



Submission to the draft *Engaging Canberrans:
A Guide to Community Engagement*

December 2010

www.youthcoalition.net

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and continuing custodians of the lands of the ACT and we pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today.

We acknowledge that the Indigenous people hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. The Youth Coalition of the ACT celebrates Indigenous cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

Submission to the draft *Engaging Canberrans: A Guide to Community Engagement*
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1. Introduction

Section 1 of this submission provides contextual information about Youth Coalition of the ACT (the Youth Coalition) and the development and format of this submission.

1.1 Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition is the peak youth affairs body in the ACT. Comprised of 90 members, programs, and individuals the Youth Coalition is responsible for representing and promoting the interests and wellbeing of young people aged 12 to 25 years and those who work with them.

The Youth Coalition is represented on many ACT Government advisory structures and provides advice to the ACT Government on youth issues, along with providing information to youth services about policy and program matters.

A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions for young people and youth services. The Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT.

1.2 Process for Developing and Format of this Submission

The Youth Coalition welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the *Engaging Canberrans: A Guide to Community Engagement* (the Community Engagement Guide). We would like to congratulate the ACT Government on its commitment to progressing best practice in engaging with individuals, groups and communities through the development of the Community Engagement Guide.

This submission is one of many made over a 14-year period by the Youth Coalition and is based on the following:

- The priority areas highlighted in the *Youth Coalition Strategic Plan 2007-10*;
- The policy positions outlined in the *Youth Coalition Policy Platform*;
- The issues raised at consultations on the 2010/11 ACT Government Budget and 2011/12 ACT Government Budget;
- The issues raised at consultations on the ACT Young People's Plan 2009 - 2014;
- Previous Youth Coalition submissions to the ACT Government;
- One-on-one consultations with member services and organisations; and,
- Current and topical research on youth affairs.

This submission has been divided into 7 sections, which include the following:

1. Introduction (this section)
2. Summary of recommendations
3. Government Engagement with the Community
4. Government Engagement with Young People
5. Accountability and Evaluation
6. Conclusion
7. References

2. Summary of Recommendations

Section 2 provides a summary of the recommendations this submission makes to the further development and implementation of the Community Engagement Guide. It is vital that these recommendations be referred to in the context of the broader submission.

Recommendation 1

That the Chief Minister's Department (CMD) develop and implement a planning, approval and registration mechanism which requires all ACT Government agencies planning community engagement activities, to seek approval from CMD. CMD would be responsible for assessing the impact of the activity upon its target groups, in line with either planned community engagement activities.

Recommendation 2

That the ACT Government's existing community engagement website be expanded to include information on upcoming policy activities, including intended dates of release, to support the youth and community sectors to plan their consultation processes.

Recommendation 3

That the Community Engagement Guide identify that six-week consultation periods must not include school holidays, including those that occur during December and January.

Recommendation 4

That Section 4.9 of the Community Engagement Guide include the following stakeholder groups:

- People with mental health issues;
- People with alcohol and other drug issues;
- People disengaged from education, training and employment; and,
- People involved with statutory services.

Recommendation 5

That the Community Engagement Guide include a recommendation that ACT Government agencies budget to reimburse individuals, services and groups for providing their time and expertise in participating in community engagement activities.

Recommendation 6

That the Community Engagement Guide ensures that all community engagement activities include a range of communication and engagement methods to access individuals, services and communities.

Recommendation 7

That the Community Engagement Guide also include the Youth Coalition of the ACT as a potential resource for ACT Government agencies in engaging with young people aged 12 – 25 and those who work with them.

Recommendation 8

That the Community Engagement Guide implement community engagement activities with young people that are meaningful, valued, beneficial for young people, and that to clear outcomes.

Recommendation 9

That the list of resources and tools outlined in the AYAC report *Where are You Going with That?* be included as an attachment in the Community Education Guide as best-practice methods of engaging with young people.

Recommendation 10

That the Community Education Guide include clear mechanisms by which ACT Government agencies are accountable to implementing best-practice community engagement activities in the ACT.

