Taking Young People Seriously ...
Meaningful youth participation involves young people becoming active in making decisions and taking action, individually and collectively, around issues that affect them.

The Victorian Government, through the Office for Youth and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), are working together to raise awareness of the benefits of involving young people in decision-making processes. This document is the first of a series of publications that will achieve this goal.

Our aim is to ensure that young people have the opportunity to contribute to building a caring and connected Victorian community.
Foreword

Young people are not only people who will contribute much in the future, they are already achieving much for our community right now. The Victorian Government believes that young people's energy, creativity and enthusiasm are essential characteristics of our society.

Young people are a vital component of dynamic local communities and should play an important role in developing strong partnerships between the community, Government and other stakeholders. I am committed to promoting the active participation of Victoria's young people in all areas that both affect and interest them.

The Office for Youth is working in partnership with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria to provide practical information and advice on how to increase youth participation and of the many benefits of doing so. Three booklets will be printed during 2003 that will provide organisations with advice on how to develop ways young people can be involved in civic and community life. There will also be information, directed to young people, on how to get involved.

This partnership will also involve local communities to create opportunities for young people to gain experience and skills and be actively involved in formal decision-making bodies and processes.

The Victorian Government is committed to creating a State where young people benefit from supportive and inclusive communities in which they are:

- valued and respected;
- supported through social, economic, educational, cultural and employment opportunities;
- able to live healthy, satisfying lives; and
- able to realise their full potential.

The 'Participation in Practice' project will inform government, non-government agencies and private organisations of the benefits of effectively engaging young people in their communities and how to do this. It will focus particularly on the issues of decision-making, consultation and participation in local communities.

Working with young people is one of the most rewarding experiences a person can have. I thoroughly recommend you take the time to read the coming booklets to see how easy it is to involve young people and how beneficial their participation can be.

Jacinta Allan, MP
Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs
Meaningful youth participation involves young people becoming active in making decisions and taking action around issues that are of interest to them and affect them.

Our society is enriched when it includes the active participation of all its members in decisions about their own lives, in determining community directions, and in taking action around their interests, issues and concerns.

Young people have the right to participate in all aspects of community life and better decisions are made about young people when young people participate in making those decisions.

Greater ownership of decisions by young people also increases their commitment to, and responsibility for, the outcomes of those decisions.
Young people’s participation in decision-making and action is central to the ways in which relevant, meaningful and effective policies and programs are developed, and in which services are delivered.

Participation starts with a commitment to listen and then act in response to young people’s diverse voices through consultative forums and processes. Participation is then enhanced through young people’s active engagement with, and ownership of, these views. This can occur through:

- supporting young people to control and manage these processes
- providing young people with space and support to develop their own collective views, and
- supporting and restructuring decision-making processes to include active partnerships with young people.

Meaningful participation requires that we then encourage young people to take action on issues that are important to them and their communities.

The Importance of Youth Participation

Those organisations which include young people in their activities show respect for young people’s skills, knowledge and experience.

Youth participation involves knowledge, experience, partnership, enjoyment, democracy and diversity.
“Young people teach me something new every day.”
Rowena Allen, CEO —
Cutting Edge Youth Services
1) KNOWLEDGE

"What better way to ensure the relevance to young people than to have them help construct their own solutions."
Alan Wu — The Foundation for Young Australians

Young people have unique insights

Young people have skills and experiences that lead to better and more informed decisions being made by organisations. Young people’s valuable ideas provide a different and dynamic perspective and offer a vision that decision-making bodies may not have considered.

2) EXPERIENCE

"Working with an organisation that values young people has given us the confidence and ability to achieve at a young age."
Michelle Scavone and Michael Robb — The Push Youth Advisory Committee

Young people have different experiences

Young people are navigating a whole range of complex opportunities and their diverse life experiences can be very different to others. These experiences can benefit the community in ensuring that programs and services are inclusive and appropriate.

3) PARTNERSHIP

Everyone benefits from youth participation

Participation results in supportive working relationships between young people and other community members. Guidance and mentoring can have a significant effect on the well-being of young people and assist them in gaining valuable skills in teamwork and creating new social networks, and discovering education and employment interests and opportunities.

Organisations and older people also benefit from working in partnership with young people as they bring new perspectives, skills and experience.
4) ENJOYMENT

Everyone enjoys being involved in their community

The energy and vibrancy of many young people can reinvigorate community organisations and events. Involvement by all sections of society is important in generating community cohesion.

“I like being able to help the youth community speak up, meeting new people and giving something back.”
Brodie McDougall — City of Boroondara Youth Reference Group

5) DEMOCRACY

Young people gain experience in decision-making

Getting involved in the community means gaining confidence in expressing views, learning about decision-making structures and understanding the meaning of active citizenship. Watching ideas contribute to an outcome can be very rewarding.

“It is great to be involved in working towards positive change in the community.”
Meghan Hopper, Darren Rose and Jun Kum Yap — Youthlaw@Werribee Legal Service

6) DIVERSITY

Young people are diverse

Participation is about valuing the diversity of young people’s opinions, experiences and cultural and family backgrounds. Diversity also includes other factors, such as age, gender, schooling and work experience, migration experience, health status, sexuality and disability. Decision-making processes need to be inclusive of all young people’s needs and experiences.

“Common goal setting is an awesome way of achieving unification within a diverse society.”
Maxine Garnsey and Andy Paine — Y-GLAM Performing Arts Project, Moreland Community Health Service
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Realising the benefits

Given there are many benefits to organisations and the community when young people are involved in decision-making, it is important to plan how this decision-making will best occur. For example, it is important to recognise the barriers that may be faced by some young people, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, from rural and regional areas and from disadvantaged backgrounds.

To ensure maximum advantage for the organisation and young people key points to consider in planning for young people's involvement or participation include:

• identifying barriers to participation and developing strategies to remove them
• ensuring that decisions and actions cater to the different circumstances and needs of all young people
• providing accessible and relevant information, training and support to enable young people to contribute effectively, and
• developing models of participation that are relevant and appropriate to young people.

A way forward

To achieve meaningful participation both young people and organisations need resources, information and support.

Through the development of a range of publications the Office for Youth and YACVic will provide Government, the community and young people themselves with the necessary skills and knowledge about how young people can be involved in all aspects of the community.

The publications will assist organisations to develop tools and strategies that support young people and organisations to develop effective models of youth participation and to help young people to develop their skills and talents to allow them to be actively engaged in their community.

Key issues will include the barriers to youth participation, overcoming these barriers and providing ongoing support and skill development for young people.

To learn more about the joint project, please contact:
Participation in Practice Project
c/o Youth Affairs Council of Victoria
Ph: (03) 9612 8999
Office for Youth

The Office for Youth has been established to ensure the Government’s vision for young people is achieved. The Office is situated within the Department for Victorian Communities and provides a whole-of-government focus on youth issues, giving young people in Victoria a strong voice and input into Government policy and program development.

The Office for Youth runs a range of programs and plays a leadership role in coordinating research and policy development on youth issues.

Through the Office for Youth the Government is committed to working with Victoria’s diverse young people, and the communities and organisations with which they are involved.

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Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria Inc. (YACVic) is the peak body and leading policy advocate on young people’s issues in Victoria.

YACVic works towards a Victorian community that values and provides opportunity, participation, justice and equity for all young people.

The main function of YACVic is to make representations to government and serve as an advocate for the interests of young people, workers with young people and organisations that provide direct services to young people.

YACVic is committed to assisting young people to participate meaningfully in the formulation and implementation of social policy in Victoria.

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