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# Youth Civic Participation in Local Government, Aotearoa New Zealand:

## Constraints and Options for Empowerment

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## Abstract

This research examined youth civic participation in four youth councils in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa NZ) local government, focusing on how institutional contexts facilitate and constrain meaningful engagement in line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). It explored how youth councillors express voice, exercise agency, and construct civic and political identities. The study employed a qualitative, interpretivist approach underpinned by a social constructionist lens. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 11 youth and 6 adult staff, alongside analysis of institutional documents and council websites. Both institutional logics and internal dynamics shaped the extent to which youth councillors could substantively participate in policymaking. Two orientations emerged, generating divergent practices and participatory outcomes across council sites: a youth development logic characterised by symbolic inclusion and constrained agency, and a participatory rights logic marked by consultation and informed engagement. The findings demonstrated that rights-based practice can be incrementally adopted, and hybrid approaches integrating youth development and rights-based logics could strengthen participatory outcomes. Through training and the application of conceptual tools, youth councillors cultivated reflexive practice, enabling them to recognise tokenism, identify structural barriers, and build relationships across social and ethnic lines. This practice, combined with targeted outreach, generated bridging social capital and strengthened connections with diverse and under-represented communities. Also, regional variation in community-based youth civic initiatives highlighted that social capital develops unevenly across contexts, underscoring the importance of council investment in youth-specific civic infrastructure. When supported by institutional scaffolding, such as resourcing youth-led initiatives, project-based activities, and

partnerships with community organisations, youth councils can act as catalysts for wider civic engagement.

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and personally transformative. “I lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1–2).

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## Key Terms and Acronyms

**Aotearoa:** Māori name for New Zealand.

**Children:** Aged 0–12 years.

**Youth:** Aged 12–24 years.

*These age categories follow central Aotearoa New Zealand government policy definitions (MYA, 2002).*

**CFCI (Child-Friendly Cities Initiative):** A global framework for local youth participation.

**CRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child):** International treaty outlining the rights of children under 18 years.

**Diverse youth:** Youth with heterogeneous identities shaped by ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, disability, and geography.

**GC12 (General Comment No. 12):** UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's interpretation of Article 12.

**Hapū/Iwi:** Māori sub-tribe/tribe.

**LGA (Local Government Act 2002):** Defines local government in Aotearoa New Zealand.

**LGNZ (Local Government New Zealand):** National organisation representing local authorities.

**LTP (Long-Term Plan):** Council's 10-year strategic plan, reviewed every three years.

**Mana Mokopuna – Children and Young People's Commission:** Formerly the Office of the Children's Commissioner, this independent Crown entity advocates for the rights, interests, and wellbeing of all children and youth under 18 in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is led by the Chief Children's Commissioner and overseen by a governing board, and provides independent monitoring and reporting on children's rights, including contributing to Aotearoa New Zealand's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Māori:** Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Ministry of Youth Affairs:** Predecessor to the Ministry of Youth Development.

**MYD (Ministry of Youth Development – Te Manatū Whakahiato Taiohi):** Central government agency supporting youth wellbeing and development.

**NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation):** Independent, non-state organisation.

**Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children:** Government department responsible for care and protection of children and young people who are at risk of harm, require statutory intervention, are in the care or custody of the State, or are involved in the youth justice system.

**PYD (Positive Youth Development):** Dominant theoretical approach in youth studies.

**Rangatahi:** Māori youth.

**SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals):** UN global framework for sustainable development.

**Tamariki:** Māori children.

**Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi):** Foundational to governance and participation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

**UNICEF:** United Nations International Children's Fund.

**Whānau:** Extended Māori family or family group.

**YDSA (Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa):** Foundational 2002 national youth strategy underpinning PYD.

# Introduction

This research examines how youth councillors enact participation and construct civic and political identities within local government in Aotearoa NZ. It investigates how youth participatory rights are enacted, negotiated, and constrained, with particular attention to the role of youth councillors in policymaking and their capacity to influence outcomes. The study explores how non-elected youth councillors represent and extend democratic practice to the wider and diverse youth community. It also considers institutional responses that promote the participation of the broader youth constituency in civic initiatives. The study seeks to generate insights into youth participatory practice while offering practical recommendations to strengthen the role of youth councils in Aotearoa NZ. This chapter begins by situating the research within the global policy framework and local socio-political context, highlighting the key tensions and priorities shaping local government's commitment to effective, inclusive, and sustainable youth civic participation. It then outlines the rationale for the study in relation to gaps in the literature, before presenting the research focus and questions. The chapter concludes with the study context, thesis structure, and researcher positioning.

## 1.2 Background Context: The Global Policy Framework

Child and youth civic and political participation at the local government level is increasingly acknowledged among practitioners and policymakers across Western liberal democracies as essential to ensuring that policies, programmes, and services reflect young people's views and lived experiences (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Canosa et al., 2022; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti, 2024). Public officials have demonstrated significant commitment to making urban areas better places for children and youth, with innovation in youth engagement increasingly viewed as a pathway to improved outcomes (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Smith, 2015).

Extensive research has demonstrated the far-reaching benefits of youth participation (Harre, 2007; Lansdown, 2005; Scales et al., 2000; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Sherrod et al., 2002; Yates & Youniss, 1996; Zeldin, 2018). Participation supports the personal, social, and civic development of young people. By engaging in government decision-making, youth develop a deeper understanding of political processes, strengthen leadership skills, and expand social networks (Conner & Cosner, 2016; Kirby & Bryson, 2002). Moreover, participation enhances democratic processes and contributes to more effective services, with communities benefiting from youth expertise in designing programmes and policies that are more relevant and responsive (Checkoway, 2011; David & Buchanan, 2020). These recognised benefits explain why youth participation has become a central concern within international children's rights frameworks and global policy agendas.

The ways in which youth participation is enacted locally cannot be separated from the international policy framework that has shaped participatory rights practice. Global recognition of the need to involve children and young people in urban planning gained momentum with the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989

(UN, 1989). Ratified by Aotearoa NZ in 1993, the CRC established the foundational legal framework for a rights-based approach to youth participation. As one of the Convention's four General Principles, Article 12(1) affirms that children and young people have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and to have those views considered, giving due weight according to their age and maturity (Lansdown, 2011; UN, 1989). Article 12(1) outlines the right to participation, [1] while the Committee's General Comment No. 12 (GC12) (UN, 2009) provides a more detailed interpretation. The Committee describes participation as an ongoing process involving information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults, grounded in mutual respect, through which children learn how their views and those of adults are considered and shape outcomes. This definition emphasises constructive exchange, the importance of feedback, and stresses that participation must be understood as a continuous, well-supported process rather than a one-off consultation. This interpretation is consistent with broader participation literature, which emphasises that meaningful engagement must be sustained, relational, and embedded in ongoing processes rather than delivered as isolated or one-off consultations (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Tisdall, 2017; Shier, 2001). Importantly, children's participation rights operate alongside other CRC provisions that emphasise inclusion and equity. Articles 2, 23, and 30 make clear that participation must be accessible to all children, including those with disabilities and those from Indigenous or minority cultural and linguistic backgrounds.[2] This articulation of participation has been a major catalyst for efforts

[1] Article 12 applies to both decisions made about an individual child and collective decisions involving groups of children. Article 12(2) requires that children be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings. Article 4 places the primary responsibility on States Parties to implement children's rights through appropriate legislative, administrative, and resource measures. Article 45 complements this by requiring States to report on these efforts and engage with international monitoring and support mechanisms. These provisions ensure both domestic action and external accountability in realising meaningful participation (UN,1989).

[2] Article 2 requires that all rights in the CRC be realised without discrimination, ensuring that participation opportunities are accessible across differences such as disability, ethnicity, culture, language, and socioeconomic background. Article 23 affirms that children with disabilities have the right to participate fully and to receive appropriate support to express their views, recognising that additional measures may be needed to ensure their inclusion. Article 30 protects the rights of Indigenous and minority children to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their language, underscoring the importance of culturally grounded and identity-affirming participation practices (UN, 1989).

by public authorities, community organisations, and NGOs to address the longstanding under-representation of children and youth in urban planning and development processes (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Harada, 2023). Despite these commitments, scholars note that meaningful participation remains elusive. As McMellon and Tisdall (2020) observe, the CRC has strengthened recognition of children's agency and unsettled traditional constructions of childhood, but persistent structural and relational barriers continue to restrict children and young people's participation and influence in public policy arenas, including their ability to renegotiate unequal youth–adult power relations.

Building on this critique, Article 12 has been described by some authors as a radical and innovative departure, yet it ultimately provides only a modest right to participation (Lansdown, 2011; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). Children's views are not determinative; adults remain responsible for weighing those views and judging their relevance in light of the child's age and maturity. Article 3 requires that the child's best interests be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them, a principle that often reinforces adult authority and can be used to limit the extent to which children's views shape decisions (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). As a result, while Article 12 is widely celebrated in policy and advocacy circles, it falls short of offering children genuine autonomy or self-determination. Even within this modest framework, implementation challenges persist. Barriers arise across institutional, social, political, cultural, and economic contexts, including tokenism, exclusion, inequality, power imbalances between adults and young people, weak accountability, and a lack of sustainable participatory structures. These factors continue to undermine the realisation of meaningful participation in practice (Canosa et al., 2022; Harada, 2023; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022).

Alongside the CRC, the 1990s saw a significant expansion of global initiatives aimed at operationalising children's rights at local and municipal levels. A key initiative was the Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), launched in 1996 by UNICEF and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) following the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2004; UN, 1996). The CFCI provided frameworks to guide municipalities in implementing the CRC locally, emphasising inclusive participatory structures (Cushing & van Vliet, 2017). The UN Habitat Agenda (UN, 1996) explicitly affirmed the importance of considering children and youth in relation to their everyday lived environments, recognising their insights, creativity, and perspectives as vital to securing an improved quality of life. Similarly, the World Summit for Social Development (UN, 1995) reinforced youth inclusion in social policy.

Other global policy frameworks further strengthened the role of youth in urban planning. For instance, States Parties to the CRC are mandated to ensure the meaningful participation of children and youth in the design and implementation of policies and programmes aimed at achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). Together, these initiatives established a normative basis for integrating youth voices into urban planning and decision-making, influencing subsequent practice and scholarship (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Canosa et al., 2022).

### 1.3 Persistent Gaps Between Policy and Practice

However, despite this global policy framework, empirical research consistently finds that youth rarely influence the structure, substance, or outcomes of their participation in public governance (Harada, 2023; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Munyede et al., 2021; Saggers et al., 2004). In many countries, the recognition of children's rights in policy remains aspirational,

transitory, and symbolic rather than embedded (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). Consultative processes, the foremost strategy adopted by Western liberal governments in their formal commitment to youth participatory rights, often result in limited representation through youth councils, advisory bodies, and youth parliaments, which remain largely unaccountable to young people (Collin, 2015; Collin & Vromen, 2010; Munyede et al., 2021; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022; Matthews, 2001a). These concerns have prompted ethical scrutiny of such models, which are frequently positioned as mechanisms to advance CRC-aligned participatory rights yet may fall short in practice (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019).

Explaining the limited impact of youth on local government policy outcomes requires examining the institutional context that shapes possibilities for meaningful participatory citizenship. Youth remain on the margins of decision-making due to a lack of institutional power, adultism, and adult-centric, hierarchical structures that resist youth cultures and the unique ways in which young people participate (Bessell, 2009; Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Matthews, 2001a; Theis, 2010). Common challenges across diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts include rights being framed in law but not delivered in practice, views solicited but not genuinely considered by adults who are reluctant to share power, inequitable inclusion of certain groups of youth, and weak accountability mechanisms that prevent youth from challenging exclusionary practices and claiming their participation rights (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023; Bridgland Sorenson, 2006; Matthews, 2001b; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022).

Youth councils are heavily critiqued as mechanisms that primarily benefit the personal development of an elite few, with limited capacity to connect with, serve, and represent the social and political interests of diverse groups of youth, including those harder to reach (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Matthews, 2001b; Matthews & Limb, 2003; Wyness, 2009). They tend to

reflect the interests of advantaged youth while overlooking the voices and needs of ethnic minorities and those with unique circumstances (Augsberger et al., 2016; Augsberger et al., 2018b). As a result, youth councils fail to extend democracy to the wider youth community and risk reproducing existing social inequalities (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Matthews & Limb, 2003). Representing diverse youth voices in local government is a key function of youth councils, and strong connectedness with the wider youth community is vital to ensuring democratic rights (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017).

The inflexibility of public institutions, combined with limited recognition by adults of the marginalised position of youth, continues to be a primary barrier to participation (David & Buchanan, 2020; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Altering institutional structures and sharing power with youth is often perceived by officials as risky and difficult (David & Buchanan, 2020). Moreover, government officials rarely acknowledge the power differential between themselves and youth, nor account for it when designing consultative processes (Collin & Vromen, 2010). Institutional barriers such as adultism, an unwillingness to adapt hierarchical, inflexible structures, financial constraints, and limited capacity result in tokenistic participation and a disconnect between local government and the youth community. This signals an ongoing inability of local government to reach out, connect with youth, and implement effective youth-centric participatory methods (Harada, 2023; Matthews, 2001a; Wyness, 2009).

Despite the vast production of conceptual models and ‘how to’ resources in the academic and practitioner literature since the inception of the CRC, progress in improving outcomes has been limited (Collin, 2015). Consequently, scholars and practitioners call for new operating models that reflect youth-centric, informal forms of participation, are inclusive of diverse youth, and foster more equitable youth–adult relations (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Collin & Vromen, 2010; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Such models must empower youth to

contribute meaningfully to urban planning, policymaking, and outcomes that shape their communities and environments.

Improving the active role of youth in urban planning is vital, as young people are interested in civic, social, and political issues and are willing to assume responsibility within their communities (Byrne & Lundy, 2019; Coffey et al., 1999; Harris et al., 2007; O'Toole, 2003; Panelli et al., 2002; Wyse, 2001). Likewise, evidence shows that community programmes where youth perceive they have a genuine voice in decision-making are most successful (Checkoway, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2016). Surveys have consistently reported that youth desire a stronger voice in local governance and want accountability from adults and institutions in relation to their input. They seek stronger links to adult councils, additional support to effectively express their views, and concrete results from their contributions (Finlay, 2010; Fitzmaurice & Brown, 2023; OCC, 2015; Ministry of Youth Development [MYD], 2020). Overall, youth want opportunities to actively shape their communities and make a positive difference in the lives of diverse groups of young people (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Harris et al., 2007; O'Toole, 2003; Panelli et al., 2002). Due to their exclusion from policymaking spaces, enhancing youth participation in urban planning is not only a democratic imperative but a pressing social justice concern, as current policy decisions will shape the long-term trajectories of their communities (David & Buchanan, 2020). This research therefore situates itself within these debates, examining how youth councils in Aotearoa NZ might transcend tokenistic structures to realise the participatory rights and social justice objectives articulated in the CRC (UN, 1989).

### 1.4 Inclusive Participation and Wellbeing at the Local Level – the Aotearoa NZ Context

Creating new operating models that address the disconnect between youth and local government is critical. The role and position of young people in local government is likely to become increasingly important in the future. Driving factors include central government obligations to the participatory rights of the CRC, significant wellbeing issues affecting contemporary youth, and a policy stance that devolves responsibility and decision-making to local authorities and their communities for addressing social wellbeing (Canosa et al., 2022; Reid et al., 2021; White et al., 2017).

The implementation of youth participation and wellbeing strategies at the local level is essential as many young people face a myriad of contemporary challenges. Poverty and inequality mean that many struggle to achieve economic security, social wellbeing, and a positive trajectory. Moreover, youth across ethnic and social lines, such as LGBTQ+ youth, may face greater challenges relating to health issues and oppression (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Braithwaite & Deane, 2023). While targeted wellbeing programmes are available through the health sector and social service providers, some argue that universal rather than targeted strategies may be more effective. This signals a responsibility for local government to build successful interventions at local and regional levels to address wellbeing priorities (Reid et al., 2021). These trends require institutions to develop youth-centric participatory methods that ensure equitable representation, enhance wellbeing, and strengthen youth influence on policy outcomes. Given that youth councils are the primary vehicle through which local governments interact with youth, their role in creating new participatory models in collaboration with adults is vital.

### 1.5 Localism and Wellbeing

Building on the challenges stated above, an increased role for Aotearoa NZ local government in youth participation and wellbeing strategies is essential. This is emphasised in the Child and Youth Strategy 2024–27, which highlights the need for stronger local leadership, collaboration, and youth-centred decision-making (Ministry of Social Development (MSD), 2024). Political and policy elites at the central government level have called for a shift toward localism, which involves devolving responsibility to local councils and their communities to find solutions to social wellbeing issues. Localism was envisaged by politicians of the Sixth Labour Government (2017–2023) as the future social policy direction for local government, designed to meet the diverse and unique priorities of each locality (Reid et al., 2021). For example, in 2018, the Minister for Local Government, Hon. Nanaia Mahuta, defined the role of local government as coordinating and facilitating public services in response to local wellbeing needs. This approach was strongly advocated by Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ), the lead organisation for the local government sector The rationale for localism rests on recognition of significant variation in wellbeing across regions. Local councils are better placed than central government to tailor services to diverse communities (Reid et al., 2021). This reflects the principle of subsidiarity: more effective decisions are made when they occur as close to the people as possible, enabling citizens to hold decision-makers more accountable (Heywood, 2013).

### 1.6 Addressing the Disconnect

While localism offers opportunities, its success depends on authentic democratic processes that bridge the gap between councils, citizens, and communities. Hon. Nanaia Mahuta emphasised that wellbeing conversations need to occur at the local level. However,

questions remain about the effectiveness of democratic processes within local government. Legislation places a strong emphasis on community engagement and participation in district and regional planning, but tensions persist in achieving equitable and diverse representation across cultural, ethnic, and social lines (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023; Reid et al., 2021).

Youth councils, as representatives of local youth, have a responsibility to connect with young people, hold wellbeing conversations, and advocate for youth services and programmes. Youth councils have been defined as formal or quasi-formal bodies of youth, typically of high school age, who advise and interact with local officials (Augsberger et al., 2018a). They serve a vital representative function; they are considered a primary vehicle for providing the wider, largely non-voting youth citizenry with a democratic voice. They signal a formal commitment to youth participatory rights in accordance with Article 12 of CRC (UN, 1989). In Aotearoa NZ, the Ministry of Youth Affairs (MYA, 1997) defined youth councils as continuing groups of young advisors who provide advice to local councils and advocate for youth in their region. Although this early guidance is no longer publicly accessible online, it outlined expectations that youth councillors would consult with local young people, discuss community issues, and provide information and advice to councils, service delivery agencies, external organisations, and youth networks.

These descriptions clearly indicate the function of youth councils, and the role and responsibilities of youth councillors: to engage with and seek the views of the wider youth population and advise youth-serving agencies accordingly. Despite these formal commitments, concerns remain that youth councillors struggle to connect with diverse youth, particularly those harder to reach (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Wyness, 2009). To address these concerns and achieve equitable representation, local government must invest

in the formation of bridging capital, that is egalitarian networks that link people across divides such as religion, class, or ethnicity (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993).

### 1.7 Diverse Youth and Inclusive Participation

Alongside these institutional concerns, the growing diversity of Aotearoa NZ's youth population raises further questions about inclusive participation. In meeting its formal commitment to inclusive participation, local government in Aotearoa NZ must remain true to its bicultural foundations while also accommodating increasing social diversity and multicultural communities (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023; Reid et al., 2021). Aotearoa NZ society is increasingly multicultural, driven largely by ongoing migration from the Pacific Islands and Asia (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023). Children and youth constitute the most ethnically diverse group, as Māori, Pasifika, and Asian populations are younger overall than the European population. Māori rangatahi, in particular, make up a significant proportion of the youth population (Statistics New Zealand, 2025). Moreover, youth are not a homogenous group (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Tuiwai Smith et al., 2002). Equitable representation must also account for the intersection of ethnic identities with other aspects of young people's identities, including gender, sexual orientation, disability, health status, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic position, rural/urban location (Eath et al., 2021). Ultimately, the goal is to ensure all youth have the opportunity to contribute to decision-making and policy outcomes that shape their communities and lived experiences. Given their marginalised position in political systems and limited influence on policy outcomes, strengthening the socio-political citizenship of youth is a critical social justice concern.

### 1.8 Aotearoa NZ Youth Participation and Youth Council Framework

Since the early 2000s, Aotearoa NZ's youth policy landscape has been shaped by a positive youth development (PYD) orientation, informed by Indigenous frameworks such as E Tipu e Rea, which emphasises holistic, culturally grounded approaches to youth wellbeing (Keelan, 2001). This orientation was later formalised through national Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (MYA, 2002) and strengthened through the Mana Taiohi framework (Ara Taiohi, 2019). Together, these approaches aimed to embed wellbeing, relational support, cultural responsiveness, and youth voice across government and NGO practice (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023).

For Pacific young people, the Lalanga Fou: Pacific Aotearoa Direction for Action (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2018) provides a strategic foundation that centres Pacific aspirations and outlines priorities for strengthening youth wellbeing, leadership, and future opportunities. Within this framework, Kau Tulī is the Ministry for Pacific Peoples' national Pacific youth advisory group (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020a; 2021). It was established to provide youth leadership and guide the Ministry's response to Goal Four of Lalanga Fou, which seeks confident, thriving and resilient Pacific young people. Targeted Pacific initiatives, including Tupu Aotearoa, a programme that supports Pacific people into sustainable employment or education pathways (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020b, 2022), the Toloa STEM programme, which aims to increase Pacific participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, n.d.), and the Ola Manuia Pacific Health and Wellbeing Action Plan (Ministry of Health, 2020) demonstrate how culturally grounded youth development approaches promote pathways into education, employment, leadership, and wellbeing, shaping transitions to adulthood.

More recent strategies, such as the Youth Plan: Voice, Leadership, Action (Ministry of Youth Development, 2020, 2023), continue to elevate youth voice and visibility. The Youth Plan is a cross-government strategy designed to amplify youth voice in decision-making, strengthen youth leadership, and ensure young people are meaningfully involved and empowered across policy processes. However, its strong emphasis on developmental outcomes overshadows deeper forms of civic and political participation, risking forms of "thin citizenship" in which young people are positioned as beneficiaries rather than co-creators of governance (Collin, 2015). This tension, between empowerment through development and constraints on participation in public policy decision-making, frames ongoing debates about youth citizenship, and underpins the analysis in this research. These tensions mirror deeper constitutional debates about whose voices are recognised in public decision making, making it necessary to consider the broader context of citizenship and Treaty commitments.

Aotearoa NZ has several distinctive features that shape youth participation through councils. Since youth councils are not mandated in legislation, their existence and influence depend entirely on local political will, creating the potential for wide regional variation and leaving structures vulnerable to budget cuts, as seen in the recent wave of disestablishments since 2024 (Radio New Zealand, 2024). Aotearoa NZ's local government system is small and relational, giving youth the potential for more direct access to councillors and staff. This can enable meaningful influence when adults hold rights-based assumptions, but it can equally reinforce gatekeeping when adults take a more paternalistic view. Te Tiriti o Waitangi provides a unique conceptual foundation by embedding expectations of partnership and shared decision-making, even if this is unevenly realised in practice (Reid et al., 2021). Unlike many countries, Aotearoa NZ also lacks a national youth council infrastructure: the once well-resourced national system was significantly downsized, removing a space for youth councillors to organise, build collective identity, and develop political visibility. As a result,

youth influence depends heavily on local conditions rather than a coordinated national framework. Recent developments highlight these structural vulnerabilities: some councils have disestablished youth councils for fiscal reasons, others have shifted to direct engagement models, while others have reinstated formal structures after finding informal direct outreach insufficient. These divergent approaches underscore the wider debate between direct engagement and institutionalised structures, with Tisdall (2015) showing that without formal mechanisms such as youth councils, youth participation becomes inconsistent, adult-controlled, and prone to tokenism. Furthermore, youth in Aotearoa NZ have expressed a clear desire for deeper policy involvement, revealing a gap between youth aspirations and institutional practice that is particularly salient. Together, these trends point to the need for structural reform: embedding youth participation as a rights-based obligation within the Local Government Act and policy cycle, supported by stable funding and mandated mechanisms. Without this, youth voice remains discretionary**,** fragile, and highly exposed to political shifts.

### 1.9 Egalitarian Citizenship and Treaty Obligations

Broader constitutional debates shape youth participation. The government in Aotearoa NZ was formed following the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi between the Indigenous Māori population and European settlers in 1840. As a constitutional monarchy, the structure of government and key features of democracy, both central and local, are based on the United Kingdom Westminster tradition. However, the need for greater effectiveness in ensuring Māori contribute to local government decision-making is well established, as Te Tiriti creates obligations for local councils that are often ignored or only partially fulfilled (Reid et al., 2021).

The broader impacts of colonisation in Aotearoa continue to shape the lived realities of Māori youth, influencing their social, cultural, and political worlds in profound ways (Fitzmaurice & Brown, 2023; Orange, 2015; Walker, 1990). The large-scale dispossession of

whenua throughout the nineteenth century fundamentally disrupted Māori economic structures, community life, and intergenerational stability. Crown breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the systematic acquisition of Māori land were not isolated historical events but catalysts for long-term social dislocation that continue to shape the conditions within which rangatahi live today (Orange, 2015; Walker, 1990). The subsequent urbanisation of Māori in the mid-twentieth century intensified this disruption, weakening whakapapa-based networks that traditionally supported identity formation and collective wellbeing (Durie, 1998).

Colonisation has also shaped the frameworks through which youth participation is understood and enacted in Aotearoa NZ. Youth participation scholarship has long been dominated by Western theoretical traditions, a pattern that has significant implications for Indigenous young people. Roger Hart, for example, whose Ladder of Participation became globally influential, acknowledged that dominant participation frameworks are grounded in Western assumptions about childhood, agency, and governance (Hart, 2008). Such models tend to privilege individual expression, formal consultation, and institutional authority, approaches that do not necessarily align with Māori relational and collective decision-making (Smith, 2012). Similarly, Fitzmaurice and Brown (2023) argue that mainstream participation practices in Aotearoa often fail to create culturally meaningful spaces for rangatahi. For Māori youth, these Western frameworks can result in participation processes that feel tokenistic or disconnected from their lived realities.

The impacts of colonisation on Māori youth are both enduring and evolving. They shape the conditions within which rangatahi live, learn, and participate, while also informing powerful forms of resistance, creativity, and leadership that Māori youth continue to enact. Rangatahi involvement in areas such as climate justice, land protection, and language revitalisation reflects contemporary expressions of tino rangatiratanga **(**Ritchie, 2023). For

example, youth activism was central to the Ihumātao movement and subsequent occupation (2016–2020), which opposed a planned housing development on ancestral land. The occupation was led by SOUL (Save Our Unique Landscape), a peaceful group of protestors whose kaupapa gained widespread national support and sustained public attention (Elers & Dutta, 2019). SOUL's actions were grounded in intergenerational responsibility and collective action, illustrating how rangatahi mobilised whakapapa, social media, and community networks to assert mana whenua rights and protect the land. Ihumātao was not only a land rights struggle but also a powerful example of contemporary Māori youth activism rooted in whakapapa and community mobilisation. Māori youth development is understood as strengths-based and culturally grounded, emphasising identity, collective responsibility, and a commitment to uplifting whānau and communities (Fitzmaurice & Brown, 2023; Ware & Walsh-Tapiata, 2010). These contemporary forms of leadership challenge colonial narratives and highlight the dynamic role that rangatahi continue to play in shaping Aotearoa's future.

In this context, the participation of Māori youth is significant. As tangata whenua, Māori rangatahi hold unique rights under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, yet their voices may be marginalised within local government structures given tensions about the responsiveness of colonial structures to be inclusive to cultural considerations. Addressing this disconnect requires openness to dialogue and flexibility by institutions to consider transformative and potentially more effective participatory governance models, including traditional collective Māori governing systems. Such approaches align with the concepts of localism and bridging social capital, offering pathways to build stronger connections between local government and diverse groups of citizens (Reid et al., 2021). These broader debates about the effectiveness of democratic arrangements for the wider population are central to egalitarian citizenship. Citizenship is an evolving concept that must be reworked to realise its egalitarian and anti-hierarchical potential (Hoffman, 2004). Realising egalitarian citizenship requires treaty

partners to engage in ongoing dialogue and critique of the inclusionary and exclusionary effects of local democratic structures.

### 1.10 Mātauranga Māori and Youth Participation

Local government structures in Aotearoa NZ are colonial institutions that do not operate through a Te Ao Māori worldview. Whether they meaningfully incorporate Māori perspectives, include rangatahi Māori, or uphold iwi–local government relationships is ultimately a question best answered by iwi and hapū themselves, and requires a Kaupapa Māori lens to define what genuine Māori participation and rangatahi leadership look like. Meaningful youth engagement in Aotearoa NZ is strengthened when it draws on Te Ao Māori, because it frames civic participation as relational, intergenerational, and grounded in collective responsibility. This worldview positions rangatahi as part of a wider whakapapa of decision-making rather than as isolated individuals being consulted (Durie, 1998). These issues are inseparable from wider debates about Māori representation. If Māori adults face renewed barriers to participation, such as the potential removal of Māori wards under the Local Government (Electoral Legislation and Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Bill/Act 2024, then rangatahi effectively inherit that structural exclusion. Youth civic empowerment therefore depends not only on youth-specific mechanisms but also on the ability of Māori communities to exercise Tiriti-led participation. In this sense, youth participation cannot be separated from the political conditions shaping adult Māori representation, nor from the obligations that Te Tiriti places on local government to uphold partnership, protection, and participation.

Mana Taiohi, launched in 2019, reflects a shift toward culturally grounded youth development (Ara Taiohi, 2019). It replaced the 2002 Youth Development Strategy and embeds mana, Te Ao Māori principles, and Treaty-based practice at the centre of youth work. Māori youth governance in Aotearoa NZ typically does not take the form of a separate youth council. Instead, rangatahi contribute through whānau, hapū, and iwi structures such as marae committees and rūnanga, where their role is grounded in whakapapa and collective responsibility. These models emphasise whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and intergenerational leadership, aligning closely with the principles of Mana Taiohi. Whanaungatanga refers to building and maintaining strong relationships, creating belonging, trust, and shared purpose. Manaakitanga emphasises care, respect, and uplifting the mana of others, ensuring decisions protect wellbeing and uphold dignity. These principles illustrate how Māori governance traditions conceptualise participation as collective, relational, and embedded in responsibilities to whānau and whenua (Durie, 1998). These perspectives highlight that Māori youth participation cannot be fully realised within Western participation models alone. A rights-based approach to youth participation in Aotearoa NZ must therefore also be a Tiriti-based approach, requiring local government to move beyond discretionary cultural inclusion toward structural arrangements that recognise rangatahi Māori as tangata whenua with distinct rights, responsibilities, and leadership roles.

### 1.11 Rationale for Study

The rationale for this study is to understand how local government integrates youth into policymaking as part of the broader programme shaping community outcomes. Local authorities play a significant and far-reaching role in influencing the environmental, economic, and social wellbeing trajectories of communities (Reid et al., 2021). Their decisions influence not only the immediate quality of life for citizens but also the long-term sustainability of local economies and environments. By tailoring policies and services to the unique circumstances of each locality, councils act as critical agents of change, guiding communities toward healthier, more equitable and resilient futures. Importantly, councils often defer to youth councils as the primary mechanism for engaging youth perspectives, relying on them more consistently than irregular, broader youth surveys. This centrality underscores the importance of developing participatory models that are effective in ensuring diverse voices are represented in decision-making processes and policy outcomes (David & Buchanan, 2020).

Given persistent concerns about young people's limited influence on policymaking, expanding knowledge of youth engagement is vital. Youth engagement has been shown to strengthen communities, enhance democratic processes, and improve the effectiveness of public services (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; David & Buchanan, 2020). Such research can help identify new pathways to address the marginalised status of youth, advance social justice goals, and improve their socio-political citizenship and participatory rights. In doing so, local government can move beyond tokenistic consultation toward authentic inclusion, ensuring that youth perspectives shape the environmental, wellbeing, and social objectives of their communities.

There is a paucity of literature in Aotearoa NZ that captures youth perspectives on how they construct civic and political identities and enact participation in local government. Youth

councils remain under-researched, with few local studies examining their role and even fewer that elevate youth perspectives (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). Research and policy literature has largely focused on broader indicators of youth wellbeing and resilience, including national surveys and longitudinal studies (Clark et al., 2020; Munford & Sanders, 2019; Sanders at al., 2015), rather than on governance, representation, and policymaking. This gap underscores the need for qualitative inquiry that centres young people's lived experiences of civic participation and explores how institutional structures and dynamics shape their ability to influence policymaking and outcomes. This research aims to address this gap, building on existing local studies, such as Freeman and Aitken-Rose (2005), who investigated the perspectives of professional planners in Aotearoa NZ local government.

Importantly, the study examines how participatory rights-based aspirations are translated into rights-informed initiatives. Existing literature is dominated by strong critiques of practice (Hickey & Pauli Myler, 2017; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Matthews, 2001a; Munyede et al., 2021), with less attention given to identifying exemplar approaches that capture the context, purpose, and processes of rights-informed initiatives. Similarly, there is a need to examine how adults and youth collaborate as partners to empower young people in policymaking (Baldry et al., 2019). A scoping review by Canosa et al. (2022) highlighted both the tensions and the possibilities between the rhetorical aspirations of rights-based youth participation and the realities of practice. The authors also noted limited synthesis regarding the nature, purpose, and scope of available resources, as well as the evidence underpinning them. There is a need for youth-serving, community-based organisations and public institutions to develop rights-based participation resources and initiatives in collaboration with children and youth. The authors emphasised the need to document how rights aspirations and principles are enacted across diverse contexts of youth participation. Persistent concerns over the failure

to recognise participation rights in practice make it essential to learn from examples of rights-based initiatives (Tisdall & Cuevas Parra, 2022).

A key objective of this study is to examine how youth councillors actively engage the diverse youth community to achieve equitable representation and advance social justice objectives. It investigates internal participation styles, institutional mechanisms, and approaches to community engagement, with a particular focus on exemplar cases of practice that enable youth councillors to remain oriented toward the priorities of local youth. Much of the existing international literature has been deficit-focused, emphasising that youth councillors often struggle to connect with the wider youth community. Their participation styles tend to be inwardly directed and insufficiently aligned with the priorities of local youth (Augsberger et al., 2018a; 2018c; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Wyness, 2009). As such studies have largely centred on the ways youth councils reproduce existing patterns of exclusion and inequality (Augsberger et al., 2018b; 2018c). In response, this research seeks to generate insight into the various ways youth councils contribute to the formation of bridging capital through community engagement, fostering connections across social and ethnic lines and enhancing representation.

