



How to Create, Run and Manage a Youth Advisory Council

A collection of experiences and recommendations
by Autism West.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report was written for the purpose of explaining Autism West's experience of starting and running a Youth Advisory Council (YAC), with the aim to inform and guide others. The report gives insight into what a Youth Advisory Council is, participant experiences and recommendations on how to start and run a Youth Advisory Council.

AUTISM WEST

Autism West is a not for profit organisation offering a safe and supportive environment for children and young adults on the autism spectrum. Autism West runs a variety of social groups for individuals on the spectrum aged 10-30+. Autism West utilises the social model of disability, and aims to provide a space where participants are supported, encouraged and celebrated.

FUNDING

Autism West was lucky enough to gain funding from the Department of Education (NGCS), which allowed the Youth Advisory Council to be formed, and for Autism West to develop a project called the Youth Empowerment Project. This project aimed to actively include young people within Autism West and provide them with a safe space where opportunities for self-development and learning would be available. The grant funding was to be used to achieve the following project specific objectives:

- Empower young people on the autism spectrum to research and document relevant issues faced by young people with autism;
- Contribute to improving outcomes for quality of life and mental health resilience with projects aimed at increasing self-determination using industry aligned self-determination scaling;

- Increase engagement and interest in social group activities measured through staff observation and Autism West's social impact indicator questionnaires;
- Provide a focus to Autism West's emerging Youth Advisory Council to increase validity of their role in Autism West's strategic development and what is adopted into its annual operational plan.

This project aligns with Autism West's overall service direction which is to provide opportunities leading to increased quality of life and mental health resilience, and provide projects that increase self-determination.

WHAT IS A YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL?

Youth Advisory Councils are groups that actively seek to engage young people by involving them in decision making and give them a voice within the community. Youth Advisory Councils can run either formally or informally and meet on a regular basis. The main aim of YAC meetings is to give young people a voice and allow them to discuss issues and topics that are important to them and others within the community.

IMPORTANCE OF A YAC:

The importance of a YAC is primarily youth engagement and allowing their voice within the community to be heard and understood. The views of young people are often not considered in governmental and organisational decision making processes, and decisions end up being made for them. Youth Advisory Councils give youth the ability to be active members of their communities and organisations they are involved in.

YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL AT AUTISM WEST

Autism West has created a Youth Advisory Council for the young people that attend Autism West social groups. Autism West felt that it was important for their young adults to have a place to come together where their voices were heard. It also acts as a vehicle of governance for the organisation to ensure the participant voice is considered at all levels of the organisation. The Autism West YAC runs on fortnightly Mondays and Saturdays for an hour and a half. The purpose of the Autism West YAC is to provide a place

for young adults and older teens to come and be themselves in an environment where they feel comfortable. The YAC allows young people to discuss social issues they are facing and gives them the skills and confidence to be able to overcome these issues. The Autism West YAC is primarily youth run with some help and guidance from staff at Autism West, some of whom have lived experience. The council members and staff are involved in all aspects of the YAC, taking minutes, setting agendas and running meetings.

WHAT AUTISM WEST YAC PROVIDES:

- A safe place
- A sense of community
- Opportunities to learn new skills
- Discussions with like-minded individuals
- Confidence building
- A place to connect and build relationships
- Dedicated and passionate staff

OUR YAC MEMBERS



ESTABLISHING A YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

Most commonly, Youth Advisory Councils are started by leaders in the community that want to engage youth in community activity and planning. Sometimes – such as in the case of the Autism West YAC - Youth Advisory Councils are developed on the back of different projects and ideas. Youth Advisory Councils are important platforms for youth to be able to voice their opinions and contribute positively

to organisations and the community. It is important that from conception, a clear direction and purpose is maintained, this will help in the retention of members and management of tasks and projects. Ideally the YAC is youth-led, with facilitation support from member(s) of staff. This person should be someone who has an interest in the YAC's direction and purpose and has knowledge of what a YAC is and how it runs.

