

Advisory groups

Advisory groups are groups of children (around 8-12 participants) who provide information, advice or recommendations to an organisation. Advisory groups work well when you require on-going feedback from children and young people. Advisory groups are appropriate for children and young people aged from 12–18 years.

Advisory groups require support to meet regularly in person. After several meetings, some interactions, can also be facilitated online or via video/telephone conference.

You should carefully consider whether an advisory group is the best way children's views can be considered. Be sure to check other sustainable methods of engagement too: www.occ.org.nz/listening2kids/how-you-engage/

Strengths

- Advisory groups provide a regular source to get on-going and timely feedback.
- As the same participants come together many times, they can provide sophisticated insights over time.
- Advisory groups can build the advocacy skills of children.

Things to think about

- Advisory groups tend to attract children who are active, articulate and well connected to their communities. However they may exclude children who are not often heard.
- Advisory groups can be costly to resource. You need to factor in the cost for meetings, (food, venue hire, travel and payments to children), secretariat support, pastoral care, and meeting outputs, eg publications or consultations.

Tips and tricks

Facilitating an advisory group

- **Establish a recruitment process** – decide how you will promote the opportunity to children and what the recruitment process will be. You may need to conduct an interview process.
- **Establish some ground rules** – have the group establish and agree on some ground rules for the meetings. Use these agreed rules to maintain a safe and respectful environment.
- **Have clear and realistic expectations** – make sure expectations of the organisation, and of the children, are clear.
- **Think about the physical environment** – the space you meet in can help the children feel relaxed. Avoid using intimidating board rooms, and opt instead for a

Advisory groups should be coordinated and facilitated by a trained facilitator. Facilitators should be trained to facilitate groups of children and be able to 'connect' with the group.

location that is familiar (e.g. community centre) or child friendly (spacious, with comfortable furnishing or bean bags and colourful interiors).

- **Build relationships** – spend time developing relationships among the group members and between the group and the facilitator. Team building time will need to be factored into the front-end of the process. This will relax children so that they can share information more readily.

The process for agreeing ground rules may need to be guided by the facilitator. Some ideas to prompt discussion are:

- Being respectful to each other and the facilitator
- Staying positive
- Everyone participates
- No cell phones
- No inappropriate language
- No put downs
- Not talking over others
- Being on time
- Knowing what is confidential and what can be shared.

- **Keep participants connected between meetings** – this could be a private group Facebook page, Skype, or telephone and video conferences.
- **Keep a relaxed environment** – incorporate ice breakers and games into the sessions to make them fun.
- **Encourage all participants to contribute** – to make sure everyone has a chance to be heard, you can use a ‘talking stick’ (like a soft toy) to signal whose turn it is to speak.
- **Make it interesting** – use a variety of workshop techniques or games that can make the process more interactive and fun.
- **Keep the same facilitator** – this is important for maintaining relationships with the group members as well as providing continuity between meetings.

Example

The Office of the Children’s Commissioner had a long standing Young Persons Advisory Group (YPAG) that provided ongoing advice on child and youth related issues. They contributed to OCC submissions and work, and made their own submissions on issues such as plain packaging for cigarettes, alcohol harm, and the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children. Having the YPAG provided us, and the wider public sector, with a valuable youth voice.