Finally, this research examines how local councils, in collaboration with youth councils in Aotearoa NZ, can stimulate social capital by supporting local youth civic initiatives. Existing literature demonstrated a strong positive link between levels of social capital, more effective local governance, and increased civic and political participation across communities (Halpern, 2005; Fukuyama, 1995; 2000; Putman, 1993; Reid et al., 2021). However, much of this work has not been youth-specific and thus failed to adequately address the distinct interests of young people, their marginalised status, or their role in shaping positive forms of social capital. Similarly, Aotearoa NZ literature outlines the ways in which local councils can foster social

capital for more effective governance and broader citizen engagement (Reid et al., 2021), but this overlooks the unique contributions and needs of youth (Halpern, 2005). By addressing these gaps, this study intends to advance both scholarly understanding and practical approaches to youth participation in local governance in Aotearoa NZ, offering pathways toward more inclusive and rights-based democratic practices.

### 1.12 Research Questions and Focus

This research focuses on three key priority areas for local government in their formal commitment to provide inclusive participatory opportunities that realise youth participatory rights in accordance with international obligations of the CRC. These priority areas were identified from a synthesis of the literature: the limited impact youth have on policymaking and outcomes; youth councils' tendency to represent only a narrow segment of young people, and a disconnect between local government and the wider, diverse youth community (Collin, 2015; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Matthews, 2001c; Munyede et al., 2021). These concerns inform the following research questions:

1. What is the substantive role and impact of youth councillors in local government policymaking and outcomes, and what are the determinant factors?
2. What internal processes and engagement strategies do youth councillors use to amplify the voices of diverse youth in government policymaking?
3. What institutional responses promote the participation of the wider, diverse youth community in broader civic initiatives?

This study aims to elevate youth perspectives, and offer insights into rights-based participation, in a way that responds to local and international calls for justice-oriented research

(Canosa et al., 2022; White et al., 2017). It aims to further understanding on how rights-based aspirations are operationalised in practice, demonstrating how adults and youth collaborate as partners to empower youth in policymaking (Canosa et al., 2022). Additionally, the study responds to calls for research into how youth councillors pursue equitable representation and broader social justice objectives (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017).

### 1.12.1 Defining Youth Participation

The academic field of youth participation, and youth citizenship studies is characterised by conceptual complexity. Discourses on youth participation can be confusing and cluttered with competing messages and assumptions about youth (Shaw et al., 2014). There is a body of literature dedicated to defining the term "youth (civic) participation", to improve conceptual clarity and inform the implementation of participatory programmes (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Amna, 2012; Checkoway, 2011; Holdsworth et al., 2007). The literature contains both narrow and broad definitions of youth participation. It occurs in a range of contexts and variety of forms, in both formal and informal settings, from a local to international level with a diverse series of expected outcomes. For example, youth participation can refer to community service and volunteering, support to others within the same community or social group, advocacy, and campaigning to raise public consciousness, working to change legislation and/or representation to government bodies, youth media (forms of media production by youth), social entrepreneurship and community development (Checkoway, 2011; Shaw et al., 2014).

In this study, youth civic participation reflects the comparable definitions provided by Adler and Goggin (2005), Amna (2012), and Collin and Vromen (2010). Amna (2012) highlighted the collective nature of civic engagement, emphasising its outward orientation and

reciprocity. It deals with the values, attitudes, beliefs, skills, knowledge, and behaviours concerned with conditions outside the immediate environment of family and friends. Similarly, Adler and Goggin's (2005) definition of civic engagement refers to acts to help shape the community's future. Collin and Vromen's (2010) definition aligns with that of Adler and Goggin (2005), and Amna (2012), who cite youth participation as "acts that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned with shaping the society we want to live in" (p82-83). This thesis therefore adopts a definition of youth civic participation that emphasises collective, outward-looking acts aimed at shaping communities and society.

### 1.13 The Study Context

This study is situated in the North Island of Aotearoa NZ. The four councils in this research represent three district councils, and one city council. These territorial areas encompass a main urban centre alongside surrounding towns and rural communities. The population for these areas (Statistics NZ, 2025) are Council Kiwi (66,400–67,500), Council Pūkeko (88, 000), Council Ruru (49, 000), and Council Tūī (58, 00). In brief, the local government system comprises two tiers: regional councils and territorial authorities. By mid-2020 local government consisted of 67 territorial authorities (comprising 13 city councils and 54 district councils), and 12 regional councils. There are also 21 local boards, and 110 community boards. District councils serve a combination of rural and urban communities, while city councils administer the larger urban areas (Reid et al., 2021). Together, these councils provided a representative cross-section of urban and rural governance contexts in Aotearoa NZ, making them an appropriate focus for this research.

### 1.14 Thesis Structure

Chapters Two and Three review the literature in relation to the key tensions and priorities for local government in their formal commitment to youth civic participation. This review provides the background to all three research questions. Chapter Two examines the institutional context that determines the role and influence of youth councillors in local government policymaking and outcomes. The chapter introduces institutional logics as a framework for understanding how organisational norms and meaning systems shape youth participation. Chapter Three focuses on the challenges youth councils face in their ability to connect with and represent the wider, diverse youth community in local government. Social capital theorising has been applied throughout the review to provide a deeper conceptual understanding of how socially constructed divisions and inequalities among youth are either reproduced and/or transformed through youth council operations.

Chapter Four reviews the literature on theoretical and conceptual understandings of youth participatory citizenship. It outlines practice models developed over recent decades to inform youth participation and demonstrates how theoretical frameworks can be used to strengthen participatory outcomes. The chapter introduces the conceptual frames used to analyse the research findings. These are Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) table of frameworks; three conceptual positions of the youth citizen, which are developed and elaborated in Chapter Five; Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation; and social capital theorising (Halpern, 2005).

Chapter Five outlines the research methodology and methods. The study is grounded in interpretivist epistemology and a qualitative research philosophy, alongside a social constructionist framework. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with eleven youth councillors and six adult staff across four local councils, complemented by secondary data from institutional documents, council websites, and national policy texts. An interpretative

analytic technique was used to analyse the findings, guided by the conceptual frameworks noted above.

Chapters Six and Seven present the research results. Chapter Six addresses the first research question by examining the substantive role and influence of youth councillors in local government policymaking, alongside the institutional dynamics that shaped these outcomes. Chapter Seven addresses the second research question by analysing how youth councillors engaged with and represented diverse youth constituencies through internal participation styles and outreach strategies. It also addresses the third research question, examining how councils fostered broader youth civic engagement.

Chapter Eight synthesises the research results in an integrated discussion that considers both theoretical and practice implications. Finally, Chapter Nine provides a summary of the key findings and offers recommendations for practice. It outlines a participatory rights-based model as an example of how youth participatory rights and social justice objectives can be embedded within local government frameworks and tailored to the Aotearoa NZ context. The chapter acknowledges the research limitations and offers directions for future studies.

## 1.15 Researcher Positioning

I have been motivated throughout my career to advance the interests and wellbeing of youth. I worked with children and young people for ten years in a professional capacity as a social work practitioner at Child, Youth and Family (subsequently renamed Oranga Tamariki). My interest in youth civic participation and participatory citizenship began with my MA thesis in 2013, titled *Citizenship and Participation of Young People in Aotearoa NZ*. This research builds on that longstanding engagement with the academic field of youth participatory

citizenship. I am aware that my professional background and commitment to youth wellbeing shape the perspective I bring to this study, influencing how I interpret the material and engage with participants. I discuss this positioning, and the reflexive considerations that accompany it, in greater depth in Chapter Five.

### 1.16 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the background context and rationale for the research. It described the socio-political context, highlighting the key tensions and priorities shaping local government's commitment to effective, inclusive, and sustainable youth civic participation. Three priority areas were identified in local government's formal commitment to youth participation: the limited impact youth have on policymaking and outcomes; inequitable representation within youth councils; and a disconnect between local government and the wider, diverse youth community (Collin, 2015; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Matthews, 2001a; Munyede et al., 2021). The chapter then discussed the rationale for the research in relation to gaps in the literature, before presenting the research focus and questions. It concluded with the study context, thesis structure, and researcher positioning.

# Chapter Two

## Youth Engagement in Local Government – Factors that Determine Policy Engagement

This chapter examines the institutional context, shaping the role and influence of youth councillors in local government policymaking. As the first of two literature review chapters, it establishes the conceptual foundation for the study's three research questions by addressing the tensions and priorities confronting local authorities in their formal commitment to youth civic participation. First, the chapter critiques consultation as the dominant governmental strategy in Aotearoa NZ and other Western liberal democracies, arguing that this approach enshrines minimal rather than maximal notions of youth citizenship (Lister, 2008). Second, it explores structural and procedural barriers embedded in urban planning and representative democracy that contribute to youth exclusion. Third, the chapter interrogates prevailing social constructions of youth, citizenship, and participation, showing how these discourses shape adult attitudes and institutional responses, and ultimately define the scope of meaningful youth involvement in public decision-making. Finally, it considers emerging models and practices that move beyond tokenistic engagement toward youth empowerment and transformative participation.

### 2.1 Youth Participation as Consultation and Youth Voice

In meeting their CRC obligations, local governments have increasingly relied on consultation as the primary mechanism for youth participation. Yet the limitations of this model, frequently criticised for its narrow and reductionist view of participation, have

prompted efforts to adopt more equitable, inclusive, informal, and youth-centred frameworks that better support genuine youth influence (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Hickey & Pauli Myler, 2017). State responses have typically embodied a narrow liberal conception of citizenship and youth engagement, reducing participation to token representation through youth councils and similar advisory structures (Collin, 2015). Consultation is the dominant governmental strategy for youth participation in Aotearoa NZ and other Western liberal democracies. It is embedded in legislation and youth policy, reinforcing its dominance across governance levels. In countries such as the United Kingdom [UK], Australia, and the United States [US], youth participation is overwhelmingly framed through consultation, with limited emphasis on partnership, power sharing, or youth-led decision making (Collin, 2015; David & Buchanan, 2020).

In Aotearoa NZ, this approach is evident in the Youth Plan 2020–2022 – Turning Voice into Action (MYD, 2020, 2023), which aims to strengthen youth voice and influence through leadership in public policy. The establishment of youth advisory groups, including Kau Tulī (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020), MYD advisory groups, and the Oranga Tamariki Youth Advisory Group (MYD, 2022a; Oranga Tamariki: Ministry for Children, 2025), further reflects the central government's reliance on consultative structures to meet its CRC obligations. Although consultation aligns with the participatory aspirations of the CRC, in practice it is embedded within hierarchical, adult-led structures that marginalise youth perspectives, reducing their role to token representation rather than genuine partnership (Beswick, 2022; Collin, 2015; Fernández Guzmán Grassi et al., 2023).

These limitations also expose deeper theoretical tensions within youth-centred policy approaches, particularly regarding whose voices are amplified and how participation is conceptualised. From a theoretical perspective, it is important to question whether

youth-centred policy approaches that aim to amplify young people's voices can be effective when they rely on a largely singular focus on individual voice. This is particularly relevant for Māori, for whom collective wellbeing and relational decision making are central to optimal development (Fitzmaurice & Brown, 2023). It also raises important questions about the extent to which youth advisory groups can represent the interests and priorities of the wider youth population, and what mechanisms exist to ensure they can meaningfully engage with diverse youth cohorts. These concerns reflect broader ideological critiques of liberal citizenship, which often positions youth as passive recipients of participation rather than active political agents (Collin, 2015; Theis, 2010). Without an autonomous and authentic role in governance, youth participation reduced to consultation reflects a minimal, or thin, form of citizenship (Lister, 2008). Minimal citizenship positions youth as passive beneficiaries of participation, with limited influence over governance or structural change. In contrast, maximal citizenship offers more empowering possibilities, enabling youth to identify and challenge inequalities and actively shape broader social and political structures (Collin, 2015; Evans, 2007; White et al., 2017).

In Aotearoa NZ, for example, section 82 of the Local Government Act [LGA] 2002 requires councils to consider the views of those likely to be affected by decisions and to adhere to principles of consultation (Reid et al., 2021). More broadly, local government legislation places a strong emphasis on community engagement and participation in district and regional planning. The legislative framework contains multiple triggers requiring various forms of citizen participation, including Significance and Engagement Policies, which determine thresholds for differing levels of mandatory engagement. Despite this extensive framework, these processes often remain procedural and compliance-driven rather than genuinely participatory (Cheyne, 2015; 2019; Reid et al., 2021). Te Tiriti o Waitangi creates obligations for local councils to ensure Māori contribute to decision-making, yet these obligations are often

ignored or only partially fulfilled (Reid et al., 2021), undermining tino rangatiratanga and iwi and hapū authority.

A key feature of local government in Aotearoa NZ is the Long-Term Plan [LTP]. Under the LGA 2002, councils are required to prepare a 10-year plan outlining community outcomes and the programme of work needed to achieve them. The LTP is therefore a critical instrument for giving effect to the wellbeing purpose of local government, although councils vary in how they approach its development, with some adopting community-led processes and others relying on more administrative, internally driven methods (Reid et al., 2021). This raises important questions about whose voices shape these long-term priorities. In particular, what role do youth under 18, who are not enfranchised as voters, have in contributing to these plans, and to what extent do LTP processes meaningfully consider youth engagement?

Since adults hold greater institutional power, their constructions of youth participation dominate. They define the terms of engagement, set the agenda, and manage the processes, leaving youth with little autonomy to shape their involvement in ways that reflect their own cultures, priorities, and lived experiences (Freeman & Aitken Rose, 2005). In this context, consultation and information sharing do not constitute genuine partnership or co-governance. Rather, they reinforce an adult-centric model that limits youth agency and fails to support their role as equal stakeholders in local governance (Faulkner, 2009; Marshall et al., 2015; Smith, 2015).

Despite these constraints, youth consistently articulate aspirations for more meaningful influence, including stronger links to decision makers and tangible outcomes from their input (OCC, 2015; MYD, 2020). National surveys reveal that young people want their voices heard in decisions that affect their lives and futures, but they also seek accountability from adults and institutions, and evidence that their contributions lead to change (MYD, 2020). However,

research has increasingly questioned whether youth voice has had any substantive impact on policy and programme outcomes (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Matthews, 2001a). In some countries, the lack of influence on community decision-making has led to youth councils being viewed as tokenistic, and in some cases, disbanded altogether (Cicchelli, 2009; Cushing & van Vliet, 2017). When consultation fails to produce substantive outcomes, young people may experience consultation fatigue, leading to disengagement from future initiatives (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Cushing & van Vliet, 2017).

### 2.2 A Narrow Scope of Participation

Lacking institutional power to shape agendas, youth participation is often reduced to consultation that seeks only their perspectives. Such consultation tends to be confined to a narrow range of policy domains, typically those deemed 'youth-related' by adults, such as the design of playgrounds and parks (Perry-Hazan, 2016). In many jurisdictions, urban planning prioritises adult needs and spaces, sidelining youth interests when their advice conflicts with more powerful adult groups (David & Buchanan, 2020; Tisdall, 2013). These adult-defined boundaries constrain the scope of youth involvement and often fail to reflect how youth themselves wish to participate (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015). As a result, youth councillors are restricted in their autonomy to define the terms of their engagement in matters of significance to them and their wider constituency (Collin, 2015; Francis & Lorenzo, 2002).

Yet despite these constraints, there is considerable potential to expand youth participation into a broader range of public policy domains. Local councils hold jurisdiction over a wide array of services, infrastructure, and policies that directly and indirectly affect the everyday lives of youth. These include areas such as environmental planning, social policy, service delivery, and community well-being, domains that are often underestimated or poorly

understood by the general population (Reid et al., 2021; Smith, 2015). Importantly, youth councillors have expressed interest in contributing to these broader issues (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Finlay, 2010). As current and future stakeholders, youth have a vested interest in shaping decisions that influence the long-term trajectories of their communities (David & Buchanan, 2020). Expanding the scope of participation and supporting youth-designed and youth-led initiatives is vital to strengthening youth autonomy and ensuring alignment with their priorities (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). The narrow scope of participation reinforces a minimal conception of citizenship, restricting youth to peripheral domains and denying them the opportunity to exercise agency in shaping broader social and political structures (White et al., 2017) This marginalisation is further compounded by the limited integration of youth into formal policy spaces, where institutional agendas and adult-centric processes continue to constrain their capacity to act as equal stakeholders in governance.

### 2.3 Integration within Policy Spaces

An enduring concern is that youth councillors are not meaningfully integrated into core policy and decision-making spaces, but instead remain on the margins (Bessell, 2009; Harada, 2023; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). While global evidence has shown that youth are occasionally involved in broader policy domains, such as water infrastructure and environmental projects, this is not routine practice (Checkoway et al., 2005; Cushing & van Vliet, 2017; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Grant-Smith & Edwards, 2001; Matthews, 2001a). In particular, youth are rarely systematically included in land-use planning and urban design processes by the urban planning profession (David & Buchanan, 2020; Hörschelmann & Van Blerk, 2012; Knowles-Yánez, 2005; Wood, 2015). In Aotearoa NZ, a survey examining the relationship between youth and planners in core planning departments found that youth

participation was not routine, levels of engagement were low, and participation was afforded minimal priority (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). Although planners expressed enthusiasm, consistent youth engagement was impeded by limited resources, a reluctance to operate outside statutory processes, staff uncertainty and lack of confidence, and reluctance to engage with youth cultures and perspectives. As a result, invitations to participate rarely translate into sustained dialogue, long-term engagement, or robust integration into urban planning and policy processes. Instead, youth involvement is often confined to tokenistic consultation (Collin, 2015).

A further, related structural, or systems barrier, concerns a trend by local governments to increasingly organise policy work through short-term projects rather than stable, long-term institutions. This trend, often described as projectified politics, means that public policy is delivered through temporary organisations such as pilot programmes, taskforces, and time-limited initiatives (Sjöblom et al., 2019). While these projects are often promoted as flexible and innovative, their temporary nature can fragment long-term planning and weaken the institutional structures needed to sustain meaningful participation. Decisions are frequently shifted into technical project teams rather than enduring democratic processes, which can depoliticise issues and limit opportunities for youth to influence ongoing policy development (Fred & Hall, 2017). For youth participation specifically, projectification can create a system where engagement opportunities appear and disappear, relationships with adults are not sustained, and youth rarely see how their contributions shape long-term decisions. This trend is likely to compound existing barriers, aligning with wider critiques of fragmented or inconsistent participation systems, where youth are invited into processes that lack the structural capacity to listen, respond, or embed their perspectives (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Wong et al., 2010). Short-term youth initiatives, such as one-off consultations or temporary youth councils, mirror the instability of project-based governance (Marshall et al.,

2015). They may generate enthusiasm in the moment, but they seldom lead to durable change. This is a major critique in youth-studies literature: tokenism is not a failure of young people, it's a failure of systems (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Matthews, 2001a).

The widely acknowledged structural barriers from existing research (David & Buchanan, 2020; Hörschelmann & Van Blerk, 2012; Knowles-Yánez, 2005; Wood, 2015) signals why integration within urban planning and policy spaces must be institutionalised rather than left to ad hoc initiatives and consultations. Achieving this requires closer linkages between youth councillors and key planners and decision-makers, enabling direct access to core policy forums. It also demands engagement across the entire policy cycle, from agenda-setting and design to decision-making and evaluation. Crucially, youth participation must extend beyond narrowly defined youth-related domains to encompass the full spectrum of public policy areas (David & Buchanan, 2020; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). Without such integration, youth remain positioned at the margins of governance, reinforcing institutional cultures that privilege adult authority and limit transformative participation. Furthermore, without mechanisms of institutional accountability, even when youth are invited into policy spaces their contributions risk being symbolic, with little assurance that their perspectives will shape decisions or produce tangible outcomes.

### 2.4 Institutional Accountability

Formal mechanisms often lack accountability to young people's views, with limited feedback provided on how their participation influences decisions (Andersson, 2017; Marshall et al., 2015). The critical issue is not merely whether youth are consulted, but whose voices are consulted, how they are listened to, and whether their ideas are taken seriously and given

weight in decision-making (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Matthews, 2001a). As Holdsworth et al. (2007) and Matthews (2001a) asked: when youth speak, is anyone truly listening?

General Comment No. 12 of the CRC (UN, 1989) affirms the child's right to be heard, emphasising that authentic participation involves more than tokenistic activity. It requires ongoing dialogue and action based on youth input. In Aotearoa NZ, youth have consistently expressed a desire for their voices to be valued and treated as equal to those of adults (MYD, 2020; OCC, 2015). Yet government officials often struggle to recognise youth contributions or commit to incorporating their perspectives into concrete action (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Harada, 2023; Munyede et al., 2021; Nir & Perry-Hazan, 2016).

Even when youth are included in policy processes, the extent of their impact remains unclear due to limited monitoring, evaluation, and youth impact assessment (Bartlett, 2005; Collin & Vromen, 2010; David & Buchanan, 2020; Harada, 2023; Munyede et al., 2021). Organisations frequently prioritise the design and implementation of participation initiatives but fail to follow through on evaluating outcomes or sustaining long-term engagement (Collin & Vromen, 2010). Also, successful participation projects are often isolated exceptions rather than embedded practice (Holdsworth et al., 2007; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). This underscores the urgent need to develop robust measurement tools (youth impact assessments, participatory evaluation) and accountability mechanisms to evaluate youth impact on policy outcomes (David & Buchanan, 2020). Without such mechanisms, youth participation risks remaining symbolic, reinforcing minimal citizenship rather than enabling the transformative potential of maximal citizenship (Lister, 2008). Addressing accountability is therefore essential to move beyond tokenistic consultation and toward institutional cultures that genuinely value youth perspectives.

## 2.5 A Disconnect between Youth and Local Government

While youth councils remain the primary mechanism for local governments to engage youth voices, greater attention must be paid to the role of the wider council in facilitating active youth participation. Given the challenges youth councils face in representing the diverse priorities of local youth, some scholars have advocated for direct engagement, enabling youth from varied backgrounds to speak from their own experiences to local officials (Bell et al., 2008; Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Collin & Vromen, 2010; Marshall et al., 2015). This approach requires local governments to proactively reach out and implement youth-centric participatory methods, rather than relying solely on youth councils as representative bodies.

However, a persistent disconnect between local government and youth communities impedes meaningful participation and the realisation of maximal youth citizenship (Collin, 2015; Harris et al., 2007; Munyede et al., 2021). Addressing this gap requires an understanding of the broader determinants within the local government context. Youth often struggle to connect with municipal institutions, while councils frequently lack the capacity or confidence to engage diverse youth through collaborative, power-sharing approaches (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Harada, 2023).

Many young people are unaware of the scope of services under council jurisdiction or how to access municipal processes (Harris et al., 2010). This disconnect is exacerbated by hierarchical structures and complex policymaking environments that feel unfamiliar, intimidating, and alienating to youth (Marshall et al., 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Youth differ from adults in their interests, commitments, and preferred modes of communication and participation (Cleaver & Cockburn, 2009; Harris et al., 2010; Lopes et al., 2009; Wyness, 2009).

Bureaucratic processes further constrain youth involvement. Successful participation requires navigating complex protocols and institutional language, yet few young people have the knowledge or support to do so (Collin & Vromen, 2010; David & Buchanan, 2020). Youth often encounter complex procedures, competing interests, and politicised environments where external forces shape policy outcomes (Marshall et al., 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Bureaucratic red tape and invisible networks contribute to their marginalisation (Fitzpatrick et al., 1998), and disillusionment and cynicism are frequently reported among youth participants (Hinton, 2008; Lansdown, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Thomas, 2007).

This alienation is compounded by local authorities' limited ability and willingness to adapt structures to be child- and youth-centric (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). Staff often lack the 'know-how' to engage diverse youth communities and implement effective participatory methods. Relationship-building, power-sharing, and sustained dialogue require time and skill, resources that are frequently lacking (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Marshall et al., 2015; Smith, 2015; Tisdall, 2015). Poor communicative practices are common, including a lack of transparency, respect, and accountability. Youth often report not being heard, and their contributions not being taken seriously (Holdsworth et al., 2007; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Tisdall, 2013). The absence of feedback from adults leaves youth uncertain about the impact of their input and without follow-up action, cynicism and disengagement are likely to persist (Freeman, 2007; Matthews, 2001a; Marshall et al., 2015). These concerns underscore the importance of embedding effective communicative practices and relational approaches to counter youth marginalisation and address their lack of institutional power (Tisdall, 2015).

A range of challenges complicates the implementation of youth-centric participatory methods within the complex landscape of local planning, policy, and decision-making. These include budgetary constraints, rigid policy cycles, competing priorities, and limited staff

capacity (David & Buchanan, 2020; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). Strengthening inclusive youth engagement requires dedicated institutional resources for support, education, and training. This entails substantial investment in staff development and time-intensive relationship-building with youth and other stakeholders. Skilled adult allies are essential to foster trust, provide ongoing mentoring, and support youth throughout participatory processes (Bessell, 2009; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2013). These procedural challenges are compounded by resource constraints. The resource demands of effective youth participation can be considerable, and councils may face constraints in meeting them. Public officials may also worry that the time and financial costs of participatory initiatives could delay policy timelines or strain institutional capacity (Tisdall, 2015). For instance, Marshall et al. (2015) found that insufficient time was allocated for capacity-building prior to youth engagement, with youth perspectives often sought only near consultation deadlines.

Nevertheless, investing in participatory methods is justified. Evidence has shown that when planning staff are committed to citizen engagement, the quality of final plans and decisions improves (David & Buchanan, 2020). Moreover, planners who engage youth gain valuable insights and become more receptive to future collaboration (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). While institutional constraints and hierarchical, adult-centric governance structures inhibit effective youth engagement, the deeper issue lies in the dominant constructions and social understandings of youth citizenship. These discourses shape adult behaviour and institutional responses, ultimately defining the limits of youth civic participation. The next section explores these constructions in detail, establishing the conceptual foundation for transformative approaches to youth engagement.

## 2.6 Prevailing Constructions of the Youth Citizen

Prevailing constructions, social understandings and assumptions about youth, their capabilities, and citizenship practice shape the attitudes and behaviour of adults in relation to the role that youth should play in public governance. These deeply entrenched ideas are based on constraint, limitation, and inability. They manifest in interactions with participating youth, social marginalising practices, that impede possibilities for achieving meaningful participatory citizenship (Bessell, 2009; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Adult attitudes and beliefs in relation to youth competency, and the value and legitimacy of youth contributions to public policy and decision-making are intrinsically linked with the extent of prioritisation and commitment given to youth participation, including the extent to which it is part of the cultural ethos of an institution (Bessell, 2009; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Therefore, it is imperative that youth and adults working to strengthen participatory outcomes, have an awareness of the complex, diverse nature of adult perceptions and beliefs.

These perceptions are underpinned by broader societal narratives, particularly futurity-based models of youth citizenship. Contemporary understandings often position youth as 'citizens-in-waiting' rather than active participants in the present (Collin, 2015; Lister et al., 2003; Lister, 2008; Harris et al., 2010; Kennelly, 2011). In Western liberal democracies, dominant representations of childhood and youth frame them as 'becoming citizens' (Collin, 2015; Lister, 2008; Kennelly, 2011). This apprenticeship model, aligned with liberal citizenship, has led governments to implement policies aimed at socialising youth for normative civic engagement. Such engagement is typically defined by attachment to state-centred institutions and conventional behaviours like voting and acquiring civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes for future citizenship (Arneil, 2002). This narrow conception of the political excludes a broader spectrum of youth political expression and agency, such as activism and informal acts of citizenship embedded in the everyday lives of youth (Harris et al., 2010; Norris,

2002). It reflects a lack of recognition for youth-led action in the present, including movements that challenge colonisation, climate change, environmental injustice, and capitalist structures (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023; Cockburn, 2013; Fridays for the Future, n.d).

Type-casting youth as 'adults-in-formation' offers a conceptual lens for understanding their societal positioning and the prevailing assumptions that shape adult–youth relations. Within this framing, youth are viewed primarily as subjects of formative preparation, recipients of instruction, discipline, and socialisation, who will, at some future point, be permitted to engage fully in public life through sanctioned, adult-defined pathways (Harada, 2023). This construction of youth as not yet ready or capable gives rise to a range of adult responses that systematically deny young people the opportunity to demonstrate informed, active citizenship within hierarchical, adult-led institutional governance (Corney et al., 2021; Furlong, 2016). Perceived age-based limitations are closely tied to youth's lack of institutional power, their exclusion from decision-making, and their marginalisation as legitimate rights-holders and civic actors (Bessell, 2009; Harada, 2023; Matthews, 2001a; Perry-Hazan, 2016; White et al., 2017).

Factors that contribute to tokenistic participation and a lack of impact are vertical communication and not treating youth as citizens who have the right to engage in decision-making (Matthews, 2001a; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Officials appear unwilling to relinquish power and adapt existing structures and processes, so they are more youth-centric, in part because youth are socially constructed as inexperienced and perceived as not likely to offer much value in their contributions to policy and planning (Bessell, 2009; Cleaver & Cockburn, 2009; David & Buchanan, 2020; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Adultism has been defined as the negative attitudes and perceptions that adults hold in relation to youth age-related capabilities (Bjerke, 2001). It is a deep-seated bias of youth competency and inferiority that devalues youth autonomy and contributions and is concomitant with an unwillingness to relinquish power and adapt processes

to form collaborative partnerships based on shared power, which is required to strengthen the role and impact of youth in public governance (Checkoway, 2011; Matthews & Limb, 2003; Ozer et al., 2022; Shier et al., 2014).

Although structural space may be created for youth councillors to engage in local government and contribute to policy formation, the extent of their influence varies across contexts, and adult-centric, marginalising practices persist. Youth are symbolically cast in the collective imagination as limited and incapable, and these prevailing assumptions shape the hierarchies and protocols that govern participatory practice. Broader societal expectations about the role youth should play as citizens mediate interactions between youth councillors and officials, often constraining the realisation of active youth citizenship (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Perry-Hazan, 2016).

Negative styles of communication and interaction between youth councillors, council bureaucrats, and elected officials that reinforce perceptions of youth as incapable and unwelcome in local government spaces have been widely reported (Bessell, 2009; Perry-Hazan, 2016). These negative exchanges reflect prevailing assumptions about the place youth should hold, their capabilities, and the expectations imposed upon them. Research has shown that constraints manifest in interactions where adult officials dismiss youth leaders' ability to demonstrate active citizenship (Seventy, 2019). Such interactions often involve youth being spoken at, their ideas dismissed, and their actions undermined, resulting in disappointment and disengagement (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). Perry-Hazan (2016) described these practices in terms of 'fawning' or 'dismissing,' extreme responses that belittle or ignore youth perspectives. Moreover, negative responses are often condoned as normal and expected by both youth and adults (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). This signals a normalisation of discriminatory practices which go unchallenged, leading to disillusionment among youth and disengagement from further participation.

Factors contributing to tokenistic participation and limited impact include vertical communication structures and the failure to recognise youth as legitimate citizens with the right to engage in decision-making. Officials often appear unwilling to relinquish power or adapt existing structures to be more youth-centric, partly because youth are socially constructed as inexperienced and perceived as offering limited value to policy and planning processes (Cleaver & Cockburn, 2009; David & Buchanan, 2020; Harada, 2023).

Adultism refers to the negative attitudes and perceptions adults hold about youth based on age-related assumptions. It is a deep-seated bias that undermines youth autonomy and contributions (Bañales, 2023; Corney et al., 2021). Adultism as discourse means that assumptions about youth competency are embedded in institutional culture. It reflects a belief in youth inferiority and is closely tied to institutional reluctance to share power or form collaborative partnerships with youth (Matthews & Limb, 2003; Ozer et al., 2022; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Shier et al., 2014). Importantly, while fields such as health and social research increasingly validate youth participatory approaches (Ozer et al., 2022), adultism and deficit discourses persist in governance contexts, limiting the transformative potential of youth citizenship.

Entrenched deficit-based and ambivalent attitudes toward the capacity of youth to contribute meaningfully, and the legitimacy of their involvement, remain among the most significant determinants of their marginalised position in public governance (Bessell, 2009; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Local planners and decision-makers often express doubt about youth capacity to contribute to complex domains such as planning and zoning, which are perceived to require technical or specialist expertise (Alparone & Rissotto, 2001; David & Buchanan, 2020). Youth are frequently viewed as unqualified, lacking the skills, knowledge, emotional maturity, and life experience necessary for meaningful participation. As a result, they are expected to overcome significant informational and

procedural barriers to be seen as legitimate contributors (Chan & Clayton, 2006; Passon et al., 2008).

Research into the motivations of local government officials has revealed a complex array of perceptions and disincentives. Some staff express indifference, viewing youth engagement as someone else's responsibility or as a specialised task best left to experts (Bessell, 2009; Marshall et al., 2015). Youth are often included by default, with officials making decisions on their behalf rather than engaging them directly, believing they are sufficiently 'in touch' with youth needs (Heinrich & Million, 2016; Percy-Smith, 2010). This perception contrasts with evidence showing that youth and adults often experience local spaces differently. Youth tend to have a more intimate connection with their communities, shaped by their daily immersion in local environments due to limited mobility and resources (Harris et al., 2010; Wood, 2011). Adults, by contrast, are often poor proxies for youth perspectives, and their interpretations of youth needs are frequently inaccurate (Marshall et al., 2015). Direct engagement with youth not only affirms their rights but also enhances the quality of decision-making by incorporating diverse, grounded perspectives (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015).

Adult perceptions may also reflect institutional priorities over youth needs. Youth are sometimes viewed as a 'political avant-garde', useful for offering insights into emerging trends, but only on an ad hoc basis (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). They may be treated as problems to manage or as occasional informants, rather than as full stakeholders in governance (David & Buchanan, 2020). Some officials argue that existing consultative mechanisms within representative democracy are sufficient, and that youth councillors, being unelected, lack legitimate authority to influence decisions. This view was evident in a 2024 case in Aotearoa NZ, where a local council's decision to grant voting rights to non-elected youth councillors sparked controversy and public protest, led by the Taxpayers Union (NZCity, 2024).

These structural and interpersonal constraints send mixed messages to youth. While they are told that youth councils are spaces for initiative and influence, their efforts are often constrained by adult attitudes and institutional inertia. This cycle of promise and inaction leaves youth uncertain about their role and status as civic actors (Collin, 2015; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). Ambivalence toward youth capacity is evident where deficit-based assumptions coexist with rhetorical enthusiasm for youth participation (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). The implications are significant: youth may internalise these assumptions, requiring sustained encouragement and reimagining to build confidence and a sense of efficacy. Many do not perceive local government as a space where they will be heard or where their needs will be addressed (Harris et al., 2010). Moreover, youth may hold a limited or distorted view of the 'political,' seeing local government as remote and disconnected from the civic issues that shape their daily lives, a symptom of the broader disconnect between youth and public institutions.

