

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

A summary report prepared for Auckland Council

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Purpose and Context

Auckland Council is committed to ensuring that children and young people can participate meaningfully in civic life.

The Thriving Rangatahi Plan¹ 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 occurs is through investment by local boards in youth councils and youth 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 in Community Wellbeing as well as the Governance and Engagement department who work closely with local boards.

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

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.

01

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.

02

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 enhances 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 voice delivers long-term benefits for individuals and communities.

“

“When adults actually trust us... the outcomes we produce can be surprising in the best way.”
(Rangatahi)

What's working well

03

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.

04

Strong system support enables confidence, continuity and impact

Youth Voice thrives when supported by a coordinated network of relevant council staff, elected members and host organisations. 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.

01

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 shared framework for Youth Voice in governance leads to inconsistencies, leaving some groups feeling marginalised rather than integrated into local decision-making.

02

Unclear purpose and competing expectations create confusion and inefficiency

There is a lack of a shared understanding of the purpose of Youth Voice among those we talked to, 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, host organisations, and council staff regarding roles and success criteria.

03

Short-term and uneven resourcing undermines stability and capability

Funding for youth voice varies across local boards, ranging from \$10,000 to \$40,000, yet expectations by local boards of what is to be delivered are often similar. In addition, funding contracts are only for one year at a time. This disparity limits resources for host organisation coordination, event support, and wellbeing, hindering what young people can achieve. Additionally, low funding hampers the attraction and retention of skilled youth workers and undermines the sustainability of support structures for Youth Voice.

Barriers and Challenges

04

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 for young people, complex council processes and variability in how staff and elected members engage with them 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 development 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.

05

Gaps in equity and representation

Youth Voice groups often lack diversity, with underrepresentation of Māori, Pasifika, disabled, rainbow, and lower-income rangatahi. Barriers like transport costs and reliance on schools hinder participation. We heard that some rangatahi felt alienated in Youth Voice and elected members' 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.

Sustaining Youth Voice Participation

Young people discussed the challenge of balancing their Youth Voice volunteering with school, work, and family responsibilities, noting the impact of transport and safety barriers further limited their ability to participate consistently.

Stakeholders noted that sustainability improves when groups have training, structured onboarding, and mentorship, but a 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-teina² 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.

² 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.

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.

- 01 Co-design a regional Youth Voice framework** that sets out a shared purpose, core functions, expected outcomes and consistent ways of working.
- 02 Embed Youth Voice within local board plans** by including commitments that outline how Youth Voice will contribute advice and recommendations into decision-making processes.
- 03 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.
- 04 Develop a Youth Voice schools partnership strategy** to strengthen recruitment pipelines and identify youth leaders beyond high achievers.
- 05 Resource practical supports that remove participation barriers**, including transport, accessibility, flexible participation options, culturally responsive facilitation and Te Tiriti grounded capability and system support.
- 06 Establish clear role definitions, safeguarding standards and shared expectations** across the Youth Voice system, supported by co-designed, flexible induction and training.
- 07 Develop and implement youth-safe governance guidance** across all local boards and council environments, setting standards for safe, respectful and empowering engagement.
- 08 Embed consistent communication and feedback processes**, alongside ongoing capability building for both rangatahi and adults.
- 09 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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Full report

<https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/publications/youth-voice-groups-youth-boards-and-councils-in-tamaki-makaurau-auckland-report/>

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