



How to better

# engage

young adults, 18-25 years,  
in council decision making

Local Government Professionals  
Emerging Leaders Program 2022 | Group Project

## How to better engage young adults, 18-25 years, in council decision making

This report has been prepared by participants of the Emerging Leaders Program, facilitated by the Local Government Professionals Australia SA in association with the University of South Australia.

The group would like to thank the youth and the youth/community workers that took part in the surveys.

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# Executive Summary

What is the biggest opportunity facing Local Government in South Australia in the next five years?

For local government to support a thriving community, all members of the community must be engaged with decision-making on issues that matter to them.

Young adults, aged 18-25, are typically seen as one of the more challenging groups to engage with. While schools have some systems in place to support an awareness of civic participation and some involvement or understanding of how local government works for students, once they leave school the connection (if any) is lost.

Most councils have a form of youth engagement through a youth worker or youth committee. Interviews with youth workers from across the state feel it is difficult to engage with this group due to lack of interest in what local government is doing. On the other hand, young adults shared that they do have an interest in being part of decisions, but don't know how to have a say or don't know enough about what the issues or decisions are.

Engagement with young adults is vital to help empower them, to understand their needs at a local level, create a sense of community and increase connection and civic participation. This in turn would provide support via services, opportunities and resources that directly impact them, such as mental health resourcing.

To help better engage with young adults, local government needs to value the youth voice and opinions in all decision-making, support the issues that matter to young adults, and review the engagement framework to better support their needs in the community.

# Introduction

Community engagement plays a crucial role in local government, providing an avenue for the local community to have their say in council's decision-making. Community members typically connect and engage with their local government as ratepayers and during registration of pets. With the average age of first home buyer between 31 and 33 (ABS 2019-20), there is one demographic that is under-represented, that of young people, in particular young adults aged 18-25.

With South Australian citizens becoming ratepayers at a later age, it is more important than ever for local councils to identify ways to connect with this demographic. People aged 18-25 years make up 10.1% of South Australia's population, which is a key future demographic whose voices may not be part of local decision-making (ABS, Census 2021).

So why is it important to engage young adults in council decision-making? What changes can we make to the way we engage with this demographic and what difference will it make? And how can we expand opportunities for leadership and development of our young adults?

A number of limitations were identified during the research phase of this report:

- ▶ Data differences - research resulted in differing age brackets, for example some referenced 15-24 years, rather than the targeted age group of 18-25 years. For the purpose of this report, we have included statistics of the wider age group, where the data for the age group of 18-25 years was unavailable;
- ▶ Engaging with youth - despite distributing the youth survey widely through various organisations and groups, feedback was limited and was not enough to be statistically significant; and
- ▶ Diverse groups of young adults - although the survey was shared with key youth groups and organisations across South Australia, there was not enough time to undertake adequate engagement with specific populations of young adults such as, refugee or asylum seeker families, those with disabilities, cultural or linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, therefore we have must identify that the scope of the report was narrowed from what was originally planned.
- ▶ Much of the cited research on this topic was older than preferred but, despite this, many of the findings were mirrored in our own research and survey results which demonstrates that the research is still relevant.



# Methodology

A comprehensive literature review from across local government, state government, youth-related organisations and research bodies forms the foundation of this report, supported by the results from two surveys, conducted by the group.

A shift in working **with** young people, and valuing them as assets: as advisors, colleagues and stakeholders is crucial if development policies are to be truly representative and effective.

- Youth Working Group of the Department for International Development

To gain a better understanding of how Councils currently engage with young adults, the group conducted two surveys and reviewed a number of Council websites, social media sites and youth action plans.

The two surveys, conducted by the group, targeted:

## 1. Youth workers within local government and youth related organisations

*How do youth engagement officers/youth workers engage with 18-25 year olds?*

The survey for youth workers included Councils, sporting groups and youth-related organisations, and comprised 12 questions. The intention was to understand how youth groups currently engage with youth aged 18-25 years and why they think the current engagement is not working. This was sent digitally and a total of 86 respondents completed the survey. (Appendix 1)

## 2. Young adults, 18-25 year olds

*What do 18-25 year olds want from local government?*

The survey comprised 13 questions and this was aimed at gaining a better understanding of how youth currently engage with their local Council, what they want and what is important to them. This survey was conducted via email, with some face to face interaction. Additional time would have allowed for more face to face and a higher completion rate, 63 young adults aged 18-25 completed the survey. (Appendix 2)

# Analysis & Discussion

## Why are young adults under-represented in decision making in local Councils?

Engagement with the community comes in many forms for councils across South Australia and supports a stronger and more trusting relationship between the community and Council. It can be via services such as libraries and community centres, through consultation on a project or via committees, groups or programs hosted by the local Council.