These prevailing constructions and the persistence of adultism underscore the urgent need for institutional change in how youth participatory citizenship is understood. At the heart of institutional culture are the values and attitudes held by adult officials (Holdsworth et al., 2007). While some scholars argue that existing structures can be effective when guided by professionals with transformed perceptions of youth, such change must permeate all levels of governance (Perry-Hazan, 2016; Matthews, 2001a). A formal commitment to participation is not enough. Ambiguity around purpose and power, entrenched adultism, and the limited impact of youth councils all point to the need for a fundamental re-conceptualisation of youth by officials, and a deeper understanding of the contested, ambiguous, and marginalised status of youth in society (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Harada, 2023). Only by transforming institutional culture and adult perceptions can youth be recognised as legitimate civic actors with the capacity to shape governance in meaningful ways.

## 2.7 A Failed Citizenship?

The suitability of youth councils as mechanisms to enhance youth voice, political agency, and participatory rights remains highly contested, contributing to a discourse of failed citizenship (Collin, 2015; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Despite longstanding critiques of structural limitations, resource deficits, and adultism, the marginalised and ambiguous status of youth in local governance remains largely unchanged (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Munyede et al., 2021). Thus, local government is critiqued by many as failing to fulfil the international policy aspirations and obligations of the CRC, which calls for increased youth participation in decision-making processes that affect young people's lives (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Stafford et al., 2003).

Youth councillors often lack institutional power and remain dependent on the very political structures they seek to influence. The Western youth council model is typically state-centric, embedded within government apparatuses that presume state neutrality and the adequate representation of diverse interests, including youth (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Taft & Gordon, 2013). Success is often measured by the quality of youth councils' relationships with adult-led councils, positioning them as insider groups that must conform to institutional norms rather than challenge them. This dynamic narrows the scope of youth participation, rendering agendas contingent on institutional complicity and reinforcing hierarchical power relations (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Reluctance to share power and the static inflexible nature of institutions has been widely acknowledged (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Matthews, 2001a).

Symbolic, structural, and discursive constraints, rooted in normative assumptions about youth citizenship, further limit the capacity of youth councillors to exercise political agency or effect meaningful change (Faulkner, 2009; Perry-Hazan, 2016). With limited evidence of

deliberative processes that foster critical reflection, youth councils often fail to challenge dominant governance logics, offering little in the way of authentic democracy (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Furlong, 2016). As such, they risk becoming performative spaces rather than transformative ones.

Scholars have argued that a significant reconfiguration of institutional structures and processes is required to improve youth participatory outcomes. There is a substantial body of literature outlining the characteristics of inclusive institutional design, and effective methods to strengthen the inclusive participation of youth (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Camino & Zeldin, 2010; Collin & Vromen, 2010; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2015; Zeldin et al., 2018). However, there exists an institutional inertia and resistance by local authorities to expand structures and participatory methods, to alter the top-down, expert-based mode of urban planning, and hierarchical relational patterns, to egalitarian approaches that are inclusive of all groups. Officials argue that this might not fit within existing institutional settings, plans, policies, and frameworks of local government (David & Buchanan, 2020; Freeman, 2005; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019).

Given the complexity of policy and decision-making within local government, institutional constraints and capacity issues, there are concerns that broadening participation to include inclusive, transformative youth-centric methods, such as co-production, and collective engagement processes based on sustained engagement, would be inefficient and could disrupt the stability of the system (David & Buchanan, 2020). The ability of neoliberal government structures and processes to be transformative and inclusive appears significantly limited. Governance works within the status quo of neoliberal democratic structures, rather than fundamentally changing them. It retains a focus on structures, and rational decision-making, rather than changing attitudes. Neoliberal governance, with its emphasis on rationality, efficiency, and control, is ill-equipped for transformative participation. Rather than disrupting

the status quo, it absorbs youth initiatives into existing hierarchies, reinforcing adult authority and technocratic decision-making (Freeman, 2005; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Officials frequently fail to recognise the marginalised position of youth and remain reluctant to relinquish power or engage with youth on their own terms (Matthews, 2001a; Tisdall, 2015). There is a lack of confidence and openness to working outside conventional statutory systems and pursuing innovative ways of working with the diverse cultures and unique preferences of youth, their ways of thinking and doing (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Tisdall, 2015).

Whether meaningful youth participation can be realised within these rigid institutional designs remains an open question. Yet many scholars view youth engagement as an untapped democratic resource. Unlocking this potential requires not only structural reform but also a fundamental shift in how officials conceptualise youth citizenship, alongside a reimagining of youth–state relations (David & Buchanan, 2020; Harris et al., 2010; Harada, 2023).

## 2.8 Institutional Logics and the Reproduction of Youth Marginalisation

The persistent limitations of youth councils outlined in the previous sections can be more fully understood through the analytical lens of institutional logics, which illuminates how deeply embedded cultural norms, organisational routines, and symbolic assumptions shape the possibilities for youth participation. Institutional logics operate as overarching meaning systems that define what is considered legitimate, appropriate, and possible within governance structures (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton et al., 2012). Applying a logics analysis reveals that the challenges facing youth councils are not simply operational or resourcing issues but are rooted in dominant logics that structure local government practice.

Kassman and Vamstad (2019) argue that society operates through multiple institutional logics and that institutional performance depends on the configuration of these prevailing

logics. In the context of local government, council decision-making is shaped primarily by the institutional logics of local bureaucracy. Although both democratic and bureaucratic logics are relevant to youth councils, these function as ideal types within an environment of institutional pluralism, with bureaucratic logics typically dominating. Consequently, youth participation outcomes differ depending on whether participation occurs within the bureaucratic logic of local government or within the wider democratic sphere of civil society (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019).

Within local government settings, youth councils are embedded in bureaucratic structures that prioritise hierarchy, proceduralism, and administrative control. This positioning shapes how youth voice is organised, channelled, and authorised, producing forms of participation that are managed and predictable rather than transformative or disruptive of existing governance practices. Although youth councils are formally grounded in a democratic logic that aspires to deliberation, shared power, and youth influence, Kassman and Vamstad (2019) show that this intended logic is routinely overridden by the bureaucratic imperatives that govern local government operations. As a result, young people are expected to adapt to adult-defined norms, timelines, and decision-making processes, reinforcing their dependence on institutional gatekeepers and limiting their capacity to exercise political agency (Collin, 2015). Given the resistance of institutions to altering established structures and processes, Kassman and Vamstad (2019) argue that youth councils embedded within public administration are not the most conducive setting for supporting strong youth advocacy or enabling young people to challenge institutional agendas and norms. Instead, they suggest that youth-led organising within civil society may offer greater opportunities for political agency, as independent youth groups are better positioned to exert pressure and influence policy outcomes (Collin, 2015; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019).

The dominance of bureaucratic logic is further sustained by symbolic and discursive logics that construct youth as incomplete or marginal citizens whose political engagement must be supervised and contained (Collin, 2015; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Tisdall, 2017). Such logics normalise youth marginalisation by framing participation as a privilege granted by adults rather than a right held by young people (Lansdown, 2011). Consequently, youth councils often reproduce the very power asymmetries they are intended to challenge, offering symbolic inclusion while restricting opportunities for dissent, agenda setting, or collective mobilisation (Hart, 1992; Percy-Smith, 2010). Taken together, these dynamics produce a form of participation that is procedural rather than substantive, aligning closely with the broader neoliberal governance logic that prioritises efficiency, control, and technocratic decision making over deliberation, contestation, and shared power (Bessant, 2014; Collin, 2015; Harris et al., 2010).

Although most of the authors cited above do not use the institutional logics framework explicitly, their analyses of adultism, symbolic participation, and neoliberal governance illuminate the cultural and discursive patterns that function as institutional logics shaping youth participation. Alford and Friedland (1991) further emphasise that attempts at institutional change depend on the resources controlled by actors, the nature of power, and the institutionally specific rules governing how resources are produced, allocated, and controlled. Youth councillors typically lack such institutional power, meaning that agendas, resources, and terms of engagement are prescribed and managed by adults (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Collin, 2015). As a result, youth councils often function as mechanisms for providing information to officials rather than as sites of shared decision-making, with young people contributing perspectives that support pragmatic planning and service development rather than shaping broader political priorities (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005).

Recognising these dynamics through an institutional logics perspective makes clear that the limitations of youth councils are structurally embedded and culturally reinforced. The dominance of bureaucratic, neoliberal, and adult-centric logics constrains the emergence of more egalitarian forms of youth participation and limits the capacity of institutions to recognise young people as legitimate political actors (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). This analysis highlights the need for an alternative institutional logic, one that repositions young people as participatory rights holders and reframes participation as an institutional obligation rather than an optional or discretionary practice (Lundy, 2007; 2018). This argument aligns closely with Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) claim that youth participation systems are shaped by multiple, often unarticulated frameworks and require a coherent system of logics to inform practice and youth council operations. Their proposed systems-of-logics framework (see Chapter Four) underscores the importance of recognising how different institutional rationalities shape youth participation and the need for coherent policy and organisational approaches.

Recent empirical research reinforces and extends this analysis, demonstrating how these logics continue to shape youth participation in contemporary practice. When participating in initiatives explicitly designed to promote youth agency, young must navigate adult-centric norms, professional expectations, and organisational routines that define what counts as legitimate participation (Harju et al., 2024; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). Youth are required to align with the bureaucratic and professional logics of the institutions hosting these initiatives, learning to speak, behave, and contribute in ways that fit adult-defined standards of appropriateness. Similarly, Glumac et al. (2024), examining co-design practices within the Democracy Reloading initiative, demonstrate how participatory processes are routinely absorbed into existing municipal procedures and risk-averse administrative cultures. Although co-design is framed as collaborative and democratic (see 2.9.2 below), findings reveal that bureaucratic and technical logics frequently override the participatory logic such initiatives

aspire to embody (Glumac et al., 2024). This suggests that the limitations of youth participation are not merely operational but are deeply rooted in the institutionalised meaning systems that govern local democratic practice. Taken together, these insights consolidate the conceptual foundation for the two frameworks developed in Chapter Four: Augsberger et al.'s systems-of-logics model and a rights-based institutional logic introduced in this research, each offering distinct but complementary pathways for reimagining youth–state relations and supporting meaningful, transformative participation.

## 2.9 New Operating Models

This section reviews literature on emerging operating models designed to improve youth participatory outcomes. These include informal modes of engagement, youth-led mechanisms, and equitable structures such as co-production.

### 2.9.1 Informal Modes of Participation and Youth-led Mechanisms

The long-term sustainability of youth councils globally depends on operating models that align practice with the participatory rights of youth as articulated in the CRC, relevant legislation, and democratic theory. Two key priorities for local governments committed to youth participation are: (1) strengthening youth influence in urban planning, policymaking, and community outcomes; and (2) facilitating the inclusive engagement of diverse and marginalised youth.

To counter exclusionary, adult-led structures and foster youth-centric participation, policymakers must shift from formal, rigid mechanisms toward informal, youth-led approaches. This requires a willingness to engage with youth cultures and adopt participatory

processes that are inclusive, accessible, and responsive to young people's lived realities (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Collin & Vromen, 2010; Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2015). A growing body of research advocates for engagement strategies grounded in the concept of 'lived citizenship', the everyday enactment of civic identity and agency by youth (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Harada, 2023). Participation is most meaningful when it is youth-led, informal, and focused on everyday issues rather than abstract or remote policy processes (Harris et al., 2010). However, critical differences in how youth and policymakers conceptualise participation often limit the integration of youth's everyday political practices into formal governance (Collin, 2015; Collin & Vromen, 2010).

Youth consistently express a preference for issue-based, localised, culturally meaningful participation, what Bang (2005) terms the 'politics of the ordinary' or the identity of 'everyday makers' (Harris et al., 2007; White et al., 2017). Yet, reliable mechanisms to translate informal participation into public decision-making remain scarce (Collin & Vromen, 2010). Informal methods are particularly effective in engaging a broader and more diverse youth constituency, including those traditionally excluded or harder to reach. These approaches counter the alienating effects of formal governance and offer flexible, youth-centric pathways for participation (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Collin & Vromen, 2010). Research has highlighted the multiplicity of youth motivations and needs, underscoring the importance of tailored institutional responses that reflect intersecting identities and experiences (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023).

Creating spaces that resonate with everyday maker identities requires engaging youth in the settings and dialogues where they already express their views, such as youth-led networks, community-based groups, and digital platforms (Collin & Vromen, 2010). Youth-led councils are widely recognised as more relevant, autonomous, and responsive to youth

interests. Participation becomes meaningful when it reflects youth-defined priorities rather than institutional agendas (Holdsworth et al., 2007). Given the persistent challenges of adult-led models, a shift toward youth-led operations offers potential for greater empowerment and social justice (Augsberger et al., 2018a). Evidence from successful youth-led councils demonstrates their capacity to influence policy and improve youth wellbeing (Cushing & van Vliet, 2017; Collin & Vromen 2010). Augsberger et al. (2018b) further argued that youth-led structures can be particularly empowering for marginalised youth and support broader equity goals. They argued that further research is needed to examine the operations, practices, and impacts of youth-led councils globally, and to identify the conditions under which they can thrive.

### 2.9.2 Co-Production/ Co-Governance

In addition to informal, youth-led models of participation, attention must be given to reforming existing systems within local government. Strengthening consultative mechanisms is essential to shift youth participation from tokenistic gestures toward genuine empowerment. Empowerment can be achieved through equitable processes such as co-production, co-governance, and youth-led approaches in the design and implementation of participatory practice (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Tisdall, 2013). Co-production offers a compelling alternative to conventional, state-centred consultation models. It is characterised by collaborative, horizontal structures that assign youth meaningful roles, redistribute power, and foster autonomy (Tisdall, 2017). Cornwall and Coelho (2007) describe co-production as an intensive, deliberative process that deepens engagement and supports the development of policy recommendations. Scotland's national Youth Commission on Alcohol exemplifies this

approach, integrating youth into a broad range of policy domains, not just youth-specific initiatives (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005).

Sustained, ongoing engagement is critical to moving beyond tokenism. Faulkner (2009) distinguished between one-off consultations, which may be symbolic, and ongoing participatory processes that involve youth in decision-making. The latter are more likely to foster empowerment. A shift from hierarchical to horizontal governance structures enables youth to define the terms of their participation in ways that reflect their priorities. Evidence showed that when adults speak on behalf of youth, their interpretations are often inaccurate (Harris et al., 2007). Horizontal processes promote trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect, key components of social capital. These egalitarian structures are associated with higher public trust and more accountable governance while hierarchical systems tend to reinforce exclusion and erode trust (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004)

Removing excessive hierarchies of control can foster a collaborative environment where youth and adults work as equals (Halpern, 2005). This is particularly important given youth's marginalised position in policymaking, shaped by institutional power imbalances and exclusionary structures. Collaborative processes that include meaningful roles, devolved responsibilities, and opportunities for civic engagement can enhance youth efficacy and confidence (Evans, 2007). Through these acts of citizenship, youth begin to see themselves as influential civic actors (Flanagan & Levine, 2011). Participation becomes meaningful when it reflects youth-defined priorities rather than institutional agendas (Collin & Vromen, 2010). When youth councillors are entrusted with substantive responsibilities, they are positioned as capable civic actors, not merely as providers of a youth perspective (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). This fosters trust and strengthens working relationships between youth and adult officials.

Implementing horizontal processes within government presents challenges. Egalitarian decision-making requires frequent meetings, open communication, and coordination across diverse stakeholders, including schools, NGOs, youth-serving organisations, and youth networks (David & Buchanan, 2020). These processes can be time-consuming and complex, potentially delaying action (Halpern, 2005). Nonetheless, evidence suggests that increased investment in participatory planning leads to higher-quality outcomes (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; David & Buchanan, 2020). Co-governance also demands a shift in institutional attitudes and practices. This can be unsettling for officials who are deeply invested in existing systems. Resistance to youth-led approaches often stems from discomfort with youth ways of thinking and doing (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Given youth's marginalisation in policy spaces, challenging this resistance is necessary (Tisdall, 2015). Ultimately, the implementation of equitable participation structures depends on institutional prioritisation and commitment. Issues of capacity, inertia, and youth exclusion within state-centred systems underscore the need to institutionalise a rights-based framework. Such reform would ensure accountability, strengthen youth autonomy, and improve participatory outcomes.

## 2.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter critically reviewed the limitations of the consultative model of youth participation and the exclusionary context of local government that restricts youth influence on policymaking. Structural and procedural barriers continue to hinder councils' ability to connect with youth and implement effective, youth-centric participatory methods. The review highlighted how prevailing conceptions of youth citizenship shape adult attitudes and behaviours, often resulting in exclusionary practices. In response, the chapter explored new

operating models aimed at bridging the disconnect between youth and local government and shifting participation from tokenism toward genuine empowerment. These models, including informal engagement, youth-led processes, and equitable structures such as co-production, offer pathways to build trust and strengthen youth–adult relationships. Empowerment can be fostered by recognising youth as capable civic actors, listening to their perspectives, and devolving meaningful responsibilities. While this chapter centred on youth impact on policymaking and outcomes, Chapter Three turns to the critical issue of representation, examining how councils have neglected diversity and the inclusive participation of marginalised youth.

This chapter also introduced the role of institutional logics in reproducing structural, procedural, and cultural constraints, demonstrating how bureaucratic and adult-centric rationalities shape the limits of youth participation. These dynamics raise important questions about whether meaningful participation can be realised within current institutional arrangements. Chapter Four returns to these concerns through a conceptual lens, extending the institutional-logics analysis and introducing a rights-based framework capable of reorienting youth–state relations toward more equitable and transformative forms of engagement.

# Chapter Three

## Equitable Representation – Addressing the Disconnect

Youth councils, as instruments of representative democracy, are widely critiqued for their elitist characteristics and limited capacity to represent diverse youth constituencies (Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Matthews & Limb, 2003; Matthews, 2001b; 2001c; Oliff, 2003). Scholars have argued that youth councils frequently fail to extend democratic representation to the wider youth community, creating a persistent disconnect (Collin, 2015; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Wyness, 2009). This disconnect stems from inward-facing participation styles, inequitable membership, and weak community engagement, which together reproduce patterns of exclusion and inequality (Augsberger et al., 2018c; Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017). This chapter begins with an overview of social capital studies and their application to youth participation.

Drawing on distinctions between bonding and bridging capital, the discussion then explores internal youth council participation styles, arguing that councils must cultivate outward-facing, cross-group connections if they are to function as legitimate representative bodies. Effective representation also requires youth councillors to cultivate a critical consciousness: the capacity to recognise, interrogate, and act upon the social and structural conditions that produce marginalisation. The analysis developed in this chapter provides the conceptual foundation for later discussion. In Chapters Eight and Nine, the distinctions between bonding and bridging capital are revisited to interpret how youth councillors engaged with diverse youth and navigated institutional constraints.

The discussion then turns to how the narrow composition of youth councils limits their capacity to represent diverse youth constituencies. It then examines the need for youth councillors to understand and recognise the diversity of youth, including their heterogeneous

identities and lived experiences, as an essential requirement for genuine representation. Finally, the chapter examines youth councils' engagement with the broader youth community, showing that without the intentional cultivation of bridging capital, councils risk reproducing exclusion and failing to reach diverse youth populations.

### 3.1 Social Capital, Trust, and the Foundations of Youth Civic Engagement

Contemporary understandings of social capital emerged in the late twentieth century, when researchers across diverse fields began noticing a series of unexpected empirical patterns: communities with dense social networks consistently demonstrated better outcomes in areas such as economic development, health, education, and governance. As Halpern (2005) notes, these findings prompted a gradual recognition that the common explanatory factor lay not in formal institutions or material resources, but in the underlying social fabric itself. This insight crystallised into what is now conceptualised as social capital. Among the most influential contributions to this shift was Robert Putnam's Making Democracy Work (1993), which demonstrated that variations in institutional performance were closely tied to the vibrancy of associational life and the level of trust within communities. Alongside Putnam, theorists such as Bourdieu, Coleman, and Fukuyama helped consolidate social capital as a multidimensional concept encompassing resources embedded in social networks, the functional value of relationships, and the cultural norms that sustain cooperation (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995a, 1995b). The OECD (2001) have similarly highlighted the strong relationship between civic participation and the accumulation of social capital.

These traditions provide the backdrop for understanding how social capital has been conceptualised and where young people have been positioned within this scholarship. Despite the breadth of this scholarship, early conceptualisations of social capital overwhelmingly

focused on adult populations (Fukuyama, 1995a, 1995b, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001; Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993). Foundational constructs such as trust, reciprocity, and networked resources were developed with limited attention to young people's experiences or forms of participation. Although research on youth social capital has expanded over the past two decades, it remains comparatively underdeveloped. Existing studies have tended to examine young people's networks in relation to youth transitions, social exclusion, or childhood contexts (Bassani, 2007; Morrow, 1999; Raffo & Reeves, 2000). Schaefer McDaniel (2004) argues that even this emerging body of work often overlooks young people's own perspectives, calling for a youth-centred approach that foregrounds their interpretations of relationships, trust, and belonging.

Social capital is commonly understood as the resources generated through social connectedness, the dense, non-hierarchical, multi-purpose relationships that exist within civil society, the social space between families, firms, and governments (Onyx, 1996). At the core of these relationships is trust, the foundational condition that enables positive social interactions and underpins the norms of reciprocity that sustain cooperation (Halpern, 2005). Individuals gain benefits through their membership in, or association with, particular networks, groups, and relationships that provide access to valued resources (Bourdieu, 1986). When trust is present, these networks function more effectively, allowing coordination, shared expectations, and mutual support to flourish (Putnam, 1993; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). The knowledge, support, experience, and opportunities that flow through trusting relationships constitute powerful assets that must be actively constructed and maintained; social capital is therefore an investment that builds over time **(**Halpern, 2005).

Furthermore, the trust that young people place in public institutions and adults is closely tied to the extent to which they believe their interests and concerns are genuinely heard and

acted upon (Molloy et al., 2002). Evans (2007) argues that the expression of youth voice requires resonance, a clear signal that young people's views are not only received but actively considered and recognised. Yet, much of the scholarship highlights persistent concerns that youth are not being listened to, that their contributions are not taken seriously, and that their perspectives rarely translate into meaningful action (Holdsworth et al., 2007; Tisdall, 2015). This experience of marginalisation and exclusion has been linked to declining levels of trust in conventional political institutions and civic processes among young people (Furlong, 2008). Halpern (2005) suggests that trust can be strengthened by listening to youth more attentively and by entrusting them with greater responsibility, for example, through measures such as lowering the voting age to 16. These insights underscore the critical role adults play in creating conditions where youth feel heard within local government, through communicative practices grounded in mutual respect, transparency, feedback, and accountability (Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2013).

Because trust is central to the formation and mobilisation of social capital, understanding how young people develop trust within civic and participatory settings becomes essential, particularly in structured environments such as youth councils. These settings offer unique opportunities to observe how young people build networks, negotiate relationships, and cultivate the forms of trust and reciprocity that underpin meaningful civic engagement. The remainder of this chapter explores these dynamics, positioning youth councils as important sites of social capital formation and as spaces where young people actively negotiate their roles within civic life.

Despite this gap, social capital theory remains highly relevant for understanding youth participation in local governance. Its emphasis on trust, reciprocity, and horizontal relationships provides a useful foundation for analysing how young people build connections

and navigate power within participatory settings. These ideas underpin the analysis that follows, particularly the examination of how internal youth council dynamics shape opportunities for young people to develop and mobilise social capital. More recent youth-centred scholarship extends these foundational ideas by emphasising the relational dimensions of young people's participation. Augsberger (2018a) and Feringa and Tonkens (2017) show that while bonding capital within youth councils can foster cohesion, it can also reproduce exclusivity unless young people engage reflexively to build bridging capital. Their work highlights how participation styles influence who is included or excluded, and how power circulates within youth governance structures. Understanding these internal dynamics is therefore essential for assessing how youth councils support inclusive participation and equitable decision-making. Together, these insights frame the analytical lens through which youth councils are examined in this chapter. The next section examines these participation styles in greater depth.

### 3.2 Internal Participation Styles: Bonding and Bridging Capital

In the Aotearoa NZ context, social capital is recognised as an important foundation for effective local governance (Reid et al., 2021), yet little attention has been given to how youth themselves contribute to these processes (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). Understanding the civic impact of youth councils therefore requires close examination of the internal dynamics that shape how young people participate. The balance between bonding and bridging capital within these structures can either support inclusive youth governance or constrain it. Youth councils are critiqued for the inward orientation of their participation styles, which limits their ability to represent and extend democracy to diverse youth communities (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Wyness, 2009). While bonding social capital, that is close-knit ties marked by trust,

reciprocity, and mutual support, plays an important role in fostering cooperation and cohesion within youth councils, such practices risk reinforcing exclusivity and undermining the representational legitimacy of youth councils. Studies of youth councils in the Netherlands, for example, found that discussions were largely internally oriented, with little attention given to the lived realities of the wider youth population (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017). This inward focus means that councillors tend to concentrate on personal interests, administrative matters, or internal group dynamics rather than sustained engagement with civic issues or the priorities of local youth. Bonding capital is valuable for team-building and procedural justice, ensuring that councillors feel respected and able to collaborate effectively. However, when bonding capital dominates without sufficient bridging capital, councils may inadvertently reproduce social inequalities, entrench divisions, and foster elitism (Halpern, 2005; Wyness, 2009).

Bridging capital, by contrast, connects individuals across diverse social groups and is essential for inclusive democratic engagement (Halpern, 2005). It enables youth councillors to build ties across divides such as ethnicity, class, and religion, and to orient their work toward social justice objectives. Socially reflexive dialogue, and conversations that foster awareness of diversity and difference, can help youth councils remain attuned to the realities of marginalised youth and strengthen their outward connections (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Van Steenis et al., 2025). This requires councillors to cultivate a critical social consciousness, an awareness of structural inequities and a commitment to action, yet such capacities are more commonly found in youth activism than in formal youth councils (Checkoway, 2011). The effects of this gap are evident in the composition and everyday practices of youth councils, where bonding capital shapes participation and narrows councillors' engagement with wider social issues. Acknowledging these limitations underscores the need to move beyond inward-looking participation styles and to strengthen the bridging capital required for more inclusive and socially responsive youth governance.

### 3.3 Developing Bridging Capital and Critical Consciousness

Building on the need for stronger bridging capital this section examines how youth councils can develop the critical consciousness necessary for more inclusive and socially responsive governance. Cultivating bridging capital is not only a matter of internal council dynamics but also a broader requirement for addressing structural barriers and recognising youth diversity. Developing such consciousness aligns with maximal notions of citizenship, which emphasise transforming structures that disenfranchise youth rather than simply participating within them (Collin, 2015; Lister, 2008). This requires cultivating what Freire (1970) terms critical consciousness: the capacity to recognise, interrogate, and act upon the social and structural conditions that produce marginalisation. In youth governance, this resonates with Evans' (2007) concept of critical civic praxis, where young people engage not only in civic activities but in challenging inequitable systems and advocating for structural change.

Councillors who understand the socio-political marginalisation of youth are better positioned to reflect critically on barriers to participation and to advocate for more culturally responsive and inclusive local government practices. These barriers include the alienating culture and technical discourse of local government, limited flexibility to accommodate cultural diversity, and discriminatory practices that persist in policymaking spaces (David & Buchanan, 2020). For example, youth often express an interest in contributing to policy but lack knowledge of how government works, underscoring the need for councillors to bridge this gap and make governance processes more accessible (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Harris et al., 2007). These dynamics become particularly visible in the composition of youth councils themselves, where patterns of bonding capital often shape who participates and who remains excluded. Such patterns raise important questions about representational legitimacy. The next

section examines how limited diversity in membership constrains the capacity of youth councils to speak for wider youth populations.

### 3.4 Diversity in Youth Council Membership

A lack of diversity in youth council membership is a central critique of their effectiveness in representing the voices, needs, and aspirations of diverse youth in local government (Matthews, 2001a; Wyness, 2009). Limited diversity also shapes the forms of social capital that youth councils produce, as narrow membership bases tend to reinforce bonding capital and inward-looking networks rather than broad, outward-facing connections with the wider youth community. Youth councils often fail to reflect the demographic composition of the wider youth community, particularly in terms of ability, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation (Augsberger et al., 2018b; Finlay, 2010; Nairn et al., 2006). Research across multiple countries has shown that members tend to be confident, articulate, high-achieving youth from well-resourced environments who are comfortable with formal council procedures (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Matthews, 2001b; Wyness, 2009). This profile reinforces existing inequalities, as the voices of less-engaged youth and those from marginalised ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds are often excluded from consultation processes (Augsberger et al., 2018c). Moreover, councillors' tendency to conform to institutional norms may limit their willingness to advocate for priorities that challenge the status quo or address the needs of marginalised youth (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). These patterns reflect well-documented social-capital dynamics, where young people with existing institutional connections, confidence, and supportive networks are more likely to be recruited or encouraged to participate, thereby reproducing existing inequalities in access to civic opportunities. Research shows that youth councillors are often recruited through existing social networks, knowing someone already involved in local government, school leadership, or community organisations,

meaning participation can depend on who you know rather than equitable, open processes, and illustrating how access to social capital shapes who is invited or encouraged to participate (Augsberger et al., 2018c).

Structural limitations also constrain representational capacity. Globally, youth councils range from 30–50 members in larger jurisdictions, with most comprising fewer than 20 participants (Cushing & van Vliet, 2017; McGinley & Grieve, 2009). Membership typically includes secondary school students under the legal voting age of 18, though some councils include children as young as nine or young adults up to 25 (Augsberger et al., 2024). In Aotearoa NZ, councils generally include youth aged 12–24 and range in size from 10 to 30 members. Given their limited size and narrow social composition, youth councils have only modest capacity to represent the full diversity of the youth population (Augsberger et al., 2018c; Matthews & Limb, 2003).

Strengthening recruitment pathways is therefore not only a matter of demographic representation but also of expanding the bridging social capital available to youth councils, enabling them to build relationships with a wider and more diverse range of young people. To address these challenges, scholars propose formal mechanisms to support diverse recruitment. Augsberger et al. (2018c) suggest proportional representation, where the number of members from each neighbourhood reflects the youth population size of that area. Councils may also reserve seats for youth from ‘sub-neighbourhoods’ with distinct cultural or socio-economic identities. In Aotearoa NZ, recruitment strategies could include outreach in schools, churches, marae, youth groups, and sports clubs, alongside targeted efforts in trade schools and alternative education settings (Augsberger et al., 2018c; David & Buchanan, 2020). At a local level the researcher suggests that collaboration with NGOs, iwi providers, social service agencies, and youth-serving organisations could further strengthen inclusive recruitment.

These patterns in youth council membership underscore the limits of youth councils' representational capacity and highlight the need to situate membership within the broader diversity of youth populations.

### 3.5 Recognising Diversity

Developing critical consciousness within youth councils requires an awareness of the diverse and shifting identities of young people, since bridging capital can only be cultivated when councillors recognise and engage meaningfully with the heterogeneity of the youth populations they aim to represent. Recognising this heterogeneity is central to understanding the structural conditions that shape young people's experiences and to strengthening the outward-facing networks needed for inclusive youth governance. Young people occupy multiple and shifting positions of inclusion and exclusion, shaped by intersections of ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, gender, sexuality, disability, and geography (Furlong, 2016; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). In Aotearoa NZ, this diversity is particularly pronounced: many children and young people identify with more than one ethnicity, and demographic patterns show increasing representation of Māori, Pacific, and Asian communities among younger cohorts (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023; Statistics NZ, 2025). Such demographic complexity underscores the need for youth councils to build outward-facing networks that connect with a broad spectrum of youth experiences rather than relying on narrow, inward-looking forms of bonding capital. National policy frameworks reinforce this imperative. The Youth Plan 2020–2022 (MYD, 2020), for example, emphasises the importance of increasing participation among groups most likely to experience exclusion, including rangatahi Māori, Pacific youth, Rainbow young people, youth with disabilities, youth from ethnic communities, young women, and those living in rural or isolated regions. These

priorities highlight that bridging capital is not simply a desirable attribute but a necessary condition for equitable youth participation. Collaboration between government agencies, iwi, community organisations, and the youth sector is identified as essential for ensuring that youth engagement processes are culturally responsive and inclusive.

Taken together, the literature suggests that youth councils must move beyond inward-facing participation styles and intentionally cultivate bridging capital. By fostering socially reflexive dialogue, developing critical consciousness, and recognising the diverse realities of youth, councils can strengthen their democratic reach and enhance their legitimacy as representative institutions. This orientation requires councillors to embrace diversity and inclusiveness not only as values but as everyday practices that shape how they connect with the wider youth constituency and advocate for equitable representation in local governance. Recognising diversity is only the first step; youth councils must also translate this awareness into meaningful engagement with the wider youth community. Within this broader commitment to diversity, the experiences of disabled young people highlight how participation rights are unevenly realised and why youth councils must attend to the specific barriers faced by seldom-heard groups.

### 3.6 Disability, Participation Rights, and the Inclusion of Seldom-Heard Young People

Children and young people with disabilities often face persistent barriers to participation, despite the CRC's clear recognition of their right to express their views and be supported to do so. Article 23 affirms that disabled children are entitled to participate fully in community life and to receive the assistance necessary to realise this right, while Article 2 requires that participation opportunities be provided without discrimination (UN, 1989). However, research consistently shows that many disabled young people are seldom-heard in

formal participation structures such as youth councils, with obstacles ranging from inaccessible meeting formats and communication methods to adult assumptions about capacity and competence (Halpenny et al., 2014). These structural and attitudinal barriers mean that youth councils often reproduce existing inequalities rather than challenge them. Ensuring the meaningful inclusion of disabled young people requires more than simply offering a seat at the table. It involves providing accessible information, adapting communication approaches, offering appropriate support, and creating participatory environments that recognise diverse ways of expressing views. This aligns with broader participation scholarship, which emphasises that meaningful engagement must be relational, sustained, and embedded in ongoing processes rather than delivered through one-off or tokenistic consultations (Tisdall, 2017; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). Without such intentional and well-supported practices, youth councils risk excluding precisely those young people whose perspectives are most critical for informing equitable policy and service design. The next section examines how community engagement functions as a practical expression of bridging capital and a critical test of councils' representational capacity.

