Voice. One-year contracts and small, variable budgets make it difficult to plan ahead, retain skilled facilitators or provide consistent support for rangatahi. This uncertainty limits what groups can achieve and places heavy expectations on hosts and young people without adequate resourcing or long-term backing.

Young people said the lack of funding restricted their ability to deliver on ideas. For many, it meant having to start again each year instead of building momentum. They described the frustration of seeing promising initiatives unable to progress due to limited resources.

*“It does kind of become a cycle of us not being able to do much.”*

Council staff said the current model of short-term, low-level funding was unrealistic for meaningful youth development. They observed that local

boards often expected strong outcomes from a base level of investment that was not enough to sustain long-term work.

*“You’re trying to fix youth development with \$20,000 a year... setting everybody up to fail.”*

*“We fund these organisations so little... [Host organisation] goes in two hours a week to run meetings and does nothing else.”*

*“Youth development requires skilled, professional attention... this model does not enable that.”*

Host organisations spoke most strongly about the pressure this created. They said funding often covered only a few hours a week, and their responsibilities included governance support, mentoring and administration. Host organisations noted that the funding provided does not always cover the full range of costs expected, including stipends, food, uniforms (e.g. T-shirts), venue hire, transport support and coordination time. Shortfalls can result in staff or volunteers personally covering expenses and limited ability to extend activities. Without adequate resourcing, host organisations said it was difficult to provide the level of guidance and continuity that rangatahi needed.

*“We only get paid for about three hours a week, but the mahi is way more than that.”*

*“We do governance, mentoring, and wellbeing support for the group, but the funding is minimal.”*

Over half of elected members surveyed said that access to funding and resources had been an effective way to strengthen Youth Voice engagement, making it the second most selected method from a list of possible options. However, only two respondents identified a lack of funding as a challenge or barrier faced by Youth Voice groups in engaging with their local boards.

Short-term, variable funding was widely seen as a significant barrier to stable and effective Youth Voice. Annual contracts and large differences in funding levels limited groups’ ability to plan ahead, retain skilled support, or build momentum over time. Rangatahi, hosts and council staff described how

small, inconsistent budgets restricted what could be achieved and placed heavy pressure on hosts to deliver far more than their resourcing allowed. These constraints reduced continuity, limited opportunities for youth development and created inequitable experiences across the region. Strengthening funding consistency and addressing resourcing gaps were viewed as essential to supporting sustainable, high-quality Youth Voice practice.

#### 4.4 Building capability and safe environments

Young people, council staff, host organisations and elected members recognised the need to strengthen both civic literacy and youth development capability to make Youth Voice meaningful and safe. While Youth Voice provides valuable opportunities for participation, the complexity of council processes, limited preparation and uneven understanding of youth development among local board members often make it difficult for rangatahi to contribute confidently and feel respected in governance spaces.

Young people talked about the challenges of understanding council processes, language and decision-making structures. They said they often felt underprepared for the complexity of civic issues, which could be discouraging and limit their confidence to contribute.

*“Sometimes I looked at the form [consultation document] ... it was a 500-word question... I didn’t understand what was going on.”*

*“Being young... you don’t have much life experience... you don’t know what you’re talking about.”*

Young people expressed a strong sense that some elected members do not take them seriously or give their ideas due consideration. Several said they felt ignored, dismissed or treated with a lack of respect. They wanted clearer, more respectful communication and consistent engagement. While a few noted positive relationships with individual board members who attended events and showed genuine care, the overall sentiment suggested young people often felt undervalued and disconnected from decision-makers.

*“I just think maybe even if we have just one person who genuinely cares about youth voice, it would make such a difference.”*

*“I think maybe that somebody can be like a representative for us because it feels like they don’t really take us seriously.”*

Council staff said that navigating council systems is complex and said young people need more structured support. They highlighted the importance of providing training to build civic literacy and make the processes easier to understand. Council staff also said elected members often lacked training in how to engage with young people which limited how effectively they could engage and support rangatahi. They described how well-intentioned efforts could become tokenistic when boards were not confident in working alongside young people or clear on what being youth-led means.

*“Elected members need training to work with young people. They don’t always know how to engage or support Youth Voice effectively.”*

*“There’s no clear guidance for elected members on how to meaningfully involve youth. It’s often left to chance.”*

Host organisations said both rangatahi and adults need training and guidelines to make Youth Voice effective. They called for civic literacy support to help young people understand council processes and for youth development training for elected members to engage confidently and appropriately. Without this, they said, participation risks becoming tokenistic rather than empowering.

*“A lot of young people don’t know what a local board is or how decisions are made — they need preparation before being thrown into meetings.”*

*“There should be proper training so youth understand how council works and what decisions they can influence.”*

*“They should have some kind of training module or set of guidelines for both rangatahi and adults.”*

Just under half of elected members (around 50%) felt only somewhat, not very, or not at all confident engaging with their Youth Voice group. Nearly a third (30%) identified limited awareness and understanding of Youth Voice among local board members as the biggest challenge or barrier to effective engagement.

