From Youth Voice to Influence

What youth sector ecosystem does Australia need?

International Youth Day 2026 – policy brief | AYAC and MYAN

Executive Summary

Forty respondents to the AYAC and MYAN discussion paper, "From Youth Voice to Influence", agreed that Australia must ensure young people can meaningfully shape the decisions that affect their lives. Their responses reveal a clear gap between aspiration and practice: young people are increasingly invited to speak, but the structures needed to translate their input into shared decision-making. Accountability and sustained influence remain weak.

Young people are calling for more than a voice; they want real influence and shared power.

- **Unanimous support for shared power.** All 40 respondents agree Australia should ensure young people have meaningful influence and share power; 35 (88%) strongly agree.
- **Practice sits on the bottom treads.** 27 respondents (68%) say young people are only informed or consulted in the settings they know. Only three experienced participation in co-design or shared decision-making.
- **Investment is aimed at voice, not power.** Voice and consultation draw attention in 65% of respondents' settings; shared decision-making in 13%. Yet shared power is the top priority for the next five years (55%).
- **Influence is lost at the start and the end.** The biggest barrier is that decision-makers do not act on young people's input (58%). Half say young people are involved too late.
- **Young people and the wider sector stress different things.** Young people put shared power (63%) and government engagement (63%) first. Other stakeholders put diverse representation first (54%, against 25% of young people).
- **The ecosystem needs infrastructure.** Respondents call for paid participation, closed feedback loops, long-term peak body funding and a coordinated national youth alliance.

Key asks:

AYAC and MYAN's central recommendation is to establish an Office for Youth within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to coordinate a whole-of-government approach to Australia's youth ecosystem. Through this Office, governments should close feedback loops by reporting how young people's input changed decisions, require every funding agreement to pay young people and cover participation costs, and provide five-year funding to youth sector peak bodies and youth-led organisations.

- governments report back on how young people's input changed decisions
- every funding agreement pays young people and covers participation costs, and
- youth sector peak and youth-led organisations receive five-year funding.

Success should be judged by whether young people are involved before priorities and budgets are set, hold genuine authority in decisions, are paid and supported to participate, and can see and verify how their input changed outcomes.

About us

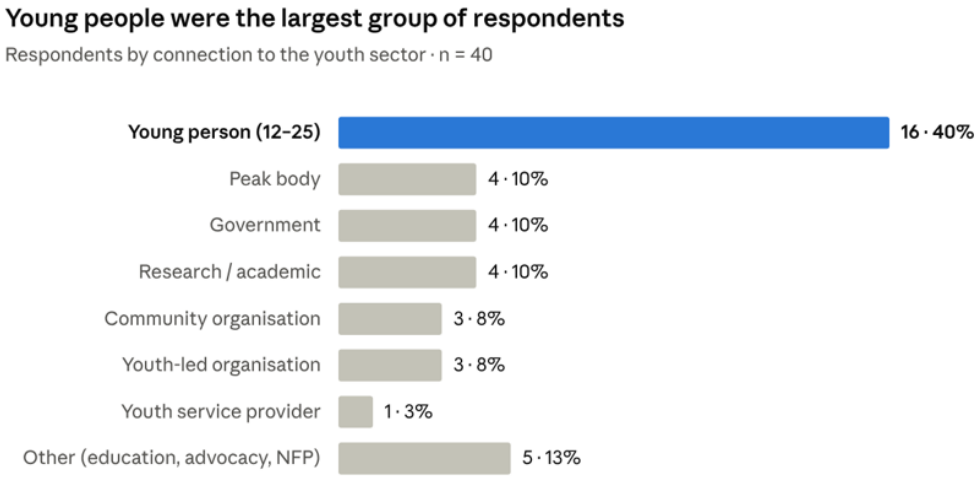
AYAC	MYAN
Australia's national peak body for young people and the youth sector. AYAC works to ensure young people are respected and have the power to lead change. It connects young people, state and territory youth peaks, youth-led organisations, academics and the wider youth sector.	Australia's national peak body representing the rights and interests of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and those who work with them. MYAN works with young people, communities, governments, and civil society to strengthen policy, practice, leadership and inclusion.

1. Purpose

For International Youth Day 2026, the **Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC)** and the **Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN)** invited young people, youth-led organisations, services, researchers, governments, funders and peak bodies to join a national conversation about how Australia can move beyond youth voice towards genuine influence, shared power and a stronger youth sector. This paper brings together insights from that conversation and an accompanying survey on Australia's youth sector ecosystem.

2. Who responded

The AYAC–MYAN discussion paper received responses from 40 participants representing diverse parts of the youth sector ecosystem, including 16 (40%) young people aged 12–25.