### 3.7 Community Engagement

A third critical dimension of youth councils' representational capacity lies in their ability to engage the wider youth community. Without intentional cultivation of bridging capital, councils risk reproducing exclusion and failing to connect with diverse youth populations. Studies consistently show that councillors struggle to reach and connect with the broader youth population, particularly those deemed hardest to reach (Halpenny et al., 2014; Nir & Perry-Hazan, 2016; O'Toole, 2003). Engagement strategies are often minimal or ineffective, with limited use of face-to-face outreach or social media. Councillors themselves have acknowledged that their interactions are primarily with adult stakeholders rather than youth,

and that outreach often relies on distributing flyers rather than cultivating meaningful relationships (Augsberger et al., 2018a). This lack of bridging capital reproduces existing inequalities and silences already excluded groups.

Effective participation strategies must create opportunities for all youth, not just those who are articulate or already engaged. Recruiting councillors with insider knowledge and networks can help establish sustainable connections, but councils must also ensure that diverse perspectives are meaningfully reflected in policy spaces (Augsberger et al., 2018a). These challenges mirror broader issues in local government engagement, where civic participation often benefits privileged groups and raises concerns about equity and social justice.

In Aotearoa NZ, local government legislation emphasises community engagement in planning, yet tensions persist around achieving equitable representation across cultural and social lines. New operating models are needed to address these disconnects, particularly given that regional disparities in wellbeing demand greater responsibility from local government in advancing social outcomes (Reid et al., 2021). Marginalised youth stand to gain the most from civic inclusion, and research has shown they contribute meaningfully when given the opportunity. However, local councils often rely solely on youth councils to represent youth perspectives, overlooking alternative engagement routes that could reach a broader constituency (Blanchet- Cohen & Torres, 2015). Strengthening community engagement is therefore essential not only for the legitimacy of youth councils but also for the broader pursuit of social justice and inclusive local governance.

In summary, the literature has highlighted how inequitable membership, inward-facing participation styles, and weak community engagement combine to limit the democratic reach of youth councils. Addressing these challenges requires intentional cultivation of bridging capital, critical consciousness, and inclusive recruitment and engagement practices. By

embedding diversity and inclusiveness as guiding principles, youth councils can move beyond reproducing exclusion and instead foster equitable representation, strengthen connections with the wider youth community, and enhance their legitimacy as democratic institutions within local government. These limitations highlight the need for new approaches that can extend youth councils' reach beyond their existing networks. The following section examines participatory innovations that intentionally cultivate bridging social capital and strengthen youth engagement.

### 3.8 Participatory Innovations that Expand Youth Engagement

Strengthening community engagement requires innovative approaches that move beyond traditional council structures. Evidence shows that youth are interested in civic issues and become actively involved when given meaningful opportunities (Harris et al., 2007; O'Toole, 2003). However, youth councils are often internally oriented and disconnected from the wider youth community (Augsberger et al., 2018c; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). These limitations highlight the need for participatory approaches that intentionally cultivate bridging social capital by connecting youth across diverse communities and creating spaces for collective voice.

One promising pathway is the development of youth summits and participatory budgeting, which create opportunities for diverse youth to deliberate on social, civic, and political issues. Summits can build connections across divides such as religion, class, and ethnicity, thereby fostering bridging capital (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993). Emerging evidence shows that organised youth activities, including summits and informal networks, are important developmental contexts for building social capital and advancing equity outcomes (Boat et al., 2024). As a form of social capital, youth summits generate collective gains by

supporting social justice objectives and increasing civic and political engagement. They provide platforms for deliberation, idea generation, and planning of local initiatives. For example, youth summits have addressed substance use, domestic violence, homelessness, LGBTQ+ rights, juvenile justice, and HIV/AIDS awareness, producing policy recommendations aligned with maximal notions of youth citizenship and efforts to transform inequitable structures (Checkoway et al., 2005; Cushing & van Vliet, 2017; Collin, 2015).

Participatory budgeting has also emerged as a significant participatory innovation, improving accountability and transparency in local governance. These processes engage youth in identifying priorities, developing proposals, and voting on funding allocations, thereby fostering democratic participation and connecting youth across diverse communities (Cushing & van Vliet, 2016). Research indicates that youth from varied backgrounds are more likely to engage when they help shape both the process and the content of participation (Bell et al., 2008). Originating in Porto Alegre, Brazil, participatory budgeting has now been adopted in thousands of municipalities worldwide, with particularly strong uptake in Latin America, parts of North America, the Dominican Republic, Spain, Italy, Germany, Canada, and the United States, each adapting the model to local governance structures and community priorities (Cushing & van Vliet, 2016). Many of these jurisdictions have developed youth-specific processes, recognising their potential to engage young people who are otherwise marginalised from formal political institutions. Evidence suggests that participatory budgeting can broaden participation by offering accessible, concrete decision-making opportunities that resonate with diverse youth populations and allow them to influence resource allocation in meaningful ways (Cushing & van Vliet, 2016; Sintomer et al., 2008).

For summits and participatory budgeting to be effective, they must reflect inclusive, flexible, youth-centric approaches rather than replicating the formal culture of governance,

which many youth find alienating (Cavet & Sloper, 2004; Oliff, 2003; Wyness, 2015). Informal participation in familiar spaces and dialogues is more likely to appeal to a broader range of youth, including those typically excluded. Councillors who embrace diversity and inclusiveness, and who remain open to youth cultures and participation styles, are more likely to increase engagement (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). Egalitarian processes foster teamwork and equivalence, building trust in youth council representatives (Halpern, 2005).

Summits and participatory budgeting also offer opportunities for sustained engagement. They can generate more accurate and nuanced understandings of youth priorities (Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2015), ensuring that youth interests are meaningfully represented in policy spaces. Direct interaction with the youth constituency enhances councillors' understanding of local voices, preferences, and concerns, thereby extending democracy and strengthening the participatory rights of diverse youth communities. In this way, summits and participatory budgeting operate as forms of bridging social capital that extend youth councils' reach beyond their internal networks and strengthen democratic legitimacy. While youth summits demonstrate the power of youth-led initiatives in building social capital, their long-term impact depends on how councils respond. To embed these voices meaningfully into governance, councils must move beyond ad hoc engagement and create inclusive spaces that welcome diverse forms of youth participation. These innovations align with recent guidance on youth participatory research and participatory grant-making, which emphasise inclusive design and shared decision-making (Centre for Evidence and Implementation, 2024; Centre for Social Impact, 2025).

### 3.9 Council-Level Approaches to Inclusive Youth Participation

Building on the earlier discussion of community engagement and social capital, broader approaches are needed to ensure councils create inclusive spaces that reflect diverse youth realities. Councils serve critical social policy and wellbeing functions, and the localised nature of social inequality suggests that local government may bear increasing responsibility in this area (Reid et al., 2021). Yet, research suggests that officials are often motivated to involve youth for pragmatic reasons, such as implementing youth infrastructure or responding to perceived crises in the youth community (Cushing & van Bliet, 2017; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). This may detract from broader concerns such as addressing inequitable access and building social capital (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). A reorientation by youth councillors toward claiming rights and pursuing social justice objectives requires the active support of the wider council. This, in turn, demands a commitment by local government to broaden participation and embrace more inclusive practices.

Inclusive council spaces require receptiveness, flexibility, and a willingness to adopt new ideas and informal modes of youth engagement (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). Creating spaces that are open to the diverse cultures of youth, and to the ways they wish to participate, is essential for improving accessibility and fostering meaningful involvement in local governance. This requires youth-centred, co-designed approaches within council structures. Bell et al. (2008) argue that youth from diverse backgrounds are more likely to engage when they help shape both the process and content of participation. Both youth councillors and adult council staff have a role in identifying and supporting opportunities for diverse youth groups, each with unique needs and interests, to engage at varying levels and through different forms of involvement (Stacey, 2005).

Given the challenges in achieving diverse youth council membership and representation, some scholars advocate for enabling youth to speak directly from their own experiences to local officials (Bell et al., 2008; Collin & Vromen, 2010). Direct engagement between council staff and diverse youth may serve as an effective complementary strategy. Importantly, this does not undermine the autonomy of youth councillors as representatives of the broader youth community. Rather, collaborative partnerships between youth councils and the wider council can create more inclusive and responsive models of youth participation, strengthening democratic legitimacy and ensuring that diverse youth voices are meaningfully embedded in local governance. Inclusive council practices not only strengthen youth representation within formal structures but also lay the groundwork for vibrant civic activity beyond them. When councils embrace flexibility and collaboration, they help cultivate youth-led civic groups and associational life, extending participation into the wider community. These inclusive practices within council structures also create the conditions for civic activity to flourish beyond them. The next section examines how community-level civic groups extend youth participation into the wider civic landscape.

### 3.10 Community-level Civic Groups

The discussion now shifts to the wider civic landscape in which young people participate. Community-level civic groups provide an important mechanism for extending youth engagement beyond formal council structures and for cultivating the bridging social capital necessary for inclusive, effective local governance. While councils play a central role in shaping participatory environments, youth participation is also strengthened through the vibrancy of local civic life and the networks that emerge within communities. In the Aotearoa NZ context, social capital has been identified as a key mechanism for effective local

governance (Reid et al., 2021), yet youth contributions to these processes remain under-explored. Communities with high levels of social capital tend to participate more actively in civic and political life, leading to better-informed decision-making and strengthening the competence and accountability of government at all levels.

Strengthening the civic environment in which young people participate requires councils to actively cultivate the conditions that allow social capital to grow. Reid et al. (2021) argue that councils can support this by creating meaningful advocacy opportunities through which communities can influence local issues and decisions, and by providing facilities and infrastructure that enable voluntary associations to develop and flourish. Councils may also offer direct assistance, including grants, advisory services, and training, to individuals and groups involved in building civic networks, as well as recognising the contributions of community members. In addition, they play a coordinating role, aligning services and funding across government agencies, voluntary organisations, and local firms to ensure that community needs are addressed in coherent and responsive ways. These strategies collectively strengthen the civic foundations necessary for youth-led initiatives to thrive and for bridging social capital to expand across local communities (Reid et al., 2021).

In addition to council-based participation, youth engagement can be broadened through the cultivation of community-level civic groups, which provide important opportunities for young people to form connections beyond their immediate peer networks. The wider literature consistently links positive forms of social capital with effective local governance (Coleman, 1988; Halpern, 2005; OECD, 2001; Putnam, 1993; Reid et al., 2021). Bridging capital, in particular, is associated with higher levels of public trust, reduced corruption, increased political participation, and a more vibrant civic sphere. In contrast, hierarchical or closed forms

of social organisation are linked to lower levels of public trust and diminished civic engagement (Halpern, 2005; Robison et al., 2002).

While these studies highlight the importance of social capital, they are largely non-youth-specific and do not adequately consider the unique interests or marginalised position of youth within local governance systems. Extending these insights to youth contexts suggests that councils can play a vital role in supporting youth-led civic groups and community initiatives. Such efforts strengthen the broader ecology of civic life, the informal and organised activities that connect people within localities (Putnam, 1993; Reid et al., 2021). High levels of civic involvement among youth, including participation in community groups, have been linked to increased civic and political engagement later in life (Furlong, 2016). A dynamic youth civic sphere provides a strong foundation for the development of social capital (Halpern, 2005).

Bridging capital grows through sustained social interaction and cross-group relationships (Portes, 1998; Schaefer McDaniel, 2004), but these connections must be intentionally cultivated to realise their full democratic and social benefits (Augsberger et al., 2018c). Such initiatives foster belonging, inclusion, and stronger ties within the communities where youth live and interact. Strong civic activity and a healthy associational landscape have also been linked to effective governance (Coleman, 1988; Halpern, 2005; OECD, 2001; Putnam, 1993; Reid et al., 2021). Accordingly, scholars advocate for councils to provide infrastructure and support that enable voluntary organisations to thrive. Councils have wide scope to promote the growth of civil society networks, given their jurisdiction over social policy, wellbeing, and community planning. Supporting youth-led civic groups not only strengthens local civic life but also contributes to more inclusive governance. By fostering bridging capital and empowering diverse youth communities, these initiatives enhance

democratic legitimacy and ensure that youth voices are embedded in local decision-making. In this way, community-based civic groups operate as vital sites for cultivating bridging social capital, extending the relational reach of youth councils and strengthening their democratic mandate.

### 3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter provide an overview of the application of social capital to youth participation practice. It examined the representational challenges facing youth councils, focusing on inequitable membership, inward-facing participation styles, and weak community engagement. These limitations restrict councils' ability to connect with diverse youth populations and undermine their legitimacy as representative institutions. The literature demonstrates that inclusive recruitment, socially reflexive dialogue, and sustained engagement are essential for councils to move beyond tokenism and cultivate genuine empowerment. By embedding diversity and inclusiveness as guiding principles, councils can strengthen associational life, build trust, and enhance their democratic reach. Ultimately, equitable representation requires not only reform within council structures but also the intentional cultivation of youth-led civic initiatives that extend participation into the wider community. In response, the chapter explored innovative approaches such as youth summits, participatory budgeting, and community-level civic groups, which foster bridging capital, expand democratic participation, and embed youth voices in local governance while advancing social justice and recognising young people as capable civic actors.

# Chapter Four

## Conceptual Frameworks to Inform Youth Council Operations

This chapter reviews the literature on theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks of youth participatory citizenship. It begins with an overview of frameworks developed over the last five decades to inform youth participatory practice and outcomes within government, non-government organisations (NGOs), and community organisations. Hart's influential Ladder of Child and Youth Participation is highlighted as one of four frameworks used to analyse the data in this research. The discussion then turns to a set of conceptual frameworks developed by Augsberger et al. (2018a) to guide youth council operations, including policy process, social justice, positive youth development, and symbolic tokenism. Of these, the latter three frames were applied in the data analysis of this thesis. This is followed by a critique of the use of conceptual frameworks in practice. The chapter concludes by presenting a case for adopting a participatory rights-based approach to strengthen the role and influence of youth in local government policymaking and outcomes.

### 4.1 Conceptual Frameworks and Practice Guidelines

Over the past five decades, a wide range of theoretical models, strategies, and guidelines have emerged in academic, policy, and practitioner literature to inform youth participation practice within local government, non-government organisations [NGO]s, and community organisations (Anderson, 2017; Arnstein, 1969; Barber, 2009; BePart Project, 2021; Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Hart, 1992; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Lansdown, 2005; Larkins et al., 2014; Shier, 2001; Treseder, 1997; UNICEF, 2018; Wong et al., 2010). These frameworks have supported programmes in civics education, youth development, and youth participation, particularly within Western liberal democracies (Cornwall, 2008). Many are underpinned by a rights-based approach, with explicit reference to Article 12 of the CRC (UN, 1989). Internationally, the NGO sector has played a significant role in advancing youth participation through research, service delivery, and advocacy (Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 2008; Collin, 2015; Kirby & Bryson, 2002). A comprehensive evaluation by Holdsworth et al. (2007) on youth participation in Australian community and public sector organisations offered wide-ranging recommendations to inform practice.

Early scholarly frameworks linking theory to practice focused on youth–adult power configurations and the distribution of decision-making authority. These models offered tools for evaluating participation, often reflecting varying degrees of youth influence and empowerment (Wong et al., 2010). Hart's widely cited Ladder of Participation (1992), adapted from Arnstein's (1969) model of citizen participation, became a cornerstone. Other linear models were complemented by non-linear approaches such as Larkins et al.'s Lattice of Participation (2014) and Treseder's Degrees of Participation (1997). Beyond individual power dynamics, organisational responses were examined by Holdsworth (2007), and Shier (2001). Barber's (2009) framework explored top-down and bottom-up dynamics, highlighting tensions, opportunities, and barriers to authentic engagement. Building on these foundations,

Lansdown (2005) identified three levels of meaningful participation: consultative processes, participative initiatives, and self-initiated actions.

However, early models have been critiqued for oversimplifying participation and neglecting its complexity (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Wong et al., 2010). More recent frameworks incorporate contextual analysis, recognising the influence of historical, political, economic, cultural, and organisational factors. Anderson's Pedagogical Political Participation Model (3PM) (2017), Cahill and Dadvand's P7 Model (2018), and Wong et al.'s Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (2010) offer more nuanced tools for analysing how youth participation is constructed, negotiated, and enacted within diverse contexts. Overall, Hart's Ladder of Child and Youth Participation remains particularly influential, providing a foundational model for understanding youth–adult power dynamics and serving as a key point of reference for the analysis in this thesis.

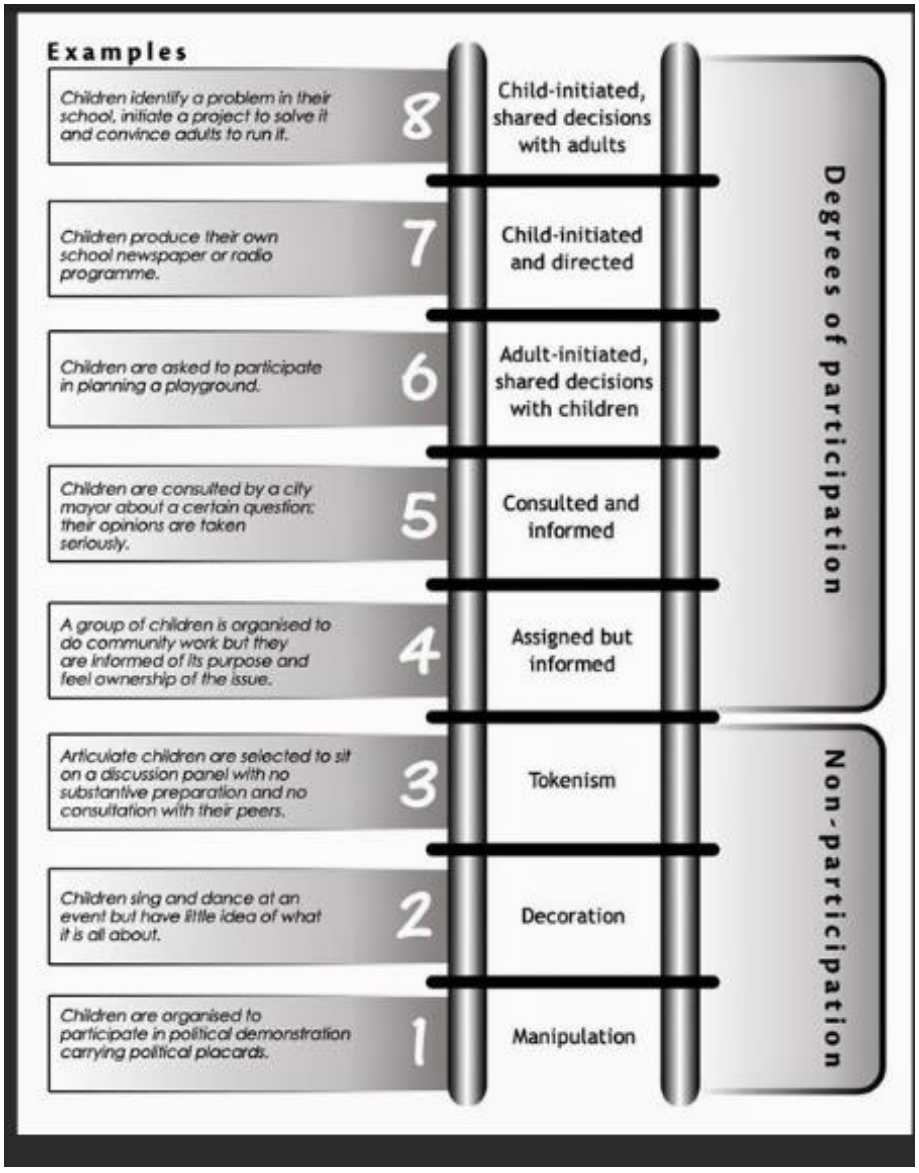
### 4.2 Hart's Ladder of Participation

Roger Hart's Ladder of Child and Youth Participation (Figure 4.1) adapts Sherry Arnstein's (1969) non-youth-specific Ladder of Participation to the context of children and youth involvement in adult-led projects, programmes, advocacy, and civic activities. Widely referenced across fields including child and youth development, education, civic participation, and democratic decision-making, Hart's model remains influential for its focus on youth–adult power relations, which determine the degree of youth autonomy in decision-making (Collin, 2015; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). The ladder is presented as eight rungs, ascending from non-participation to full participation, each representing a distinct level of agency, control, or power afforded to youth (Hart, 1992; 2008):

- Manipulation: Youth do not understand the issues, their role, or how their contributions are used.
- Decoration: Youth are publicly visible (e.g., at events) but unaware of the purpose or meaning of their involvement.
- Tokenism: Youth appear to have a voice but have little control over the subject, style, or substance of their input.
- Assigned but Informed: Youth understand the project's intentions, know who made decisions, have a meaningful role, and volunteer after being fully informed.
- Consulted and Informed: Youth act as consultants in adult-led projects, understand the process, and have their opinions taken seriously.
- Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Youth: Adults initiate projects but share decision-making authority with youth.
- Youth-Initiated and Directed: Youth conceptualise and lead projects independently, with adults in supportive, non-directive roles.
- Youth-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults: Youth initiate projects and share decision-making power with adult partners, for example in fundraising, programme development, or community campaigns.

This continuum illustrates the tensions and possibilities of achieving meaningful, youth-centric civic participation, while also providing a foundation for later critiques and alternative models. Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation offered a heuristic for situating these practices along a continuum, from non-participation (e.g., manipulation, decoration, tokenism) to genuine engagement (e.g., assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated shared decisions, and youth-initiated processes). This continuum helps interpret the varied participatory practices observed across councils in this study.

Figure 4.1 Ladder of Child and Youth Participation (Hart, 1992).




Hart's Ladder and subsequent models have been critiqued for the hierarchical framing which assumes that the higher rungs of participation reflect optimal participation. This framing overlooks the fact that youth can be empowered through participation aligned with the lower rungs such as 'informed and consulted' (Wong et al., 2010). Hart's model has also been critiqued for its Western orientation and cultural bias (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). It tends to emphasise individualism, including the value of progressive independence and autonomy in

child and youth development. Such assumptions may be problematic when applied generically to cultural groups that prioritise collectivism and familial or communal interdependence. Hart himself acknowledged that Western theories of child and youth development dominate the global literature (Hart, 2008). In response to these critiques, Hart clarified that his ladder was not intended as a prescriptive participation tool, but rather as a thinking tool to prompt critical reflection among practitioners. Its value lies in helping professionals and institutions systematically examine their current practices and develop contextually appropriate models of youth engagement. The ladder's simplicity and clarity may explain its enduring influence, especially when compared to subsequent models that, while more nuanced, are often more complex.

Importantly, the higher rungs of Hart's Ladder represent circumstances in which youth, in collective struggle against discrimination and oppression, advocate for equal democratic rights in solidarity with others (Hart, 2008). Youth participation cannot be meaningfully discussed without addressing youth–adult power relations and the broader struggle for equity. In this sense, the higher rungs reflect maximal *n*otions of youth participatory citizenship, grounded in transformation, rights-claiming, and structural change (Collin, 2015; Evans, 2007; White et al., 2017).

In summary, models and practice guidelines from academic, policy, and practitioner literature articulate ambitious goals and ideals, and have contributed to the uptake of discourse on the structural and cultural barriers to youth participation (Collin, 2015). These frameworks offer valuable insights into the range of participation processes that may occur, and how practice can be framed to support more meaningful engagement of children and youth. They can assist in challenging and dismantling unequal power dynamics between youth and adults, with power-sharing, equitable relationships, and recognition identified as core mechanisms for change (Graham et al., 2018).

### 4.3 Augsbergers' Conceptual Framework

Building on this conceptual foundation, Augsberger et al. (2018a) propose a set of conceptual frames to inform youth participatory practice and youth council operations (Figure 4.2). Their framework identifies four conceptual frames: policy process, social justice, youth development, and symbolic tokenism, developed from existing literature and empirical research on youth councils. By linking practice components to conceptual frames, the model offers direction and coherence, offering an evidence-based system of logics to strengthen both theoretical rigour and practical consistency in youth council operations. Such a framework may also provide practitioners with greater certainty about what youth participation entails, including its goals, processes, and intended outcomes (Holdsworth et al., 2007). The framework serves as a practical tool that can be elaborated on and operationalised by practitioners to and strengthen youth council effectiveness and improve participatory outcomes. Augsberger et al. (2018a) recommend that scholars and practitioners continue to explore and refine the linkages between practice components and conceptual frames to enhance clarity and coherence. Importantly, the framework highlights where youth council practices align with social justice objectives, youth development goals, or policy focused activity, or whether they risk slipping into symbolic tokenism. Greater explicitness in linking theory to practice can help reorient youth council operations toward participatory rights and social justice objectives, guiding practitioners committed to adopting a genuinely youth-centric approach. The following four sub-sections provider a broader overview of these frames, followed by a critique of this framework.

Figure 4.2 Table of Practice Frames (Augsberger et al., 2018a)

**Table 1** Practice components

| Frame/theory | Practice components | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Membership/role of adults | Meetings | Activities | Social networks | Role in government |
| Policy Process (e.g., youth as interest group) | Some adult guidance needed to navigate formal processes | Formal procedures; appointment to council; voting; access to mayor or other leaders | Policy focused; focus on community impact | Access can be partially based on relationships ("who you know"); benefits of networking | Formally within; linked to decision-makers on on-going basis |
| Positive youth development | Some adult facilitation; knowledgeable about PYD | Informal procedures; activity-focused; learning and sharing | Skill-development (e.g., public speaking, leadership) | Major focus on socialization; team-building | Minimal; may be consulted; youth may plan community events/training supported by government official |
| Social Justice (e.g., participatory rights) | Connected to community; diverse; adult role minimal | Procedural justice, make sure all voices are heard; prominent discussion of diversity, power, oppression | Youth driven/youth organized; community engaged; strong advocacy component | Access based on representation; effort to engage diverse youth constituency | Focus on "voice", right to be heard; potentially outside of government; youth and decision-makers are closely linked |
| Symbolic Tokenism | May not be a formal council; may call upon existing council or form group as needed | Limited and episodic | Incongruence between mission, structure, activities; funding may require youth participation which drives activities | Limited; internal to youth group rather than external linkage | Occasional rather than sustained; lack of feedback loop to decision-makers |

### 4.3.1 Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is widely referenced in youth policies, programmes, and academic and practitioner literature. It is often presented as a normative, universally applicable framework for both youth who are thriving and those facing challenges (Almerigi et al., 2005; Amodeo & Collins, 2007). PYD views youth as vital resources with innate capacities to thrive. A favourable developmental trajectory occurs when youth are embedded in affirming, resource-rich environments that nurture growth and development (Benson et al., 2006). The framework emphasises the strengths, assets, and potential of young people rather than focusing on deficits. PYD favours strength-based interventions that offer opportunities across diverse social contexts and foster multiple supportive relationships. These interventions aim to promote long-term positive life outcomes through productive community engagement (Almerigi et al., 2005; Damon, 2004; Sanders et al., 2015). Youth are seen as major actors in their own development and as underutilised resources for positive community outcomes (Benson et al., 2006).

A central tenet of PYD is that environmental circumstances shape individual wellbeing, socialisation, and developmental outcomes. Youth are in a developmental stage of adolescence

and require support to transition to adulthood. Earlier youth development frameworks often failed to recognise the influence and complexity of social environments, encouraging interventions that sought to remedy problems at the level of the individual, suggesting that responsibility is the individuals to bear (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1963; Gilligan, 1993). PYD represents a shift from deficit-based views of adolescence to a focus on the positive aspects of the youth experience, including the innate strengths and capacities of youth. In this sense it represents of reframing youth development as a collective responsibility.

Despite their strengths, PYD-informed participation policies are often critiqued for their limited emphasis on youth influence in policymaking. Youth development approaches tend to assign youth councillors only minimal roles in governance. These approaches represent a minimal model of citizenship, privileging individual outcomes such as skill acquisition and socialisation, while neglecting opportunities for youth to exercise policy influence or contest institutional barrier, and societal structural inequities (Collin, 2015; Lister et al., 2007; White et al., 2017). Typical activities include leadership training, public speaking, team building, and facilitating community events, often under the guidance of adult facilitators knowledgeable in PYD who oversee council processes. While these activities support personal growth, they position youth as beneficiaries rather than agents of change. Consequently, youth engagement remains developmental rather than transformative. In contrast, maximal citizenship offers more empowering opportunities, enabling young people to identify inequalities and work collectively toward structural change (Collin, 2015; Evans, 2007; Lister et al., 2007; White et al., 2017).

PYD approaches are also critiqued for their emphasis on strategies to support the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood and to manage problematic behaviour such as substance abuse, unemployment, and criminal offending (Collin, 2015). Such approaches

signal a continued preoccupation with the limitations of youth that stems from a post-positivist stance underpinning early developmental theory, particularly assumptions about the limited organic adolescent brain. Recent advances in neuroscience and medical imaging have reignited interest in the cognitive limitations of the under-developed adolescent brain, reinforcing societal perceptions of young people's lack of capacity and maturity. This devaluing of youth capability often undermines youth agency and autonomy in adult-led contexts, where young people are assigned diminished responsibilities in line with these perceived limitations (France, 2016). In this way, the stage of youth is constructed in universal terms, consistent with a post-positivist scientific view, and policies aligned with this approach take on a normative, universal appeal (Collin, 2015; White et al., 2017).

Beyond these developmentalist critiques, PYD approaches are also challenged for their individualistic rather than collective orientation to participation and wellbeing. Indigenous scholars argue that recent government approaches to youth development, youth wellbeing, youth voice, and participatory rights (see Chapter Two, 2.1) risk viewing children and young people in isolation from their families, whānau, and communities. As such, these programmes may inadvertently disadvantage Māori youth (Fitzmaurice & Brown, 2023). These critiques highlight the tension between the developmental benefits emphasised by PYD and the limited opportunities for youth to exercise genuine influence in governance. This tension is particularly evident in Aotearoa NZ's national youth policy framework, comprising the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (Ministry of Social Development, 2024), the Youth Plan: Voice, Leadership, Action (Ministry of Youth Development, 2020), and related cross-government wellbeing initiatives, all of which are grounded in positive youth development principles. These policy settings raise important questions about how to balance individual growth with enabling transformative youth participation in public governance (Fitzmaurice & Brown, 2023). These critiques become particularly relevant when examining how positive youth

development principles have been institutionalised within Aotearoa NZ's national youth policy framework. Aotearoa NZ's national youth policy framework illustrates how a positive youth development orientation can both empower and constrain youth participation.

### 4.3.2 Youth Development Focus in Aotearoa NZ's National Youth Framework

Aotearoa NZ's national youth policy framework illustrates how a positive youth development orientation can both empower and constrain youth participation. In Aotearoa NZ, youth development and well-being frameworks and the principle of youth voice dominate approaches to youth participation (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023). The Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa NZ (MYA, 2002) was pivotal in embedding a youth development framework across public and NGO sectors. It promoted opportunities for young people to build supportive relationships, connect with community networks, and access diverse pathways for growth.

A landmark moment occurred when Aotearoa NZ's national youth development peak body, Ara Taiohi, released the Mana Taiohi framework (Ara, Taiohi, 2019), a principle-based framework for youth development in Aotearoa NZ. This marked a significant milestone in youth development practice in Aotearoa NZ. It evolved from the earlier Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa NZ (2002) and set out interconnected principles grounded in mana (dignity, respect, and authority), and the inherent value of young people. The framework promotes a holistic, culturally responsive approach that recognises young people as active participants in shaping their communities and influencing policy. Mana Taiohi provides a unifying framework that strengthens youth development outcomes and advances equity across diverse contexts.

Ara Taiohi (Ara Taiohi., 2019) has advanced youth development in Aotearoa NZ through initiatives that strengthen leadership and wellbeing. In 2019, it coordinated the national Youth Week campaign, showcasing young people's talents and promoting participation, while also contributing to sector reviews that reinforced its role as the umbrella organisation for youth work. Alongside the Aotearoa New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network, [3]the national hub promoting safe and effective mentoring practice, Ara Taiohi delivers training for young people aged 16–24 to become mentors and leaders, embedding Mana Taiohi principles in practice.

For Pasifika youth, targeted programmes such as Tupu Aotearoa NZ (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020; 2022) support those not in employment, education, or training into sustainable opportunities, while the Toloa programme (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, n.d.) encourages Pacific students to pursue STEM education and careers. Similarly, the Ola Manuia: Pacific Health and Wellbeing Action Plan 2020–2025 (Ministry of Health, 2020) highlights education, training, employment, and leadership as key priorities, reflecting concern with high youth unemployment and the broader economic structures shaping pathways to adulthood. Together, these initiatives embody a positive youth development orientation, providing culturally responsive pathways that strengthen resilience, leadership, and wellbeing. By embedding Pasifika values and community networks, they ensure that youth participation is both inclusive and transformative, addressing immediate developmental needs while challenging structural inequities that shape transitions to adulthood.

[3] The Aotearoa NZ Youth Mentoring Network is New Zealand's national hub for youth mentoring practice. It promotes safe and effective mentoring by providing training, resources, and sector support, and has co-developed national guidelines for youth mentoring in partnership with government agencies. Each year, the Network supports hundreds of mentors and organisations, reaching thousands of young people across the country.

Other recent strategies, such as the Youth Plan: Voice, Leadership, Action (Ministry of Youth Development, 2020; 2023), continue this trajectory by prioritising youth development goals while elevating youth voice and leadership in public decision-making. While the Youth Plan strengthens youth visibility and influence, its emphasis on education, employment, and training risks overshadowing the central aim of fostering authentic participation in governance. The framework acknowledges the diversity of youth identities, with growing attention to inequities across ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. Yet civic and political participation remains underdeveloped within national strategies, raising questions about how youth voice can be meaningfully elevated. The establishment of a cross-agency working group signals a commitment to collaboration, but its top-down design risks reproducing the limitations of thin citizenship, where youth are positioned as beneficiaries rather than co-creators of policy (Collin, 2015).

In summary, Aotearoa NZ's national youth framework demonstrates the enduring influence of a positive youth development orientation, from the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa NZ (MYA, 2002) through to the introduction of Mana Taiohi (Ara Taiohi, 2019) and the more recent Youth Plan (2020; 2023). These strategies have embedded youth development principles across government and NGO practice, promoting opportunities for youth to build relationships, access pathways for growth, and exercise leadership. At the same time, the framework reveals important tensions: while developmental outcomes such as education, employment, and wellbeing are strongly prioritised, civic and political participation remains underdeveloped. This approach risks reproducing forms of thin citizenship, where youth are positioned primarily as beneficiaries rather than co-creators of policy. The challenge moving forward is to balance developmental goals with authentic participatory rights, ensuring that diverse youth voices are meaningfully elevated in governance and decision-making processes. Ultimately, the evolution of Aotearoa NZ's youth development framework highlights the need

to move beyond developmental outcomes toward genuine participatory rights, ensuring that youth are recognised not only as beneficiaries but as co-architects of democratic governance.