Alongside these capability gaps, Youth Voice members, host organisations and council staff emphasised the importance of clear safety protocols and role boundaries to create safe, supportive environments for rangatahi participation. Council staff said clearer safeguarding practices would help rangatahi feel supported and confident when engaging with elected members and council processes. Young people also said that with safe, welcoming spaces, they would feel more comfortable and empowered to speak openly.

*“Sometimes we feel exposed or intimidated when we have to present to elected members.” (Rangatahi)*

*“It’s not always a youth-safe environment. The power imbalance can make it really hard for rangatahi to speak.” (Host)*

Stakeholders agreed that strengthening civic literacy, youth development capability, and safe practice is essential for meaningful Youth Voice. Rangatahi often felt underprepared for the complexity of council processes and at times undervalued in governance spaces, which limited their confidence to contribute. Council staff and hosts highlighted the need for structured training for both young people and elected members, noting that uneven understanding of youth development and lack of clear guidance can lead to tokenistic engagement. Safeguarding protocols and youth-safe environments were seen as important foundations to help rangatahi participate with confidence, feel respected and engage effectively in local decision-making.

## 4.5 Gaps in diversity and representation

Stakeholders consistently noted that Youth Voice groups do not always reflect the diversity of their communities. Māori, Pasifika, disabled, rainbow

and lower-income rangatahi were often under-represented. Barriers such as transport costs, a lack of cultural responsiveness and recruitment that relied heavily on schools limited who was able to take part.

Funding agreements and council expectations direct Youth Voice groups to “actively seek effective ways to make visible and address the aspirations of rangatahi Māori and other marginalised demographics.” To achieve genuine representation, stakeholders said sustained relationships, resourcing and ongoing cultural responsiveness is required.

Several rangatahi said they wanted to engage more rangatahi Māori but were unsure where to start or how to do this in a way that felt genuine. Young people noticed that some groups lacked diversity and said this could make joining feel intimidating or unappealing. They described walking into meetings and not seeing anyone like themselves or feeling that the kaupapa did not reflect their culture or lived experience.

*“We don’t really know how to reach more Māori youth... we want them to join but we don’t know how to go about it.”*

*“It’s not about intentionally picking people just for diversity... but if you’re Māori or Pacific, you might think there’s no one like me here.”*

*“Most of them are Asian... I think I’m the only person that’s from the African Middle East.”*

Some young people also said Rainbow/LGBTQI+ representation was limited or invisible in many Youth Voice groups.

*“We don’t really talk about rainbow youth. It’s like that’s not part of diversity here.”*

*“There’s no one openly queer in our group, so it’s hard to bring those perspectives.”*

Council staff also recognised that some youth councils across Auckland did not reflect the communities they represented. They considered that this undermined the credibility of Youth Voice as a mechanism for representation. Staff said that while some groups had relationships with iwi

or local cultural networks, these were inconsistent and often dependent on individual champions, rather than established practice. They also spoke about the need for training to build confidence and capability in supporting Māori, Pasifika and rainbow rangatahi.

*“We’re not diverse. Our youth councils aren’t diverse.”*

*“It’s hard to get Māori representation... it [Youth Voice councils] doesn’t resonate with Māori.”*

*“There’s a need for more cultural competency across the board, especially in how we work with Māori, Pasifika and rainbow youth.”*

Host organisations talked about the need for long-term, well-resourced strategies to strengthen diversity and inclusion. They said one-off recruitment drives or short-term outreach were not enough to shift participation patterns or sustain engagement for marginalised rangatahi. Hosts emphasised that meaningful representation takes time, trust and relationships with local Māori and Pasifika communities.

*“Massive gap... engaging more Māori and Pasifika will take a multiyear strategy.”*

*“You can’t just do a call-out and expect Māori youth to show up, it takes relationships.”*

Elected members also noticed gaps in representation. Some questioned whether they were hearing the voices of local young people, noting that membership in some local boards skewed toward certain schools or youth who lived outside the area.

*“The majority of [youth council] was made up of young people who don’t even live in [local board area], so I have felt that I am not really hearing their voices.”*

Stakeholders agreed that Youth Voice groups do not consistently reflect the diversity of their communities, with Māori, Pasifika, disabled, rainbow and lower-income rangatahi often under-represented. While funding agreements expect groups to actively support the aspirations of Māori and other under-

represented young people, participation is limited by barriers such as transport, uneven cultural responsiveness and recruitment processes that rely heavily on schools. Meaningful representation requires sustained relationships, resourcing and capability to engage inclusively. Without this, young people may enter spaces where they do not see themselves reflected or feel that their culture or identity is understood, which can discourage participation and undermine the credibility of Youth Voice as a representative mechanism.

## 4.6 Sustainability challenges

Sustaining Youth Voice participation depends on effective structures, consistent support and realistic expectations that recognise the time and commitment rangatahi give. All stakeholders spoke about the importance of stable systems such as clear frameworks, mentoring and opportunities to connect regionally that help Youth Voice groups thrive. This section explores the key factors that influence sustainability, including clear expectations and frameworks, the loss of specialist support roles, opportunities for regional learning and collaboration, the challenges of hosting and attending events, and the systems needed to build continuity and resilience.

