Children and Young People’s Voices Project

We want to hear the voices and views of children
The vision of the Office of the Children’s Commissioner (OCC) is to ensure that New Zealand is a place where all children thrive. Our functions include:

- Raising awareness and understanding of children’s interests, rights, and welfare;
- Undertaking and promoting research into any matter that relates to the welfare of children;
- Bringing children and youth voices and views into discussions and advice; and
- Acting as an advocate for children’s interests, rights, and welfare.

The Children’s Commissioner has a statutory obligation to ensure “the views of children are taken into account in the exercise or performance of the Commissioner’s functions.” The OCC also encourages other organisations to allow children to have a voice in matters that affect them, one of the rights New Zealand has agreed to as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC).

OCC is passionate about listening to the views of children and young people to inform our work and to provide advice to government agencies.

In 2014 we reviewed our approach to engaging with children
Our key mechanism for doing this in the past was our Young Persons Advisory Group (YPAG) - first established in 2003. YPAG enabled us to engage regularly with a number of young people so that our decisions and our advocacy were based on the current lived experiences of young people. However the formal structure of YPAG, and the criteria required for young people to be considered for the group, did not allow younger or more vulnerable children to take part. It supported in-depth work on a limited number of topics (usually through face-to-face meetings) each year, but was not flexible enough to get children’s input on issues as they arose.

We need an efficient mechanism for canvassing the views of children and young people, taking advantage of new technologies that young people use.

The Voices Project is our main method for collecting children’s views
The vision of the Voices Project is to establish an easy and effective way to canvas children and young people’s views on a range of topics as needed. By working with selected schools, the project will provide a rigorous mechanism for students to effectively contribute their views into government decision making processes that are relevant to them. Ultimately, this should lead to more accurate, relevant and effective decisions and policies to promote children’s wellbeing, as well as strengthening schools’ commitment to civics education.

This is not ‘research’ – this is consulting and engaging with children and young people so they have a voice in decision-making processes.

Through the Voices Project, we are developing a new way of consulting with children and young people that will:

- include the views of many more children and young people
- provide the Children’s Commissioner and other government agencies with children’s views across a range of topics as and when needed, and
- empower children and young people to participate in civil society.

Whose voices are we seeking to include?
We want to include children and young people whose voices are least likely to be heard without targeted efforts to consult them, including children who are:

- 5-17 years-old,
- vulnerable to systematic risk factors outside of their control, such as economic, social, mental, cultural and physical factors, and
- Māori and Pasifika children, who we know are over-represented in a range of poor outcomes.

To reach these groups of children, the OCC partners with primary, intermediate and secondary schools in diverse communities.
How do children’s voices inform policy advice?

The OCC ask children their views on relevant topics. The responses are analysed and used in OCC advocacy work to influence decisions and policies affecting children. We use both aggregate findings and quotes that reflect children’s voices.

One aim of the project is to demonstrate how children’s views can be included by government agencies in priority setting, policy development and service design. We can even ask children and young people questions on behalf of agencies. In this way, the Voices Project will support organisations to improve agencies decisions and action around children, and better fulfil New Zealand’s UNCROC commitments.

Findings will also be shared with partnering schools so they understand the unique perspectives of their students and can use the findings to inform their local decisions.

How do we empower children?

We engage children on matters that affect them, and tell them how their input has been used and influenced decisions and actions. Partnering schools can build on the participation in the Voices Project to demonstrate democratic process and children’s rights.

We hope that children will be empowered by their experience to better advocate for their own interests and participate as more active citizens. We know children’s lives can be improved simply through the processes of engaging with, and listening to them; but in particular we believe their views can usefully inform, and improve, public policy.

How does the Voices Project work?

We partner schools (including schools in low socio-economic areas) to hear from children:

- OCC provide the child-friendly survey, consent forms, and information sheet for teachers
- the schools confirm permission from children and parents to run the surveys
- teachers provide support in class
- children complete the surveys via school internet, and
- OCC report back to the school with their results.

We ask children and young people their views on a range of topics affecting them, their families, their communities, and the nation.

Examples of topics we have included in the Voices project in 2015 are:

- information on the types of activities they do out of school hours, and any barriers to participating in activities they would like to do
- how they learn best
- when they are happiest
- rating of the options for the Flag Referendum
- views on learning Te Reo Maori and sign language in school
- views on age thresholds for important things like leaving home, stopping school or going to adult prison.

We make it easy to read and respond:

- wording is designed so children could easily understand it if read to them, or if they could read it themselves (targeted to a reading age of 7), or for secondary schools, the lowest expected ability of the target age group
- introduction paragraphs are factual and designed not to ‘lead’ the answers.

We make it optional:

- multi-choice questions always had an ‘other’ (open text) answer option
- children don’t have to answer any or all of the questions
- all children have the option to withdraw at any time from the survey
- we follow ethical guidelines and processes.

We feed-back results to each school:

The results from the surveys are analysed and given back to the schools in aggregate form. We also explained what we use the data or quotes for, e.g. advocating for a particular policy change, as part of a submission. This was to help the children see that their views were being taken seriously, and that we had listened to their voices.

As we complete analyses of surveys, results will be accessible through our Listening2Kids web pages.

Want to learn more about the Voices project?

You can contact: Emma Hope e.hope@occ.org.nz 04 470 8717