Of those aged 15 to 24, only 10.4% are homeowners with 83.5% entering the property market as renters (ABS 2019-20). With the rate of house ownership falling; less young adults will have contact with their council through the usual channel of rates. Most Councils connect and engage with youth in their demographic directly. A review of seven metro and regional Councils found that most have a form of youth engagement. This may be via a youth team, a youth advisory group/committee, social media presence or by offering grants targeted at specific age groups (Appendix 3).

Are these groups enough? Saggars et al, states ‘Too many local governments have only got one thing in their youth participation repertoire: youth advisory committees or representative structures’ (Saggars et al 2004, p. 109).

Through survey results, the general sentiment among the youth workers was that it is difficult to engage with this younger demographic due to lack of interest. With 54% of youth workers advising that younger adults don’t feel like local government matters apply to them. While 63% of youth workers believed that 18-25 year olds don’t have an interest in what local governments are doing and do not feel connected.

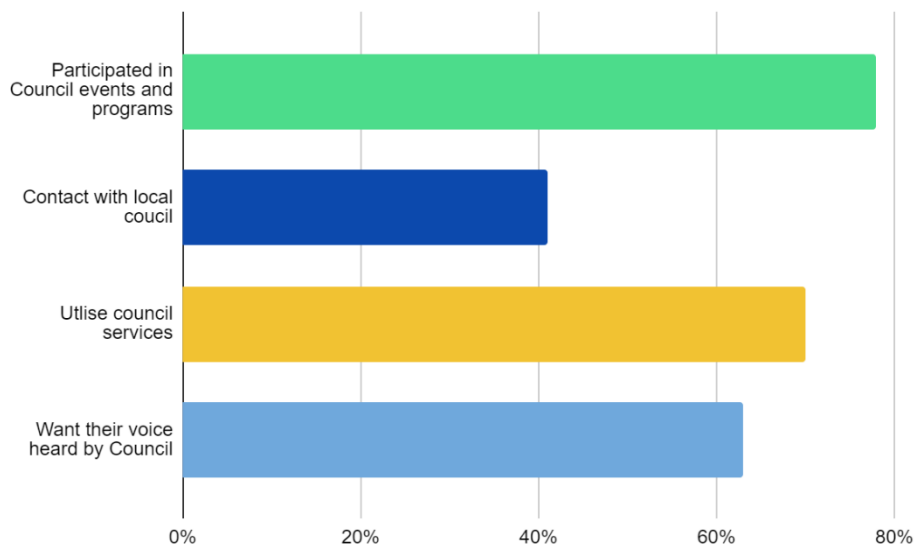


Image 1: Survey responses from young adults.

In contrast, our research with young adults showed that many of those interviewed do in fact have contact with their local council. Of these the majority participated local library and community centres, with the second most popular form of participation being Council events and programs (see Image 2). Additionally, the majority of young adults surveyed expressed interest in having their voice heard, with one participant responding ‘I am unsure on what areas I am able to have a say in my Council, so I would like to know’ and a number of respondents conveyed they wanted more visibility on services.