Recommendation 11

That the Community Engagement Guide ensures that all community engagement activities collect and provide data on which stakeholder groups they engaged with, including young people, hard-to-reach groups, community services, and the broader community.

Recommendation 12

That the ACT Government develop a formal evaluation process for the Community Education Guide, to evaluate its effectiveness and use by ACT Government agencies.

3. Government Engagement with the Community

Section 3 of this submission seeks to broadly discuss the ACT Government's engagement with the community, particularly in relation to:

- The need for a whole-of-government approach;
- Timeframes for community engagement;
- Engaging 'hard-to-reach' groups; and,
- Online engagement.

3.1 A Whole-of-Government Approach

In developing the Community Engagement Guide, the Youth Coalition strongly emphasises the opportunity the ACT Government has in working towards a whole-of-government approach on community engagement.

The Youth Coalition has been advocating for a whole-of-government approach to community engagement and consultation for a number of years; in response to the increasing demand placed upon the youth and community sector to participate in ACT Government policy activities.

As an example of this increasing demand, at the time of developing this submission, the Youth Coalition and the broader youth sector is also engaged in, or preparing to engage in, the following ACT Government policy activities:

- Consultation on the Discussion paper: Maximising Potential – Improving Life Transitions for Young People in Care, due 30 November 2010;
- Consultation on priorities for the second year of the ACT Young People's Plan 2009 – 2014, in 2010;
- Consultation on the draft Community Engagement Guide (this submission), due 2 December 2010;
- Consultation on the draft Youth and Family Support Program Framework, due 15 December 2010, which will result in significant changes to the youth and family support sector;
- Consultation on the ACT Government Budget 2011 / 2012, due 17 December 2010;
- Consultation on the Future Directions of ACT Schools, due on 17 December 2010;
- Consultation on the draft Performance Indicators and Outcomes Measures for the Youth and Family Support Program Framework, due on 24 December 2010 (Christmas Eve);
- Consultation on a Discussion Paper on the new Youth Homelessness Framework, to be released in 2010;
- Participation in the Feasibility Study on Youth Health in 2010 and early 2011;
- Participating in a tender process for the Youth and Family Support Program, to commence on 4 January 2011; and,
- Consultation on the Discussion Paper and Proposed Charter: ACT Carers Charter, due 31 January 2011.

The timing of these activities have placed significant burden on the youth and community sector, and in many cases limited services' and peaks' capacity to engage their membership and participate meaningfully. The Youth Coalition strongly believes that it is the role of the Chief Minister's Department (CMD), through the development of the Community Engagement Guide, to apply a whole-of-government approach to community engagement.

The Youth Coalition commends the ACT Government on its existing community engagement website (www.communityengagement.act.gov.au), which provides a clear overview of current and recent policy activities.

We recommend that a planning, approval and registration mechanism be developed and implemented by the CMD, which requires all ACT Government agencies that are planning community engagement, to register an 'expression of interest' with CMD. CMD would be responsible for assessing the impact of the activity upon its target groups, in line with other planned community engagement activities; and provide approval on the timeframes for planned activities.

This type of 'whole-of-government' approach, and staggering of community engagement activities would greatly reduce the burden currently experienced by key target sectors and the community.

In addition, the Youth Coalition recommends that the community engagement website include information on upcoming policy activities, including intended dates of release. This would support the youth and community sector to plan their consultation processes.

Recommendation 1

That the Chief Minister's Department (CMD) develop and implement a planning, approval and registration mechanism which requires all ACT Government agencies planning community engagement activities, to seek approval from CMD. CMD would be responsible for assessing the impact of the activity upon its target groups, in line with either planned community engagement activities.

Recommendation 2

That the ACT Government's existing community engagement website be expanded to include information on upcoming policy activities, including intended dates of release, to support the youth and community sectors to plan their consultation processes.

3.2 Timeframes for Community Engagement

The Youth Coalition welcomes the recommended minimum timeframe for consultation of six weeks, specified within the draft Community Engagement Guide, along with the statement that community engagement should not take place during the Christmas and New Year period.

In addition to this, the Youth Coalition recommends that the Community Engagement Guide state that community engagement, particularly consultation, should not take place over school holidays, including those that occur in December and January. This is important for peak bodies, community services, and the ACT Government, in ensuring that engagement is family-friendly.