### 4.6.1 Clear structures, expectations and frameworks

We heard that sustaining Youth Voice requires clear structures, fair expectations and supportive systems to prevent burnout and maintain continuity. Young people described the constant balancing act of volunteering while managing school, work and whānau commitments. They said competing priorities made it hard to stay engaged consistently, and transport and safety were barriers, particularly for evening meetings or events held far from home. Youth Voice group also suggested strengthening the internal culture of groups with team bonding outside of meetings and resourcing wellbeing supports for facilitators and rangatahi via supervision and workshops.

*“My biggest one is time management... I have responsibilities outside of school... at times it can be challenging to balance all of that.”*

*“Public transport is a big one... the train usually breaks down at some point during the week.”*

Council staff said young people were often expected to manage workloads that were too heavy for volunteers and faced unrealistic expectations about what they could deliver. They also described how rangatahi were balancing school, work and family commitments alongside their Youth Voice roles.

*“We ask a lot of them. They’re trying to juggle school, jobs and this volunteer role that sometimes feels like a full-time job.”*

*“Sometimes the expectation is that they deliver like paid staff, that’s not fair or realistic.”*

Hosts and elected members agreed that consistency and guidance are essential. They said groups would benefit from shared templates, role descriptions, planning templates and handover tools.

*“They should have some sort of training module or set of guidelines.”*

Strengthening the foundations, through clear expectations, structured onboarding, and supportive frameworks is vital to making Youth Voice both sustainable and rewarding for young people.

#### 4.6.2 Reduced specialist strategic roles and system support

In 2023, Auckland Council’s Connected Communities department underwent restructuring which resulted in a significant reduction of the level of dedicated regional youth development expertise within council. At the time of review there were just 2.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) Specialist Youth Advisor roles covering multiple boards, which limited their ability to provide strategic, relational and coordination support. Stakeholders suggested that this reduced capacity has contributed to gaps in regional development.

Council staff said that these specialist roles were essential for connecting, coordinating and championing youth participation across the region.

*“When they disbanded that [previous] team, they lost people with immense experience... all of that’s now gone.”*

Host organisations said they could not fill the gap left by council specialists. They described their role as providing day-to-day support but said broader system guidance was needed to maintain quality and consistency.

*“We do what we can, but without those dedicated youth development staff, it’s hard to keep things connected across boards.”*

Elected members also spoke about resourcing challenges. A quarter (25%) said a lack of staff support was a barrier for Youth Voice groups to engage with local boards.

Reduced specialist capacity has left a gap in regional coordination and guidance. Rebuilding this capacity would strengthen consistency, mentoring and coordination, helping Youth Voice remain an effective and well-supported network.

#### 4.6.3 Regional collaboration, shared learning and training

There was strong support for regional collaboration and shared learning. Youth Voice groups, hosts, council staff and elected members said that bringing Youth Voice groups together for hui, workshops or training would help build capability and sustain engagement.

A Southern Clusters pilot is currently underway, funded by local boards in South Auckland. The pilot brings rangatahi together for peer support, connection and mentoring, with an external consultancy agency facilitating regular spaces where young people can strengthen their leadership and civic skills, share insights, develop youth-led projects and respond to community priorities.

Youth Voice groups were enthusiastic about more opportunities to connect, collaborate and learn alongside other Youth Voice groups. Many described how observing others helped build their confidence and skills.

*“In terms of what our successes are, I think having chances to connect with other youth boards would help us grow.”*

Council staff described regional learning as an opportunity to address uneven capacity and capabilities and develop collective approaches to big issues.

*“How do you bring the youth voice groups together... you just have a wonderful learning opportunity and on a really meaty topic you could have something.”*

*“I’d love to see our elected members connect with youth voice groups across the region to learn together.”*

Host organisations said that creating spaces for Youth Voice groups to come together strengthens capability and helps sustain engagement over time.

Elected members supported regional coordination, saying it could strengthen consistency and help boards learn from each other.

*“We should be having regular meetings, including regional ones, so we can learn from each other and share what’s working.”*

Together these perspectives show that investing in regional collaboration, training and shared learning can help sustain Youth Voice by building stronger networks and a sense of collective purpose.

#### 4.6.4 Hosting and attending events

Events were described as a vital way to connect with communities, showcase youth leadership and engage a wider group of young people. However, across groups we heard that delivering successful events with limited time, funding and support is challenging.

Youth Voice groups said events are exciting but hard to organise or attend due to cost, transport and communication barriers. They described struggling with the logistics of running activities, covering costs and promoting them effectively.

*“It’s hard to get people to come when they don’t even know it’s on.”*

*“We had a great idea for an event, but we couldn’t find a space or budget.”*

Host organisations said that events are central to maintaining youth engagement but are often difficult to deliver with limited staff and budgets. They worried that when events struggled to attract participants or recognition, it was disheartening for rangatahi who had put in significant effort.