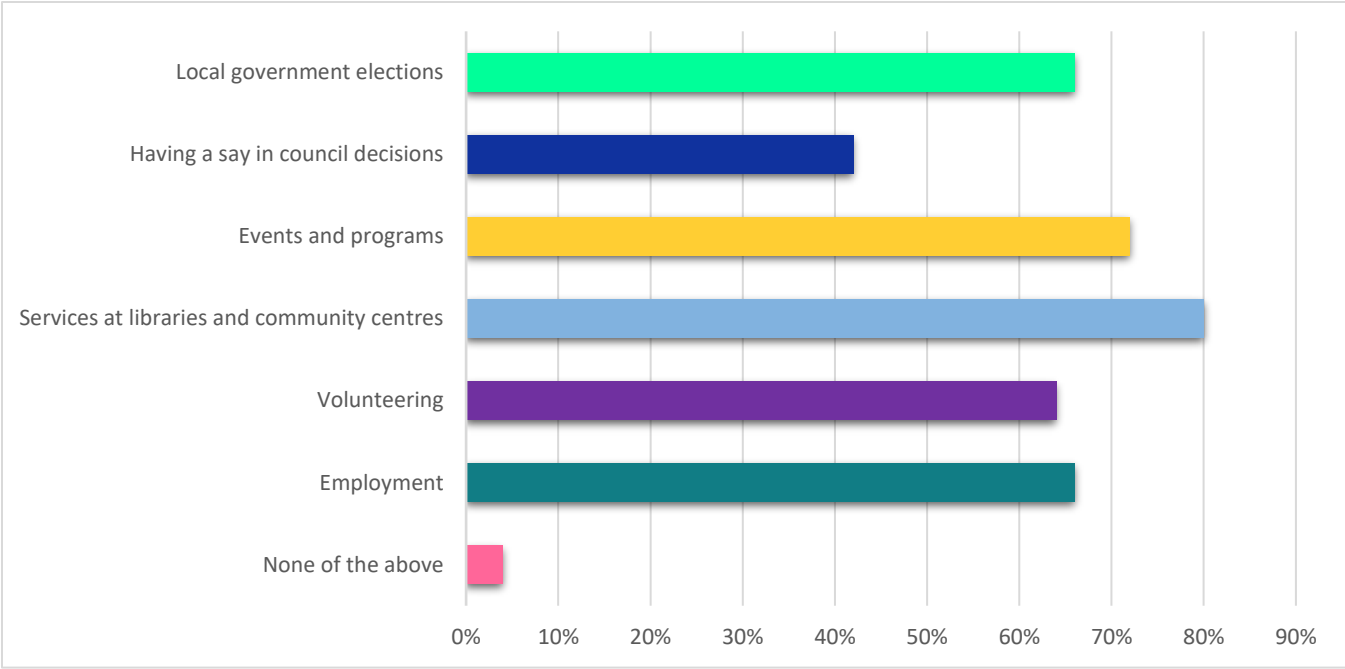


Image 2: Survey responses from question 5 of the youth survey “are you aware of the following opportunities within Council for?”

**With a higher than expected percentage of young adults keen to have a say, why aren’t they?**

One youth worker shared;

There are a couple of factors at play. Firstly, most young people are unfamiliar with the breadth of works provided by Council, and are unaware of the ways LG (local government) impacts their lives. Secondly, Councils are not cool and/or exciting entities in their eyes, or, thirdly, Council is seen as an organisation that puts up barriers that stops them from achieving their objectives (we’re often prone to saying ‘no’, rather than ‘yes, if’).



Further research found there is a disengagement of young adults from almost all political and government mechanisms. According to the United Nations ‘Young people are still regularly excluded from policy and political decisions affecting their lives’ (United Nations 2020,p.2). Local government has a vested interest in the engagement and development of young adults to ensure they grow up to be engaged residents within the community (YWGDID, 2010). Strict processes and structures of local government can be confusing, alienating and out of reach to young adults as they are often designed by older people who have different interests to young adults (Saggers et al 2004).

Governments can also face a number of barriers in youth engagement, particularly around planning and policy making:

- ▶ Policy creation, dialogue and consultation primarily occurs in formal settings, excluding diversity.
- ▶ The ultimate decision-making is usually made by a small number of senior executives in a private setting (YWGDID, 2010).

This is supported when we review the data of decision makers within a council; the elected body. An analysis of the age demographic of elected members (EMs) at seven rural and metro councils resulted in only one being in the 18-25 age group, with almost 90% of EMs over the age of 35. In addition, Council staff between ages 18-25 make up just over 1% of the workforce, but they make up 11.9% of the overall South Australian population (Appendix 4).

(I want to know) what (councils) do, what they are involved in, what I can do to contribute.

- Young adult survey participant

**Why is it important for young adults to have a voice? Why do we need engagement with this demographic?**

A study, focussed on youth participation for policy makers (YWGDID, 2010), outlines three key reasons that effective youth engagement brings;

- ▶ It enables the exercise of citizenship;
- ▶ Ensures services and policies are appropriate for youth; and
- ▶ Makes the millennium development goals.

Lifelong civic engagement is more likely when started early in life (United Nations 2016).

Schools teach the Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship framework to school students across Australia, but a recent report questioned whether it was enough ground work. One of the issues shared was that there are 'steps needed to improve the voting confidence of young adults' (Laughland-Booÿ & Ghazarian, 2020,p190). Young adults want a broader understanding of how democratic Australia works, they want to see how action and their voice matters.