Twenty-four respondents also gave written answers, quoted throughout this brief by role. Where young people's views differ from those of other stakeholders, the brief reports both views.

Young people are increasingly invited into consultations, advisory groups, co-design processes, and other engagement activities that affect their lives. This is important progress, but the critical test is whether participation gives young people meaningful influence over the decisions, priorities and resources that shape their lives and communities.

2.1 About the evidence

- **Discussion paper:** AYAC and MYAN, *From Youth Voice to Influence: What youth sector ecosystem does Australia need?* International Youth Day 2026.
- **Responses:** 40 respondents engaged with the discussion paper through the AYAC–MYAN survey between 12 August and 16 September 2026; 24 also gave written answers.
- **Percentages:** shares of all 40 respondents unless a group is named (16 young people; 24 other stakeholders). Several questions allowed more than one answer, so totals can exceed 100%.
- **Comparisons and themes:** the "now vs next five years" chart pairs the closest matching options from two questions. Written answers were grouped into themes for this brief and are quoted by role only.

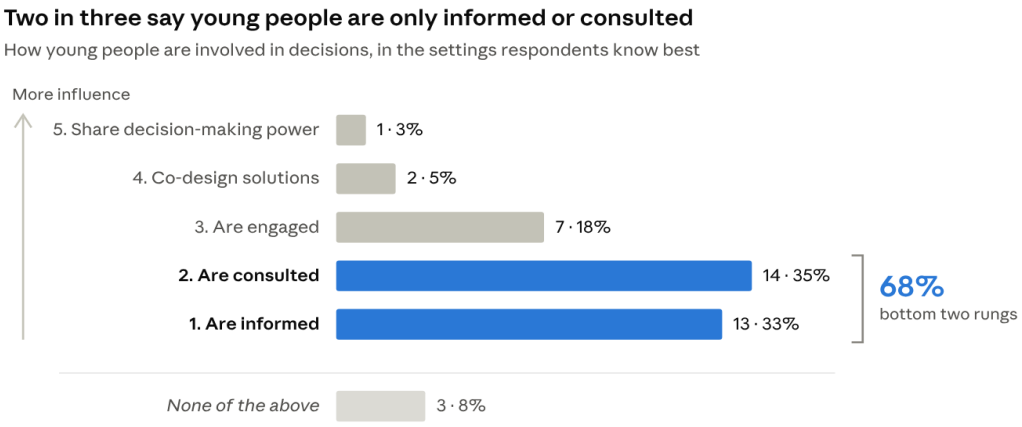
3. Why this matters

Too often, young people are asked for their views after agendas have been set, or without a clear pathway for their input to shape outcomes. Being heard is crucial, but it is not the same as having influence or sharing power. Respondents to the AYAC and MYAN survey invite a national conversation about moving beyond youth voice to genuine partnership, shared decision-making and systems change endorsed this goal without exception.

All 40 agree Australia should ensure young people have meaningful influence and share power, and 35 strongly agree. Young people (14 of 16 strongly agree) and other stakeholders (21 of 24) are equally firm. The question is *how*, not *whether*.

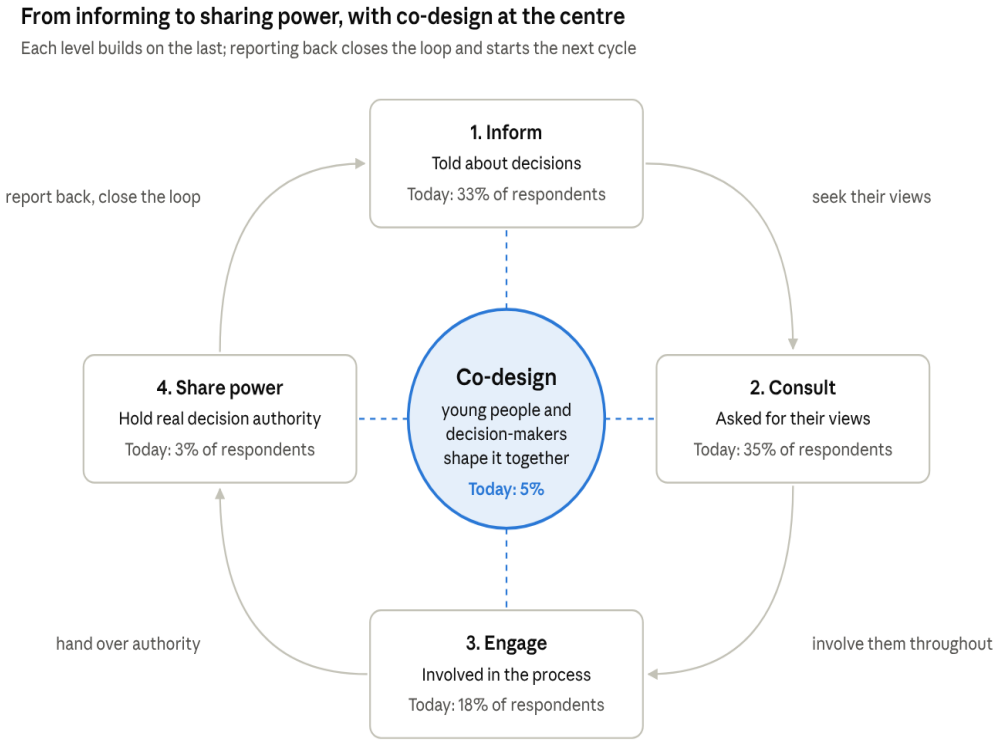
Respondents also confirm the paper's concern that participation rarely reaches influence. Asked how young people are involved in the settings they know best, two in three chose the two lowest rungs.