In relation to the timeframe outlined in the draft Community Engagement Guide of 2 – 6 weeks for activities that aim to 'inform' target groups, the Youth Coalition notes that some activities may require additional time, particularly for those that require changes in the community (such as the changes to the education attainment requirement, or introduction of non-smoking outdoor areas).

Recommendation 3

That the Community Engagement Guide identify that six-week consultation periods must not include school holidays, including those that occur during December and January.

3.3 Engaging 'Hard to Reach' Groups

The Youth Coalition commends the ACT Government for identifying groups of people in the ACT who may be 'hard to reach', and welcomes the ACT Government's commitment to engage with these stakeholder groups. In addition to the existing list of groups identified in Section 4.9 of the draft Community Education Guide, the Youth Coalition recommends that the following groups be included:

- People with mental health issues;
- People with alcohol and other drug issues;
- People disengaged from education, training and employment; and,
- People involved with statutory services (such as Care and Protection or the Justice System).

Individuals within 'hard-to-reach' groups, or who have highly specific experiences (such as young carers), are paradoxically often over-consulted. Consequently, it is vital that consultation with these groups is meaningful and well-executed. Peak bodies are a useful resource in supporting consultation with these stakeholder groups, through their existing relationships and engagement with service providers and consumers.

The Youth Coalition strongly believes that stakeholders should be reimbursed for providing their time and expertise in community engagement activities, including those initiated by the ACT Government. While the Youth Coalition often advocates for young people to be reimbursed for their participation in community engagement, we also note the importance of reimbursing service providers, communities and peak bodies for their engagement.

While peak bodies may receive some funding for their engagement in policy consultations and activities, their actual participation often far outweighs their organisational capacity and the work they are funded for.

Recommendation 4

That Section 4.9 of the Community Engagement Guide include the following stakeholder groups:

- People with mental health issues;
- People with alcohol and other drug issues;
- People disengaged from education, training and employment; and,
- People involved with statutory services.

Recommendation 5

That the Community Engagement Guide include a recommendation that ACT Government agencies budget to reimburse individuals, services and groups for providing their time and expertise in participating in community engagement activities.

3.4 Online Engagement

The Internet can provide an inexpensive and fast way to widely engage with communities and stakeholders in the ACT, as outlined in the draft Community Engagement Guide. The Youth Coalition supports the use of online engagement in accessing individuals and communities.

However, we do highlight the importance of not resorting to online engagement as the only method of community engagement, in any community engagement activity. While the Internet is effective in reaching a wide audience; individuals, services and communities often experience 'survey overload'. In addition, some forms of online engagement do not allow individuals to provide a depth of qualitative feedback.

Recommendation 6

That the Community Engagement Guide ensures that all community engagement activities include a range of communication and engagement methods to access individuals, services and communities.

4. Government Engagement with Young People

Section 4 of this submission seeks to respond specifically to ACT Government engagement with young people, particularly in relation to:

- The benefits and rationale of engaging with young people;
- The risks and barriers in engaging with young people; and,
- The evidence pertaining to engagement with young people.

4.1 Benefits and Rationale

The Youth Coalition is pleased that the draft Community Engagement Guide includes a specific section on engaging with young people aged 12 – 25 in community engagement activities.

We believe that young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect them and the life of their community. Participation gives young people the opportunity to have a say about what is important to them, allows them to 'own' decisions made about their lives, increases self-confidence and skills, and empowers them.

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

Benefits of youth participation for organisations and communities include: bringing new perspectives, ensuring programs are responsive and effective, community capacity building, promoting inclusive and cohesive communities, and developing social competence and social responsibility (Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association, 2008).

The Youth Coalition commends the draft Community Engagement Guide for identifying the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner as a potential resource for ACT Government agencies in planning consultations with young people. We strongly recommend that the Community Engagement Guide also include the Youth Coalition of the ACT as a key resource; as the peak body for youth affairs and young people aged 12 – 25 in the ACT.