Do we need to change the way we teach young adults about civic participation and politics? Could a 'maximal' approach in schools work, which supports youth to become change-makers in society? (Brodie-McKenzie, 2020). Brodie-McKenzie 2020, also shares that allowing young adults to be seen as citizens today, and not just citizens of tomorrow builds understanding and empowers young adults. For those aged 18-25, local governments can enhance or further educate our young adults in helping them to make a difference and seeing how their vote matters.

Understanding the needs of young adults at a local level, outside of or alongside group or event participation, would assist local government in providing support via services, opportunities and resources. Could there be a way to share or highlight more of what councils are doing via the group participation already occurring with council youth workers or other youth organisations?

Throughout our research, youth engagement workers shared that by giving youth a voice and an opportunity to have a say, it created a sense of neighbourhood, community values and increased connection. Building on this connection, one youth worker also shared that it had to be two-way, and their interest was also driven by providing immediate feedback;

They like the 'instant' connection with what they are doing and how it impacts the community. e.g. (Council using) social media posts showcasing the great work our council/teams are doing. (A way to demonstrate) Instant connection to what has been achieved and how it relates to the bigger picture.

Local governments can increase engagement by actively involving youth in decision-making, processes and planning. Burns et al 2008, states that disengagement is often linked to the attitude, values and competencies of individuals. Young adults are prevented from participating by being subjected to exclusionary processes. Failure to address or even acknowledge these practices will reduce the capacity of young adults to actively engage (Bessant, 2004).

The World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement suggests that;

Youth are calling for increased transparency, greater inclusion, and enhanced engagement. Their efforts are being bolstered by the use of new information and communications technology (ICT) and social media, which have been used to drive and effectively reshape activism both within and across borders (United Nations 2016 p.14).

Further that while policies may be well intentioned implementation is often delayed or poorly funded, the result being disappointment and frustration (United Nations 2016).

Building relationships and clear communication is the foundation of affecting engagement in decision-making for young adults (QGDCS, 2006). Engagement model tools, tools such as Capire’s engagement triangle (see Image 3) demonstrates how sharing knowledge, strengthening relationships and informing decisions can work together to achieve better outcomes, with benefits for projects and communities.



Image 3: Engagement Triangle (CCG, 2022)

**What is important to those aged 18-25? What do young adults need?**

Through our survey with young adults, we found while there was a need to know more, the connection is not there. Young adults are keen to ‘give more feedback and knowledge to the Council and develop an understanding of how processes work for the non Council community members’. Many respondents also requested a say in decisions around mental health, delivery of services, LGBTI+ and social support.

A recent youth study found that a number of young adults had a strong civic awareness and they nominated COVID-19, the environment, and equity and discrimination as areas that need to be addressed (Mission Australia, 2021). In this same survey, almost half of the participants identified mental health as a barrier to achieving work or study goals. More young adults are feeling the impacts of mental health, with over 75% of mental health issues occurring before the age of 25 this is clearly an area where young adults need greater support (Beyond Blue, 2022).

Young adults who are excluded and disengaged from their peers, schools, families and communities have poorer health and mental health (Burns et al, 2008). The value of being part of a youth group was shared, with one participant stating;

For the past four years we had an elected member in this age bracket who after spending time on our YAC (Youth Advisory Committee) was inspired to become a Council member. She was successful and has nominated again this year.

Supporting youth could help with being happy and healthier, and encourage and support a healthy, more engaged community.

Employment also came up as an area young adults want council's support with. Young adults are one of the highest unemployed age groups, although the youth unemployment rate in South Australia has decreased over the past year, 11.4% in January 2022, compared to 14.9% one year earlier (GSADTF 2022). Providing avenues for meaningful engagement may also assist with confidence in future job prospects.

This age group is keen for things to do, they want to know about events and opportunities that relate to them. They also want to hear about the decisions being made at their local Council and how it directly impacts them. This group also wants to be part of the decision making process. One youth participant surveyed, stated;

What is the Council doing to respond to the needs of young adults, and what are the local governments plans and goals through surveying young adults? Do they want to give young adults decision making power, or do they just want feedback which older people in power will make decisions on?


### **How could communication play a role?**

In the group survey, young adults were asked their preferred communication platforms, while youth workers were asked what communication methods they use to communicate with this demographic.

Digital and mobile communication plays a large part in the interaction with the 18-25 year old demographic. For this age bracket, Facebook worldwide represents 22.6% (the highest users of facebook are 25-34 year olds 32.1%), the largest age group for Instagram is 25-34 (31.2%), with 18-24 close behind at 31% (Statista, 2022).