Responses to the discussion paper survey, n = 40, single choice. Rungs follow common participation ladders (inform → consult → engage → co-design → share power).



Both co-design answers came from young people, but no group describes a system where shared decision-making is normal. Three respondents said none of the options fit, suggesting structures are weak or absent. As one young person put it, the need is to*: "step-up from just consultations, and step into co-designs and shared decision making."*

Participation levels as a connected co-design cycle. The levels are connected, not separate steps on a ladder. Co-design sits at the centre of every level: young people and decision-makers shape each stage together. The cycle closes when decision-makers report back on what has changed, which builds the trust needed for the next round.



4. How the youth sector ecosystem works

The youth sector ecosystem is the network of people, organisations, and relationships that support young people's wellbeing, participation, rights, and leadership. It includes young people and youth-led organisations, community organisations, youth workers, service providers, researchers, governments, funders, advocacy organisations, and state, territory and national peak bodies.

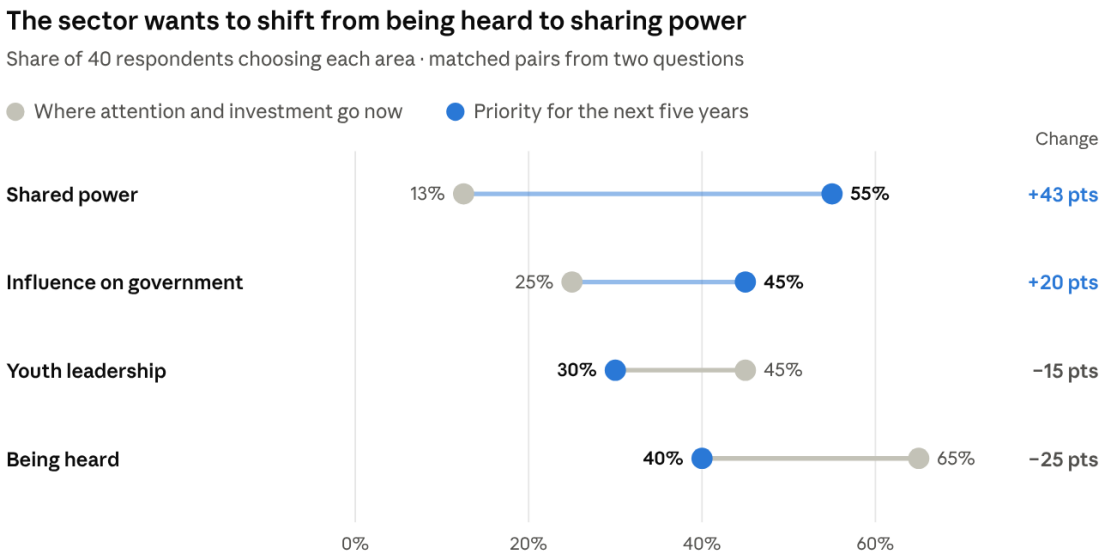
Describing the youth sector as an ecosystem is more than a metaphor: each part depends on the others to turn knowledge into action. Frontline services draw on research to demonstrate need and impact, while researchers use practice-based insight to strengthen the evidence base. Peak bodies connect this knowledge to policy, and young people identify priorities and guide direction. When a peak body disappears, research or data is missing, or a critical service closes, the damage is not confined to one organisation; it reappears across the system as lost knowledge, capacity, coordination and influence.

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No single organisation can understand, hold, or represent the whole ecosystem. Local services and communities often identify emerging needs before they appear in formal data. Peak bodies connect these local insights across jurisdictions, identify patterns, and bring them into policy and decision making. Young people contribute direct knowledge of how systems affect

their lives and communities. The ecosystem creates value when these different forms of knowledge move between local, state and territory, and national levels and inform action at each level.

