

Guidance for RMFs

BACKGROUND

YACWA is providing this advice and guidance to Regional Managers Forums (RMFs) on engagement with the community services sector and engagement with young people, given the important strategic role that RMFs have in this reforms process, through some funding through the Department of Finance.

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Data collected by YACWA in late 2015 indicated that a majority of organisations did not know what RMFs were or the important role that they played in their region.

As part of YACWA's support around the implementation of the Aboriginal Youth Services Investment Reform, we are providing some advice and guidance to RMFs on **a) engagement with NFP community service organisations at the RMF level** and **b) youth engagement** in the roll-out of Reforms in each region.

We acknowledge that youth specific strategies may not always be an immediate focus for the RMF, depending on the needs and context of each local area at any given point in time. However, the principles listed here can also be extrapolated to consider engagement with the community services sector generally.

We also acknowledge that RMFs may potentially being re-branded as District Leadership Groups (DLGs) in the near future. Where we have referred to RMFs in this document, please consider this terminology to be interchangeable with DLGs if this goes ahead. This re-brand may also be an opportunity for RMFs/DLGs to revisit and revitalise their membership and function in their community.

Our recommendations are made with these perspectives in mind.

We are of the opinion that RMFs/DLGs have the potential to be very powerful forums in their local communities; providing important strategic oversight and coordination for the social issues in the region based on data and anecdotal evidence; as well as providing important intelligence for State Government with respect to a real place-based approach. YACWA believes that RMFs/DLGs should be supported with some kind of resourcing, even at a minimum, a part-time secretariat resource, to assist them to grow into this powerful role.

We hope that this guidance can contribute something small to the evolution of RMFs/DLGs around the state.

Why is engaging with the community services sector (and local government) important?

The not-for-profit community services sector, and local government, are key partners for the State Government in working with people in communities. The NFP sector and local government have a significant amount of expertise and knowledge from working with people in communities day in and day out. Local government in particular often has a very important holistic and integrated perspective of a local area's key concerns and needs. Working with communities requires as much expertise, knowledge and different perspectives as possible in order to have the best possible outcomes at the end of the day.

Apart from it being a good idea to use the expertise, knowledge and perspectives of those outside of state government working with communities, the Delivering Community Services in Partnership (DCSP) Policy (2011) encourages a respectful, positive working relationship between state government and the NFP community services sector. Whilst the Policy aims to change the nature of procurement relationships, the overwhelming focus of the Policy is on the 'nature of the relationship' between state government and the NFP sector. Engaging with NFP community services (and local government) on your RMF is an excellent way to live the Partnership Principles and Behaviours within the DCSP Policy.

DIFFERENT MECHANISMS FOR ENGAGING WITH THE SECTOR

1 HAVE PERMANENT NFP REPRESENTATIVES ON YOUR RMF.

This may take the form of 1-2 NFPs in your area that may deliver a large proportion of the youth community services.

CONSIDERATIONS

We suggest that you find a way to understand the reputation of these NFPs in your area. If they are well regarded by the rest of the sector, it will likely be possible that they will be able to represent a cohesive 'sector voice' on your RMF. It is also possible that due to organisational politics (they exist everywhere!) they will not be able to represent a sector voice on your RMF and will only be able to speak from their own perspective. This may still be useful for you. However, the reputation of the NFP/individual with other NFPs in the area is really important to ensure that you do have a 'sector voice' and not just the voice of 1-2 individual NFPs.

One way you might be able to ensure this is by approaching a network of youth NFP providers that meet in your region. Most regions have a youth network that meet regularly, and YACWA can support you to find the right contact people. Perhaps your local youth network could elect a representative themselves, and/or have a rotating representative on your RMF. At a minimum, this connection will be valuable from the perspective of creating connections between various networks meeting in your region. Important intelligence can be gathered in this way.

Even with this approach, it is advisable to get broader perspectives from time to time, perhaps through employing another one of the following approaches.

2 CREATE A YOUTH-FOCUSSED SUB-COMMITTEE

This takes the form of a youth-specific sub-committee that reports to your RMF. This may consist of only NFP representatives, or a mix of NFP representatives and interested government representatives. This is the form that many other RMFs have taken.