*“We organised the best event but if no one comes...”*

*“We put so much energy into events, but funding only covers a few hours a week. There’s never enough to plan properly.”*

*“Transport and timing are big barriers; if young people can’t get there, they just don’t come.”*

Council staff recognised events as one of the main touchpoints between rangatahi and local boards, but the effort required to organise them was often underestimated. They said inconsistent support, short-term funding and competing commitments affected turnout.

*“We see bursts of activity around events, but then everything stops, it’s not sustainable without dedicated roles.”*

*“We fund events, but often too late in the year for them to make an impact.”*

Elected members valued events as visible, community-building activities and wanted more coordination across boards to share ideas and resources.

*“We should be pooling efforts; each group is reinventing the wheel with their own events.”*

*“Attendance drops when events clash with exams or when promotion is left too late.”*

While events are a vital part of Youth Voice, their success depends on sustained funding, accessible venues, effective promotion and coordination across local boards to share resources and avoid burnout.

#### 4.6.5 Building continuity

Continuity across years was a sustainability challenge for some Youth Voice groups. Where participation, leadership and support structures changed frequently, groups struggled to retain learning and maintain momentum.

Some Youth Voice members spoke about the loss of knowledge when leadership changed and there were no systems for handover or mentoring. They said alumni networks, tuakana-teina approaches and structured onboarding would help maintain continuity.

*“The leadership team changes every year... those people are not here.”*

*“We also weren’t guided by other people... there isn’t really a way of old members telling the new members how to do something.”*

Hosts, council staff, and elected members all said that structured onboarding, mentoring and alumni networks would help new members build on what came before rather than starting from scratch.

Elected members said consistent membership and engagement was a key concern, with 60 per cent identifying *“difficulty in maintaining Youth Voice group participation”* as a barrier. They pointed to factors such as competing demands on young people’s time, large geographic areas and reliance on small networks. Elected members also noted that frequent staff turnover compounded these challenges, saying Youth Voice often relied too heavily on individuals, and when staff changed, continuity and institutional knowledge were lost.

Maintaining continuity is a challenge for some Youth Voice groups, with turnover among rangatahi and staff leading to the loss of knowledge, momentum, and consistency. Continuity could be enhanced through structured onboarding, handover, mentoring, tuakana-teina approaches and alumni networks that help new members confidently step into their roles and

build on past achievements. Strengthening these practices would help preserve institutional knowledge, deepen engagement, and reinforce Youth Voice as a resilient, connected and future-focused network.

## Summary box – barriers and challenges

Across Tāmaki Makaurau, Youth Voice groups are making a difference, but their impact is limited by uneven engagement, unclear systems, and short-term support. Youth Voice groups want to be genuine partners in decision-making, yet many said inconsistent contact with local boards, limited follow-through, and variable resources make it difficult to sustain motivation and influence. Where boards engage regularly and take their ideas seriously, young people feel heard and valued. Where this doesn't happen, participation can feel tokenistic, discouraging and disconnected from outcomes.

Stakeholders said Youth Voice works best when everyone understands its purpose and success measures. Uncertainty about whether Youth Voice is primarily intended to run events, build leadership, influence decision-making or balance all these aims makes it challenging to understand the aims of Youth Voice and measure progress. Short-term, uneven funding adds to this challenge. One-year, low-value grants often fail to reflect the time, skill and consistency needed for youth development, creating instability for both Youth Voice groups and host organisations.

Findings show that gaps in civic literacy, youth development capability and safeguarding practices make participation harder and, at times, unsafe. Young people said they sometimes feel unprepared for complex council processes or undervalued in governance spaces. Council staff and hosts noted that elected members also need clearer guidance and training to engage confidently and respectfully with rangatahi.

Representation remains another challenge. Māori, Pasifika, disabled, rainbow, migrant and rangatahi from families with limited access to

resources continue to be under-represented in Youth Voice groups. Stakeholders said that genuine diversity cannot be achieved through one-off recruitment drives; it requires long-term, relationship-based approaches that are culturally responsive and well-resourced.

Finally, maintaining continuity was identified as a persistent barrier. Frequent turnover and the absence of structured handover processes mean many groups “start from scratch” each year, losing valuable knowledge and momentum.

There was broad agreement that these challenges require a more coordinated and regional or sub-regional approach. Stakeholders said Youth Voice would benefit from shared training, mentoring and opportunities for groups to connect across local boards. A regional or sub-regional supported network could strengthen consistency, build capability, and reduce duplication, helping Youth Voice operate as a connected system rather than isolated local efforts.

These findings point to the importance of establishing clear structures, consistent engagement and stable investment to strengthen Youth Voice. This aligns with evidence from the brief literature review, which show that authentic youth participation relies on a clear purpose, equitable resourcing, skilled adult allies and systems that make young people’s contributions visible, valued and acted upon.

## 5. Insight summaries and recommendations

This final section brings together the key insights from the review, paired with a set of targeted recommendations. Each insight highlights a critical aspect of the current youth voice system: what is working well, where there are gaps, and what matters most to rangatahi and those supporting them. Immediately following each insight, practical and achievable recommendations are outlined that respond directly to that insight. Implementing these recommendations will require co-design opportunities across Youth Voice groups, host organisations, local boards and Auckland Council staff.

