



**Department of Justice & Community Safety  
Barwon Child Youth & Family**

**Youth Client Voice Project**

**Executive Report**

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## 1.0 Executive Summary

***“It is so important to hear the child voice. This is going to make my whole week, I got to share my story and my brother’s story. We are important kids, and you’ve heard us.”***

The Youth Client Voice Project (the Project) was developed in recognition that a systemic approach to hearing (and responding to) the voice of young people involved, or at risk of involvement, in the justice system is not embedded in policy development, service delivery, practices or processes. It is acknowledged that many individual workers do attempt to respond to their client’s voice, but generally in an ad hoc manner.

The Project defines ‘services’ as the broad range of supports provided for young people who are currently involved, or likely to become involved, in the justice system. This includes both statutory and voluntary programs across a number of departments and service organisations.

The aims of the Project were to identify achievable actions for government, service providers, and workers to change the way policy is developed, services are designed, and worker practices are embedded.

Management Governance Australia (MGA) was contracted to undertake the Project in May 2022 and based on the review of the literature, the following definition of youth client voice was proposed: *“a process that reflects a true partnership between youth and adults in a professional setting, integrating the perspectives and skills of youth with the experience of adults”* (Aceves-Martins M, 2019).

MGA’s research found that the value of client voice and client participation has long been recognised in health, social work and mental health settings, and the benefits for organisations, systems and individual young people is well evidenced. There was a note of warning, however, that consultation does not necessarily equate to meaningful participation. Among the many effective international and national examples, the new Young Voices resource (<https://www.vic.gov.au/young-voices>) developed by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing is significant. Overall, the evidence for increasing and amplifying the voices of young people in the justice system in Victoria is compelling, however, current implementation is neither prioritised nor well understood.

To gain an understanding of the local issues, MGA undertook interviews with 12 young people who identified that they had been impacted by the justice system in some way (some directly, others indirectly). All were over 18 years and involved in various aspects of the service system, including out of home care, justice and other programs.

The key learnings from young people were that they did not feel that they had a voice, and that if they had a voice, then they wanted to use it to help others. They offered suggestions such as support from people with lived experience, having a meeting with all their workers, more choices in schools and activities, more stability of workers and places to live, and workers with good communication skills, who believe in the young person and get to know them and their environment.



MGA also convened two online stakeholder workshops with 25 workers from government and community services. Key themes from stakeholders were better understanding of how to be a youth advocate (working with, not for, the young person), having time to build trust and get to know the young person's ecosystem, access to lived experience peers, and care team meetings where client is present.

MGA created a feedback document that uses graphics and quotes to share the learnings and highlight the opportunities, using the aspirational approach of "What if young people at risk of involvement in the justice system had a voice?" This identifies the recommended actions presented as a simplified 9 step model (refer Recommendations) and a poster that supports stakeholders to understand what it would be like, if the model were to be implemented by the government, service organisations and workers.

The project website (<https://www.mg-australia.com.au/youthclientvoice/>) includes audio of selected quotes. The aim of this website is to actively engage with the voices of the young people and encourage leaders from government, providers and workers to begin the process of changing the outcomes for young people, so that the following quote will not be heard in the future:

*"No one explained my rights. There was no privacy. Seems like everyone just is living my life. I am not living my life."*

The voices of the young people interviewed for this project were powerful and compelling, and it is evident that there will be multiple benefits if we activate their inclusion for system design and service delivery.



## 2.0 Recommendations

MGA offers the following recommendations, for nine actions to be undertaken:

Three actions for Government:

1. Use <https://www.vic.gov.au/young-voices> for youth engagement and participation.
2. Based on this tool, ensure the voice of young people informs policy setting, tender development and program review (further detailed actions below).
3. Ensure providers have the capacity and expertise to capture young people's voices in service agreements.

Three actions for Services & Organisations:

1. Implement regular roundtable discussions with workers and family/carers, ensuring the young person is present and supported.
2. Invest in staff training and professional development, for example, how to effectively source and use feedback from young people to inform service design (further detailed actions below).
3. Actively support ongoing relationships and develop protocols for staff handovers to enable continuity for young people to reach their personal goals.

Three actions for Workers

1. Check if young people feel heard when asking for feedback, for example, "How do you feel about our work together today or over the last month/year? What else we can do?" Reflect back, then use this to plan future interactions.
2. Explore each young person's social ecosystem (friends, carers, family) for consideration in service planning and reporting.
3. Find ways to support each young person's personal goals including cross-referrals, partnerships and/or flexible funding.

Further considerations for government to support the inclusion of youth client voice include:

- Require organisations to demonstrate how the needs and interests of young people has been/will be captured to inform service/project design and delivery.
- Consider how youth client voice will be collected and incorporated into project/service design as part of tender/grant selection.
- Encourage organisations to include young people on governance structures where appropriate/feasible.
- Require (and fund) organisations to evaluate impact of the service/project on young people and to incorporate young people's perspectives as part of this evaluation.
- Incorporate a degree of flexibility into contractual arrangements to enable organisations to respond to the identified needs of young people.
- Identify and support ways for organisations to share information to reduce the need for young people to repeat information to different service providers.
- Consider factors such as social participation and other protective factors as indicators of well-being to support a more holistic approach to measuring impact.

Further considerations for services to encourage youth client voice in their organisations include:

- Access and support young people to develop and implement new initiatives, programs, events and materials.



- Access young people’s perspectives to monitor and review existing services and programs, both from a short- and long-term viewpoint.
- Work in place-based engagement and collaborations to identify challenges and solutions for young people.
- Enable and support young people to participate in research, working groups and boards to provide lived experience leadership.
- Support young people to provide feedback on tenders and programs.
- Establish a culture whereby young people are seen not as ‘service users’ but ‘partners in change.’



### 3.0 Findings and Outputs

The voices of the young people interviewed for this project were powerful and compelling, and it is evident that there will be multiple benefits if we amplify their inclusion, in terms of individual outcomes as well as system design and service delivery.

It is acknowledged that many workers currently attempt to source feedback and engagement, so when young people report they still feel unheard despite this, it suggests these practices need to be embedded in a way that can be measured more visibly by the young people, service organisations, and by government.

The first step to embedding ‘youth voice’ practices is to achieve commitment from these three levels and across the service system. To some extent, this commitment can be imposed by government directions, such as through contractual requirements, but for genuine change it also needs to be valued and owned by all levels of the system.

Subsequently, in addition to this Report, MGA has developed a poster and website that can be shared broadly to increase awareness and recognition of the importance of incorporating ‘youth voice’ in all aspects of engagement with young people. These tools are framed in positive language, to encourage readers to recognise that this is both an achievable and beneficial approach and encourage stakeholders to implement measures to improve their engagement with client voice.

The poster is framed in positive, aspirational language, showing how potential outcomes can be readily and meaningfully embedded into government, service organisations and worker practices to support the voices of young people.

The nine actions are deliberately simplified, to demonstrate that these practices can readily be implemented by government, organisations and workers without any additional costs – simply by incorporating additional steps in the existing processes.