The Youth Coalition implements a range of sector development activities with the youth and community sector, including a series of service-based networks, a weekly eBulletin, and *the Big Red Book: The First Handbook and Directory for People who Work with Young People in the ACT*, which profiles 96 programs and services that work with young people. We are strongly engaged with workers and services in the youth sector, and provide a valuable pathway to engaging with youth services and with young people who access them.

Please refer also to Attachment A, which includes the Youth Coalition's new Policy Platform on *Young People's Participation in Decision-Making*.

Recommendation 7

That the Community Engagement Guide also include the Youth Coalition of the ACT as a potential resource for ACT Government agencies in engaging with young people aged 12 – 25 and those who work with them.

4.2 Risks and Barriers

Participation should be meaningful and this can only occur when young people are adequately informed and supported in their involvement; their contributions are valued, they believe the work they are doing has a purpose, they see the change occur and are provided with feedback.

However, young people often experience a range of systemic barriers to their engagement and participation, which includes age discrimination (at an individual, community and societal level), limited access to opportunities and inadequate resourcing to support meaningful youth participation. Youth Coalition consultations on this issue highlight that many young people do not feel engaged with decision-making at a local or national level, and describe a disconnect between what young people think and what decision-makers believe young people need. Young people also felt that governments do not support genuine youth consultation, either in methods used, or in taking expressed views seriously. They report feeling that governments only engage with young people who are highly educated or already actively engaged with community consultative processes, such as through student unions. Young people identify that they would like a greater say in issues that affect them directly, such as health and education funding and delivery.

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

The Youth Coalition strongly believes that community engagement activities with young people should be genuine, valued, beneficial for participants; and that young people should be reimbursed for providing their time and expertise.

A report by the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition in 2010 states:

Historically both non-government and government organisations have been criticised for only consulting with well educated, already empowered young people, often missing the needs of disadvantaged and disenfranchised young people.

The non-government sector and in particular, direct service providers to young people, are at the forefront of moving away from traditional methods of engagement towards designing innovative, creative and alternative strategies that empower young people to discuss, generate and implement ideas that they believe will assist with creating a better community for them and their peers. (Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, 2010: p. 12)

The report (Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, 2010: p. 4) also found that despite an emphasis on utilising effective practice, there is little evidence to suggest that young people's views make a measurable difference on wider public policy issues; suggesting that there is a disconnect between the actual engagement with young

people, and the inclusion of findings into policy or outcomes.

Recommendation 8

That the Community Engagement Guide implement community engagement activities with young people that are meaningful, valued, beneficial for young people, and that to clear outcomes.

4.3 Existing Evidence Base

There is a wealth of evidence and resources that relate to engaging with young people aged 12 – 25 in Australia. The AYAC report (2010) provides a comprehensive list of toolkits and resources that can support organisations and agencies to engage young people in consultation. The Youth Coalition recommends that these resources be included as an attachment in the Community Education Guide as best-practice methods of engaging with young people.

Recommendation 9

That the list of resources and tools outlined in the AYAC report *Where are You Going with That?* be included as an attachment in the Community Education Guide as best-practice methods of engaging with young people.

5. Accountability and Evaluation

Section 5 of this submission seeks to provide information on the need for accountability and evaluation in the further development and implementation of the Community Engagement Guide.

5.1 Accountability

Accountability requires the formal reporting of actions, outcomes and standards associated with the fulfilment of responsibilities (Government of South Australia, 2009). The Youth Coalition views the Community Engagement Guide as a key document that the ACT Government should be accountable to, in their implementation of all community engagement activities.

In addition, the Youth Coalition highlights the importance of ensuring that every community engagement activity collect and provide data on what stakeholders they have engaged with, including young people, hard-to-reach groups, services and the broader community.

Recommendation 10

That the Community Education Guide include clear mechanisms by which ACT Government agencies are accountable to implementing best-practice community engagement activities in the ACT.

Recommendation 11

That the Community Engagement Guide ensures that all community engagement activities collect and provide data on which stakeholder groups they engaged with, including young people, hard-to-reach groups, community services, and the broader community.