The recommendations were developed in collaboration with the advisory group through workshops that shared and tested insights and evidence from the research. In early 2026, the advisory group will work together to develop an action plan that clarifies areas of responsibility.

### 5.1 Youth voice framework and best practice guidelines

The Youth Voice groups currently operate within a fragmented and uneven system, with each local board and group developing its own structures, expectations and levels of resourcing. Some Youth Voice groups have strong relationships with local boards and council staff, clear expectations and consistent support. Others experience limited visibility, variable guidance and uneven access to the people and resources they need. There are few opportunities for coordination and shared learning across the region. This lack of a joined-up approach means rangatahi do not all receive similar levels of support, opportunity, continuity or impact on local board decisions.

This fragmentation is compounded by the absence of a shared understanding of the overall purpose of Youth Voice. While most stakeholders agree that Youth Voice exists to strengthen youth perspectives, leadership and community connection, these aims are interpreted differently by local boards, hosts, council staff and rangatahi. A shared

purpose and a clear set of outcomes would help anchor Youth Voice as both a leadership development platform and a democratic participation mechanism, ensuring everyone is working towards the same goals with a consistent understanding of what success looks like.

The lack of a framework and best practice guidelines has cascading effects. Groups have limited opportunities to share learning, build continuity or plan together. Loss of institutional knowledge was one of the biggest sustainability challenges. Regional collaboration, clearer expectations and sustainable investment would create a more stable, equitable and connected system that supports continuity, strengthens relationships and positions Youth Voice as a trusted and visible part of how council listens to, and partners with, young people.

### 5.1.1 Recommendations

**1. Co-design a regional Youth Voice framework** that sets out a shared purpose, core functions, expected outcomes, and consistent ways of working with best practice guidelines covering:

- A shared purpose and outcomes for Youth Voice.
- Clear expectations for engagement with local boards.
- Expectations of host organisations and the Auckland Council system support.
- A shared roles and responsibilities framework that outlines the expectations and functions of hosts, Engagement Advisors, Community Brokers and Specialist Youth Advisors.
- A shared understanding of how different levels of investment support different types of Youth Voice activity, capability and impact.
- Guidance tools for onboarding, continuity, handover, mentoring and alumni involvement.
- Regional collaboration and sharing learning mechanisms.
- Communication, visibility and feedback processes.

**2. Embed Youth Voice within local board plans** by including commitments that outline how Youth Voice will contribute advice and recommendations into decision-making processes throughout the three-year life of the plan.

## 5.2 Equity and representation

Equity and representation are not consistently embedded within the Youth Voice system. While some groups reflect the diversity of their communities, representation of Māori, Pasifika, disabled and rainbow rangatahi varies widely and often depends on individual champions rather than sustained strategies. Many groups continue to recruit primarily through schools or existing networks, which means working or tertiary engaged young people, youth outside of mainstream education, and those not already connected to community organisations are often missing. Even within schools, access is uneven. Some Youth Voice groups described strong, supportive relationships with principals, deans and other school staff. Others experienced limited or inconsistent engagement, leading to narrow pipelines that privilege high-achieving or highly visible students. This limits how well Youth Voice can speak to the realities, priorities and aspirations of diverse rangatahi across Tāmaki Makaurau.

Although funding agreements expect Youth Voice groups to reflect their communities and engage marginalised youth, there are few mechanisms that support this in practice. Recruitment processes, relationships and resources for equity-focused work are inconsistent, and many hosts describe difficulty reaching young people beyond their established circles.

Cultural responsiveness is also uneven. While youth models like Mana Taiohi<sup>6</sup> set clear expectations for equity and partnership, these principles are not consistently visible in Youth Voice practice. Relationships with iwi, mana whenua, Māori youth organisations, Pasifika groups and rainbow communities are often informal, short-term or dependent on personal connections rather than being embedded as ongoing, supported partnership practice.

Stakeholders emphasised that genuine representation grows through sustained relationships, accessible processes and creating safe, mana-

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<sup>6</sup> Mana Taiohi is a principle-based framework that informs the way people work with young people in Aotearoa. It is informed by young people and reflects a Te Ao Māori worldview.

enhancing environments where all rangatahi feel valued and able to contribute. Removing practical barriers such as transport, safety concerns, family commitments and unsuitable meeting times is also essential to supporting equitable access.

### 5.2.1 Recommendations

#### 1. Strengthen system-wide expectations for equity and representation

by embedding clear guidance and practical tools that support Youth Voice groups, hosts and local boards to reach and include Māori, Pasifika, disabled, rainbow, migrant and working rangatahi. This guidance should cover:

- Moving beyond school-based recruitment to reflect the full diversity of local board communities.
- Te Tiriti-aligned practice and practical tools for partnership.
- Culturally grounded relationships with iwi, mana whenua, Māori youth organisations, Pasifika communities and rainbow groups.
- Simple, shared equity plans and regular reflection on who is participating and who is missing.
- Creating safe and mana-enhancing environments where all rangatahi feel they belong and can contribute.