CONSIDERATIONS

This has been a popular mechanism, and it enables RMF members who have a specific focus on young people to really put their expertise to use.

This is an additional meeting requirement on members, so this group should be quite focussed in its terms of reference, and have an action-oriented focus.

Another option might be to consider the youth network in your region (mentioned above) becoming like a youth-focussed subcommittee, if it's appropriate. This could minimise the amount of time that youth organisations in your region spend in meetings.

3 CREATE STANDING ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS WITH THE SECTOR AND COMMUNITY IN YOUR REGION

Sometimes meetings are not the most effective mechanisms through which to engage key stakeholders. Your RMF may not have NFP representation at all, and might choose to engage with the sector and the wider community 4-5 times a year through particular issue-focussed workshops or consultation processes. For example, if community cohesion and the engagement of refugees and migrants is a particular concern for your RMF given an influx of refugees/migrants settling in your area, that might be one of your focusses throughout the year.

CONSIDERATIONS

It would be important to ensure that the issue-focused workshops/consultation processes are based on issues, concerns or priorities that have been developed together with the sector (and ideally with the community).

This mechanism has the added advantage of potentially stimulating a number of different collaborative initiatives not limited only to organisations linked with the RMF. For example, a number of NFPs may work with young people to action an initiative that is raised at the workshop. Further, it provides a way to engage with community and with the sector at once. You could, of course, have youth representatives on your RMF but it can sometimes be daunting for young people to sit as outnumbered representatives on such a group. As will be described below, young people need to be supported in order to contribute in forums like this. This option instead provides a safer, more supported mechanism for engagement.

As with any consultation process, if this is the mechanism by which you choose to engage with the sector and your community, it is important to work on the actions and outputs of that together. If the RMF actions anything purely within government infrastructure that has been an output of that workshop, remember to communicate that back to the people that were engaged in suggesting, and taking that action forward, in the first place.

Finally, this advice is not intended to be prescriptive. You can, of course, have some combination of the above ways to engage the NFP sector in the work of your RMF. You might have a youth subcommittee, as well as 2-3 different key points of engagement throughout a year. There is no limit to the different ways you can work with your NFP sector and local government colleagues, (except your imagination!) as they are likely to be open to any kind of engagement that is meaningful and for the good of the communities you are all working with.

OTHER THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATION

Whilst it has been said throughout this document, it is worth repeating again! It is really important to engage the local government authorities in your region on your RMF. They play a critical role in their communities, and often have a wealth of experience and great perspectives to offer to the discussions at RMF meetings.

MEETING FACILITATION

Some RMFs are very well executed, with a lot of fruitful and engaging discussion, and follow-ups that are actioned by a variety of people after the meeting. Some can be at times meandering and/or can lose people's attention mid-way through the meeting.

A great chair will facilitate the meetings in such a way that is clear about the purpose of each meeting, any priority areas, etc. It is also important that more than 1-2 stakeholders around the table have an opportunity to engage with the topics being raised. It is clear if people stop seeing value in the meeting that they will stop attending.

Presentations to the RMF from other RMFs, from the NFP sector, local government, etc can be great for informing the group about initiatives and projects that could support the region and the work of the RMF. They may provide opportunities for innovation. However, they can also sometimes be a waste of time. It's important to ensure presentations are time-limited, and to facilitate some focussed discussion after presentations about what the key take-aways are and how they might be actioned for your RMF.

DIFFERENT MECHANISMS FOR ENGAGING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

As previously mentioned, you could absolutely consider having youth representatives on your RMF. If you are considering this, we applaud your commitment to youth engagement!

However, it can be daunting for young people to sit as outnumbered representatives on such a group, and we acknowledge that if you have young people sitting on your RMF, you will likely also want additional community engagement, and that will quickly overwhelm the membership of an RMF.

In any case, young people must be supported and empowered to contribute to issues that are important to them. We'd suggest that direct RMF representation is probably not the way to do this, and is likely not the most effective use of young people's time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 CREATE STANDING ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUR REGION

Please see Engagement Mechanism 3) previously. Bringing young people from different backgrounds and perspectives together periodically to engage with them can be a very valuable mechanism to include young people in the development of strategies which are being created for their benefit.