### 4.3.3 Policy Process Frame

The policy process conceptual frame developed by Augsberger et al. (2018a) focuses on policy-related activities that generate positive civic outcomes for local youth. Practice components indicative of this model include formal procedures within local government, such as youth councillors having voting rights and access to the mayor. Adult guidance is emphasised to help youth councillors navigate formal political processes and procedures. Access to the policy process is often mediated through relationships and networking, a "who you know" dynamic, with youth councillors reliant on officials to facilitate ongoing links to decision-making spaces. Participatory budgeting, adopted by youth councils in some countries, is considered emblematic of this orientation. In this process, youth councillors gather input from the wider youth community, assess priorities, design proposals, and vote on preferred projects. Capital funds are then allocated to the selected initiatives (Cabannes, 2006; Cushing & van Vliet, 2017; Guerra, 2005).

### 4.3.4 Social Justice Frame

A social justice approach recognises the inequitable power relations embedded within structural and systemic inequalities, and the challenges of harnessing youth power in both institutional and informal settings. It also acknowledges the need for deliberate efforts to empower youth (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Lister et al., 2007). Within the literature, youth are

often positioned as marginalised, constrained by partial citizenship status and subject to age-based discrimination (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Lister et al., 2007; White et al., 2017).

A social justice framework offers an overarching vision for youth council operations, aligned with objectives and strategies aimed at improving participatory rights, ensuring equitable and inclusive representation of diverse youth, and advancing broader social justice goals. Strengthening participatory rights involves enhancing youth connections with local government and urban planning and increasing their influence on policymaking and outcomes (David & Buchanan, 2020; Harada, 2023). Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) social justice frame encompasses the following practice themes and elements:

- Youth participatory rights: Emphasis on youth voice and the right to be heard in local government, with strong connections between youth and decision-makers.

- Adult Support: Adults actively support youth councillors' participatory rights and influence in policy-focused activities (see Chapter Six).
- Youth-led practice: Activities are informed, driven, and organised by youth, with minimal adult involvement.
- Community engagement: A strong focus on advocating youth interests and leveraging support networks to engage a diverse youth constituency.
- Procedural justice: Internal council processes ensure all voices are heard, with explicit attention to diversity, power, and oppression.
- Empowerment through process: A focus on participatory processes over outcomes, foregrounding power dynamics and strategies of youth empowerment.

The wider literature has highlighted the elitist characteristics of youth councils and their struggles to connect with and represent a diverse youth cohort, particularly those who are

harder to reach or have unique needs (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Matthews, 2001a; Wyness, 2009). However, Augsberger et al. (2018a; 2018c) argue that the use of a social justice conceptual frame can reorient youth council practice toward more inclusive and transformative social objectives. When youth participation involves authentic debate, decision-making, and initiatives that impact policy outcomes, it can further social justice goals and strengthen the equitable representation of diverse youth.

The practice components of this frame, including youth-led activities, strong community engagement, and advocacy, signal a deliberate focus on process, power, and empowerment. The frame supports a vision of youth councils as inclusive, youth-led spaces with minimal adult involvement, strong social networks, and internal participation styles that foreground diversity, power, and oppression. It also emphasises youth voice and strong connections with decision-makers. However, it does not provide explicit mechanisms to strengthen youth councillors' influence on policymaking or to institutionalise participatory rights within local government structures.

### 4.3.5 Symbolic Tokenism

The concept of symbolic tokenism, as articulated by Arnstein (1969) and Hart (1992), remains a critical lens for evaluating the authenticity of youth participation. It refers to instances where adult-led institutions seek recognition for involving young people, yet offer minimal commitment to their voice, autonomy, or influence in decision-making processes (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2010). Such practices are often exploitative, undermining the legitimacy of participation initiatives. This contributes to to youth disillusionment, resistance, disengagement from programmes and seeking alternative forms of participation (Holdsworth et al., 2007; Matthews, 2001a).

Symbolic tokenism is most evident when young people have little or no choice over the subject matter or mode of communication, and when their views, if solicited, are ultimately disregarded (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992). Hart (1992) situates this phenomenon at the lowest rungs of his Ladder of Youth Participation, specifically under manipulation and decoration. These forms of engagement deny young people their participatory rights and autonomy, reducing their involvement to a performative gesture rather than a substantive contribution. Importantly, symbolic tokenism also arises when institutional rhetoric about youth participation is not matched by practice. For example, official documents may claim that youth councillors influence policy outcomes, yet in reality their roles remain marginal and their impact negligible (Collin, 2015; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). Identifying such discrepancies between stated intentions and operational realities is essential for holding institutions accountable and advancing more meaningful, rights-based participation.

In summary, the use of unarticulated frameworks and ad hoc practice (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Cushing & van Bliet, 2017) signals the need for a coherent framework. While useful, Augsberger et al's (2018a) typology has limitations. The policy process frame is merely a prescriptive account of policy-focused activity. As such, it does not offer rights-informed mechanisms to address the marginalised position of youth and their inability to influence that youth have policymaking and outcomes. As such, practitioners operating from the policy process frame may reinforce existing hierarchies rather than transform them, unless paired with broader strategies for equity and inclusion.

### 4.4 The Use of Conceptual Frameworks in Practice

Despite a rich theoretical landscape of models and typologies designed to inform youth participatory practice, little attention has been paid to how these frameworks are utilised in youth council operations or to improve participatory outcomes. Most studies focus on narrative accounts and critique the marginalised status of youth within institutional settings (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Matthews, 2001a, 2001b; Munyede et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that youth council practice is shaped by multiple, unarticulated frameworks, with new practitioners often relying on inherited institutional norms (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Cushing & van Vliet, 2017; Munyede et al., 2021). In summary, practitioner guidelines and academic frameworks have had limited influence on public policy, failing to transform hierarchical structures, adultism, and inequitable power arrangements that continue to exclude youth from state-centred political processes (Collin, 2015). Hart's (1992) model remains frequently referenced, reflecting its enduring value, though Hart (2008) himself emphasised that the ladder was intended as a "thinking tool" rather than a prescriptive framework. Prescriptive applications risk imposing rigid classifications and misrepresenting cultural groups, conflicting with justice-oriented and reflexive aims. By contrast, heuristic orientations align with commitments to youth voice, complexity, and contextual adaptation. Models such as Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) frames function as flexible analytical tools that practitioners can adapt to reflect the empirical realities of each council site. This reinforces a central claim of this research: youth participation must be theorised and enacted as a context-sensitive, justice-oriented practice.

### 4.5 Tools, Frameworks, and Evidence for Rights-Based Participation

Alongside scholarly frameworks and resources produced by the NGO sector (Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 2008; Collin, 2015; Kirby & Bryson, 2002), government and intergovernmental bodies have also developed practical tools to support the implementation of children's and young people's participation rights within public institutions. These instruments translate youth participatory rights commitments into operational guidance that public institutions can use to plan, assess, and strengthen practice. The Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 (Council of Europe, 2012*)* establishes a normative expectation that children's views must be embedded across legislation, policy, and institutional processes, while the Child Participation Assessment Tool (Council of Europe, 2016) provides a structured set of indicators for evaluating how effectively these commitments are being realised in practice. UNICEF's (UNICEF, 2022) guidelines for meaningful child participation similarly offers a globally recognised framework outlining the core requirements for ethical, meaningful, and rights-based participation**.**

Similar approaches are evident in Aotearoa NZ. The Ministry of Youth Development's Guide for Local Government on Youth Participation (MYD, 1997) offered early national guidance on embedding youth voice in local government policy and planning. The Office of the Children's Commissioner's nationwide engagement with children and young people, conducted through surveys, interviews, workshops, and consultations as part of New Zealand's Sixth Periodic Review under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, provides an example of an institutional practice, rather than a conceptual tool, that operationalises participation rights in practice (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2021). This engagement reflects the organisation's ongoing responsibilities in monitoring, advocacy, and review, including major processes such as New Zealand's UNCRC periodic reviews.

Together, these frameworks demonstrate that participation is increasingly recognised not only as a rights-based obligation but also as a technical, administrative practice requiring deliberate design, monitoring, and continuous improvement. However, the existence of these tools does not guarantee that participatory rights are substantively realised in practice, and this gap between formal guidance and lived experience underscores the need for closer scrutiny of how rights-based participation is understood and enacted within public institutions.

While conceptual models and practice frameworks offer valuable tools for guiding context-sensitive, justice-oriented participation, embedding rights-informed logics within local council structures is required to improve outcomes. The CRC is increasingly visible in social policy discourse, and youth consultations are often considered routine by officials. Yet there is limited focus on how participatory rights are substantively realised within public sector contexts (Byrne & Lundy, 2019; Canosa et al., 2022; Collin & Vromen, 2010). Persistent tensions remain between rhetorical policy commitments and the realities of practice (Canosa et al., 2022; Collin, 2015). The widespread exclusion of young people from urban planning and policymaking spaces demands more robust approaches to implementing youth participatory rights, supported by evidence-based resources and frameworks. Clarifying what constitutes rights-informed 'good practice' is essential (Canosa et al., 2022), and closer scrutiny is needed regarding how rights-based participation is defined and operationalised across contexts. A scoping review by Canosa et al. (2022) revealed significant gaps in synthesis, scope, and evidentiary basis, with many resources lacking clarity on how participatory rights can be embedded in everyday practice. Moreover, web-based resources were often adult-centric, designed for professionals rather than co-developed with youth, and showed limited consistency in addressing diverse circumstances.

This knowledge gap underscores the need for future research to document promising rights-based initiatives and explore how rights aspirations are translated into practice across varied contexts (Graham et al., 2019). There is a particular need for exemplar case studies that illuminate meaningful collaboration between youth and officials, including the context, purpose, processes, challenges, choices, and outcomes involved. These insights are vital to strengthening participatory rights and advancing ethical, inclusive governance. Ultimately, advancing youth participation requires moving beyond rhetorical commitments to embed rights-informed, evidence-based practices that position young people as genuine co-creators in governance.

### 4.6 Institutionalising a Participatory Rights-based Approach

Building on the need for rights-informed resources and frameworks, a further step is to institutionalise these commitments within local government planning documents. A rights-based approach reframes youth participation as an entitlement rather than a discretionary practice, countering tokenism and conditional involvement. Institutional texts often signal intentions for youth inclusion, yet youth councillors remain marginalised in decision-making. Resistance to granting youth councillors voting rights or stronger policy roles reflects ongoing reluctance to share power (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). These dynamics restrict authentic autonomy and highlight the need for explicit rights-based commitments that position youth as legitimate actors in governance.

Despite widespread interest in advancing youth participation, practice often diverges from the aspirations of the CRC (UN, 1989). Article 42 obliges states to make CRC principles widely known, yet local government engagement frequently remains pragmatic rather than rights-driven (Canosa et al., 2022; Freeman & Aitken Rose, 2005). In Aotearoa NZ, planners'

engagement with youth has rarely been shaped by CRC principles, raising concerns about compliance. Embedding participatory rights in planning documents such as Long-Term Plans (LTPs), statutory documents that set councils' priorities and budgets over a ten-year period and are central to meeting councils' social and wellbeing objectives, and in strategic frameworks can orient institutional commitment, elevate policy emphasis, and foster accountability (David & Buchanan, 2020).

Yet research has shown that youth councils often operate without a coherent framework, shaped instead by ad hoc practices, local experiences, or inherited structures (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Holdsworth et al., 2007). This fragmented landscape reflects multiple institutional logics, ranging from youth development and rights-based rationalities to symbolic tokenism, social justice, and managerialism, which define the scope and authenticity of youth participation in markedly different ways (David & Buchanan, 2020; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Institutional logics are defined as symbolic and material frameworks: sets of assumptions, values, beliefs, and practices that guide how institutions conceptualise legitimacy, organise action, and reproduce meaning (Thornton et al., 2012). They are not limited to formal or dominant ideologies; rather, they encompass any coherent rationality that shapes institutional behaviour and actor cognition.

This multiplicity of logics reveals how youth participation is shaped by competing institutional rationalities, some emancipatory, others constraining. Tensions are evident between the logics: for example, social justice demands structural change and power-sharing, while tokenism maintains the status quo through symbolic inclusion. Similarly, youth development logic frames youth as "not yet ready," whereas social justice logic insists they are already capable of meaningful contribution. Managerial logic may instrumentalise youth

participation for efficiency, while rights-based logic insists on participation as a non-negotiable entitlement (Ponte & Pesci, 2021; Sjöblom & Löfgren, 2019).

Without embedding participatory rights in critical planning documents such as LTPs and strategic frameworks, councils risk mission drift, diminished legitimacy, and inconsistent outcomes. Clear mission statements and institutional commitments are essential to orient practice toward social justice and ensure continuity across political cycles (Sullivan & Larson, 2011). Structural marginalisation compounds these challenges. Youth are often positioned as "becoming citizens" with partial legitimacy, excluded from voting and lacking the resources to act as effective policy actors (Harris et al., 2007; Lister et al., 2003). Councils, however, offer a more accessible arena for youth to shape their communities, given their influence over urban planning and social wellbeing. Explicit rights-based goals distinguish participatory rights from broader youth development agendas, signalling recognition of youth marginalisation and affirming obligations to ensure meaningful participation.

Institutionalising rights-based participation requires moving beyond consultation, which often serves adult information needs rather than empowering youth as decision-makers (Collin, 2015; Evans, 2007). Concrete accountability mechanisms are needed to align practice with CRC principles, reduce vulnerability to political cycles, and consolidate a culture of youth participation (Holdsworth et al., 2007). Embedding rights in local government systems strengthens youth contributions to long-term community visioning and planning, advancing social justice and reinforcing democratic legitimacy.

Finally, an emphasis on embedding rights in local government planning documents is echoed internationally. The Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life **(**Council of Europe, 2003) remains the most influential reference, defining participation as the right, means, space, and opportunity to influence decisions, and

offering practical tools for municipalities. More recent global resources, such as the Youth Participation Handbook (Youth Democracy Cohort, 2023) and guidance from UNICEF (UNICEF, 2020), emphasise equity, accountability, and sustainability in youth engagement. Complementary scholarship demonstrates that embedding participatory rights within long-term plans, mission statements, and governance frameworks strengthens institutional legitimacy and counters tokenistic practice (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Collin & Vromen, 2010; David & Buchanan, 2020). Together, these references reinforce the argument that institutionalising youth participation requires structurally embedded, rights-based models, not ad hoc consultation. While embedding participatory rights in institutional frameworks is essential, their realisation in practice depends equally on the support of adult allies who shape how youth are positioned and empowered within local governance.

In summary, institutionalising a participatory rights-based approach demands embedding commitments within statutory planning documents, aligning practice with CRC principles, and navigating competing institutional logics. International charters and resources reinforce the need for structurally embedded models that move beyond tokenistic consultation. Yet the realisation of participatory rights relies on cultural change and the support of adult allies, ensuring youth are positioned as legitimate actors in governance and co-architects of democratic futures.

### 4.7 Effective Support from Adult Allies

While formal frameworks provide continuity and legitimacy, their success ultimately relies on adult allies who translate these commitments into practice by shaping how youth are positioned, supported, and empowered within local governance (Collin, 2015; Holdsworth et al., 2007). Evidence suggests that youth value the involvement and support of adults in

participatory programmes (O'Toole, 2003; Zeldin et al., 2016). Effective youth–adult partnerships foster intergenerational understanding and improve developmental outcomes when youth receive active, skilled support (Zeldin et al., 2008, 2016, 2018). Given the developmental needs associated with adolescence, Zeldin et al. (2018) argue that the most effective forms of youth participation involve collaboration across all aspects of group decision-making, from visioning and planning to evaluation and continuous improvement. Scholarship on youth–adult partnerships emphasises that adult involvement should gradually decrease as youth gain experience, confidence, and responsibility (Akiva et al., 2014, 2016; Camino, 2000, 2005; Li & Julian, 2012; Zeldin et al., 2008, 2016).

Adults' constructions of youth roles significantly shape institutional responsiveness (Collin & Vromen, 2010). This research draws on three conceptual positions of the youth citizen (see Section 5.10): "youth as participatory rights holders", "youth as developing citizens", and "youth as providers of a youth perspective". These positions synthesise broader scholarship on youth citizenship and participation, highlighting how adult perceptions shape the scope of youth influence and the forms of participation made available to them. Crucially, these constructions are not only theoretical but are reflected in the participation frameworks used to analyse youth engagement. Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation illustrates how adult assumptions about youth capacity translate into gradations of involvement, ranging from tokenistic consultation to shared decision-making. The ladder provides a practical expression of these adult framings: the lower rungs of non-participation (manipulation, decoration, tokenism) align with constructions of youth as developing citizens or as providers of a youth perspective, while the higher rungs assume youth as legitimate participatory rights holders capable of shared or independent decision-making. In this way, Hart's model operationalises the conceptual positions of the youth citizen by showing how adult assumptions become embedded in concrete participatory arrangements.

This alignment is echoed in wider scholarship. Collin (2015) and Holdsworth et al. (2007) demonstrate that youth councils are frequently framed by adults as advisory rather than authoritative bodies, reinforcing limited forms of participation consistent with the lower rungs of Hart's ladder. Taken together, these perspectives show that adult framings of youth, whether as rights holders, developing citizens, or providers of a youth perspective, continue to underpin institutional practice and shape the effectiveness of youth participation in local governance. These positionings are not merely abstract categories; they directly shape how adult allies engage with youth, influencing whether they support young people as legitimate rights holders, treat them as citizens-in-training, or limit their role to providing a youth perspective, with each stance carrying implications for institutional responsiveness and participatory outcomes.

The ability to influence policy outcomes requires empowerment, defined by Gutierrez (1990) as a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, and political power to enable individuals and communities to improve their circumstances. Adult allies are critical to fostering this empowerment, providing knowledge of how to act and sustaining engagement between youth and officials through ongoing projects (Faulkner, 2009; Zaff et al., 2010). Taken together, these insights highlight that institutionalising youth participatory rights cannot be achieved through frameworks and planning documents alone. It requires adult allies who move beyond deficit framings, recognise youth as legitimate rights holders, and actively foster their empowerment as co-architects of local governance.

## 4.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter demonstrated that conceptual frameworks can strengthen practice and enhance youth council operations by providing a coherent approach that avoids ad hoc implementation and orients participation toward policy engagement and social justice outcomes. It identified a significant gap in both academic and practitioner literature regarding rights-informed practice across diverse contexts, underscoring the need for exemplar studies that document how youth and officials collaborate on rights-based initiatives. The chapter concluded that advancing youth participatory rights requires embedding a rights-based approach within local government structures and planning documents, supported by adult allies who challenge deficit framings and empower youth as legitimate actors in governance. Together, these insights highlight the importance of moving beyond rhetorical commitments to structurally embedded, justice-oriented practices that secure more equitable and meaningful outcomes for young people.

## 4.9 Literature Review Conclusion

Across Chapters Two, Three, and Four, this literature review has shown that youth participation in local government is shaped by structural, representational, and conceptual dynamics that both enable and constrain young people's influence in governance. Chapter Two demonstrated that the consultative model remains the dominant approach in local government, yet it is fundamentally limited by structural and procedural barriers that restrict youth impact on policymaking. Bureaucratic routines, risk-averse cultures, adult-centric norms, and narrow conceptions of youth citizenship collectively reproduce exclusionary practices. These institutional logics shape how participation is designed, who voices are considered legitimate, and what forms of youth input are deemed acceptable. While emerging models such as

co-production, informal engagement, and youth-led processes offer promising alternatives, their implementation is often constrained by these entrenched structures.

Chapter Three provided an overview of the application of social capital to youth participation practice. It examined the representational challenges within youth councils themselves. Inequitable membership, inward-facing participation styles, and weak community engagement undermine their legitimacy as representative bodies. The literature highlights that inclusive recruitment, socially reflexive internal participation styles, and sustained community engagement are essential for moving beyond tokenism and cultivating genuine empowerment. Innovative approaches such as youth summits, participatory budgeting, and community-level civic groups illustrate how bridging social capital can expand democratic participation and embed youth voices more deeply in local governance, particularly when councils support youth-centred, co-designed processes.

Chapter Four introduced conceptual frameworks capable of reorienting youth participation toward rights-based, justice-oriented practice. The review identified a significant gap in both scholarship and practice regarding how rights-informed approaches are operationalised within local government. Embedding youth participatory rights requires structural commitment, supportive adult allies, and a shift away from deficit framings toward recognising youth as legitimate civic actors. These frameworks offer a way to challenge the institutional logics identified in Chapter Two and to guide councils toward more equitable, transformative forms of engagement.

Taken together, these chapters reveal three interconnected gaps that shape the focus of this study:

- the limited impact youth have on policymaking and outcomes

- the narrow representational base of youth councils
- the weak institutional mechanisms for engaging the wider, diverse youth community

These gaps directly inform the research questions guiding this thesis, which examine (1) the substantive role and impact of youth councillors in policymaking, (2) the internal processes and engagement strategies used to amplify diverse youth voices, and (3) the institutional responses that support broader youth participation in civic life. By synthesising insights across participation models, representation, social capital, and rights-based frameworks, this literature review establishes the conceptual foundation for investigating how youth participatory rights are enacted in practice. It positions the study within local and international calls for justice-oriented research and highlights the need for empirical work that documents how youth and adults collaborate to advance equitable, meaningful participation. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach used to explore these questions and to examine how youth councillors navigate, negotiate, and reshape the institutional conditions of local governance.

# Chapter Five

## Methodology and Methods

This chapter establishes the philosophical and methodological foundations of the study, situating it within an interpretivist epistemology and a qualitative research philosophy that prioritises participants' lived experiences, meaning-making practices, and subjective perspectives. Guided by social constructionism, the research frames reality as co-constructed through social interaction, institutional dynamics, and cultural contexts, providing the conceptual lens through which youth civic participation in local government is explored. Building on this foundation, the chapter outlines the research design, detailing the sampling and recruitment strategies, participant profiles, and local government settings. It then describes the qualitative methods employed for data collection and analysis, before addressing strategies to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and reflecting on the ethical considerations that shaped the research process.

### 5.1 Epistemology

This study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, exploring how youth participatory rights are enacted, negotiated, and constrained in local government settings. It focuses on the lived experiences and institutional dynamics that shape youth engagement, guided by three priority areas drawn from the literature and aligned with local government's formal commitments under the CRC (UN, 1989): (1) the limited influence of youth on policymaking and outcomes; (2) inequitable representation; and (3) the disconnect between local government and the wider, diverse youth community (Collin, 2015; Feringa & Tonkens,

2017; Matthews, 2001a; Munyede et al., 2021). These issues informed the following research questions:

1. What is the substantive role and impact of youth councillors in local government policymaking and outcomes, and what are the determinant factors?
2. What internal processes and engagement strategies do youth councillors use to amplify the voices of diverse youth in policymaking?
3. What institutional responses promote the participation of the wider, diverse youth community in broader civic initiatives?

To address these questions, the study employed qualitative interviewing within a reflexive framework, eliciting rich insights into participants' thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of participatory practice in local government (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Schwarz & Reiling, 2024). Grounded in interpretivist assumptions, this approach views knowledge as constructed rather than discovered, with truth emerging from context-dependent, socially mediated interpretations (Grant & Giddings, 2002).

A qualitative framework is particularly suited to exploring phenomena about which little is known (Flick, 2023, 2024; Padgett, 2008). In Aotearoa NZ, youth councils remain under-researched, with few studies examining their role and even fewer that elevate youth perspectives. Existing scholarship has largely focused on broader indicators of youth wellbeing, such as those reported in national surveys and longitudinal studies (Clark et al., 2020; Munford & Sanders, 2019), rather than on governance, representation, or policymaking. This gap underscores the need for qualitative inquiry that centres young people's lived experiences of civic participation and explores how institutional structures shape their opportunities for influence. Addressing this gap requires qualitative inquiry that foregrounds

young people's lived experiences of civic participation while critically analysing the institutional structures that condition their opportunities for influence.

This study therefore focused on young people's own conceptualisations of citizenship, producing expansive accounts of their participatory practices and contributions in everyday civic life (Collin, 2015; White et al., 2017). Such an approach rests on the ontological assumption that youth is not a universal biological stage but a socially constructed phenomenon, and on the epistemological stance that understandings of youth, participation, and political identity are historically and culturally bound (Smith, 2015). It also advances social justice aims by elevating the voices and expectations of youth councillors, enabling deeper insight into how they construct civic and political identities within local government. This is critical given young people's marginalised position in Western liberal democratic systems (Collin, 2015; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; White et al., 2017). Finally, by elevating youth perspectives, qualitative approaches also complement quantitative studies by enriching knowledge of civic and political participation. The paradigmatic differences between qualitative and quantitative traditions highlight how ontological assumptions about youth shape what can be known and produced epistemologically (White et al., 2017).

In this study, qualitative methods facilitated a detailed, descriptive, and contextual account that encompassed the diverse perspectives and experiences of both youth and adult participants (Creswell, 2013). Guided by an interpretivist epistemology, the research assumes that reality emerges from the multiplicity of subjective human experiences (Keane, 2025). Knowledge is therefore gained by exploring the meanings youth councillors assign to their participatory experiences, how they interpret and make sense of their roles, contributions, and outcomes. Capturing these varied realities enables a fuller, more nuanced understanding of youth participatory practice within youth councils (White et al., 2017).

Grounded in interpretivism, the approach rejects the notion of a single, definitive truth, recognizing instead that external reality cannot be directly or conclusively known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Willis, 2004). Accordingly, there is no singular or authentic "voice of youth"; rather, youthhood is constituted through diverse identities, experiences, and discourses (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023). Young people engage with civic life in varied ways, shaped by differing expectations, motivations, and outcomes for public participation (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). In line with this premise, the research sought to explore a range of youth and adult perspectives that reflect both inclusionary and exclusionary practices, including examples of successful participatory outcomes. These epistemological and ontological foundations, combined with qualitative methods, provided a coherent framework for capturing the complexity of youth participatory practice across diverse experiences.

## 5.2 Theoretical Perspective

This study is grounded in social constructionism, as distinct from social constructivism. While both perspectives emphasise the role of human interaction in shaping knowledge, social constructionism highlights the collective processes through which meaning is produced in society, such as institutional discourses, cultural practices, and shared norms. In contrast, social constructivism focuses on the individual cognitive processes by which people construct understanding through personal experience (Keane, 2025). Because this research examined how youth civic participation is structured and negotiated within local government settings, the emphasis is on the broader social, institutional, and cultural dynamics that shape engagement. Social constructionism therefore provides the most coherent ontological foundation, aligning with interpretivist epistemology and ensuring methodological congruence across the study design.

The research intention is to develop a nuanced understanding of the institutional landscape shaping youth participatory experiences and outcomes. A core ontological tenet of social constructionism was chosen as it holds that reality, including knowledge, norms, and institutional structures, is not objective or fixed, but produced through social interactions, language, and shared meanings (Keane, 2025). Accordingly, experiences are intricately shaped by broader institutional and social conditions, and knowledge generated from participants must be interpreted within the context in which it occurs. Knowledge is co-constructed by individuals and groups in situ, with the research focus on how meaning is collaboratively produced. This reflects an approach to understanding social behaviour that prioritises the collection of 'thick', contextual data to achieve a situated understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2013), thereby enhancing research quality through deeper, more insightful interpretations of the phenomenon.

Building on this ontological foundation, the study applied a social constructionist lens to examine how ideology and youth–adult power relations shape participatory experiences and the capacity of youth councillors to influence policymaking. This perspective rests on the assumption that social and ideological constructs are embedded in practices constituting social reality and are inextricably linked to the distribution of power governing relationships and institutions. Ideologies and power relations are produced, maintained, and contested, critically influencing what is deemed permissible within political institutions and how individuals may legitimately interact (Phillips, 2023; Willis, 2004).

Research informed by social constructionism challenges dominant assumptions that uphold exclusionary practices, illuminating how power operates relationally to serve particular interests and reproduce systemic inequalities (Phillips, 2023; Willis, 2004). In this study, attention to youth–adult power dynamics is especially pertinent given young people's

marginalised status within state political systems (Collin, 2015; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Central to this lens is the role of discourse, which shapes institutional norms, legitimises dominant ideologies, and constrains alternative forms of participation. Power, embedded in language, practices, and taken-for-granted assumptions, is reproduced through institutional narratives that normalise systemic inequalities.

Building on this perspective, dominant conceptions of youth, the 'youth citizen', and youth participation directly inform institutional responses to engagement (Collin, 2015). These responses shape the forms participation takes, the opportunities afforded, and the inclusionary or exclusionary practices enacted (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). Such constructs underpin councils' institutional goals and intentions for youth participation, the participatory approaches they adopt, and officials' ways of thinking and responding. Moreover, adult perceptions of young people's legitimate role in policymaking influence the expression of youth voice and autonomy, determining the extent to which young people can meaningfully impact decision-making processes. To analyse these dynamics, the study drew on Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) frames for positioning youth: 'youth as providers of a youth perspective', 'youth as developing citizens', and 'youth as capable civic actors and participatory rights holders'. These frames provided a lens for examining officials' assumptions about youth capabilities and their legitimate role within local government, illuminating how institutional logics and adult-centric norms either empowered or constrained youth participation.

In addition to adult perceptions, institutional orientations and documentary framings were examined to identify evidence of dominant constructions of youth, the youth citizen, and youth participation, such as youth development or rights-based models. This examination involved analysing discursive framing within written council documents to understand how institutional intentions and goals for youth participation mirrored these constructions. These

institutional features influence the realisation of participatory rights and the achievement of positive outcomes (Collin, 2015; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017).

Beyond institutional framings, the study examined the lived experiences and creative ways that youth and adult participants perceived, negotiated, and contested exclusionary practices, while also recognising marginalised and dissenting voices. Importantly, the research identified instances where officials made claims in support of youth participatory rights. Adult-centric biases and attitudes are widely recognised as barriers to youth engagement in local government, contributing to ongoing marginalisation within state political systems (Collin, 2015; Gallagher, 2006; Lister et al., 2007; Matthews, 2001a; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Yet adults also facilitate meaningful engagement and achieve positive outcomes, providing support and advancing claims for participatory rights (Bessell, 2009; Marshall et al., 2015; Zeldin et al., 2018). This duality aligns with literature documenting extensive variation in the structure and activities of youth councils across and within national contexts (Augsberger et al., 2024; Cabannes, 2006; Checkoway et al., 2005; Cushing & van Vliet, 2017; Holdsworth et al., 2007). By focusing on officials' roles in both inclusionary and exclusionary practices, the study aimed for a deeper understanding of the complex, sometimes contradictory nature of youth council operations in Aotearoa NZ. It also illuminated how local practices reflected broader, recurring patterns, local expressions of universal dynamics (Willis, 2004).

In summary, this study adopted a social constructionist paradigm to examine the power dynamics and ideological assumptions embedded in adult-centric conceptions of youth, citizenship, and participation in local governance. By foregrounding youth voice and autonomy, it explored both inclusionary and exclusionary practices and the institutional determinants shaping these outcomes. The research questioned dominant models of youth engagement, asking whose interests are served and how power operates to disenfranchise young people. Prevailing narratives influence adult responses to youth participation, shaping

its form and the extent to which it is genuinely youth-led. Consequently, they affect young people's capacity to construct civic identities, define youth-informed agendas, and influence policy outcomes. These dynamics generate practices that both enable and constrain participation, with significant implications for realising youth rights under the CRC (UN, 1989).

## 5.3 Research Design

This section on research design begins with an outline of the processes of participant sampling, recruitment and selection. This is followed by an outline of the data collection process which included qualitative interviews and secondary documents. The final section addresses the data analysis framework.

## 5.4 Participant Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was employed, with an inclusion and exclusion criteria designed to identify and select participants based on their exposure, knowledge, and experience of practice within youth councils, youth council operations, and of the wider local government context. Purposive sampling is a technique whereby the researcher selects participants who can provide the necessary data to address the research questions (Daniel, 2012; Emmel, 2013). This strategy tends to ensure richness in the data gathered and has the advantage of efficiently accessing a range of participants who meet the eligibility criteria (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Fossey et al., 2002). The selection criteria included:

1. Youth aged 16-25 years with current involvement in youth councils.
2. Adult staff who were currently employed by the institution and working directly with youth councillors.

3. Institution managers and/or board members with at least two years' experience in their current role and knowledge of institutional culture, policy, and youth council operations.

Primary data was obtained through qualitative, semi-structured interviews with both youth and adult participant groups, while secondary data comprised the content of institutional documents and website content, and Aotearoa NZ national policy documents. Selecting both multiple participants and documentary sources generated in-depth, rich, contextual data, which enabled greater meaning to be captured in relation to the way youth participatory citizenship is enacted within local government (Thyer & Holosko, 2019).

Youth were selected as the research aimed to obtain knowledge that elevates the voices and participatory experiences of youth in local government. This acknowledged that the perspectives of youth are critical to understanding the way they construct their civic and political identities (White et al., 2017). It also recognised the extensive literature that highlights the marginalised position of youth in state-centred political systems (Hickey & Pauli-Myler; 2017; Matthews, 2001a; Munyede et al., 2021; Perry-Hazan, 2016).

The official age category of youth depicted within official Aotearoa NZ documents, depicts the age of youth as 12-24 years (MYA, 2002). Likewise, most youth councils in Aotearoa NZ comprise youth aged 12-24 years. The 16–24-year range formed the inclusion criteria in the current research, for convenience, as adult/parental permission was not required. Adult participants were required to have a minimum of two years' experience working with youth in the institution. Adults working directly with youth were selected, as this infers a greater depth of experience and knowledge of youth council operations within the institution. This adult participant group were selected in line with the significant amount of literature identifying that the attitudes, and actions of adults largely determine youth participatory

experiences and outcomes (Camino, 2000; Halpenny et al., 2014, Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Zeldin et al., 2018). Councils, with currently operating youth councils were sought from across the central and lower regions of the North Island of Aotearoa NZ for practical considerations as this is where the researcher resides.

### 5.5 Participant Recruitment and Selection

A letter of invitation to participate in the research, and a request to recruit participants was sent by post and email to fourteen local government institutions and five community-based youth-serving organisations in the North Island of Aotearoa NZ, such as the YMCA and Scouts (Appendix A). The researcher did not receive any response from community youth-serving organisations. Of the nineteen organisations (both youth-serving organisations and local councils) who received the invitation, responses were received by four local government institutions. Pseudonyms are used from here onward to refer to each of the local government institutions, namely, Kiwi, Pūkeko, Ruru, and Tūī (Aotearoa/NZ native birds).