#### 2. Develop a Youth Voice – schools partnership strategy to strengthen recruitment pipelines and support the identification of youth leaders beyond high achievers, including:

- Formalising relationships with principals, deans and school-based youth coordinators.
- Supporting outreach to alternative education, kura and tertiary institutions.
- Broadening recruitment to recognise diverse strengths, backgrounds and experiences.

#### 3. Resource practical supports that remove participation barriers such as:

- Transport assistance and accessible, youth-friendly meeting locations.

- Flexible meeting times that accommodate work, whānau and schooling commitments.
- Culturally responsive facilitation training and dedicated inclusion resources for Youth Voice groups.
- Youth Specialist Advisors working with Ngā Mātārae to build capability, systems and guidance for Te Tiriti-grounded partnership practice, including support for partnerships with mana whenua where local boards have existing or emerging relationships.

### 5.3 Capability and capacity building

Youth Voice groups are strongly youth-led and adult-supported, with rangatahi managing budgets, driving initiatives and leading engagement with other young people. However, there remains significant variation in how youth leadership is understood and supported across council systems. Many adults are committed to empowering young people but are uncertain about how to balance autonomy, accountability and safeguarding. This results in inconsistent practice, reliance on individuals who are confident in youth-led approaches, and confusion about where responsibilities sit between hosts, council staff and elected members. Stakeholders highlighted that clearer role definitions, safeguarding frameworks and shared expectations would build trust, reduce risk and strengthen confidence across the system.

Across the review, concerns about youth safety were a major and repeated theme. Rangatahi, hosts and council staff described local board workshops and meetings as not consistently youth-safe, noting unclear boundaries and intimidating spaces that at times made participation feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Young people talked about feeling exposed or dismissed in governance settings, while adults noted the absence of clear behavioural expectations, safeguarding processes or accessible pathways for raising concerns. These experiences highlighted the need for a more structured, system-wide approach to creating youth-safe governance environments, including clear conduct standards, consistent protocols, and accountability mechanisms that protect and empower rangatahi in all council-engagement spaces.

Alongside these safety gaps, both rangatahi and adults identified capability gaps that limit meaningful participation. Young people often lack the civic literacy, orientation and ongoing training needed to navigate council processes and engage confidently in governance spaces. Some council staff, elected members and hosts said they do not always feel well-equipped to work in youth-led/adult-supported ways, or to engage confidently in culturally responsive, safe and partnership-based practice. Induction processes vary widely, with some groups receiving comprehensive preparation and others receiving very little. These inconsistencies contribute to experiences where young people's ideas are not reaching local boards, feedback loops are weak and participation can feel tokenistic when youth advice and recommendations are not incorporated into decisions.

Strong relationships demonstrate what is possible. In areas where local boards actively partner with rangatahi, Youth Voice has greater visibility, stronger influence and deeper community impact. These examples show that when Youth Voice is valued, well-resourced and integrated into decision-making processes, it strengthens leadership development and civic participation. Embedding consistent training, safeguarding protocols, communication pathways and feedback mechanisms would support adults to work confidently alongside rangatahi, and ensure young people feel safe and valued. Building shared capability across the whole system is important to making Youth Voice authentic, impactful and sustainable.

### 5.3.1 Recommendations

**1. Establish clear role definitions, safeguarding standards and shared expectations** across the Youth Voice system, supported by a co-designed flexible induction and training that covers:

- Responsibilities, boundaries and safeguarding protocols for rangatahi, hosts, council staff and elected members.
- Youth-led/adult-supported practice and youth development principles.
- Civic literacy, council processes and cultural safety.
- Modular resources that can be tailored to local contexts.

**2. Develop and implement a youth-safe governance guidance** across all local boards and council environments, setting standards for safe, respectful and empowering engagement, including:

- Guidance on conduct in meetings, one-to-one contact and safeguarding rangatahi during deputations and workshops.
- Accessible, youth-specific accountability and complaints pathways.
- Considerations for youth-friendly environments, including venue, timing and accessibility.

**3. Embed consistent communication and feedback processes, alongside ongoing capability building** for both rangatahi and adults, including:

- Regular feedback loops that show how youth input informs decisions.
- Clear communication pathways between Youth Voice groups, hosts, council staff and local boards.
- Mentoring, peer learning and training that supports authentic partnership.
- Support for adults to work confidently alongside rangatahi and uphold safe, culturally responsive practice.

## 5.4 Future research

Future research will strengthen the evidence base for Youth Voice and youth participation across the region.

### 5.4.1 Recommendations

**1. Strengthen the evidence base for Youth Voice** through targeted research and case studies that:

- Document exemplary Youth Voice practice, highlighting strong partnerships with local boards, culturally responsive and inclusive participation, and successful youth-led/adult-supported initiatives.

- Expand the scope of this review in a second phase that includes other forms of youth participation beyond formal Youth Voice structures, such as place-based youth action, youth leadership groups for communities of interest and national/international best practice.

## 6. Summary

This review found that Youth Voice groups across Tāmaki Makaurau are creating meaningful opportunities for rangatahi to lead, connect and contribute to local board decision-making. Where youth-led ownership is supported by effective partnerships with hosts, council staff and local boards, Youth Voice builds confidence, leadership and civic capability, strengthens belonging and whanaungatanga, and provides local boards with deeper insight into the lived experiences and aspirations of young people. These strengths highlight the conditions that support effective practice.