As an example of where this can work really well, please [click here](#) to read more about the YPP and YLG, facilitated by the South East Metropolitan Partnership Forum.

CONSIDERATIONS

If this is only done once, and it often can be done only once, then it can appear tokenistic. Changes happen in our communities, and young people's lives, constantly. We have to find a way to keep up with that, rather than referring to a youth forum that was held in 2013 and what that told us then. This mechanism for engagement can become much more meaningful if it is done fairly regularly (perhaps once a year).

It is also important to acknowledge that this can be a costly and time-intensive exercise, and that also needs to be taken into consideration.

2 LOOK AT THE ENGAGEMENT WITH DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, AND WITH SCHOOLS

Schools are where many young people spend most of their time between the ages of 6-17. Many schools work with their students collaboratively around many elements of their education, and the Department also brings together schools and the people who support students regularly in different networks to discuss and collaborate. Using this already existing mechanism for engagement with young people, in whatever way is appropriate for the individual school, is a straightforward way to engage with young people.

CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to note that this mechanism does not capture the many young people that do not regularly attend school. Their perspectives are just as important, and so appropriate mechanisms for engaging them should also be sought.

This mechanism is likely to provide time and cost savings, and be more effective; however it needs to be more than just the perspective of the Principal, Deputy Principal, or Education staff. There have to be mechanisms within the school where these staff are engaging appropriately with the young people themselves.

3 UTILISING OTHER CONSULTATION/ ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS IN YOUR REGION

There are a number of different youth groups in communities that could be utilised to gain the perspectives of young people in the area:

- Youth Advisory Councils (often facilitated by local government)
- Student Councils at Schools
- Youth leadership groups at Church
- A number of community service organisations in different areas have youth leadership/advisory groups, for example:
 - Aboriginal Health Council has a Youth Subcommittee
 - Headspace have youth advisory groups in each region where they operate
 - Save the Children's Youth Leadership Group
 - The Youth Disability Advocacy Network (YDAN), auspiced by YACWA
 - Etc

CONSIDERATIONS

It is important not to lean too heavily on groups of young people volunteering their time for a group/cause that they care about. Too much additional consultation can diminish their experience of what they were actually there for to begin with.

Many of these groups are likely to capture the same sorts of young people. It is important to get beyond just these groups, and look at meaningfully engaging with, for example, young people engaged with the criminal justice system; or the young people that have a lived experience of the kinds of issues you are trying to work on through your RMF. Finding them is a tailored experience – it depends specifically on what the issue is, and what kind of support/ advice/guidance is required from the young people.

OTHER RESOURCES ON ENGAGING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

We recently spent a lot of time collating useful co-design and consultation resources for working with young people on a different project – Youth In Community Services, which was also generously supported by the Department of Finance. We also spent time summarising some of those resources that had some great points, because we know it can be hard to find the time to read long and sometimes complex articles!

[Click here](#) to be taken to a summary of this project, as well as to a repository of links and documents which we find useful when talking about co-designing or engaging with young people.

WHAT YACWA CAN PROVIDE

We can provide the following support for your RMF in engaging/consulting young people and the youth community services sector:

- Advice and support on setting up a youth sub-committees or sourcing NFP sector members for your RMF;
- Advice and support on engaging with young people in your region;
- Facilitation of meetings to set strategies and actions for your RMF (click here to see the agenda which we facilitated the Wheatbelt Human Services Managers Forum through);
- Awareness raising sessions about the Aboriginal Youth Services Investment Reforms, designed to help attendees understand what the Reforms are, how they are being implemented in other areas, and what the likely impacts are for government and for the NFP sector alike;
- Engagement in sector mapping exercises, to understand who delivers what services in your local area and what the key gaps are
- Training for your RMF and/or for the NFP sector in your region about any of the following topics that relate to key themes within the Aboriginal Youth Services Investment Reform:
 - Co-designing programs and services with Aboriginal young people
 - Measuring outcomes,
 - Collaboration, strategic alliances and partnerships – theory and practice (eg how do you write these into tender documents; how do you manage them, how do you measure their impact, etc)
 - This may include some discussion about the possibility of mergers and amalgamations given these are topical issues within the sector at the moment

CONTACT US TO LEARN MORE. yacwa@yacwa.org.au

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