Challenges in gaining access to institutions is well documented and can have implications for the nature and quality of the data obtained, including insight into the institution and its members. Therefore, it can have an impact on the trustworthiness of the findings (Shenton & Haytor, 2004). Contributing factors include demands on staff time, and a perceived need to protect the reputation of the organisation. Research has the potential to discover inefficiencies and poor practice within organisations and this may be a concern for managers (Buchanan & Bryman, 2009; Saunders et al., 2019; Shenton & Haytor, 2004).

Since local councils were the sole group who responded to the invitation to participate, a recalibration in the research occurred, that involved a shift from a broad scope of youth involvement in both youth-serving community-based, and government organisations, to a

narrower focus on youth councils. This change in research focus is indicative of the iterative, emergent nature of critical and qualitative research (Willis, 2004). This recalibration required a further systematic review of relevant literature in relation to youth councils and public policymaking. The researcher later reflected that given the broad and complex nature and scope of youth participatory citizenship, identifying a narrower focus of enquiry, such as on youth participation within youth councils in local government, at the conception stage of the research process, would have avoided a period of research drift.

After sending the letter of invitation to participate in the study, the researcher contacted each institution and/or was contacted by an institution representative. The researcher sought an institution liaison person to negotiate the research process including access to participants. Information about the study in the form of two separate Information sheets, one each for staff/ manager participants (Appendix B), and for youth participants (Appendix C) was circulated to staff and youth councils. The recruitment process differed slightly across the four local councils. In Council Ruru, the council liaison person contacted interested potential participants, and provided the research with their contact details. In Council Tūī, youth participants made direct contact with the researcher to organise interview times. In Councils Pūkeko and Kiwi, the researcher presented the research information directly in person at youth council meetings, and with staff of each council. The adult coordinators then talked with interested participants and arranged all interview times for all participants.

### 5.5.1 The Institutions and Participants

The four selected institutions were councils located in urban cities in the North Island of Aotearoa NZ and with similar population and other demographic characteristics in relation to age and ethnicity. The population of these territorial areas comprise the main urban area and

surrounding towns and rural areas. The population for these territorial areas from June 2025 (Statistics NZ) are Council Kiwi (66,400–67,500), Council Pūkeko (88, 000), Council Ruru (49, 000), and Council Tūī (58, 00). The four councils in this research represent three district councils, and one city council.

The research participants included eleven youth councillors and six adult staff from the four local government institutions. All youth councillors were current and active youth council members. The age range was 16 to 18 years. The participants comprised a diverse composition. Youth councillors were comprised of New Zealand/ European (6), Romanian born (1), Māori (1) Asian (2), and Pacific Peoples (1). Of the adult participants two identified as Māori and four New Zealand European/Pakeha.

In Council Kiwi, five youth councillors, and three adult staff were interviewed. One staff member had responsibility for the council's community development portfolio. Among her responsibilities was providing support for youth council operations. A further staff member had recently been appointed as a youth council administrator, and the third staff member was a manger for an external organisation, contracted by the council to provide a range of social, dance and art-based activities for local children and youth. This participant had regular contact with the youth council. In Council Pūkeko, one youth councillor was interviewed.

The participants in Council Ruru comprised two youth councillors and three adult staff members. Two of the adult participants were elected representative city councillors. One was actively involved with the youth council in a support role and had previously served as a youth councillor for several years prior to being elected as a city councillor. The second elected councillor was not actively involved with the youth council but held the city councils' youth portfolio. A third adult participant was employed as a council policy and strategy officer, and he was involved in providing support for the youth council in completing submissions. The

participants in Council Tūī comprised three youth councillors. One youth councillor was employed by the council as the youth council administrator/coordinator, while this previously adult role remained unfilled. Table 1 illustrates participant details.

Table 1

*Participant Details*

| Name | Role at commencement of research | Length of involvement in council | Council |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rachel *Youth* | Youth Councillor. Current Co-Chairperson | 4 years | Ruru |
| Josh *Adult* | Elected Councillor Previously a Youth Councillor on Youth Council for 6 years | 10 years | Ruru |
| George *Adult* | Youth Advocate and Graduate Policy Development officer | 2 years | Ruru |
| Tom *Youth* | Youth Councillor | 1 year | Ruru |
| Anna *Adult* | Elected Councillor Portfolio holder for Youth | | Ruru |
| Belinda *Youth* | Youth Councillor | 3 years | Kiwi |
| Cherie *Youth* | Youth Councillor | 5 years | Kiwi |
| Tim *Youth* | Youth Councillor | 6 months | Kiwi |
| Sam *Adult* | Manager | 5 years | Kiwi |
| Emma *Youth* | Youth Councillor | 18 months | Kiwi |
| Zac *Youth* | Youth Councillor | 6 months | Kiwi |
| Jane *Adult* | Youth Council Coordinator | 1 month | Kiwi |
| Sue | Community Development Officer | 2 years | Kiwi |
| Kim *Youth* | Youth Council Chairperson, Youth Councillor | 18 months | Pūkeko |
| Molly *Youth* | Youth Councillor | 2 years | Tūī |
| Sally *Youth* | Youth Councillor | 1 year | Tūī |
| Eve *Youth* | Youth Councillor and Youth Council Administrator | 4 years | Tūī |

## 5.6 Data Collection

The following section outlines the qualitative methods employed to elicit process of collecting primary and secondary data, with attention to the relational, contextual, and power-laden processes through which meaning is constructed and voice is articulated.

## 5.7 The Interviews

Primary data was obtained through face to face, qualitative interviews with eleven youth councillors and six adult staff members, using a semi-structured interview schedule. This data was gathered between April 2018 and October 2018. Participants were given the option of selecting the physical location for the interviews to occur, at a place they would feel most comfortable. This included a public place away from the local council site to ensure participants' privacy from other council members if they did not wish others to know of their participation in the research. Interviews occurred at public venues including the museum, library, and city council rooms. Two participants were interviewed online, using Zoom technology. Interview times varied between 1.5-2 hours in duration. Ten participants were interviewed individually, while seven youth councillors chose to be interviewed in pairs of two. This option was made available due to the possibility that participants may lack confidence, the power differential between the researcher and participants, and the benefit of participants exchanging ideas with each other as they consider their responses to questions. The qualitative interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim by the researcher and returned to participants for checking.

Social constructionism and interpretivism require methods that provide rich, in-depth data of participants' perspectives and experiences. This was achieved by the researcher adopting a flexible interviewing style, using an interview schedule that included both structured, open-ended questions, and unscripted questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This ensured the researcher was not strictly determining the course and content of discussion, but rather allowed opportunity for the participants to control the direction of the interview and the content of their narratives. A flexible schedule and interviewing style ensured the acquisition of rich, thick, descriptive data that reflected participants' own interpretations (Thyer & Holosko, 2019). It enabled participants to formulate and articulate their ideas, observations, and experiences of participatory practice and youth council operations. This approach allowed the researcher to capture youth participants' meaning making, their constructions of youth participatory citizenship, from their own terms of reference, the way they do, and wish to, engage in acts of citizenship, and define their civic and political identities (Collin, 2015). This included the way youth councillors perceived themselves as influential, or ineffective, in shaping youth participation within local government. It avoided the hazards of quantitative surveys that require participants to provide answers to pre-determined sets of questions and categories being imposed on them by the researcher's own adult-centric narrow construction of youth civic participation (White et al., 2017).

## 5.8 The Interview Schedule

Two interview schedules were developed, one for youth councillors (Appendix D), and one for adult staff and managers (Appendix E) with minor variations in questions to account for the different roles. The interview schedules centred on themes and principles in relation to the three research questions outlined in the earlier section on epistemology. The themes of the

interview schedule encompassed prominent constructs of youth participation in the literature. These included youth voice, youth autonomy, empowerment, equitable youth-adult relationships, diversity and inclusiveness, symbolic tokenism, and meaningful participation (Augsberger et al., 2018c; Evans, 2007; Harris et al., 2007; Hart, 1992; Zeldin, 2018). The questions aimed to capture the nature, scope, and configuration of activities which defined youth participatory practice and youth council operations. Information was also sought on the characteristics of the institutional context that facilitated inclusionary and exclusionary practices such as adults' construction of youth citizen and youth participation, internal mechanisms, and the relationships youth councillors had with key officials and the wider institution.

Given that the effectiveness of participatory experiences and outcomes is contingent upon the role of adults, interview questions centred on the perspectives, experiences, and expectations of youth councillors in relation to the support they received by key officials (Camino, 2000; Halpenny et al., 2014, Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Zeldin et al., 2018). Likewise, questions focused on practice that signified effective, accountable communicative practice, likely to promote trust in youth-adult relationships. These are youth being heard, their views and interests being followed up with action by adults, and receiving feedback (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Holdsworth et al., 2007). Interview questions also centred on participants' perspectives and experiences in relation to practice that aimed to ensure the voices and interests of diverse groups of youth, including those harder to reach, were reflected in local government. Finally, participants were asked about the range of activities that facilitated engagement with the wider youth community in civic initiatives.

## 5.9 Secondary Data

Secondary data comprised institutional documents obtained directly from participants and sourced from local government and youth council websites. These documents were analysed to understand how institutions frame their intentions and goals regarding the function and operations of youth councils, as well as their expectations for the roles and tasks of youth councillors. The secondary data included youth strategies, terms of reference, handbooks, and guidelines. These materials were examined to discern the institutions' orientation toward youth participation, enabling an assessment of the extent to which youth councillor roles and youth participation were framed through lenses of youth development, policy-focused activity, and/or youth participatory rights.

Published documents were also sourced from the Aotearoa NZ national Ministry of Youth Development website. This included national youth policy and strategies, current participation initiatives at the national level, and guideline documents published by the government to guide local government on youth policy and youth participation (Ministry of Health, 2020; Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2020, 2022; Ministry of Youth Development, 1997, 2009a, 2009b, 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023). This information was viewed to understand the government's overarching direction for youth participation, and the emphasis placed on a youth development approach, policy focused activity, and/ or youth participatory rights.

The literature review focused on the scholarship from Aotearoa NZ and similar countries with liberal democracies including Australia, the UK, the US, Europe, and Canada. This knowledge informed the literature review and analysis, and was obtained from the Massey University library catalogue, Discover. Key social science databases were accessed including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Search terms used were: "youth citizenship", "youth participation", "youth civic participation", "youth councils", and "youth participatory

rights". Having outlined the data collection procedures, the following section details the analytical strategies employed to interpret the findings.

## 5.10 Data Analysis

This section outlines the deductive and abductive analytical approach used to interpret the data and construct the research findings. It describes the conceptual frameworks and the development of an analytical framework (Appendix F), which informed data collection and guided analysis. Key deductive themes are then detailed.

In the initial phase, 'attribute coding' was manually applied to sort data into categories and develop an organisational schema (Miles et al., 2020). For example, codes captured data type (e.g., interviews, council documents, website content) and aligned participants with their respective council site, including interview date and location. The analytical framework comprised predetermined codes and themes aligned with the research questions. These categories reflected constructs frequently cited in youth participation literature, including: youth voice; autonomy and empowerment; inclusive participation; effective communicative practices (e.g., respect, being heard, transparency, feedback); youth-adult relationship dynamics (e.g., support, trust); equitable relations; symbolic tokenism; authentic participation; and bridging social capital (Augsberger et al., 2018b; Evans, 2007; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Halpern, 2005; Hart, 1992; Marshall et al., 2015; Zeldin et al., 2008; Zeldin, 2018). Four conceptual frameworks guided the analysis:

1. Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) table of frameworks: policy-focus, positive youth development, symbolic tokenism, and social justice (Figure 2, Chapter Four).
2. Hart's (1992) Ladder of Child and Youth Participation (Figure 1, Chapter Four).

3. Three conceptual positions of the youth citizen: as "youth as participatory rights-holders", "youth as developing citizens", and "youth as providers of a youth perspective".
4. Bridging Social Capital (Halpern, 2005).

The three conceptual positions of the youth citizen used in the analysis are drawn from existing scholarship: young people as participatory rights holders, as developing citizens, and as providers of a youth perspective. These positions served as analytic lenses for interpreting officials' accounts and institutional practices, helping to illuminate how youth participation was framed, enabled, and constrained across the data. First, young people were understood as active citizens and participatory rights holders, drawing on work that positions youth as legitimate civic actors with both agency and entitlements. Holdsworth et al. (2007) emphasise young people's meaningful civic engagement, while rights-based interpretations of the CRC frame participation as a fundamental entitlement (Lansdown, 2011; UN, 1989; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

Second, young people were conceptualised as developing citizens, drawing on scholarship that understands citizenship as emergent and unfolding over time. Collin's (2015) notion of "citizenship in the making" highlights how young people are in the process of forming civic identities and capacities, reflecting a developmental view of citizenship as something gradually acquired. This framing positions youth as becomings, that is individuals whose civic roles and competencies are still taking shape, rather than as fully recognised civic actors in the present (Lister, 2008). In the analysis, this position was used to interpret how officials described youth councillors, and to understand the institutional programmes shaping youth engagement, particularly those grounded in positive youth development approaches (Augsberger et al, 2018a). As outlined in Figure 4.2 (Chapter Four), PYD programmes often construct youth as

needing guidance, support, and structured opportunities to develop into capable future citizens, aligning closely with this developmental conceptualisation.

Finally, the analysis considered how young people are often positioned as providers of a youth perspective within organisational contexts. This framing reflects critiques that participation can become instrumentalised, with young people invited primarily to supply a perspective that aligns with organisational priorities rather than to exercise substantive influence (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). Attending to this dynamic helped illuminate the tensions between meaningful participation and organisationally shaped expectations of youth voice. Together, these conceptual lenses shaped the interpretation of the data by highlighting youth participation as simultaneously civic, developmental, and organisationally mediated. These three positions build on the broader constructions of youth citizenship discussed in Section 2.6, which outline prevailing societal narratives about youth capability, futurity, and civic participation.

Furthermore, the analysis was informed by social capital theory, particularly the distinction between bonding and bridging capital discussed in Chapter Three. These concepts shaped the interpretation of youth councillors' participation styles and representational practices, guiding the development of codes related to internal cohesion, outward-facing engagement, and the cultivation of cross-group connections. Social capital theory also informed the analysis of how councils facilitated broader youth civic engagement, recognising that institutional scaffolding, including committee integration, resourcing, and youth-specific civic infrastructure, plays a critical role in enabling young people to build bridging ties and participate meaningfully in governance. Incorporating social capital as an analytical lens ensured that the analysis remained attentive to both the relational and structural conditions that enable or constrain youth participation.

Immersion in the full depth and breadth of interview and document content, and systematic alignment of data with codes, was essential to understanding its context and nuance (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The data was manually coded, with transcripts re-read multiple times to identify ideas, meanings, patterns, and insights. Repeated readings ensured accurate selection of statements, and transcripts were checked against original audio recordings for fidelity (Grundy et al., 2003; Tracy, 2019).

Guided by the above analytical framework, the researcher deductively explored key concepts drawn from youth participation literature. Several deductive propositions were developed to bound the inquiry, identifying data relevant to the research questions and enabling comparison between empirical insights and theoretical claims (Yin, 2014). These propositions are elaborated in Appendix F. Codes were combined into patterned themes and refined through iterative comparison with the literature (Miles et al., 2020). For instance, expressions of youth voice and autonomy, or their absence, were synthesised into the themes of authentic and tokenistic participation (Wong et al., 2010; Lundy, 2007). This deductive application of theory to data enhanced the rigour and trustworthiness of the research, allowing findings to be situated within existing scholarship, while generating new insights.

The researcher also employed abductive analysis to work iteratively from surprises, doubts, and tensions within the data, creatively theorising these moments through engagement with relevant literature (Schwarz & Reiling, 2024). Unexpected and puzzling findings emerged during data collection, particularly in relation to practice within Youth Council Tūī. An important and unexpected finding was the marked regional variation in youth civic initiatives. By contrast, participants in Kiwi and Pūkeko were unable to identify local youth civic initiatives involving youth councillors. This divergence appeared to indicate differing levels of social capital formation across regions.

To interpret this data, the researcher adopted abductive reasoning, a dynamic, creative mode of theorising that bridges inductive and deductive approaches. It involves oscillating between empirical observations and theoretical ideas to arrive at plausible explanations (Hulst & Visser, 2024). This approach requires openness to new insights, allowing patterns to emerge organically while suspending bias and preconceived assumptions. These patterns are then interpreted through a theoretical lens, supporting both theory-building and theory-testing, and enabling nuanced, context-sensitive insights valuable to social policy and community research.

Four guiding principles shaped the abductive process: (i) embracing surprises, tensions, and doubts; (ii) using knowledge creatively to theorise; (iii) crafting through methodological bricolage; and (iv) iterative engagement throughout the research. The researcher identified how unexpected patterns resonated with existing literature, requiring sensitivity to complexity, including divergences between theoretical expectations and empirical observations, and tensions between stated intentions for youth participation in policy documents and the realities of practice (Yanow, 2000).

During abductive analysis, the researcher integrated literature early and creatively throughout the research process to develop a broad theoretical foundation spanning youth studies and youth participation. This enabled the identification of ‘family resemblances’ in knowl**e**dge, that is shared conceptual patterns across disciplinary boundaries (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Hulst & Visser, 2024; Timmermans & Tavory, 2022; Tsoukas, 2009). Such a foundation fosters sensitivity to nuanced meanings within the data and supports more theoretically powerful interpretations (Brower et al., 2000). Through this approach, new theories may be developed, or existing ones clarified, extended, or updated based on a creative understanding of practice. It also facilitates the generation of practitioner-relevant knowledge (Brower et al., 2000; Dodge et al., 2005; Raadschelders, 2011). Abductive reasoning aligns

with interpretivism, which views realities as socially and materially constructed, fluid, and context dependent. It assumes that research processes and practices bear resemblance to those occurring elsewhere or earlier (Tsoukas, 2009), inviting qualitative researchers into ongoing theoretical dialogue.

### 5.10.1 Youth Council Orientation

To address the first research question, data were grouped into four thematic categories. The first theme examined the orientation to youth participation within each council, was identified through three sources: (1) participant descriptions of the nature and scope of youth council activities; (2) written materials from council documents and websites; and (3) officials' perspectives. Drawing on Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) conceptual table (Figure 2, Chapter Four), youth council practices and activities were coded according to four frames: policy-focus, youth development, social justice, and symbolic tokenism. This coding integrated documentary evidence with participants' experiences to assess alignment with conceptual frames of youth development, policy engagement, social justice, and participatory rights.

These representations illuminated institutional intentions and goals for youth engagement. Analysis focused on how these sources depicted the role of youth councillors and the function of youth councils, specifically, whether youth councillors were framed as policy contributors or youth development participants. The analysis was guided by a deductive proposition: councils operating predominantly within a youth development framework are likely to afford youth councillors a minimal role in policymaking, thereby limiting their capacity to influence outcomes that reflect the interests of local youth (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Collin, 2015).

### 5.10.2 Authentic and Tokenistic Practice

To examine the data in relation to authentic and tokenistic practice, the researcher drew on three key interpretive tools: Augsberger et al.'s (2018) frame of symbolic tokenism, Hart's Ladder of Child and Youth Participation (1992), and literature conceptualising tokenistic participation (Collin & Vromen, 2010; Holdsworth et al., 2017; Matthews, 2001a). Youth councillors' expectations and experiences were explored using the key concepts of youth voice and autonomy. These concepts are widely recognised in youth civic participation literature as foundational to empowerment and meaningful engagement (Hart, 1992; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Matthews, 2001a).

Data were coded to identify internal mechanisms and participation styles that enabled and supported youth councillors' engagement in policy-focused activity (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017). To distinguish between authentic and tokenistic practice, the analysis considered communicative dynamics, the degree of autonomy afforded to youth, opportunities to exercise youth voice, and the capacity to influence policy and drive change. Both primary and secondary data were examined to assess the extent to which council and website documents' articulation of youth councillors' roles aligned with the actual scope, provision, and lived experience of participation.

Youth voice and autonomy were conceptualised as the extent to which youth councillors felt their voices were heard and acted upon by council officials (Holdsworth et al., 2007; Marshall et al, 2015; Tisdall, 2015). Data were analysed for evidence of accountability in communicative practice, particularly in terms of transparency, such as whether youth councillors received feedback and support from officials. Opportunities for youth voice, supported by effective communicative practices, are critical to fostering positive youth–adult

relationships and trust (Evans, 2007; Halpern, 2005; Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2015). Phrases coded as indicators of youth voice included: “they listen to us,” “they act on what we say,” and “we feel heard by them.” In qualitative analysis, such keywords are essential for developing codes that accurately reflect underlying meanings and convey participants’ perspectives (Naeem & Ozuem, 2023). For example, “we decide on what we submit on” was coded as an indicator of youth autonomy.

In contrast, tokenistic practice was characterised by limited opportunities for youth councillors to engage in policy-focused activities or effect meaningful change. It was marked by a lack of autonomy in shaping the youth council agenda and diminished youth voice in communicative interactions. Participants described feeling ignored or unheard, with concerns and interests not acted upon by council officials, and a notable absence of feedback, transparency, respect, and trust. This was captured in expressions such as *“*they don’t listen,” “we don’t get feedback,” and “we are not involved in change in this community.”

### 5.10.3 Officials Construction of Youth Participatory Citizenship

The conceptual frames offered by Cahill and Dadvand (2018) were adopted to understand how officials construct youth participation, youth citizenship, and the role of youth councillors. These frames, youth as developing citizens, youth as providers of a youth perspective, and youth as valued, capable civic actors and participatory rights-holders, offer insight into how adults position youth within participatory structures, and the implications this has for youth agency, voice, and inclusionary or exclusionary practices. The researcher adopted several propositions in relation to these frames. One such proposition was that officials who perceived youth as valued, capable civic actors and participatory rights-holders would be more likely to engage in actions that empower youth and support claims for participatory rights,

thereby strengthening their role and impact in policy spaces (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Holdsworth et al., 2007; UN, 1989).

### 5.10.4 Equity and Representativeness

The second research question centred on equity and representativeness. Data were examined to identify internal processes and engagement strategies that enhanced democratic participation among diverse youth. Codes captured youth councillors' perceptions of community engagement, internal participation styles, and mechanisms for aligning with local youth priorities. They also reflected strategies to strengthen connections with the broader youth population and promote inclusive representation.

Abductive analysis enabled interpretation of unexpected findings, most notably in Youth Council Tūī, where strong community connectedness and active efforts to engage underrepresented youth contrasted sharply with practices in the other councils and with prevailing literature, which often portrays youth councillors as disconnected and lacking diversity (Augsberger et al., 2018c; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Wyness, 2009). Through critical reflection, the researcher identified a distinct participatory orientation among these youth councillors, marked by efforts to bridge social divides and foster inclusive civic engagement. Drawing on youth participation literature and social capital theory, this orientation was theorised as a form of bridging capital, linking equity-focused thinking with inclusive practice (Checkoway, 2015; Evans, 2007; Halpern, 2005; Youniss et al., 2002). This builds on Feringa and Tonkens' (2017) work, which connects bridging capital to reflexive participation styles that promote broader youth representation.

### 5.10.5 Broader Civic Participation

The third research question explores how youth councillors facilitate civic initiatives that yield collective benefits for local youth. Initial coding (Appendix F) described the scope of these initiatives, followed by analysis of institutional supports enabling their implementation. Data revealed notable variation across youth councils in councillors' connectedness to the wider youth community and involvement in civic initiatives. This variation was interpreted through the lens of bridging capital (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993; Reid et al., 2021), a concept central to inclusive practice yet under-developed in youth council literature (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017). Using abductive reasoning, bridging capital was applied to identify institutional mechanisms that foster community connectedness and inclusive citizenship (Lister, 2008).

The application above illustrates the iterative nature of qualitative research, where concepts and questions evolve through immersion in data (Davidson & Tolich, 2018; Tutty et al., 1996). The study's context unfolded over time, requiring attentiveness to conceptual lenses while remaining open to unexpected findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Theoretical application, such as linking critical social consciousness to inclusive practice (Theme Five) and bridging capital to community variation (Theme Six), reflects an abductive analytic approach (Berg, 2001; Bingham, 2023; Boyatzis, 1998). The next section considers how this combined deductive-abductive approach enhances research trustworthiness.

## 5.11 Research Trustworthiness

The practice of memoing, or reflective note-taking was integrated throughout the research process to manage data and support rigorous analysis and trustworthy findings. Memoing contributes to an audit trail, a detailed account of the research steps, which enhances

the study's trustworthiness and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tierney & Clemens, 2011). It facilitated critical, analytical thinking and deep engagement with the data. The researcher's evolving thoughts, insights, questions, and interpretations in relation to codes, themes, and patterns were recorded and tracked over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A log was maintained to document data collection, analytical reflections, and interpretations of meaning in relation to the research questions (Bingham, 2023; Ravitch & Carl, 2019). Importantly, memoing prompted the researcher to critically examine how her own subjectivities and underlying assumptions might shape data interpretation (Bingham, 2023).

Using qualitative methods and an iterative analytical approach that combined deductive and abductive reasoning enabled the researcher to generate a rich description of participant accounts, capturing the essence of their perspectives and experiences (Bingham, 2023). This approach deepened the flexibility and interpretive depth of the study. Triangulating data and situating findings within existing literature and theoretical frameworks enhanced the study's trustworthiness by strengthening its credibility, confirmability, and transferability (Tierney & Clemens, 2011). These qualities were further reinforced through the application of conceptual frameworks to the interpretation of data, expanding the relevance and impact of the findings. This contributed to the coherence and applicability of the research within the broader context of youth civic participation in public policymaking and local government (Bingham, 2023). This is demonstrated in the findings and discussion chapters.

Research trustworthiness was supported by purposefully obtaining thick descriptions of youth councillors' participatory experiences and the institutional context. This enriched the quality of the study by generating knowledge with greater depth and insight into the phenomenon (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Youth voices were elevated to capture their constructions of participation, a critical justice objective given their marginalised position in political systems

and their historical exclusion from research dominated by adult-centric, quantitative methods (White et al., 2017).

Achieving thick description involves eliciting deep, dense, and detailed participant accounts to enable insightful interpretation (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). It is realised when readers feel they have experienced or can meaningfully relate to the events described (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Such vivid detail enhances the credibility of the research, while rich contextualisation allows readers to assess the transferability of findings to other settings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This was achieved by providing robust quotations and detailing interactions among youth councillors and between youth councillors and adult officials, their feelings, perspectives, and experiences, capturing their meaning-making in relation to participatory practice and youth council operations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, regular supervision occurred with the doctoral research supervisors referred to as peer debriefing by Lietz and Zayas (2010). Triangulation occurred using two of more data sources (primary and secondary data), and the use of research supervisors, in reviewing the interpretation of data, and research methodology and methods. Another measure was obtaining feedback from participants who reviewed their transcripts prior to approving for analysis, and in respect to the findings (Sarantakos, 1998). Together, these strategies support the trustworthiness of this research.

### 5.12 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In line with social constructionism, which recognises that all knowledge is situated, the researcher's positionality shapes what is seen, how meaning is interpreted, and how knowledge is constructed (Berger, 2013). A positionality account increases trustworthiness by making

transparent the researcher's background, aspects of identity, worldview, institutional affiliation, and epistemological stance. This research was chosen for its central focus on issues of power and prejudice. My personal and professional experiences as a social worker have shown that these forces are ever-present and profoundly shape the human experience, affecting opportunities, access to services, a sense of belonging, the quality of relationships, and broader life outcomes. This worldview informed a commitment to justice-oriented inquiry that elevates youth voice and challenges dominant institutional narratives. A social work background provided a unique vantage point to trace how ideologies are embedded in institutional practices and discourses. This positionality helped identify which discourses are privileged and which are silenced, and to illuminate institutional logics that normalise exclusion or marginalisation, particularly of youth perspectives. In this way, positionality becomes a tool for disrupting adult-centric assumptions in policy and amplifying counter-narratives that challenge dominant ideologies.

The researcher's interpretation aimed to capture the essence of participants' experiences. Interpretation is the foundation of qualitative inquiry; to credibly represent a participant's story, the researcher must understand and make explicit their position in relation to the phenomenon under study (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). In this study, reflexivity was facilitated through memoing, which involved critically examining how positionality, assumptions, values, affective responses, and interactions influenced the research, including interpretive choices, coding decisions, and interview questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Using a research journal, the researcher reflected on how her assumptions about youth agency might shape the interpretation of participant narratives, and asked: Am I reproducing institutional logics even as I critique them? Does my language, within the thesis and interviews, reflect or resist dominant ideologies?

Reflexivity required consideration of insider/outsider status. An outsider position refers to instances where the researcher does not share a group identity or lived experience with participants (Yip, 2024). In this study, a notable methodological limitation was the researcher's outsider status, particularly her limited knowledge of the machinery and operations of local government. This, combined with a small number of adult participants, inevitably constrained the depth of insight into institutional contexts and processes. However, reflexivity and awareness of outsider status enabled the researcher to examine how institutions define legitimacy, authority, and participation. Furthermore, the larger number of youth participants enabled the researcher to elevate youth voices and explore how young people enact participation and construct their civic and political identities. This is a critical consideration in youth research, as much of the existing literature on youth political participation has tended to focus on adult participant accounts. This focus has produced strong critiques of practice but has limitations in relation to generating knowledge about young people's perspectives on how they wish to participate and construct their political identities (Matthews, 2001a; White et al., 2017).

The study aimed to generate knowledge that could inform future research employing critical methodologies that bridges policy mechanisms with emancipatory aims. It contributes by examining how youth–adult power dynamics, communicative practices, and conceptualisations of the youth citizen underpin inclusionary and exclusionary practices. Future research might incorporate goals to support youth councillors in engaging in transformative practice, challenging institutional power, and strengthening participatory rights within local government. Such an approach aligns with the consensus in the literature on the need to strengthen institutional commitment and accountability to implement youth-centric participatory structures and methods (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Collin & Vromen, 2010; David & Buchanan, 2020; Harada, 2023; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019).

My background in social work and lived experiences have shaped a deep awareness of how institutional power operates, and a desire to challenge exclusionary practices that marginalise youth voice. By examining ways in which institutions construct legitimacy and participation, this study aimed to illuminate the discursive and structural barriers that constrain youth agency. My positionality enabled a sensitivity to the ways in which institutional logics, often presented as neutral or benevolent, can obscure power asymmetries and silence dissenting voices. Reflexive engagement with these dynamics allowed the research to move beyond description, toward an analysis that exposes how youth–adult power relations are embedded in communicative practices and policy frameworks. In doing so, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks not only to understand youth participation, but to reimagine it in ways that are more inclusive, and dialogic.

### 5.13 Methodological Limitations

This study has several methodological limitations. As a qualitative project using purposive sampling, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable to wider contexts, and the sample may reflect response bias, as those who chose to participate may differ from those who did not (Patton, 2015). Participant numbers varied across councils, and only one participant was recruited from Pūkeko. While this limits the ability to draw council-level conclusions for Pūkeko, the participant's experiences aligned closely with themes raised by multiple participants from Kiwi Council, providing some cross-case corroboration. However, detailed descriptions of the methodology, methods, study context, and findings has been provided to enable readers to assess if findings may be transferable to other local council contexts (Bowen, 2009). My positionality as a researcher also shaped the study. While reflexive and tikanga-aligned practices were used, my background and outsider-status (discussed in

section 5.12) may have influenced data collection and interpretation (Berger, 2015). These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but provide important context for their interpretation.

## 5.14 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with Massey University's (2017) Code of ethical conduct for research, teaching, and evaluation involving human participants. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Human Ethics Committee in 2017 (SOB 17-22) (Appendix G). Discussion of ethical considerations occurs in the planning stage of the research process and at any stage where issues arise. The research was informed by the ethical values of autonomy, non-maleficence, privacy and confidentiality, beneficence, justice, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations.

## 5.15 Autonomy

The ethical principle of autonomy affirms individuals' right to make informed decisions about their participation in research, free from influence or coercion (Hardwick & Worsley, 2011; Massey University, 2017). Informed consent comprises several key components: agency, provision of information, comprehension, and the absence of pressure, manipulation, or coercion (Massey University, 2017). Autonomy also entails respect for participants, avoidance of unnecessary deception, and mitigation of conflicts of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Agency refers to the individual's capacity to make an informed and voluntary decision. These principles were rigorously upheld throughout this research.

Adhering to the ethical principle of autonomy requires providing clear and comprehensive information to enable individuals to make an informed decision about participating in research (Hardwick & Worsley, 2011). To support this, tailored information sheets were distributed to adult participants (Appendix C) and youth participants (Appendix D). These documents outlined the research purpose, participant rights, and any potential impacts of involvement. Additional information was presented at youth council meetings at Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko, where youth participants and staff had the opportunity to ask questions directly to the researcher. Time was also allocated for questions and clarification prior to each interview. These measures ensured that participants received robust, accessible information and were fully informed before providing consent (Hardwick & Worsley, 2011; Massey University, 2017). Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any point prior to signing the transcript release form. No participants chose to withdraw.

### 5.16 Non-maleficence

In this study, it was essential to ensure that no harm occurred to either council institutions or research participants. Harm may encompass damage to reputation, dignity, interpersonal relationships, or future employment prospects. Consideration was given to potential risks and costs for both councils and participants, including possible implications for employment relationships and conditions. Individual employees may have been concerned about potential ramifications for their employment status arising from participation (Plankey-Videla, 2012). For instance, during one interview, a youth participant, while expressing critical views about aspects of her experience with the youth council, asked whether her involvement in the research might affect her chances of being accepted into a university politics course. Organisational reputations were also a consideration, particularly the risk of exposing

inefficiencies or incompetence (Plankey-Videla, 2012). Additionally, a substantial body of literature on youth participation critiques the role of adults and questions the capacity of formal public organisations to support youth agency and decision-making. To uphold non-maleficence, the research was conducted in a manner that minimised disruption to organisational activities.

### 5.17 Privacy and Confidentiality

The risk of harm to participants and councils, was reduced by measures to protect privacy and confidentially. Harm can also be caused by breaches of privacy. Participants have the right to expect that their privacy is respected and that they have autonomy over any decisions made about their privacy (Hardwick & Worsley, 2011). Participants were given the option of selecting the physical location for the interviews to occur, at a place they would feel most comfortable. This included a public place away from the local council site to ensure participants' privacy from other council members if they did not wish others to know of their participation.