Respondents see an ecosystem whose investment is aimed at being heard rather than at sharing power. Asked where attention and investment go now, and what should guide the next five years, they point to a clear shift.



Responses to the discussion paper survey, n = 40, multi-select. Pairs match the closest options across two questions; hover a dot for the exact wording.

Shared power is the most-chosen priority (55%) but one of the least-resourced areas today (13%). Influence over government decisions shows the same gap. Better collaboration across the sector was a priority for 14 respondents (35%).

Written responses echo the paper's warning about fragmentation. A youth-led organisation observed that "advocacy organisations and decision-makers are separated and siloed until challenges occur when it is often too late to change the system."

A young person called for:

> *"Better connection between grassroots advocacy and advisory groups to real change and policy at a larger scale."*

5. Three conditions for a sustainable youth sector ecosystem

A sustainable youth sector ecosystem depends on three core features. Respondents' insights show why each matter and what is needed to strengthen it.

5.1 Constant renewal

The paper: Young people naturally move into and out of the youth stage, so the sector must continually support new leaders, build relationships, and pass knowledge between generations. This requires dedicated structures, resources, and investment.

Respondents: Youth leadership development is the most-chosen action to strengthen influence (21 respondents, 53%), and 12 (30%) name stronger leadership pipelines as a five-year priority. Respondents want renewal to start early and to be funded properly:

- "Start with young people from a younger age, maybe 10 years old." — *government respondent*
- "Young people cannot advocate for themselves … if they do not know what their rights are." — *education respondent*, calling for rights education in schools
- Programs are "over-reliant on youth volunteers to function in a way that borders on exploitation, simply because the money is not there." — *young person*

5.2 Diversity of young people

The paper: Young people are not single, uniform groups. Their experiences differ by age, culture, geography, identity, access, and life experience. A strong ecosystem must ensure young people facing the greatest barriers can influence decisions.

Respondents: Greater representation of diverse young people is a five-year priority for 17 respondents (43%). It is the top priority for other stakeholders (54%) but chosen by only 25% of young people, who put shared power first. Written answers stress who is currently missing:

- The current structure "overwhelmingly favours the engagement of those already involved in advocacy and lacks diversity from the hardest-to-reach communities." (*young person)*
- Without proper resourcing, the ecosystem "will continue to hear from the same, most accessible voices." (*disability advocate and researcher)*
- "Re-think what 'multicultural' means" and the effect of constantly using the label "CALD": "Everyone has a culture — equity begins with recognising that." (*Researcher)*
- "Reaching young people in the regions." (youth-*led organisation)*