The review also identified areas where Youth Voice can be strengthened to support greater impact and sustainability. These include variability in engagement with local boards, resourcing and funding timeframes, clarity of purpose and expectations, capability and safeguarding practice, representation, and maintaining continuity as membership and support roles change.

The recommendations outlined in this report respond to these opportunities by proposing a co-designed regional framework and best practice guidance, strengthened equity and participation supports, improved safeguarded settings, consistent induction and capability building, and targeted future research to strengthen the evidence base. Implementing these changes will build on existing strengths through co-design and advisory group-led implementation, alongside Youth Voice groups, host organisations, local boards and Auckland Council staff.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1 Participant information sheet (PIS) Youth Voice groups

Please note that tailored Participant Information Sheets were developed for each participant group to ensure clarity and appropriateness of information. Separate versions were prepared for council staff, host organisations, and parents or carers of participants aged under 16 years. Below is the Participant Information Sheet provided to Youth Voice group members.

### **Information sheet and consent form for Youth Voice participants**

This project is part of a review of Youth Voice groups across Tāmaki Makaurau. We want to hear from youth group members about what is working well, what is not, and what support would help Youth Voice groups have a greater impact in local decision-making.

Your kōrero will help Auckland Council understand how they can better support groups and strengthen Youth Voice in your community and across the region.

[Point and Associates](#), an independent research team, is undertaking this project in collaboration with the Auckland Council. We're talking with Youth Voice members across twelve local boards, host organisations, local board members and Auckland Council staff to gather a full picture of how Youth Voice is working.

**If you are under 16, your parent or caregiver will also need to give permission for you to take part. Please ask them to fill out the consent form for parents and carers. You can access the form [Information sheet for Parents and Carers.docx](#)**

#### **What will happen in the focus group?**

We are inviting you to be part of a focus group. The focus group will run for 60-90 minutes, and we can meet either in person or online—whichever works best for your group.

You're welcome to bring a support person with you. The kōrero will be run by someone from the Point and Associates research team, and we'll make sure the space feels welcoming and safe.

We'll ask for your permission to audio record the session. This helps us make sure we remember everything correctly. Only the Point and Associates research team will hear the recording.

As a thank-you for your time and experience, you'll receive a **\$50.00 GiftPay voucher**.

### **What kind of questions will be asked?**

We'll ask about your experiences in Youth Voice—what's going well, what's been challenging, and what kind of support would help make Youth Voice stronger.

We'll ask about:

- How your Youth Voice group has made a difference in your community
- What helps or makes it hard to be involved and have your say?
- What makes Youth Voice work well, and what could be done better?

You don't have to answer anything you're not comfortable with.

### **Your rights**

You can choose whether or not to be part of this project. If you decide to join but change your mind later, you can pull out any time before **31 August 2025**. If you withdraw, we'll delete any information you've shared before we begin analysing the data.

You can also take breaks, skip questions, or ask for support at any time.

### **Your kōrero is private.**

Everything you share will be treated with respect and kept private. Your name won't be used in any reports. We remove names and identifying details so what you say can't be linked back to you.

Because you will be part of a group, other participants will hear what you say. We'll ask everyone to respect each other's privacy and not share what's said outside the group, but we can't guarantee this.

All recordings and notes will be stored securely and accessed only by the Point and Associates research team and a select few members of the Auckland Council Social and Economic Research and Evaluation team. We use passwords and secure systems to protect your information.

### **Whenever we do research, we like to make sure people feel safe**

We'll work at your pace and make sure the group feels respectful and inclusive. If anything comes up that's upsetting or hard, support is available.

If you need help at any time, you can contact:

- Call or free text **1737** to talk to a trained counsellor
- Call **LIFELINE** 0800 54 33 54 or text **HELP** to 4357
- Text **Youthline** free at **234** or call **0800 37 66 33**

### **Our research team and contacts**

- **Jules Radford-Poupart** – Lead researcher, Point and Associates  
 021 989 745       [julie@point.co.nz](mailto:julie@point.co.nz)
- **Trudie Cain** – Senior Social Researcher, Auckland Council  
 027 778 5757       [trudie.cain@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz](mailto:trudie.cain@aucklandcouncil.govt.nz)

## 8.2 Consent form Youth Voice group

- **What you need to know before signing the consent form:**
- **This is your choice:** you can choose to participate in the focus group. You can stop at any time, and it won't affect any support or opportunities you receive.
- **Your voice matters:** We want to hear your experiences to help make Youth Voice groups better across Tāmaki Makaurau. You'll receive a **\$50 voucher** as a thank you.
- **Your kōrero is private:** Your name won't be shared. What you say will be kept confidential and won't be linked to you in any reports.
- **Feel safe and supported:** You are welcome to bring a support person, ask questions, and take breaks as needed.
- A more **detailed information sheet is available** It includes comprehensive information about the purpose of the research, what participation involves, how your information will be used, and your rights as a participant. You can view the document via this link.