It was interesting to note that none of the youth workers selected email as their key method of communicating with young adults, when in fact 49% of young adults preferred this way of communicating. Instagram also rated highly as a communication tool.

Oaktree (2016) also stated that all young adults have a right to participation and that diverse social group participation leads to more robust organisational governance.



Supporting young people to be heard and be empowered to make change and create their own path to success through targeted support and intervention to give you

*Youth worker survey participant*

# Recommendations

The research indicates that there is no single best approach to the complex issue of disengagement of young adults. Local governments must take a holistic approach with coordinated mechanisms that are flexible, adequately resourced, and diverse (Australian Youth Research Centre, 2007). Much of the research although older, the recommendations have not changed. Local government has historically taken an informant approach to engagement, but ever increasingly Councils are moving to a model of active engagement.

The responses from the two surveys also supported this conclusion and highlighted the disconnect between local government and young adults. While youth teams currently have multiple avenues for successful engagement there is an opportunity for councils to review how they are supporting and connecting with young adults.

## Recommendations:

- ▶ Recognise the value of engagement with young adults, particularly their capacity to be involved in decision-making - there must be an attitudinal shift within local government to achieve this;
- ▶ Be inclusive and interact with a diverse range of young adults and not just individual groups as they are often a non-homogenous group;
- ▶ Ensure that interactions provide a positive experience - this will increase the likelihood of continued participation and encourage long term community involvement;
- ▶ Afford valuable opportunities - such as mentoring, volunteering, community groups and events - again to encourage long term meaningful connection;
- ▶ Better utilise social media as a method of communication, in particular instagram - include targeted advertising campaigns for young adults.
- ▶ Encourage and foster peer to peer connections such as social networks and entrepreneurship - social entrepreneurship offers a win win solution in terms of economic benefit for social needs;
- ▶ Offer fewer specific programs that involve ongoing commitment and more once off events or functions - these should be run by young adults in conjunction with local government, i.e. by young adults for young adults - this will empower young adults to take ownership and target events purposefully;
- ▶ Further involvement in decision-making for future planning is vital to better support young adults on the topics that matter to them. This must be done in a meaningful way, youth must be allowed to make decisions and be involved throughout the whole decision making processes of Council where possible;

- ▶ Tie engagement into employment pathways, career opportunities and life skills - For example, training or volunteering opportunities - promoted through schools, universities etc;
- ▶ Establishing connections early on - robust engagement through school and out of school activities creates a foundation that local government can then continue to build upon.

In conclusion, although many key issues have been identified there are still questions to be investigated around the effective implementation of young adult participation and engagement. It is important for local governments to understand young adults' experiences and what 'citizenship' means to them. This report offers broad recommendations and highlights the need for more research to better understand the needs and wants of young adults.

Youth are increasingly demanding greater inclusion and meaningful engagement and are taking action to address development challenges themselves (United Nations 2020, p.2).

Local governments must find ways to foster and encourage young adults to ensure continued involvement throughout the course of their lives for the benefit of both the individual and community.



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# Appendices

**Appendix 1:** Youth workers and organisations survey results

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VVEwXmWOCOukyVFpTRFd59WioOYmfYIS/view?usp=sharing>

**Appendix 2:** Youth survey results

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vfaND\\_hXvhJUtYEJgnJ1Da1fE6jtkbQ5/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vfaND_hXvhJUtYEJgnJ1Da1fE6jtkbQ5/view?usp=sharing)

**Appendix 3:** Council youth groups, socials and web pages

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1\\_B-iyfHv80GzhFSYodjjEgUhnw8Y3H2U/edit?usp=share\\_link&oid=110909840065622909502&rtpof=true&sd=true](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1_B-iyfHv80GzhFSYodjjEgUhnw8Y3H2U/edit?usp=share_link&oid=110909840065622909502&rtpof=true&sd=true)

**Appendix 4:** Staff and EM representation

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1a1u0FyvAE9s15jhXFIM7zxFYkXcJTqtoInfope9sU0/edit?usp=share\\_link](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1a1u0FyvAE9s15jhXFIM7zxFYkXcJTqtoInfope9sU0/edit?usp=share_link)

**Appendix 5 –** Youth workers survey summary data

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/11jMVI324ycPTflwO3MMrVY1GzLMaJxLR/view?usp=sharing>

**Appendix 6 –** Youth survey summary data

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Acx-l6sfjwmi6yATjg\\_V03QnCkG6KD6Q/view?usp=share\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Acx-l6sfjwmi6yATjg_V03QnCkG6KD6Q/view?usp=share_link)