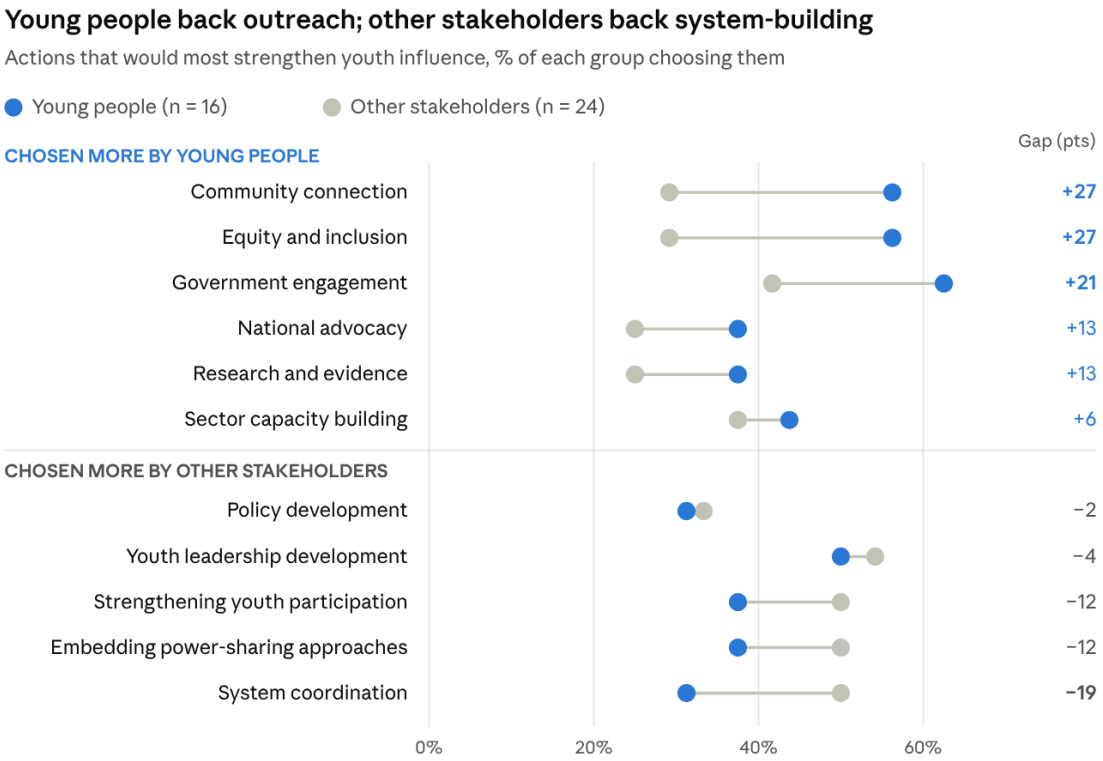
5.3 Unequal decision-making power

The paper: young people, youth workers and youth-led organisations bring lived experience, practice knowledge and community connections, but need meaningful opportunities, mentoring, information and resources to influence decisions, priorities and outcomes.

Respondents: Respondents place the responsibility for this imbalance on institutions as much as on young people. 17 (43%) say organisations lack the skills or capacity to share power, and 15 (38%) say participation is unpaid or under-resourced. One researcher urged the sector to "build the capacity of adults and organisations to share power, rather than placing the responsibility for participation solely on young people."

Young people and other stakeholders agree on direction but differ on the actions they would take first. Responses to the discussion paper survey: 16 young people, 24 other stakeholders; most chose five actions. Gap = young people share minus other stakeholders' share.

Young people lean towards outward-facing actions: engaging government, community connection, and equity and inclusion. Other stakeholders lean towards system-building: embedding power-sharing approaches, system coordination, and stronger participation structures.



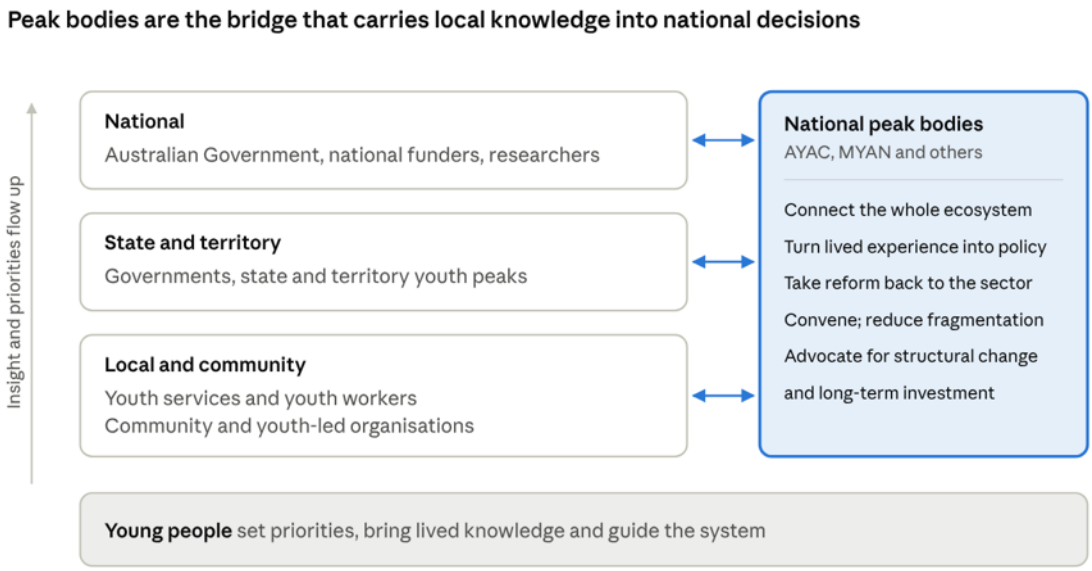
6. The role of national peak bodies

Peak bodies operate as a bridge in the ecosystem, connecting local knowledge and experience with state, territory and national decision-making.

They bring the insights of young people, communities and services to decision-makers, remove barriers to decision making, and support young people to exercise influence directly.

As national peak bodies, AYAC and MYAN:

- Connect young people, communities, services, researchers, funders and government.
- Translate lived experience, sector knowledge and evidence into policy and systems advice.
- Translate policy and reform agendas back to young people, communities and the sector.
- Convene diverse perspectives and reduce fragmentation across the ecosystem.
- Advocate for structural change, equity, participation and long-term investment.