[Information sheet and consent form for Youth Voice participants.docx](#)

**Please tick Yes or No for each statement:**

- I understand that participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw at any time before August 31, 2025.  
 Yes       No
- I understand that what I share will be kept confidential and that my name will not be used in any reports.  
 Yes       No
- I give my permission for the focus group to be audio recorded (only the research team will have access to the recording).  
 Yes       No
- I understand that other people in the group will be able to hear what I say. We'll all be asked to keep things private, but I know confidentiality can't be fully guaranteed in a group setting.  
 Yes       No
- I know I can ask questions at any time.  
 Yes       No
- I consent to participating in the Youth Voice project.  
 Yes       No

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Youth Voice Group:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## 8.3 Focus group Youth Voice interview schedule

### Welcome & Purpose

1. Opening karakia
2. Introduction of facilitators
3. Check in regarding audio recording – confirm consent <https://forms.office.com/r/EsiceX9imB>
4. Cover confidentiality and create a safe space. Please don't share what's said outside this group.
5. Project overview – briefly explain the purpose and focus of the research
6. Any questions or concerns?

### Introductions

1. Sharing names, how long you have been involved and what inspired you to join the [name Youth Voice group]
2. Can you tell me about your group?
  - o (e.g., ages, recruitment etc)

### Section 1: Strengths and Positive Impact

1. In your own words, how would you define the purpose of the Youth Voice group in your local board area?
2. Can you share some examples of when your group made a difference or influenced a local board decision?
3. What has helped make your Youth Voice group fun, successful, and meaningful?

### Section 2: Challenges and Barriers

1. What challenges have you faced as part of your Youth Voice group?
  2. Have there been any barriers that made it hard for your Youth Voice group to connect with the local board or Auckland Council staff?
    - o (Prompt) Do you feel your Youth Voice group can reflect the views of all young people within your local board area (diversity and inclusion)?
    - o How might diversity and inclusion be improved?
2. What support or resources would make it easier for young people to participate?

### **Section 3: Support Structures and Relationships**

1. What support has helped you make a difference in your Youth Voice group?
2. How could support from Council, host organisations, or others be better?

### **Final Reflections and Wrap-Up**

1. If you could make one recommendation to strengthen Youth Voice groups, what would it be?
2. Any final thoughts or anything we haven't covered that you'd like to share?

### **Closing**

1. Thank participants for their time and insights.
2. Outline the next steps and how findings will be shared.

Closing karakia

## 8.4 Survey elected members

### About the project

This survey is part of a research project evaluating the effectiveness of Youth Voice groups in Tāmaki Makaurau. Youth Voice members, Auckland Council staff, and host organisations are also contributing to this project to help build a clearer picture of what's working well, what could be improved, and how Youth Voice can be better supported. Your participation is voluntary. The survey is anonymous - we will not collect your name or any identifying details. We will record which local board you are a member of, solely to help us track participation across the twelve participating local boards. By completing and submitting this survey, you are providing your informed consent to take part in the study. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Jules Radford-Poupard at [julie@point.co.nz](mailto:julie@point.co.nz).

- 1. Which local board are you a member of?**
  
- 2. How familiar are you with the Youth Voice initiative in your local board?**
  - Extremely familiar
  - Very familiar
  - Somewhat familiar
  - Not very familiar
  - Not at all familiar
  
- 3. How confident are you engaging with the Youth Voice group?**
  - Extremely confident
  - Very confident
  - Somewhat confident
  - Not very confident
  - Not at all confident
  
- 4. In your own words, what is the purpose of the Youth Voice group?**
  
- 5. How valuable is the Youth Voice group in ensuring young people's perspectives are considered in local board decision making?**

- Extremely valuable
- Very valuable
- Somewhat valuable
- Not so valuable
- Not at all valuable

- 6. Can you please share an example of a successful initiative, project or decision influenced by the Youth Voice group?**
- 7. Which of the following methods have been effective in strengthening Youth Voice engagement and participation? (please select all that apply)**
  - Regular meetings with local board members
  - Deputations
  - Elected member Youth Voice liaison role
  - Youth seat on the local board
  - Support from host organisations
  - Training and capacity building for Youth Voice members
  - Strong relationships with council staff
  - Access to resources and funding
  - Other (please specify) and/or provide any additional explanation of your response(s)
- 8. What are the biggest challenges or barriers Youth Voice groups face in engaging with your local board? (please select all that apply)**
  - Limited awareness and understanding of Youth Voice among local board members
  - Lack of staff resource
  - Lack of funding
  - Difficulty in maintaining Youth Voice group participation
  - Limited influence on decision-making processes
  - Challenges in communication between Youth Voice group and local board members
  - Regular participation in Local Board meetings
  - Other (please specify) and/or provide any additional explanation of your response(s)

**9. How effective is the current support provided by the local board to Youth Voice groups?**

- Extremely effective
- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not so effective
- Not at all effective

**10. What opportunities do you see for strengthening partnerships between Youth Voice groups, local boards, host organisations and council staff?**

**11. Do you have any other comments or insights about Youth Voice in your local board?**