HOW AUTISM WEST ESTABLISHED A YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL (RECRUITMENT):

To found the YAC, the appointed staff facilitators visited the established social groups at Autism West and talked to participants about joining the YAC. When visiting the social groups the facilitators explained to the participants the intentions of the YAC and the vision for what it would be. Going into the groups with an already established direction facilitated the recruitment process as it helped to gain the interest of the participants. From here, the facilitators wrote down the names of those who were interested and got their contact details. The first YAC meeting was set for the 14th of May 2018 with the agenda of getting to know the new YAC members and discussing possible project ideas and themes for discussion at the following YAC meetings. It is important to note that retention of members for the Autism West YAC came through giving everyone a chance to speak and have a voice, something that is often not given to young people.

RUNNING A YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

In order to run a successful Youth Advisory Council it is important to ensure that the council members are the main facilitators in the running of the YAC. The most important aspect to remember when running a YAC is that it should be youth-led, with the members of the YAC deciding on meeting times, agendas and YAC projects. Setting a good foundation for the YAC may require facilitators to sit down with the group in the first meeting and discuss a mission, goals and some general rules. When establishing these it is important to encourage group participation, allowing all of the members in the YAC to input their views and ideas.

HOW AUTISM WEST'S YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL RUNS:

Autism West's YAC currently has 15 active members who come for fortnightly meetings and discuss projects and issues that are important to them. Autism West's YAC is primarily youth-led with the members of the YAC deciding the agenda for each meeting and sharing their input on project and community participation ideas. Each meeting runs for 1.5 hours and follows an agenda, which is set at the previous meeting. The YAC facilitator runs the meetings to ensure the agenda is met and the meeting stays on topic. At the end of the formal meeting there is an informal social element that the members enjoy. Minutes are taken at each meeting by the

facilitator, these are then typed up and sent to all of the members. After each meeting and before the next meeting, an email reminder about the meeting is sent out to members, together with the agenda for the meeting. The members of the YAC are expected to reply to this email with an RSVP to the meeting and are given the opportunity to add to the agenda if they wish. It is important to give council members as much notice as possible to enable them to be organised, to attend and commit to the YAC. A sense of community and sharing is instilled into every meeting, with food being provided to members (which also helps with member retention) and a small period at the beginning of the meeting for members to mingle and engage in conversation before official business commences.

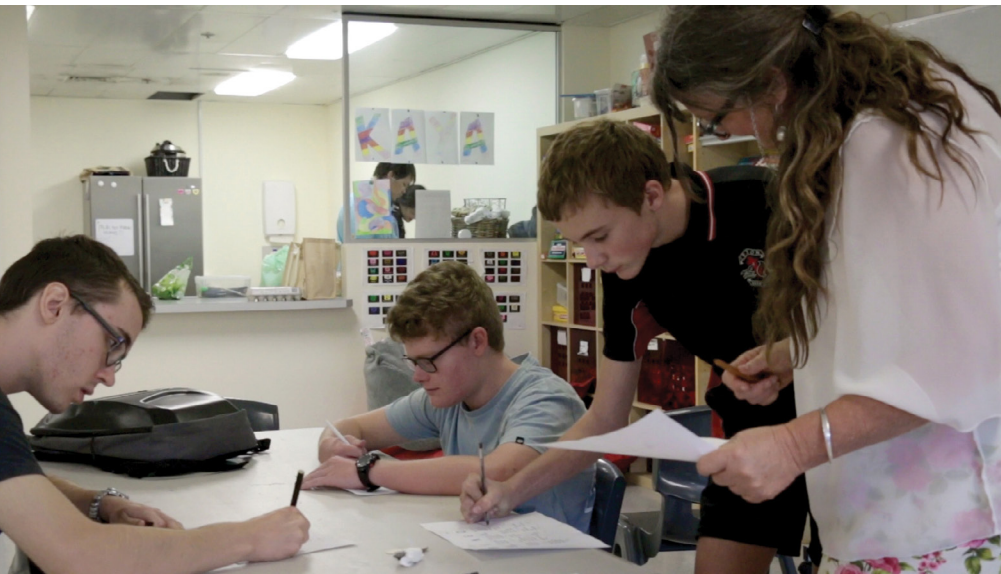
AUTISM WEST YAC PROJECTS:

The Autism West YAC has undertaken a number of different projects since its inception in 2018, including participating in fundraising projects for Autism West, such as making sandwiches and selling them to other groups within Autism West to fundraise for the annual Team Sprint Cup. The YAC has also participated in self-advocacy projects, which includes a guest speaker attending a YAC meeting and giving a talk around what self-advocacy means and looks like. Following this, the YAC has been invited to talk at a number of schools around Perth about what it is like to have autism and how important it is for society to have diversity.

The main project that the YAC has undertaken is the Youth Empowerment Project, a project based around youth lead research focusing on a social issue impacting people on the spectrum. The YAC chose employment as the social issue to research, and the project entailed the members of the YAC to come up with interview questions (see appendix) and become mentors for the younger participants at Autism West. The YAC members were asked to mentor the younger participants whilst they undertook the interviewing (action research) in the social groups at Autism West. The YAC was then to analyse the data gained from the action research and draw conclusions from the data. The purpose of the project was to empower the young people at Autism West, teaching them new skills in research and improving their interpersonal skills whilst talking to others. At the completion of the Youth Empowerment Project, the YAC is required to design an employment booklet for potential employers in the area, informing them of the benefits of hiring someone who is neurodiverse.

WHAT HAS AUTISM WEST LEARNT?

- Ensuring that the YAC is youth-led fosters a culture of trust and engagement amongst members and extends to how the young people view Autism West as an organisation;
- Ensure specific projects are chosen by the YAC, which fosters motivation for members to attend meetings;
- Trust takes time and is established through building strong relationships;
- Having a set agenda and following it ensures meetings are effective and efficient;
- Having food at meetings is a good way to establish a sharing culture and helps build a social aspect to the YAC;
- It is important the meetings don't go for too long and run on time.



EXPERIENCES FROM AUTISM WEST'S MEMBERS

"It has helped me in many ways, especially with my social skills."

"I look forward to attending the YAC."

"I've gained a better understanding of myself and my confidence and self-esteem has grown since being a part of the YAC."

"The YAC is like my second family."

"It could be the most life changing thing you ever be a part of."

"I keep coming because it gives me feelings of excitement, peace and joy."

QUICK TIPS FOR OTHERS

- Respect the members and give everyone a voice;
- Offer a space where people feel welcomed and safe;
- Share contact details with members;
- Have organised meetings;
- Send out reminders about meetings;
- Set agenda for meetings and have someone that facilitates the meeting and takes minutes;
- Set specific projects for the YAC to complete.

APPENDIX 1 – AUTISM WEST MINUTES TEMPLATE



Youth Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

Attendees:

1.0	General Themes
2.0	Discussion
3.0	Strategies to Apply
4.0	Next Meeting

APPENDIX 2 – YAC TERMS OF REFERENCE

Youth Advisory Council


Terms of Reference:

The Autism West Youth Advisory Council comprises of members who are committed to.....

This committee's most common responsibilities are:

1. To review and guide service evaluations
2. To advise the Board and staff on development and direction of service
3. To manage projects which address societal issues relevant to their community of peers.

APPENDIX 3 – YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE



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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

Appendix 6

Example Questionnaire – Youth Empowerment Project

Questions to participants about employment:

- What are the benefits and challenges of being neurodiverse?
- What are your strengths?
- How do you think your strengths could be beneficial to a workplace
- What would be the benefits to you and your workplace if co-workers knew and understood neurodiversity?
- If you could choose , what would be your preferred communication method
- Does your preferred communication method change depending on who you are talking to or how you are feeling?
- What do you think would help you achieve your goals at work?
- What do you think make a job meaningful?
- Do you have any concerns about gaining employment?
- What are your dreams for future employment?



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