Respondents want this bridge made stronger, better funded and better coordinated. Stronger investment in youth sector infrastructure is a five-year priority for 16 respondents (40%), and system coordination is chosen as an action by 17 (43%). Ten of the 24 written responses call for coordinated national infrastructure.

- **A national youth alliance.** "There is no equivalent for young people" of the National Women's Alliances. A funded National Youth Alliance would allow "joint advocacy on cross-cutting issues, shared infrastructure and data, coordinated approaches to funding." — *disability advocate and researcher*
- **Properly resourced peaks.** "We need to have properly resourced peak bodies that have the legitimacy to co-ordinate across the sector … Expecting youth voice simply to float upwards and affect policy change is as misguided as the voodoo doctrine of trickle down economics." — *peak body*
- **Strength in unity.** "By organising into a unified national youth ecosystem, it makes funding cuts more difficult." — *young person*
- **A shared strategy.** "A national forum or consensus amongst NGOs would enable a more coordinated and multi-pronged strategy." — *researcher*
- **Youth work as the engine.** Youth work's relational, place-based practice can bring "an even greater constituency of young people" into decisions than formal advisory groups. — *peak body*
- **Visibility.** "More visibility and more updates on what MYAN and AYAC is doing." — *government respondent*

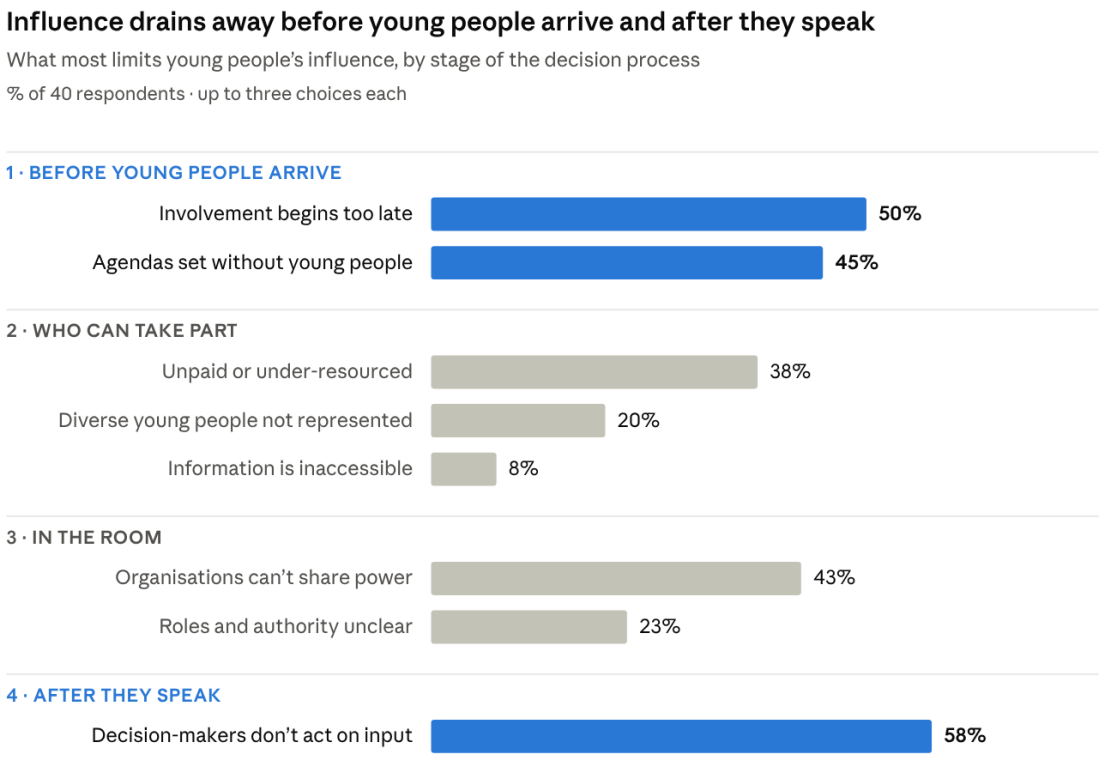
Fragility at any one peak spreads: when a specialist organisation faces funding uncertainty, "the loss isn't contained to that organisation. It's a loss of specialist knowledge, community trust, and advocacy capacity … across the entire system." This is the paper's ecosystem argument, confirmed from the field.

7. The importance of power sharing

Youth voice is essential, but it is meaningful only when young people can influence decisions that affect their lives. Participation can become tokenistic when young people share views or experiences without a clear pathway to shape outcomes. Strengthening youth voice means involving young people early, recognising their knowledge as evidence, sharing decision-making authority and ensuring they can influence agendas, priorities and resources.