Ensuring the identity of the councils and regions remains confidential was a key mechanism for reducing this risk. The nature of qualitative research means the identity of participants is not anonymous to the researcher. Participants were offered protection through specific measures taken to protect their identity. All potential identifying characteristics were removed or framed in a way to conceal identity in the final report, including names, location, and size of the councils. Measures to ensure their confidentiality such as the use of pseudonyms, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage during the interview and prior to transcription of data. Participants were provided with the opportunity to check and edit their transcripts. Project data is being securely stored for a minimum of six years following examination of this thesis to allow for further publications to be completed, before being

destroyed. The data gathered from this research will not be used for any purposes other than the research and subsequent publications. Data was stored on a password-protected laptop or in a locked filing cabinet, with the researcher being the only person with access to the data.

### 5.18 Beneficence

Beneficence refers to research providing benefits to the participants, including broader society (Hardwick & Worsley, 2011; Massey University, 2017). This research had the potential to be of benefit to participants as it provided them with an opportunity to reflect on a specific aspect of their practice; several of the participants commented on this at the conclusion of their research interview. The research aims to produce new knowledge, to inform, and further improve youth council operations.

### 5.19 Justice

The principle of justice ensures that the research is fair and just, and there is an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens (Hardwick & Worsley, 2011). This principle requires fair access to participate in the research. This was achieved through having clear participation criteria and adopting a first-come approach to participation (where participation criteria were met). This reduced any biases in participant selection and ensured equitable distribution of benefits and risks of the research.

### 5.20 Te Tiriti o Waitangi articles and Research Obligations

Academic research in Aotearoa New Zealand is shaped by obligations arising from both Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Māori text) and the Treaty of Waitangi (the English text). Contemporary interpretation recognises the significant differences between the two texts and

understands Treaty obligations through both versions and the principles derived from them (Waitangi Tribunal, 2014). Te Tiriti is directly relevant to this study because youth participation in local government sits within the Crown's sphere of kāwanatanga (governance). Article 1 responsibilities must be read alongside the Article 2 guarantee of tino rangatiratanga, which affirms the authority and self-determination of Māori communities, including rangatahi. Article 3 further requires the Crown to uphold ōritetanga, ensuring equitable rights and outcomes for Māori within civic spaces. Current public sector guidance, such as the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's Te Tiriti principles (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, n.d.), reinforces these obligations by outlining how kāwanatanga, tino rangatiratanga, and ōritetanga should guide policy and practice. Honouring Te Tiriti therefore requires creating conditions in which rangatahi can exercise meaningful voice and agency within governance structures. These sources collectively establish the expectation that research involving Māori youth participation must be grounded in commitments to authority, partnership, and equity.

These national obligations are mirrored in institutional ethical frameworks. Massey University's Code of Ethical Conduct (2017) reflects the Crown's Treaty principles and requires researchers to ensure that Māori perspectives are treated with integrity, that tikanga and cultural safety guide the research process, and that analysis attends to equity and representation. While this study is not Māori-led and does not claim to be Kaupapa Māori research, it is conducted within Aotearoa NZ's Te Tiriti o Waitangi context. Accordingly, the research is guided by the Crown's Treaty principles and institutional ethical obligations, rather than the fuller obligations associated with Māori-led or co-designed research. The study therefore upholds tikanga and cultural safety, attends to equity and representation, and treats Māori youth perspectives with integrity, while recognising that tino rangatiratanga is expressed through respectful engagement rather than Māori governance of the project. This approach

aligns with public sector and university practice, which draws on both the Māori text articles and the Crown-developed principles (Royal Commission on Social Policy, 1988; Te Puni Kōkiri, 2001).

The principles of partnership, participation, and protection, first articulated by the Royal Commission on Social Policy (1988), remain central to Crown agencies and ethics committees (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2001). These principles informed the study's ethical approach. Partnership guided relational engagement with youth councillors and the recognition of their lived experiences. Participation shaped accessible, youth-centred interview processes that enabled diverse rangatahi to contribute meaningfully. Protection informed decisions around confidentiality, cultural safety, and the safeguarding of participants' narratives (Cram, 2001).

Tikanga-aligned practice was embedded throughout the study. Manaakitanga (care and respect) was upheld by allowing participants to choose interview locations where they felt comfortable, and rangatiratanga (autonomy) Waitangi Tribunal, 2014) was supported through flexible, participant-led questioning. The Article 2 guarantee of tino rangatiratanga further required that Māori youth voices be treated with authority and respect, shaping the relational and adaptable interview approach. These obligations informed both the ethical foundations and the analytical orientation of the study. The analysis examined how youth councillors sought to engage diverse communities and amplify underrepresented voices, fostering meaningful relationships with local youth (see Chapter Seven). Inclusive practices were particularly evident in councils where youth councillors strengthened connections with Māori youth and promoted culturally responsive engagement. Exploring this practice reflects the researcher's commitment to tino rangatiratanga and ōritetanga, as well as to the Crown's principles of partnership, participation, and protection. Overall, the research upholds Te Tiriti o Waitangi by recognising youth as legitimate civic actors and by adopting a methodology that is relational,

equity-focused, and attentive to the rights and responsibilities embedded in both the Māori text and the Crown's interpretive framework (Cram, 2001; Waitangi Tribunal, 2014).

### 5.21 Professional Standards

Ethical considerations in this study were deeply informed by my professional values and standards as a registered social worker. The principles outlined in the Aotearoa NZ New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) Code of Ethics (2021) provided a critical foundation, emphasising respect for human dignity, social justice, and the protection of vulnerable populations. Alongside this, the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) Code of Conduct guided my practice by reinforcing accountability, integrity, and the importance of maintaining professional boundaries. Together, these frameworks shaped my approach to participant engagement, ensuring that issues of consent, confidentiality, and power dynamics were navigated with care. They also reinforced my commitment to amplifying youth voices in ways that were inclusive, equitable, and aligned with both professional standards and international obligations under the CRC.

### 5.22 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how interpretivism and social constructionism shaped the study's focus and informed its paradigmatic orientation to researching youth civic participation in local government. It outlined the qualitative methods employed, including strategies for participant sampling, selection, recruitment, and data collection. The chapter then introduced the conceptual framework and described the deductive analytical approach guiding the analysis.

Drawing on both deductive and abductive reasoning, the chapter demonstrated how the chosen paradigm supported a rich, contextual, and nuanced account of inclusionary and exclusionary practices within youth councils, as constructed through participants' experiences and perspectives. Building on this methodological foundation, the following chapter presents the first set of research findings, illuminating how young participants constructed and navigated inclusionary and exclusionary practices within youth councils.

# Chapter Six

## Youth Voice and Agency in Policymaking: Roles and Outcomes

This chapter presents the first set of findings in relation to the first research question: What is the substantive role and impact of youth councillors in local government policymaking, and what are the determinant factors? To explore the research question, the researcher analysed each youth council's orientation to youth participation using four conceptual frames adapted from Augsberger et al. (2018a) (Figure 2, Chapter Four): policy-process, youth development, symbolic tokenism, and social justice. This chapter focuses of the first three frames, while the social justice frame is applied to the findings in Chapter Seven. The analysis also draws on the three conceptual positions of the youth citizen outlined in Section 5.10, using these positions to interpret how officials and institutional programmes positioned youth councillors within governance processes.

Across sites, youth councils varied in their prioritisation of policy engagement, resulting in uneven opportunities for youth councillors to contribute to meaningful change. Participant accounts reveal both inclusionary and exclusionary practices. Access to policy processes and tangible outcomes was shaped by each council's orientation to youth participation, an orientation embedded in institutional mechanisms, officials' constructions of youth citizenship, and communicative practices. Youth expectations of their council experience are described to show how these aligned, or diverged, from the realities of practice. The opening section of the chapter examines authentic practices aligned with the policy-process frame, particularly evident in Youth Councils Ruru and Tūī. This is followed by an analysis of practices in Youth Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko, which reflect alignment with the youth development and symbolic tokenism frames.

## 6.1 Policy Process Frame

This section examines youth councillors' engagement in policy-focused activity, exploring participation through their expectations and participatory experiences. The results refer to practice evident in Youth Councils Ruru and Tūī. The analysis focuses on the interconnected concepts of youth voice, autonomy, and agency, exploring how these dimensions manifest within council contexts, and influence participatory outcomes. It examines the conditions under which youth councillors were empowered to express their perspectives, make decisions, and enact change. The discussion incorporates several key elements:

- Institutional mechanisms and processes that enabled policy-focused activity.
- Quality of relations between youth councillors and officials, particularly mutual respect and trust.
- Accountable and effective communicative practices, including feedback and transparency.
- Opportunities for youth voice and agency in shaping positive outcomes for local youth.
- Perspectives and actions of officials who actively facilitated these outcomes.
- Alignment (or divergence) between youth councillors' expectations and practice realities.

These dynamics were particularly evident in youth councillors' engagement with verbal and written submissions, where institutional mechanisms, effective communicative practices, support from officials, and youth expectations intersect to shape their influence in policy processes. It is within these formalised spaces that youth councillors most visibly assert their agency, navigating procedural frameworks to articulate priorities and claim space within governance processes.

## 6.2 Verbal and Written Submissions

In Youth Councils Ruru and Tūī, established formal mechanisms supported youth councillors' engagement in policy-focused activity. Data from interviews and council documents revealed that youth councillors were actively engaged in completing written policy submissions on local council policy and strategy as routine practice. This included having input into the annual and long-term plans (LTP) and representation reviews, with additional input, although to a lesser extent, into regional and national policy. The act of forwarding submissions functioned as an institutional mechanism that required youth councillors to collectively deliberate as a group, on the social and civic priorities of local youth. Aside from written submissions, youth councillors also participated in verbal discussions with elected and non-elected council officials about other matters on the council agenda, including local planning initiatives.

Importantly, all five youth councillors in Ruru and Tūī regarded the submission process as both an institutional mechanism for accessing and engaging with formal policy structures, and a meaningful opportunity to articulate collective youth priorities and influence decision-making. The process involved deliberation and shared decision-making among councillors and was viewed as a conduit for expressing youth voice and exercising agency in shaping local policy. This was explained by Eve:

> As a youth council, we submit each year to the council annual plan with anything we have noticed in terms of our consultation or as a youth council. We will do a presentation to council, a written submission, and an oral submission usually. In the past, the annual plan submission [was] anything from streetlights, water fountains. We will prepare for that for quite a while. Council will use that to influence their decisions. So that is a direct link of how we influence decision-making. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

> So, at every formal we meeting we actually have a whole section in the agenda about policy updates. So, we hear about all the by-laws and things council are currently seeking consultation on. Then we put in the youth view. Also, at our presentations to council we can speak to them about what we think about a certain thing that they are discussing. (Rachel, youth, Ruru)

The prioritisation of this consultative model by the councils was evident in the explicit expectations placed on youth councillors to provide a youth perspective through written submissions on formal plans, policy, and strategy on the council agenda. Completing submissions was a mandatory task required of youth councillors and was prescribed by officials. This expectation to complete submissions was evident in written website material detailing the role and tasks, of youth councillors. For example, website statements of Youth Councils Ruru and Tūī signalled that the role of youth is to "advocate for local youth on issues and implement changes on behalf of young people in the community… canvas[ing] the views of local youth and provid[ing] this information to officials". Importantly, youth councillors retained the autonomy to determine which policy issues they considered relevant to complete submissions on.

In addition, the task of completing policy submissions was actively supported and reinforced by officials in Youth Councils Ruru and Tūī. For example, in Ruru, George, an official responsible for coordinating strategic policy advice, had regular contact with youth council, ensuring submissions were aligned with council priorities. Likewise, officials were in regular attendance at youth council meetings, assisting when required with the submission process. In Ruru, the "consultation working party" was established as a youth council sub-

committee for the purpose of identifying matters of council policy and strategy requiring a written submission and response from youth council, as Josh explains:

> One of the youth council's working parties is the 'consultation working party', youth councillors keeping an eye out [for] all the policies and strategies that council is consulting on with the public, and if there is anything relevant there, they are submitting on it. (Josh, adult, Ruru)

Overall, the submission process operated as a formalised avenue through which youth councillors could exercise collective agency, ensuring that youth perspectives were embedded within local policy deliberations. Yet, while these mechanisms provided structure and legitimacy, the effectiveness of youth engagement was significantly shaped by the role of adults, whose scaffolding and guidance influenced how youth councillors navigated and contributed to policy processes.

### 6.3 Strengthening Policy-focused Activity: The Role of Officials

This section offers insights into how adults can strengthen youth participatory rights, drawing on the research results. The analysis draws on the conceptual positions of youth citizenship outlined in Section 5.10, focusing here on two positions most relevant to policy-focused activity: "youth as participatory rights-holders" and "youth as providers of a youth perspective." These positions were used to interpret how officials positioned youth councillors within governance processes.

Key officials in Youth Councils Ruru and Tūī held youth-centred perspectives that positioned youth councillors as valued, competent civic actors and participatory rights-holders.

These perspectives informed actions to strengthen youth councillors' roles and influence in policy-focused activity. For example, an elected city councillor (Josh) played a significant role in encouraging and coaching youth councillors. He offered mentorship and encouragement to develop their competency in preparing written submissions, including supporting their ability to craft and present persuasive arguments. Josh described one such scaffolding approach as follows:

> I made a point of saying to youth council, you know what, that is the type of submission we need to be hearing because in my view, it was just such a good argument. The growth in the calibre of their submissions in the last year and a half has been massive. (Josh, adult, Ruru)

Furthermore, Josh actively recognised the quality of youth councillors' submissions, affirming the legitimacy of their contributions to formal policy processes. One example was their submission on a representation review, a statutory requirement under local government legislation, which mandates councils to review their representation arrangements at least once every six years. Such reviews address matters including the structure of the elected council, the number of elected members, and the voting system in use (e.g., district-wide elections or ward-based systems). Josh's recognition and encouragement were evident in several instances, including:

> And [the youth councillors' submission] wasn't provided by anyone else, it was provided by them. What I am saying, is that no one put forward that particular case. They came up with it. And that is the value. None of them were 18 at that point. They were all below voting age and they put that together and had that ability to think about how democracy can be maximised, essentially. It exemplified why we should stay with the status quo in a sense and it was put much more succinctly and convincingly than

> many of the other submissions for and against wards and district wide elections. (Josh, adult, Ruru)
>
> We're there to provide input when required but if I am honest, the NCEA review, which is one of the best submissions I have ever seen the youth committee put together, for central government, they did that without any input from us whatsoever. (Josh, adult, Ruru)

Moreover, Josh demonstrated a determined effort to raise the profile and influence of youth council within the wider council and the community. His actions were a critical element in strengthening the role and influence of youth councillors in governance.

> Over the last few years our committee has gone from being perceived as a hassle or a nuisance [to] being valuable in the development of policies. I think a lot of it is the structural changes and the input they have had. One of the comments that the Mayor made regarding the youth committee review working party. When we debated this, one of the comments the mayor made was he recalled a time, between five and eight years ago, when the youth committee was given some money from the Ministry of Youth Development to consult on a youth issue. I don't know what that issue was but they were asked to consult in the community. He said that he got absolutely infuriated by the fact that they choose to, back then, hold a sausage sizzle at a local Four-Square and have a few conversations with the people as they were giving out a free sausage. So, I guess what we are doing now is so much more meaningful and robust than it was back then and that's where the frustration came from. That the role was not being fulfilled in the way the council wanted it to be. (Josh, adult, Ruru)

Likewise, Josh made deliberate efforts to strengthen youth integration into decision-making processes. He was exploring ways to involve youth councillors in the creation of policy, rather

than limiting their participation to submissions on policies already scheduled for public consultation. This reflects a key official actively advancing youth participatory rights through incremental changes to existing policy mechanisms. As Josh explained:

> [He wished] for the youth committee (youth council) to actually participate in the development of the policies before they go out for consultation. So, making sure the officers are actually approaching the committee, 'hey can we organise a workshop to get your feedback on what we have got so far.' The idea behind including policies and strategies that have not yet gone out for public feedback is that the committee can actually provide input into the development of those policies and strategies before they go out. So, it enables the committee to be far more proactive, … in actually developing the policy. (Josh, adult, Ruru)

In a further example that illustrates the role of adults, a submission by Youth Council Tūī to the regional council authority on transport issues received a written letter of support by the mayor. Endorsement by this senior official signalled institutional commitment to support the goals and aspirations of youth council, while recognising their contribution as valuable.

The above examples illustrate how officials' ways of thinking about youth participation, the role of youth councillors, and the function of youth councils contributed to specific actions aimed at strengthening young people's access to policymaking processes. For instance, Josh's actions reflect an official who perceives youth as "participatory rights-holders." However, adult perspectives are complex and diverse in relation to how they view the role of the youth citizen. For example, comments from Sue, an official from Kiwi implied that the primary purpose of youth submissions was to meet the information and consultative requirements of local government, gathering youth perspectives to inform pre-existing official agendas. This adult-informed framing was echoed by George, an official from Ruru:

> Going back to what I do, I am feeding them the information, giving them encouragement to provide us the youth perspective. From our point of view, that is what they mean to us, providing feedback and information for the youth perspective on a certain topic. (George, adult, Ruru)

Institutional intentions for youth participation and the role of youth councillors, as embedded in council documents, also reflected an adult-informed agenda. For example, one directive from Council Pūkeko, evident in website content, identified the role of youth councillors: "canvas the views of local youth and provide this information to officials." This signals a model of youth participation as consultation, where youth are positioned primarily as informants rather than co-architects of policy. This framing highlights the tension between competing priorities: the institutional imperative to elicit youth perspectives as input for more informed policymaking, and the equally vital recognition of young people's participatory rights, their entitlement to voice, agency, and meaningful influence over policy outcomes. This tension reflects broader questions about whose interests are served, and how youth participation is conceptualised and enacted within local governance structures. While policy submissions were pivotal in granting youth councillors access to decision-making, the subsequent section demonstrates that the consultation process underpinning the establishment of a local youth development centre epitomised the power of youth voice and yielded positive outcomes for local youth.

### 6.4 The Youth Development Centre

A significant result to emerge from this study is that policy submissions played a pivotal role in giving youth councillors access to decision-making, while the consultation process underpinning the establishment of a local youth development centre epitomised the power of

youth voice and yielded positive outcomes for local youth. This demonstrates how such outcomes can be achieved through effective community engagement, representation, equitable youth–adult partnerships, and a responsive institutional system. It further exemplifies how advocacy can translate into tangible results.

The conception of the youth centre originated from concerns about youth mental wellbeing, identified through a 2010 community youth survey conducted collaboratively by the youth council and the wider council. The formal process toward the centre's establishment began with a submission by the youth council to the council's 2015–2035 Long-Term Plan [LTP], which was subsequently endorsed through public consultation. This iterative process, spanning multiple youth council terms, reflected deepening collaboration and equitable youth–adult partnerships, between youth councillors, officials, and external stakeholders. Following the consultation process, youth councillors joined an advisory group of key stakeholders tasked with leading the design and development of the youth centre. Their inclusion on this planning committee signalled an institutional commitment to recognising youth as legitimate partners in governance. An external organisation, Real, was contracted by the council to operate the centre, with the aim of providing young people aged 13 to 18 a space for creative expression, through music performance and other arts-based initiatives, as well as a safe, social environment after school. The youth council remained actively involved throughout the entire process, from identifying the need for a youth centre in response to community feedback, to participating in planning and decision-making. Youth councillors described their involvement as emblematic of "the power of youth" (Eve, youth, Tūī).

The legitimacy of youth voice was reflected in this process, which demonstrated youth councillors' capacity to represent and advocate for local youth. Through ongoing community engagement, they effectively canvassed youth voices, identified key priorities, and advanced

these within institutional planning processes. It also fostered enduring relations between officials and youth councillors, based on trust and mutual respect. Their advocacy culminated in the establishment of a youth development centre, achieved through equitable youth–adult partnerships and sustained policy engagement. The centre stands as a concrete achievement of youth councillors' representative role, demonstrating how advocacy grounded in local priorities can reshape institutional responses.

The establishment of the multi-purpose youth development centre exemplifies what can be achieved through equitable structures and shared institutional power, where youth are afforded meaningful roles. Through this process, youth councillors were empowered to secure collective gains for their peers. These activities provided youth councillors with meaningful roles, fostering a sense of purpose, and belonging within the wider council. This, in turn, contributed to the development of trust between youth councillors and officials, a critical element of positive social capital. Such practices signalled a positioning of youth as competent civic actors, reflecting institutional confidence in their capabilities and affirming their agency. These dynamics were underpinned by effective communicative practices, which are explored in the following section.

## 6.5 Effective Communicative Practices

In Youth Councils Tūī and Ruru, positive relationships with officials were evident where youth councillors had stronger access to policymaking processes through completing presentations to the wider council and written submissions. These outcomes were closely tied to effective communicative practices, including feedback, transparency, and accountability, which fostered relationships characterised by support, mutual respect, and trust. Regular attendance by officials at youth council meetings created spaces in which youth councillors felt

heard, valued, and included. The opportunity to complete written submissions, which was reported by all five youth councillors in Ruru and Tūī, reinforced this sense of responsiveness, signalling that youth concerns were acknowledged and acted upon. For youth to fully experience voice, the results revealed that it must be accompanied by resonance: a clear signal that their views are heard, actively considered, and meaningfully recognised. This point was echoed by Sally (youth, Tūī):

> You want to be heard; you want to have a conversation. You don't want to be pushed aside. Or just have the general 'hi how is your day going'—you don't want to have that conversation with someone in Council. I think it's important to have a deeper conversation with a young person and a councillor per se. People who are prepared to actively listen and act on it—you should be open to it, rather than shutting it down. Like young people stand up, present their ideas and it is just a presentation. It does not go any further. We have that strong connection in people who are going 'these guys' ideas are valuable, let's listen to that, how can we potentially use that?' (Sally, youth, Tūī)

Comments by youth councillors further highlighted the significance of institutional support, as Eve (Tūī), Sally (Tūī), and Tom (Ruru) explained:

> For us, our experience with council so far has been amazing. They are always really supportive and love to hear our ideas, which is really cool. They make a strong effort to connect with us. We have two councillors who come to our full youth council meetings and update us on what's happening. They turn up when they can—which is pretty much all the time. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

> There is often good support because we actually have a specific person from the policy team who is assigned to the Youth Committee. He doesn't sit on the committee like Andy does, but he provides regular updates and emails us when there is an important submission. He often offers to meet up and help with the submissions, which is really nice. (Tom, youth, Ruru)

> They are fantastic and have totally gone above and beyond. We have our formal full council meetings once a month and project meetings every other week. Always feeding in what council is doing, and anything that might be specifically applicable to us. (Sally, youth, Tūī)

Beyond communicative practices, youth councillors in Tūī were integrated into the wider council through appointments to sub-committees such as the Creative Council Committee and Connected Communities. This contributed to a sense of institutional inclusion and belonging.

> The Creative Communities is an advisory group for council. It is like a subgroup of the actual council. There is one youth council representative who sits on there and helps. They give out grants related to creative arts and music. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

> Connected Communities will help youth council internally to identify how groups within council or community can partner with us. They are a group in council. They focus on community engagement. From the Foodbank to the community centre. They advise how we can connect with these organisations to strengthen and use resources. People who have vast amounts of knowledge about a subject to help their project. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

### 6.6 Youth Inclusion on External Boards

Youth councillors from Pūkeko, Ruru and Tūī reported that youth were included on external boards in an advisory capacity, extending opportunities for youth voice beyond the council chamber.

> We have youth on multiple advisory boards around the coast. I am on the CWB-the cycle, walkways, bridleways. (Sally, youth, Tūī)

> Youth Committee is also trying to focus on having youth appointments to different community organisations, we have youth councils appointed to the YMCA board, we have youth councillors appointed to the Rural Community Board, we have youth councillors appointed to Square revitalisation project. We also have youth councillors appointed to the welcoming community's project which focuses on welcoming newcomers to the region. It allows all of those different groups to have a youth voice within them. (Rachel, youth, Ruru)

These roles provided structured avenues for consultation, allowing young people to contribute perspectives on issues such health services, as arts and recreation. However, while advisory positions created formal opportunities for youth input, they did not necessarily make clear how this input influenced final decisions or policy outcomes. The extent to which this membership provided collective gains for local youth is unclear. As a result, youth participation risked being confined to symbolic consultation, with limited transparency about the extent to which youth perspectives shaped governance. This reflects a broader limitation of consultative mechanisms: although they enable voice, they often obscure impact, leaving young people uncertain about whether their contributions materially affect institutional priorities. In contrast, councils such as Tūī demonstrated how mechanisms like youth summits and policy submissions could move beyond advisory functions, embedding youth perspectives more

visibly in decision-making and strengthening the legitimacy of youth voice (see Chapter Seven, 7.3).

In summary, Councils Ruru and Tūī employed structured consultation mechanisms and scaffolding from adult allies, affording youth a more equitable role in urban planning. A thread underpinning these positive experiences is that youth councillors were positioned as capable civic actors by officials and were able to exercise civic and political agency to achieve collective gains for youth.

Notwithstanding the benefits of the submission process in enabling youth voice and agency in policymaking, notable gaps remain, signalling the need to further develop youth roles in policymaking. For instance, across all four youth councils there was no evidence of youth being routinely integrated into collaborative processes with professional planners, nor of youth councillors engaging in sustained project work with the broader youth community. Nevertheless, an important finding is that youth councillors in Ruru and Tūī were able to advocate on a range of youth-relevant issues through the policy submission process, supported by officials and a council system responsive to youth councils and youth priorities.

## 6.7 Youth Development Frame

This section reflects the conceptual position of "youth as developing citizens," where participation is framed primarily as a pathway for personal growth, skill development, and civic socialisation rather than as a mechanism for structural influence (see Section 5.10). Across all youth councils, youth development objectives shaped initiatives that promoted leadership, skill development, and celebrated youth achievement. Belinda gave an indication of a leadership focus: "We have a leadership event and camp. Then they will have different leadership speakers

coming in to talk to them". (Belinda, Kiwi). Similarly, Cherie noted "I think being part of the youth council is leadership. I think a lot of us know what leadership is. We did a whole week of leadership stuff". (Cherie, Kiwi). Kim provided an example of the role of youth council in celebrating youth achievement: "The Youth Potential awards: we give awards to the kids, something that motivates them. We will hold this event; we will just celebrate them". (Kim, youth, Pūkeko)

In Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko, youth participation was largely restricted to a youth development approach, evident in the strong emphasis on youth development activities. This approach was formally embedded in Council Kiwi's Youth Strategy document, which explicitly referenced and was shaped by the Aotearoa NZ Youth Development Strategy, 2002 (MYA, 2002). Notably, this national framework adopts a youth development rather than a rights-based approach to participation, reinforcing the orientation observed in this site. The strategy prioritises personal growth and leadership over structural influence. This orientation was evident in the recent appointment of the owner/operator of a local private music studio as the adult coordinator for Kiwi Youth Council. It was further reflected in the council's decision to contract Real (pseudonym) Education Trust, a youth service provider, to manage operations, as Sue explained:

> We (the council) do not provide youth services. Real [Education Trust] are our main contract holder for youth services. So, their main contract is to facilitate youth council meetings and recruit the team. Also, to deliver three events around, leadership, youth week, and one thing of their choice-one other event. Or if there are any opportunities for them to get involved in our work, or we might come up with something additional and get some funding for them to deliver it. Run a

> planning session or a getaway at the beginning of the year, and a celebration at the end of the year. (Sue, adult, Kiwi)

The three events mentioned by Sue refer to a contract between the council and Real Education Trust to deliver three annual events in collaboration with the youth council. These include one focused on leadership, another on Youth Week, and a third chosen by the youth council. Examples have included paint and colour runs, and the Amazing Race, which incorporated an accessibility component for young people with disabilities. The planning and delivery of these events provided youth councillors with valuable experience and skill development in event management, leadership, communication, and coordination with adults. They also supported broader socialisation goals by offering fun and inclusive opportunities for children and youth, fostering recreation, connection, and belonging, as Cherie, Zac and Kim explained:

> I can't imagine how many events I have put on. Paint parties, suicide prevention, LGBT, just honestly so many I have lost count, and I have really enjoyed. (Cherie, youth, Kiwi)

> We have a cultural "divercity" day every year. Last year I helped with music and sound. This year some of us helped with running the bouncy castles. They have different food stalls and different performances from different culture; and they open in up with a Māori person, a South African, a European person. Just celebrating all the different cultures. (Zac, youth, Kiwi)

> Yes, stepping up to do a speech, having to have that trust of everyone. For me, this year it has given me a lot of leadership opportunities. I have definitely grown a lot in confidence and leadership. Giving other people opportunities as well, speaking. Giving

> presentations, doing something new, being able to share that role out. (Kim, youth, Pūkeko)

The Real Education Trust operates in five regions in Aotearoa NZ and was contracted to provide youth services in Councils Kiwi, Pūkeko, and Tūī. The organisation offers a range of skill development and creative arts programmes for youth, including live sound engineering, recording and beat production, photography, dance, barista training, event management, music, song-writing, and fitness. The programme aims to provide a safe and accessible space where youth can gain a sense of belonging and purpose while engaging in creative pursuits. In Kiwi, the council's contract with Real to deliver youth services and facilitate the youth council signalled an institutional prioritisation of youth development.

Real's focus in the Kiwi and Pūkeko council regions was on creative arts and music. Sam, the manager of the local Real programme in Kiwi, described initiatives with a particular emphasis on hip-hop dance performance.

> We have used dance quite heavily because a lot of young people are really into it, there is such a demand for it. So, we do all sorts, we will do classes, competition teams, performance teams. We sit with young people who are interested in events and say we have money where we can run an event that we engage young people, what shall we do? They start dreaming and planning, literally it is an event management course. So, we break it down, we have decided on an event, what is the goal of the event? How do we measure that it was successful? Ticking all these boxes. How will we promote it? We are running events all the time. We will engage young people through skating, scooters, BMX, and they will do big events, competitions, something really interactive.

> At the skate park, basketball. I really want to push for wider creative arts- photography, art, design. (Sam, youth, Kiwi)

The organisation also ran an internship for interested youth, as Sam explains:

> Real offers two types of internships. One involves interns studying a certificate or diploma in youth development. The other provides youth with opportunities to engage in the programme and assist in teaching activities, such as dance or event management. The internship that I implement is for anyone interested in dance, and the whole purpose is to give them the skills and confidence needed to then become employed as a tutor or assistant tutor within the programmes that we run. Usually, every six months, if we have space for more, we will ask if anyone is interested in an internship." (Sam, youth, Kiwi)

Furthermore, the organisation had a role in relational building and informal, yet important emotional support as Sam explained:

> We have lots and lots of young people we work with each week. It is important that there is a place that they come, feel valued, that builds their confidence in other areas of their lives. We create an atmosphere that is going to build them up. So that is even in our responses to them, and the way they interact with each other. During the year [of the young person's] journey, they feel supported, …enough that they feel they can come to me and tell this has been happening in my life, where they feel they can voice something. [They develop] self-confidence [and a sense that] they have value. [We] teach them that in different environments they will not always get the same response. Here, this is how we react to you because we actually see value in you. (Sam, youth, Kiwi)

Real had a close connection with youth councils Kiwi and Pūkeko. Youth councillors in Kiwi spoke of the positive relationships with Real, commented that are more youth-focused than the council as Cherie explained:

> Yeah, they are youth focused. Their focus is on making NZ better for youth. When we say something, give them our ideas, we know it is going to happen. They are not like the Council, think about it for a while, then forget. They will involve us; make it happen. Real is involved with everything. They got us to work at the Careers Expo. They involve us as much as they can. (Cherie, youth, Kiwi)

A youth development focus was also evident in Council Tūī, where Real was contracted to provide services in the youth development centre, described earlier. The centre's programmes, ranging from barista training to music and sound engineering, illustrate the council's emphasis on youth development, consistent with the wider pattern across all four councils. However, unlike Kiwi and Pūkeko, Tūī also placed a strong emphasis on civic engagement.

The defining characteristic of a youth development approach is that benefits primarily accrue to the personal development of individual youth councillors, rather than contributing to broader civic outcomes for local youth (Collin, 2015; White et al., 2017). Participation in event management provided councillors with opportunities to build leadership, organisational, decision-making, and communication skills, fostered through collaboration with adults and community organisations. While youth development approaches largely resulted in individual gains, the findings revealed that when these opportunities involved acts of reciprocity with the wider youth community, collective benefits could emerge. For example, Sally (Youth Council, Tūī) described how a leadership opportunity had a meaningful impact on her own life while also benefiting others. Within the youth development centre, where the council contracted Real to deliver youth services and programmes, Sally played an active role in running the musicians'

lounge. Through this involvement, she developed mentoring and leadership skills by supporting other young people to build music abilities and pursue their aspirations.

> Yes, I have received heaps of mentoring and support through Real. In college, I was involved, but probably not as involved as I would like to have been. I was chosen to do a few leadership courses and stuff. Since I've been going to the centre, I've figured out what I want to do in the future and how I want to get there. I feel like I belong there. I am just going to keep on working. I do want to the praxis internship and become an intern at Real, then follow along that path and see where it takes me, as a youth worker. (Sally, youth, Tūī)

Sally's experience underscores that youth development–oriented participation is most meaningful when situated within young people's broader life trajectories, expectations, or aspirations. More broadly, the findings suggest that collective benefits can also emerge when such opportunities are grounded in reciprocity with the wider youth community. Overall, youth development initiatives across the four councils highlight the cultural and social value of youth development, strengthening identity, belonging, and wellbeing. While such gains are significant, they may also divert attention from youth political agency and representation. This was particularly evident in Councils Pūkeko and Kiwi, where a youth development framework dominated, as the next section illustrates.

### 6.8 Symbolic Tokenism

This section examines the participatory experiences of youth councillors in Youth Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko, focusing on their engagement in policy-oriented processes and outcomes. As outlined in Section 4.2, Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation provides a

conceptual lens for analysing the quality and depth of youth councillors' involvement. While the findings in this chapter are not organised by the ladder's rungs, the framework informs the interpretation of the data, particularly in identifying forms of non-participation such as tokenism, decoration, and limited decision-making power. The themes that follow therefore represent grounded expressions of the lower rungs of Hart's model. The analysis also draws on two of the conceptual positions of youth citizenship outlined in Section 5.10: "youth as participatory rights holders" and "youth as providers of a youth perspective." These positions illuminate how institutional practices shaped the extent to which youth councillors were able to exercise agency, influence policy, and contribute meaningfully to governance processes.

The findings reveal exclusionary practices and a disconnect between youth councillors, council officials, and the broader youth community, indicating that much of their engagement reflected symbolic tokenism. These dynamics were examined through participants' expectations and lived experiences, with particular attention to youth voice, autonomy, and agency. To illuminate these dynamics, the findings are organised around the following themes:

- Absence of institutional mechanisms and processes enabling meaningful policy engagement.
- Narrow scope of involvement in policy issues.
- Quality of relations between youth councillors and officials, particularly mutual respect and trust.
- Communicative practices, including feedback loops and transparency.
- Misalignment between institutional intentions for youth participation, and practice realities.
- Misalignment between youth councillors' expectations and the realities of practice.