5.2 Evaluation

Evaluation is essential in order to adapt to new requirements and changing conditions for policy-making. The Youth Coalition commends the ACT Government for including a section on evaluation in the draft Community Engagement Guide, particularly relating to evaluating specific community engagement activities. We note again the importance of implementing mechanisms by which ACT Government agencies are accountable to the CMD for their community engagement activities, including evaluation.

In addition, the Youth Coalition recommends that the CMD formally evaluate the effectiveness and use of the Community Engagement Guide by ACT Government agencies.

Recommendation 12

That the ACT Government develop a formal evaluation process for the Community Education Guide, to evaluate its effectiveness and use by ACT Government agencies.

7. Conclusion

The Youth Coalition would like to thank the ACT Government for providing this opportunity to contribute to the further development of the Community Engagement Guide. We commend the commitment by the ACT Government to developing a Community Engagement Guide based upon best-practice principles and practice of community engagement.

This submission identifies many opportunities by which the ACT Government can build upon the existing strengths of the Community Engagement Guide. In particular, we highlight the importance of, and opportunity for, working towards a whole-of-government approach in community engagement.

8. References

ACT Government (Accessed 2010) ACT Community Engagement Online, Canberra:
www.communityengagement.act.gov.au.

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

Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (2010) Where are you going with that? NSW.

Government of South Australia (2009) What is Good Policy? Department of
Education and Children's Services, SA.

Youth Coalition of the ACT (2010) The Big Red Book: The First Handbook and
Directory for People who work with Young People in the ACT, Canberra.

ATTACHMENT A.



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

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

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

Benefits of youth participation for organisations and communities include: bringing new perspectives, ensuring programs are responsive and effective, community capacity building, promoting inclusive and cohesive communities, and developing social competence and social responsibility.¹

Participation should be meaningful and this can only occur when young people are adequately informed and supported in their involvement; their contributions are valued, they believe the work they are doing has a purpose, and they see the change occur and are provided with feedback.

However, young people often experience a range of systemic barriers to their engagement and participation, which includes age discrimination (at an individual, community and societal level), limited access to opportunities and inadequate resourcing to support meaningful youth participation. Youth Coalition consultations on this issue highlight that many young people do not feel engaged with decision making at a local or national level, and describe a disconnect between what young people think and what decision-makers believe young people need. Young people also felt that governments did not support genuine youth consultation, either in the methods used, or in taking expressed views seriously. They reported feeling that governments only engage with young people who are highly educated or already actively engaged with community consultative processes, such as through student unions. Young people identified that they would like a greater say in issues that affect them directly, such as health and education funding and delivery.

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

The Youth Coalition supports the ACT Government's commitment² to developing a 'Child Friendly City' for children and young people, which defines young people's participation as 'promoting children and young people's active involvement in issues that affect them; listening to their views and taking them into consideration in decision-making processes'.³ However, the Youth Coalition notes that meeting the nine building blocks of a Child Friendly City requires dedicated and adequate funding.

A number of theoretical models of youth participation have been developed in Australia, most notably Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation⁴, which outlines a series of steps towards meaningful youth participation. The Youth Coalition also supports the work progressed by other organisations in Australia, including the *Where are you Going With That* report⁵, *Taking Young People Seriously* Handbooks⁶, and *Young People in Decision-Making* Toolkit⁷.

To complement and progress these key resources in an ACT context, the Youth Coalition advocates for the development and implementation of a project that would specifically support diverse programs and services to identify, develop and implement youth participation strategies, policies and procedures within their service. An example of such a project is the *Child Safe Child Friendly* program, developed by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People. The ACT Children and Young People Commissioner is currently developing guidelines to assist government agencies to consider the impact of their work on young people.

Commitments

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

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

² Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services (2009) ACT Young People's Plan 2009 – 2014, ACT Government, Canberra

³ UNICEF (Accessed 2010) Child Friendly Cities

⁴ Hart, R (1997) Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence

⁵ Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (2010) *Where Are You Going with That: Maximising Young People's Impact on Organisational and Public Policy*, New South Wales

⁶ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2009) *Taking Young People Seriously* Handbooks, Victoria

⁷ Wierenga, A (2003) *Sharing a New Story: Young People in Decision Making*, Foundation for Young Australians, Victoria