For AYAC and MYAN, the next phase of youth participation is about building practical structures for shared power, including governance roles, early involvement in setting priorities, and the support young people need to influence systems.

Participants locate the loss of influence exactly where the paper warns it occurs before young people arrive, and after they speak.



Responses to the discussion paper survey, n = 40. Barrier wording shortened; hover a bar for the full option. Stage grouping by this brief.

The single largest barrier is that decision-makers do not act on young people's input (58%). Young people feel this most sharply: 69% chose it, against 50% of other stakeholders. Other stakeholders more often point to timing (54% say involvement begins too late) and organisations' lack of capacity to share power (46%).

Written responses describe what real power sharing looks like:

- **Authority, not advice.** "Sharing power means young people sit in governance roles with real authority, not just advisory ones." — *disability advocate and researcher*
- **Binding structures.** "Create leadership structures for young people with legislated binding authority" with "3rd party oversight to ensure accountability and transparency." — *researcher*
- **Closed feedback loops.** "Always provide detailed feedback to young people after consultations. Show exactly where the changes they actually made were influenced/taken by a young person." — *young person*
- **Practical mechanisms.** "Co-design projects, youth-led initiatives, participatory budgeting and representation on relevant Council committees and working groups." — *government respondent*
- **Room to learn.** "We tend to not allow them to make bad decisions … But I think this just erodes the ability to have an opinion or make a decision." — *government respondent*

The cost of getting this wrong is trust. As one youth-led organisation put it:

"Why would you 'have your say' if no one ever listens?"

8. Recommendations: a five-year implementation roadmap

Respondents were clear that shared power requires coordinated action across the ecosystem. The recommendations are organised below by the implementation phase, with ongoing commitments separated out. Phase 1 is 2027, Phase 2 is 2028–2029, and Phase 3 is 2030–2031.

National infrastructure: AYAC and MYAN urge the Australian Government to adopt a whole-of-government approach to youth ecosystem coordination and establish an Office for Youth within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Working with AYAC, MYAN and other specialist peak organisations as anchor organisations, the Office would coordinate youth-related work across portfolios, connect government with young people and the youth sector, and provide the national infrastructure needed to sustain shared power and accountability.

8.1 Phase 1 — rebuild trust and establish foundations (2027)

Action	Evidence from respondents	Responsible party
Fund national, state and territory youth peaks and youth-led organisations on five-year cycles	Infrastructure investment a priority for 40%; peak body fragility affects the whole system	Australian Government; state and territory governments
Report back within three months of every engagement and publish an annual account of how young people's input shaped decisions	Top barrier: decisionmakers do not act on input (58%; 69% of young people)	All governments; youth sector organisations and services
Involve young people when strategies, budgets and reviews are being scoped	Involvement too late (50%); agendas set without young people (45%)	Australian Government; state, territory and local governments
Fund state and territory youth peaks and place-based youth work	Local settings support effective leadership; youth work reaches beyond formal advisory groups	State and territory governments
Include payment, access and co-design costs in every grant	Participation unpaid or under-resourced (38%); funding raised in 9 of 24 written responses	Funders and philanthropy
Publish a central library of participation tools, case studies and remuneration guidelines	Useful frameworks are scattered; respondents requested remuneration guidance	AYAC, MYAN and youth sector peak bodies

8.2 Phase 2 — strengthen standards and capability (2028–2029)

Action	Evidence from respondents	Responsible party
Embed children's rights to education and student voice in schools through school–youth organisation partnerships	Youth leadership development was the top action (53%); respondents called for rights education from an early age	State and territory governments; schools; youth organisations
Develop a national Youth Participation Standard covering early involvement, authority, payment, accessibility and feedback	68% say young people are only informed or consulted; only 3 of 40 see co-design or shared power	AYAC, MYAN and youth sector peak bodies; young people and youth-led organisations
Run capacity building on sharing power for public servants, services, boards and funders	Organisations lack capacity to share power (43%); sector capacity building chosen by 40%	AYAC, MYAN and youth sector peak bodies; governments; funders
Make inclusion the default through disability access, cultural safety and regional reach	Diverse representation was the top priority for other stakeholders (54%)	Youth sector organisations and services; governments; funders
Train staff to identify and change practice that is not youth-led	Respondents called for practical tools for reflection and action	Youth sector organisations and services

Action	Evidence from respondents	Responsible party
Build funders' understanding of youth-led practice	Youth-led organisations called for training across the sector, including funding bodies	Funders and philanthropy; youth sector peak bodies

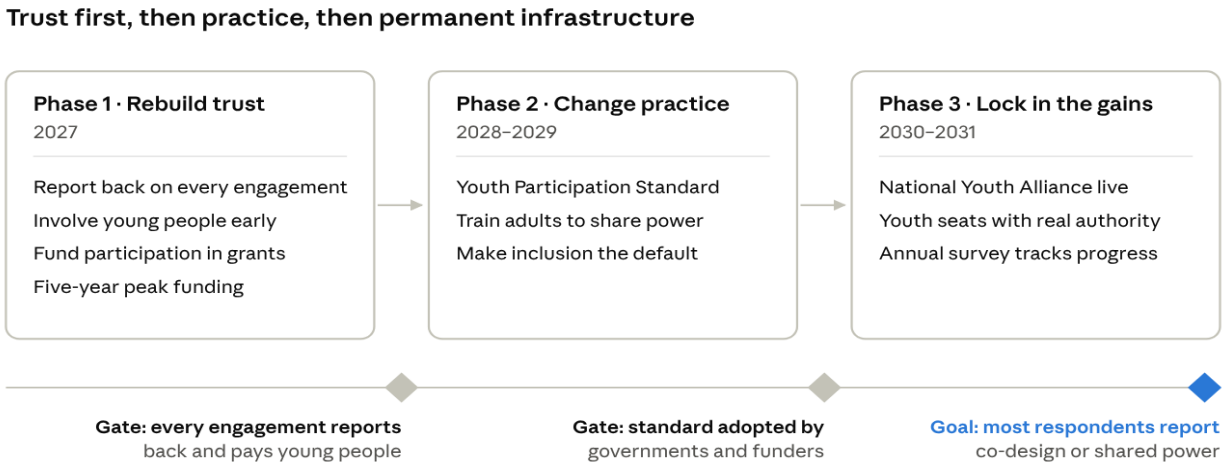
8.3 Phase 3 — embed shared power and infrastructure (2030–2031)

Action	Evidence from respondents	Responsible party
Give young people seats with real authority on relevant committees and pilot participatory budgeting	Shared power was the top five-year priority (55%); 9 of 24 written responses sought authority, not advisory roles	State, territory and local governments
Put young people into paid governance and design roles with real authority	9 of 24 written responses sought authority, not advisory roles	Youth sector organisations and services; governments
Fund a National Youth Alliance bringing cohort-specific peaks together	Coordinated national infrastructure raised in 10 of 24 written responses; system coordination chosen by 43%	Australian Government; AYAC, MYAN and youth sector peak bodies
Plan shared public "third spaces" for young people in new suburbs	A young person identified disconnected growth suburbs as a barrier to connection	State and local governments; planning authorities

8.4 Ongoing actions — sustain coordination and accountability

Action	Evidence from respondents	Responsible party
Convene the sector towards a shared national strategy and National Youth Alliance	Better collaboration a priority for 35%; written calls for a national forum or consensus	AYAC, MYAN and youth sector peak bodies
Offer longer, flexible funding that allows time to build relationships with young people	Funding conditions were identified as a barrier to authentic engagement	Funders and philanthropy; governments
Co-own the Youth Participation Standard and set success measures	Respondents called for youth leaders to define success and inform investment	Young people and youth-led organisations; AYAC and MYAN
Build peer networks linking grassroots advocacy to state and national decision-making	Young people asked for stronger connections between grassroots advocacy and policy	Young people and youth-led organisations; youth sector peak bodies
Lead direct engagement with government, with resourcing from peaks and funders	Government engagement was the top action for young people (63%)	Young people and youth-led organisations; peak bodies; funders
Repeat the survey each International Youth Day and report progress publicly	Respondents requested greater visibility and regular updates	AYAC and MYAN

The recommendations work as a five-year sequence: quick actions that rebuild trust first, then the standard and capability that change practice, then the lasting infrastructure that holds the gains.



Proposed five-year roadmap, 2027–2031 · 3 phases, 2 gates and a goal; actions are detailed in section 8.

Measuring progress. AYAC and MYAN can repeat this survey each International Youth Day. Success by 2031 would mean most respondents place young people at *co-design* or *shared decision-making*, rather than *informed* or *consulted*, and "decision-makers do not act on input" no longer ranks among the top three barriers.

9. Making it happen: a call to action

Australia now needs to move from inviting youth voice to sharing power. Governments, funders, peak bodies and services must act together, so young people are involved early, supported to participate and able to see how their input changes decisions.

The immediate ask is clear: rebuild trust through transparent feedback and paid participation, strengthen practice through shared standards and capability, and secure the long-term infrastructure that connects local experience with national decision-making.

AYAC and MYAN call on every part of the ecosystem to commit to the five-year roadmap, resource its actions and report progress publicly on each International Youth Day. Coordinated action can make genuine influence, not consultation alone, the standard for all young people.