The following section shows that limitations were most evident in the narrow scope of policy engagement afforded to youth councillors, where institutional priorities shaped not only what was possible, but what was permissible. A disjuncture emerged between youth councillor's aspirations for participation and the realities of practice. Council Kiwi's youth development orientation, embedded in its Youth Strategy document, and shaped by the Aotearoa NZ Youth Development Strategy (2002) (MYA, 2002), aligned with the practice observed in Youth Councils Kiwi and Tūī, reinforcing youth councillors' limited policy influence.

### 6.9 A Narrow Scope of Engagement

The ability of youth councillors in Youth Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko to exercise youth voice and agency in policymaking was constrained by a limited scope of activity, which was reflected in the institutional prioritisation of a youth development approach. The exclusion from policy engagement reported by multiple youth councillors in Kiwi coincided with a dominant focus on youth development framework. Youth councillors spent considerable time working with Real in relation to the planning and convening of three annual events, described earlier, leaving little time for policy engagement. Both youth and adult participants in Kiwi and Pūkeko commented on this unrealistic role demand, particularly in their ability to engage with, and represent the wider youth community. This role-demand and time constraint issue is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

While youth councillors acknowledged and valued the individual gains from experience in planning and delivering community events, this narrow focus did not align with the priorities and expectations of many who sought a more substantive role in local government policymaking and civic affairs. Gaps between youth councillors' aspirations and expectations, and their actual roles, tasks, and opportunities often diverged from the reality of practice.

Overall, their involvement in policy-focused activity was minimal. Crucially, these exclusionary processes constrained the expression of youth voice, both that of youth councillors and of the wider youth community. For many, the desire to amplify the voices of their peers was a key motivation for joining the council, as Belinda explains:

> I think most things are important to have a youth perspective on, because we make up a big section of the population. None of us can vote, so we are not going to have a say. So, I assumed the youth council was established to give all of those under 18 a voice. (Belinda, youth, Kiwi)

When asked about input into policy and decision-making, Cherie responded "Yes, but there hasn't been a lot of it-they will have something, a job, and they want a youth councillor to do it-once a year. They don't give us much to do". (Cherie, youth, Kiwi)

Lacking institutional power, youth councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko had minimal autonomy over agenda-setting. Their input into council initiatives was typically contingent on invitations from officials, with consultation narrowly confined to youth-related issues as defined by those officials. The narrowing of policy domains in which youth councillors were consulted, restricted to youth-relevant areas, reflected institutional intentions for youth engagement. These intentions were formalised in governing documents that outlined the role of youth councillors. For example, documents from Youth Council Kiwi stated that youth councillors were expected to "give advice on planning and infrastructure, particularly relating to any direct impact on young people". Youth councillors were involved in discussions on topics such as the development of a family-friendly community park and the re-development of local swimming pools. These issues were framed within a youth development paradigm, rather than situated within broader civic policymaking.

This prioritisation of a youth development approach, coupled with their marginal role in policy-focused activity, contributed to a sense of powerlessness and frustration among many youth councillors, who lacked the institutional leverage to challenge the status quo. As Belinda explains:

> We haven't had any influence on actual policy change within the district. Which is disappointing because that is why I joined the Youth Council-that is how it was portrayed. I thought this sounds cool, because I am really interested in politics. Then I found out that we just make events. I am not trying to sound ungrateful because it has been a great leadership opportunity running the events, and it has done a lot for my confidence. I feel I would have probably preferred if we could have engaged with the council more, make policy changes and do good stuff for the community. I have been here for three years, and it has been the same-at the end of the year, they will say it will get better next year; we promise we will engage with the council more, but you don't. I really hope it can change. It would be good if that could change. It would be so good to see us represented. (Belinda, youth, Kiwi)

Due to limited institutional power to challenge the status quo, youth councillors were constrained in their ability to engage with issues of genuine significance to them. Many expressed interested in a broad range of local concerns, including water and transport infrastructure, climate change, and youth mental health, yet their formal involvement in these areas remained minimal. In Youth Council Pūkeko, one councillor was given the opportunity to speak publicly during the Prime Minister's (Jacinda Ardern) announcement of the government's youth mental health strategy. However, this instance could be interpreted as 'participation as decoration' (Hart, 1992, see Chapter Four), rather than a meaningful opportunity to influence youth mental health policy or programming.

Notably, several youth councillors participated in civic activities as individuals, independent of their youth council roles. For example, during the data collection phase of this research, Belinda was interviewed by regional and national media (including a segment on prime-time six o'clock television news) about her research and activism aimed at reducing the health impacts of vaping on local youth. This initiative originated from a school social studies project. Youth councillors' broader civic interests and individual activism contrasted with the institutional constraints of their formal roles. This is because opportunities to engage in such civic and policy-focused activity were not available to them within the institutional boundaries of the youth council itself.

Simultaneous to a limited role and scope, youth councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko experienced a raft of exclusionary processes in relation to policy-focused activity. There was no evidence of shared decision-making over the allocation of resources, underscoring their lack of institutional power. Adult-centric agendas often prevailed, with the interests of youth side-lined if their advice conflicted with the views of more powerful adult groups. Kim provides a poignant, grounded example of this youth disempowerment:

> I know we were supposed to have a youth space area in town. All last year we were working on it, all this year, what youth really want there, and now it has been fully scratched, because businesses' want to go in there and do something. It is like thanks for your input, but we are going this way now. I guess it is a bit of a kick in the X. I think there were a few more business partners who joined, making it just a space for everyone to use, not just youth. But at the end it is not our decision. We can give our opinion and what we would like, say with the youth space, but at the end of the day it can be completely overruled. (Kim, youth, Pūkeko)

> I was approached by a girl, who was approached by a past Principal who wanted us to come and talk to the kids about what the council will be doing about updating the new sports things in town and new playgrounds and things. But at the end it is not our decision. We can give our opinion but and what we would like, say with the youth space, but at the end of the day it can be completely overruled. I guess it just continues. I feel they see us as younger and not educated to make decisions. That is the impression I get. They definitely want more advice and opinions but at the end of the day it is their decision. (Kim, youth, Pūkeko)

Furthermore, youth councillors felt their voices were not heard and acted on by council officials. Where youth councillors' views were solicited by officials, they were often not given serious consideration, prioritised, or acted upon. Consequently, youth councillors had no authentic role in decision-making. For example, while they were approached for input into the redevelopment of the pool complex, this was widely perceived as a tokenistic gesture, as Paul, Cherie, and Kim explain:

> This may sound controversial, they come in and ask for our opinions, but a lot of the time, they have made up their minds. So, when the pool person came in, the ideas were all set in stone. They had already done the planning; already decided on a location and when it was going to be built. It was like they were coming to speak to us, to tick a box-that is what it seemed; we really had no input at all. If we had said, hey maybe we wanted two pools instead of one, they would say no. If we said we wanted to paint the walls purple, they would say they have already decided on white. (Paul, youth, Kiwi)

> It was already set in stone. They had already done the planning; already decided on a location and when it was going to be built. Like everything was set in stone. It was like

> they were coming to speak to us, to tick a box-that is what it seemed; we really had no input at all. We are often ignored. I think its our young age (Cherie, youth, Kiwi)

> I guess every meeting we have a new something we have to give our opinion on. I definitely think we have been able to express our opinions. Sometimes our opinions are heard but not always actioned. (Kim, youth, Pūkeko)

> I think there should be two representatives from the youth council on most city council meetings. I assume that is where they talk about their policies. If we were there, we could say something back. What we have seen; when they come and talk to us, the ideas are pretty much finalised. They are 98 % finalised. There is a tiny little bit of room for us to make some decisions, the majority has already been decided. So, if we are actually there in the city council meetings, and we can have input into policy, it would be a lot more balanced. (Belinda, youth, Kiwi)

Beyond a narrow scope of engagement, often reduced to consultation on "youth-related domains", there was a lack of formal mechanisms to integrate youth councillors into spaces where policy decisions are made, implemented, and evaluated, as illustrated in the next section.

### 6.10 A Lack of Internal Mechanisms

In Youth Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko, there was no evidence of youth councillors contributing written submissions or participating in the development of annual or the LTP. The LTP is a cornerstone of Aotearoa NZ's local government system and a critical instrument for

advancing the wellbeing purpose of local governance. Similarly, there were no formalised processes for youth councillors to collaborate with professional planners in land use or urban design, nor evidence of sustained project work with the broader youth community. Instead, consultation occurred at the discretion of officials, and was ad-hoc, rather than structured and intentional, as Sue (adult, Kiwi) explained:

> Our department has a responsibly around the community engagement, so we are always checking on what engagement is coming up across the other units and have you considered this-so linking them in-more and more. And it is making them aware that the youth council is there to feedback into some of their workstreams. we work with other teams that need community engagement for policy development and review. So, they can put it to the youth council for feedback, but also try and get the Youth Council to try and share it with peers. They can take it into schools. Buy you still find teams coming in looking for advice. (Sue, adult, Kiwi)

Sue's comments also reflected an adult-controlled agenda, and suggest a view of youth councillors as not quite capable:

> I think they are wanting a youth perspective-sometimes you feel you do not want to be presenting information to them that is going over their heads. You have got to keep it relevant to them. (Sue, adult, Kiwi)

The reliance by Kiwi on an external provider to facilitate the youth council underscores a structural disconnect between the council and youth representation, suggesting that youth councils are treated as advisory appendages rather than integral participants in governance. This arrangement reflects a perception of youth councils as vehicles for advice and community development, rather than as bodies with legitimate participatory rights in shaping policy. In

effect, the youth council is positioned primarily as a tool for youth development and advice to officials, rather than as a political forum where young people exercise their right to participate meaningfully in policy engagement.

### 6.11 Exclusionary Communicative Practices

The ability to exercise youth voice depends not only on structural mechanisms but on the relational and communicative ethos of the institution. Youth councillors' exclusion from policy spaces signalled a broader disconnect from the wider council, underpinned by ineffective communicative practices. Youth–adult relationships within Youth Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko were marked by a lack of trust and mutual respect. Rather than being incorporated into the broader council environment, youth councillors were isolated, contributing to a 'them and us' culture and a limited sense of belonging. For example, there was no evidence of youth councillor involvement in wider council committees. While youth councillors reported a positive relationship with the adult coordinator who worked directly with the youth council, their relationship with the wider council was described as ambivalent. Contact with council staff was infrequent, and youth councillors felt their views were seldom sought. As Belinda explained, "We only see them probably once a year, twice at most" (Belinda, Kiwi). Many youth councillors expressed a desire for more regular engagement with a broader range of council representatives, including the Mayor.

Communicative practices were characterised by a lack of recognition, avoidance, and inadequate feedback mechanisms, signalling a broader lack of institutional accountability. This was poignantly articulated by Cherie:

> I think sometimes there is a lack of respect. We are taking that time out of busy day, our school life, we are doing NCEA. We don't even get a thank-you. We thank them

> for coming in. Then when something happens, it is oh the Council made this happen, not the Youth Council. We do not get any recognition. The playground, along Marine Parade. Like they call it the Council playground but most of those ideas came from us. It has been re-developed a couple of years ago. Another playground in Green Meadows, a massive one, and we contributed so many ideas. Were they implemented? Kind of, but not to the full extent. (Cherie, youth, Kiwi)

This sense of exclusion and lack of recognition was compounded by inadequate feedback mechanisms, which further signalled a broader absence of institutional accountability. While Cherie highlighted the erasure of youth contributions in public narratives and signage, Paul underscored the routine dismissal of youth input during consultation processes. As he explained:

> Mainly little things. They might say 'what shall we do for a playground', and we give them ideas, and they say that is great. Then they avoid doing it. The pool slide thing-it was an idea, and we all thought it would be cool. All on board, they said we are going to do it, then like they never did. You don't get feedback or hear about it again. (Paul, youth, Kiwi)

> I have been here for three years and it has been the same. At the end of the year, they will say it will get better next year; we promise we will engage with the council more, but you don't. I really hope it can change. It would be so good to see us represented. I do not have the exact statistics, but we are a large part of the community. (Belinda, youth, Kiwi)

A pattern of avoidance was illustrated in the examples of youth councillors who reported a lack of support with their aspirations in relation to climate change and environmental concerns, as Cherie explains:

> The climate change-they did not listen. I was annoyed. When our staff come to talk to us, and say they are going to make a change and don't do it-they are all the talk-they do not walk and walk kind of thing. I think a lot of us in the Youth Council believe in climate change and we want it to be a thing. When someone comes in, and talks about it, and doesn't really do it. It makes us upset. We try but we feel that they are not trying for us. Too busy for us, kind of thing. They said we are going to have a meeting with the full adult Council. Important for this and then it hasn't happened. (Cherie, youth, Kiwi)

Officials encouraged youth councillors to connect with their youth colleagues in the Youth Climate Committee, which was based in the neighbouring regional council, to work on climate change and environmental issues. Youth councillors in the regional council gave a presentation to council officials on local climate and environmental concerns. A recording of a presentation revealed that youth councillors felt powerless as they were unaware of the next course of action to take to address these identified concerns. Youth are interested in global issues, such as climate change, but often do not know how they can make a difference, while many believe it is not possible to make a difference. The absence of clear communication and follow-up from officials not only left youth councillors uncertain about next steps, but also reflected a broader institutional culture that lacks genuine commitment to youth participation in local governance.

These findings collectively illustrate how institutional culture and communicative practices shape the contours of youth participation in local government. In Kiwi and Pūkeko, youth councillors described exclusion from decision-making spaces, limited recognition of their contributions, and a lack of meaningful feedback, a 'politics of disrespect'. Cherie's account of unacknowledged input into playground design and Paul's frustration with abandoned ideas exemplify how youth voices were solicited but rarely acted upon, reinforcing a sense of marginalisation.

This pattern of avoidance was especially evident in youth councillors' experiences with climate change advocacy. Despite strong interest and proactive engagement, youth aspirations were met with performative gestures rather than substantive support. As Cherie noted, promises of meetings with the full council never materialised, and officials redirected youth efforts to neighbouring committees without clear pathways for action. The regional council's youth presentation on environmental concerns similarly ended in uncertainty, with no follow-up or guidance, reflecting a lack of institutional commitment to youth agency.

The findings in Pūkeko and Kiwi reveal that the absence of formal mechanisms and strategic support critically undermined youth councillors' capacity to participate in policymaking. This deficit had profound implications for their sense of agency and legitimacy. While positioned as representatives of youth voice within local governance and tasked with advocating on behalf of their peers (Chapter Seven), their role was fraught with difficulty. Formal avenues of influence, such as policy submissions, sustained engagement with planners and decision-makers, and access to policy spaces, were notably absent. In the absence of these mechanisms, and without adequate tools to mobilize and connect with their peers, participation risked collapsing into symbolic representation rather than substantive influence. The disjuncture between institutional rhetoric and the lack of practical support not only constrained youth councillors' ability to enact meaningful change, but also exposed deeper questions about the authenticity and integrity of participatory commitments embedded within council structures.

## 6.12 Summary

This chapter examined the institutional conditions shaping participatory outcomes and mediating youth empowerment. Access to policy processes and tangible influence depended on each council's orientation to youth participation, embedded in institutional mechanisms,

officials' constructions of youth citizenship, and communicative practices. Comparative analysis across the four councils shows that institutional orientations, shaped by mechanisms, adult allies, and communicative practices, can either constrain or enable youth empowerment. Councils Ruru and Tūī, which moved toward rights-informed participation, demonstrated greater responsiveness and inclusion, while others remained bound to youth development paradigms that limited youth influence. The findings revealed that while formal consultative mechanisms are widely acknowledged as limited, incremental adjustments can shift participation from tokenism toward substantive influence.

Equitable youth–adult relationships, mutual respect, effective communication, and opportunities for meaningful engagement emerged in Ruru and Tūī when youth councillors were engaged in policy submissions, youth summits, and the transformative practice of establishing a youth development centre. This reflected a responsive institution that valued youth voice and civic agency, positioning youth as capable civic actors. Nonetheless, notable gaps and tensions were evident. Youth were not routinely integrated into collaborative processes with professional planners or sustained project work with the broader youth community. The next section shifts from direct policy engagement in council to examine the ability of youth councillors to engage with and represent diverse youth constituencies.

# Chapter Seven

## Representing the Diverse Youth Community

This chapter examines the capacity of youth councillors to advocate for and represent the interests of diverse youth constituencies within local government. It addresses the second research question: What internal processes and engagement strategies do youth councillors use to amplify the voices of diverse youth in policymaking? The analysis situates these findings within the institutional dynamics that shaped the representative role of youth councils.

The discussion begins by examining the aspirations of youth councillors alongside officials' expectations of both the councillors and the broader function of youth councils. It then explores key institutional dynamics, such as procedural mechanisms, participation styles, scaffolding by officials, and inclusive outreach strategies, that collectively enabled youth councillors to articulate youth priorities in local government spaces. This is followed by an examination of the constraints encountered by youth councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko, which highlight the limits of representative capacity in practice. Finally, the chapter turns to the third research question, considering institutional responses that promote the engagement of diverse youth communities in broader civic initiatives, presented in the section Building Local Youth Civic Initiatives.

### 7.1 Advocacy for Local Youth: Youth Councillors' Aspirations

To understand the capacity of youth councils to extend democracy to the wider youth constituency, it was important to examine councillors' aspirations and expectations. Interview data revealed that a strong motivation for joining youth councils was the desire to represent the voices and priorities of local youth. As Kim (youth, Pūkeko) explained:

> I thought it was a good opportunity to get the voices of young people spread. I thought of it as a role where voices were a little more heard. I thought it offered a range of different backgrounds and different voices that maybe were not being heard. (Kim, youth, Pūkeko)

Eve provided clear detail about the desire of youth participants to represent local youth through internal discussions.

> When I first came onto the youth council, I found it a great space to be able to work on the issue that you see as a young person. As a collective group, trying to be representative of the district. You can bounce off each other and see where you think the issues are that impact most for young people in the community. Then we will base the projects for the year-out on those issues that we see, or our consultation as well. We go out and consult with youth. We know we are not entirely representative of young people's perspectives and ideas. I think it is a really affective way of managing youth voice, and making sure it is channelled into something productive, in terms of a project or something. (Eve, youth, Tūī).

Participants accounts revealed that youth councillors were interested in, and keen to advocate for local youth on a range of contemporary youth issues. For example, youth participants in Tūī, Ruru and Pūkeko engaged in lobbying for designated youth spaces, as Kim explained: *"*I

know we were supposed to have a youth space area in town. All last year we were working on it, all this year, what youth really want there" (Kim, youth, Pūkeko). Likewise, youth councillors in Tūī lobbied for safer public spaces and public transport infrastructure for youth, as Sally from Tūī explained: "There is no train through X. There is no regular way for youth to get across the region. There are only two buses that run through".

Climate change was a key issue for youth councillors in Kiwi. They were looking to join with their counterparts in the regional council who were actively involved in climate action dialogue. Similarly, Sally from Tūī spoke of her intentions to join a local climate action group:

> Climate change is a big one. A lot of people in the region care about the environment. The environment groups in the schools are quite big. There are always trying to make a difference. In the community we have a Spade Aid. Down in X they plant trees for the day from 9am to 1pm. It is predominately youth who come along to plant trees. I have a few years in a row now. They have recently announced a climate emergency, the same day Carbon Neutral X presented to Council, and their presentation got approved, so they are planning for X to be carbon neutral by 2025. I am working toward being on it. Is it adult run, with youth advocates. It has been running for a few years, but newly recognised. (Sally, youth, Tūī)

Mental health and wellbeing emerged as a prevalent concern across all four councils. Several participants shared personal experiences, while incidents in the community prompted the establishment of a youth development centre in Tūī, a significant initiative spearheaded by youth councillors. Cherie (youth, Kiwi) highlighted the financial barriers to counselling and described her advocacy for subsidised services:

> No-one wants to talk about it. They are too scared to talk to the adults because of the disrespect we get given. Mental health has affected me, people in my family. It needs

> to be recognised more. Counselling in Napier cost about $200.00. You can go to your GP and get three free sessions with a counsellor. That is not enough. We are trying to get counselling free for certain ages and we are putting on a massive presentation. We have made a speech; we are making a video. We are going around the community asking people for their opinions. Then we will present it, to the wider community, councillors, youth council, anyone. We will share it on Facebook. (Cherie, youth, Kiwi)

Other youth councillors emphasised animal rights and public health concerns. For example, Tim reflected:

> One thing I would like youth to be more involved in is animal rights. SAFE. Coming from a farm, we have changed a lot. Our dogs are let off during the day. Seeing the way people treat their stock, the way these guys were treating sheep, pulling the gate down on the backs. (Tim, youth, Kiwi)

Similarly, the desire to serve youth was also evident in the external advocacy work on vaping by Belinda (Kiwi). As noted in Chapter Six, Belinda had engaged in advocacy, external to her youth council, aimed at reducing the health impacts of vaping on local youth by opposing the sale of vaping products in local retail stores.

These examples illustrate how councillors' aspirations translated into collective discussions. Moreover, across all councils, youth issues were consistently featured in meeting agendas and minutes, underscoring the intentions of youth councillors to amplify the lived experiences of youth and extend democratic participation to young constituencies. The aspirations of youth councillors to advocate for local youth was most visibly seen in lobbying efforts, and the content of policy submissions on a range of issues, which are described in detail under "Youth Summits, Surveys and Policy Submissions".

### 7.2 Institutional Expectations and Priorities

The aspirations of youth participants to amplify the perspectives of young people converged with institutional expectations. Youth councillors were expected to solicit youth views and relay this information to council. Website content emphasised that youth councillors play a vital role in connecting with local youth and ensuring their voices are represented in local government.

- Council Kiwi highlighted the duty to "canvas the views of local youth and provide this information to officials."
- Council Pūkeko stressed the importance of "actively consulting schools, community groups, and young people to identify their needs, concerns, and bring this information to council meetings."
- Council Ruru framed the role as "advocate for local youth on issues and implement changes on behalf of young people in the community," and "assisting the city council to engage effectively with youth."
- Council Tūī described the function as "discuss issues with local youth, share these insights with the wider council, and advocate on their behalf."

Together, these statements positioned youth councillors as a bridge between young people and local government, ensuring that youth perspectives informed decision-making and community priorities. They also framed youth councillor engagement as a mechanism for fulfilling councils' broader consultation needs.

In Ruru and Tūī, this consultative function was reinforced through formal mechanisms such as written policy submissions and verbal presentations to officials. Youth Council Ruru had a close relationship with George, an official responsible for coordinating strategic policy advice. George liaised regularly with the youth council to ensure submissions were aligned

with broader priorities. A youth council consultation working party was also established in Ruru, dedicated to monitoring the submission process and sustaining youth councillors' attention to the policy agenda. Josh, an elected official from Ruru, further noted that youth-led events such as musical festivals were expected to be centred on social themes relevant to young people, including mental health and wellbeing.

Taken together, these institutional expectations aligned with youth councillors' aspirations to represent local youth. Youth engagement in Ruru and Tūī was embedded within institutional infrastructures that both supported and shaped the ways in which youth voice was channelled into local governance. At the same time, these arrangements highlight a tension: while youth councillors were motivated to represent youth, their advocacy was often steered toward issues already prioritised by officials through the council policy consultation submission agenda, illustrating how institutional scaffolding could simultaneously enable and constrain the democratic potential of youth representation.

### 7.3 Youth Summits, Surveys and Policy Submissions

Youth aspirations and institutional expectations to represent local voices were enacted through mechanisms such as online and in-person surveys, district-wide consultations commissioned by councils in collaboration with youth councils, youth summits, policy submissions, and verbal presentations to council. These processes provided structured avenues for youth voice, attuning councillors to youth priorities and strengthening connections with decision-makers. This enabled councillors to articulate priorities and advocate for change in annual and long-term plans (LTP), representation reviews, and regional and national policy. Importantly, insights generated through summits and surveys were systematically incorporated into written submissions, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of youth perspectives and ensuring

that local concerns were reflected in policy advice. In this way, youth councils contributed substantively to both the annual and LTPs, representation reviews, and regional and national policy development.

For example, a youth summit convened by Ruru created a vital forum for local youth to deliberate on civic, social, and political issues relevant to their lived experiences. Josh (Ruru, official) described the summit as a way to gather the "collective wisdom of all youth and then transmit the information afterwards." The day-long event, held at a community venue, involved around 100 students from intermediate through to year 13. Workshop groups, led by youth councillors and supported by adults with expertise in areas such as mental health, explored topics including employment and labour market skills, bullying, education, mental health, climate change and sustainability, gender and identity, and leadership. Youth councillors consolidated these insights into recommendations presented to local school principals. This information also informed local and national policy submissions, as Rachel (Ruru) conveyed:

> We recently made a submission to the New Zealand Education Committee; they were doing a review on the NCEA education system and our consultation working party wrote up a really good review. This had a lot of input from other young people. (Rachel, youth, Ruru)

Aside from youth summits, youth councillors in Ruru and Tūī extended democratic representation by integrating findings from brief surveys, social media posts, conversations with local youth and a large-scale survey, into written submissions, verbal presentations, and the development of a youth council policy strategy. For instance, following the identification of transport as a significant concern in the district-wide survey, Tūī councillors submitted a proposal to the regional council addressing transport issues. Social media platforms to engage and canvass youth perspectives included polls and surveys seeking input from youth on what

they wanted and cared about, upcoming council submissions, as well as assisting local youth with the submission process, as Sam explains: “If there is a council submission coming up, we will post about it and encourage youth to submit and help them with that process because it can be confusing sometimes”. (Tom, youth, Ruru)

Additional efforts to engage the youth voice of the wider youth community included physical paper surveys at key events run by youth council, and promoting events at schools, in school assemblies and through school notices, as Sue outlined:

> So we might have, depending on what it is, they can go into their school assembly and say this is coming up, giving notice to their peers. School assemblies-or even something like elections. We had Mary, yesterday, she said it was really awesome when they went into schools, for the election stuff and the Youth Council went and stood with them to support them. This is something you should get involved with. (Sue, adult, Kiwi)

Surveys at key events were used to garner perspectives for long-term objectives such as lobbying for a youth hub, an initiative to provide a space where all youth can gather and feel accepted and included. Sam detailed this informal survey process:

> So, one of the questions in our survey that we handed out at the music festival was “If you had a youth hub, what would you like to see included in the building?” For the youth hub, we did consult at schools, and we did a little presentation and we broke them up into groups and did some brainstorming and [asked] what they wanted to see again. We had some big pieces of paper and colourful pens and they wrote in groups [using] bullet points and we took that away and we typed it up. (Tom, youth, Ruru)

The mechanisms of youth summits, surveys, and policy submissions were utilised to obtain collective insights to advocate for local priorities. These forms of representation strengthened the legitimacy of youth voice and provided councillors with the tools to press for change in Tūī and Ruru. These examples illustrate how survey data and youth deliberation were mobilised to influence policy agendas and ensure that youth perspectives were embedded within institutional decision-making processes. Chapter Six highlighted the pivotal role that youth councillors in Tūī's played in the establishment on a local youth development centre. The legitimacy of youth voice was reflected in this process, which demonstrated youth councillors' capacity to represent and advocate for local youth. Through ongoing community engagement, they effectively canvassed youth voices, identified key priorities, and advanced these within institutional planning processes. Youth-led outreach and reflexive engagement strengthened the representational legitimacy of youth councils and embedded youth voice in policymaking processes. Despite these mechanisms, there were limitations in these which are outlined later are "Areas for Development'. The discussion now turns to explore the way practice in Tūī focused on power and equity.

## 7.4 Reflexive Participation Styles

While internal youth council discussions across all four councils were oriented toward youth priorities, in Tūī reflexive conversations were explicitly framed around power and equity. Deliberations were directed toward social justice objectives, linking councillors' critical social consciousness, including commitments to diversity, inclusiveness, and youth empowerment, with efforts to enhance the participation of less included youth. Training provided to councillors in Tūī deepened their awareness of the marginalised position of youth within local government and the challenges of achieving equitable representation across

diverse groups. For example, externally provided training on civic engagement provided to Tūī extended their capacity for critical reflection and informed decision-making, shifting practice from tokenistic consultation toward youth empowerment. Eve explained:

> Usually someone exterior with that kind of knowledge will come in and share. We try to have opportunities for youth council members to upskill. Whether it is around civic engagement and council. The most recent one we did, alongside the training on camp about youth participation and the power of youth voice. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

Comments from Eve illustrate how these gains in understanding were reflected in efforts to empower local youth.

> As a Youth Council, we will promote your vote and the power of youth voice. We have done quite a bit of work around that. Social media campaigns about the power of your voice. Recently, we have just finished up on a documentary on the process the youth council went through for the establishment of the Youth Development Centre (see Chapter Six). It is about the submission process, getting youth voice, where the idea for the centre came from. The difficulties and challenges with the process. That is a great example of showing the power of youth voice. We developed in into a visual display and have just turned it into an animation. We are going to put that up on our social media channels. It is a story board to show how we got to the centre. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

Furthermore, youth councillors in Tūī drew on Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992) to evaluate requests from external organisations seeking youth input. The ladder served as a reference point to assess whether such requests were authentic or tokenistic in nature. As Eve explains:

> If groups come to us, we usually try and filter it, making sure that people who are coming in aren't falling into the tick-box for young people. We've had talks with young people to avoid that tokenism, which can happen. That's one of the things we're working on, developing our strength in. We had a few sessions in youth participation and engagement, so we can recognise when it's positive and when it's not so positive. And equipping Youth Council to have those skills—to say, 'As a group, we probably aren't the best representation, or the best group to be talking to about this. Did you want to go here?' (Eve, youth, Tūī)

This example illustrates how youth councillors applied theoretical tools and training to critically assess engagement opportunities, resist symbolic inclusion, and advocate for more authentic, representative youth participation. It reflects a shift from passive consultation toward empowered, reflexive practice grounded in social justice principles.

Additionally, youth councillors in Tūī demonstrated a critical awareness of the barriers young people face in accessing state-centred political systems. They recognised that youth council membership does not necessarily reflect the diversity of the wider youth community in terms of ability, ethnicity, culture, and socio-economic position. Consequently, the voices of many groups may remain underrepresented. As Eve (Tūī) explained, "We don't claim to represent all youth."

This recognition of inequalities in access to participation, and of the marginalised position of youth within political systems, prompted councillors to consider strategies for engaging harder-to-reach groups. One such initiative involved culturally informed approaches to engage Māori youth from a particular location, who had been historically underrepresented on the youth council. These efforts exemplify practice grounded in principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity, as Eve from Tūī explains:

> We are thinking about how we can shift the way we deliver consultation or gain young people's opinions for different communities. That's one thing we've been looking into recently, is creating a group called Te Anamata, which means 'the future'. This concept fits at the very top of Hart's model. We've always had challenges getting directly into the X community. Usually, one third of our members are from X, and two thirds from outside. With our X members, we were looking at how we could access youth voice from X differently. This was a concept they entirely developed, they sparked the idea. They're still developing the group itself. The idea is that it will be a direct subgroup of Youth Council operating out of X to gain young people's views from that area. It'll be a go-to group that connects with different organisations related to young people or community groups. It's like roots deeper into that community, and better suited to that area. There's a large Māori population in X, so it's really important that the kaupapa of that group is applicable to that area. We know that X and X are very different in terms of youth communities. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

Positioned at the top of Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992), Te Anamata was conceived as a mechanism for authentic engagement and embedding youth voice more deeply within community structures. Eve emphasised that the kaupapa of the group was tailored to the area's large Māori population, reflecting the importance of culturally grounded, place-based approaches. The conception of Te Anamata originated from Molly (Tūī), a councillor with lived experience in the community, underscoring the value of insider knowledge and relational ties in reaching marginalised groups. These findings support a targeted recruitment strategy that enlists youth councillors from across diverse areas of the local authority, thereby increasing the likelihood of incorporating perspectives from underrepresented communities and strengthening equity in participatory structures.

This example illustrates how youth councillors moved beyond generic consultation models, such as brief online or face-to-face surveys, to develop culturally grounded, place-based mechanisms for inclusive engagement. The creation of Te Anamata reflects a shift toward deeper relational accountability and responsiveness to community-specific needs. It also demonstrates how youth-led innovation can challenge dominant governance norms and foster more equitable participatory structures. Advocacy in Tūī also took reflexive forms, as councillors critically examined the limits of their representativeness and sought to include harder-to-reach groups. Training and theoretical tools such as Hart's Ladder of Participation enabled councillors to resist tokenism and advocate for authentic engagement. Initiatives such as Te Anamata illustrate how advocacy extended beyond generic consultation to culturally grounded, place-based mechanisms that embedded youth voice more deeply within community structures. These innovations highlight how advocacy was not only about influencing policy but also about transforming participatory practices to ensure equity and inclusion.

In summary, youth councillors in Tūī demonstrated critical awareness in three key areas: the marginalised position of youth within local government, the challenges of representing diverse youth groups, and the broader social inequalities affecting youth. This awareness was advanced through the provision of training opportunities, signalling council responsive to youth agency. Importantly, this awareness underpinned social justice efforts and underscores the need for youth councillors to adopt a mindset grounded in diversity, equity, and inclusion. These findings suggest that once youth councillors develop an in-depth understanding of the structural inequalities and barriers to participation facing youth, they are better positioned to engage in critical reflection and to consider strategies for strengthening connectedness with diverse youth constituencies.

A deliberate consideration of the needs of communities with limited council engagement, particularly how consultation could be delivered more effectively through outreach strategies, is essential for advancing democratic, participatory rights for diverse youth in local government. This form of critical reflection aligns with Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) social justice framework, Empowerment Through Process, which prioritises participatory processes over outcomes and emphasises youth empowerment through attention to power dynamics, relational accountability, and ethical responsiveness. It highlights the importance of internal dialogue on diversity, power, and oppression, alongside a commitment to pursuing strategies that reduce social inequalities. While Ruru and Tūī had some strategies in place, this was not evident in Kiwi and Pūkeko, as the following section illustrates. The findings revealed that practices for connecting with and representing diverse youth varied across sites, shaping uneven opportunities for equitable representation.

### 7.5 Uneven Representation

Interview data revealed that many youth councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko joined with the aspiration of representing the voices and priorities of local youth in government. However, clear pathways to contribute to and influence policymaking were absent. As outlined in Chapter Six, youth councillors encountered numerous exclusionary factors that limited their ability to engage meaningfully in policy processes. Internal mechanisms and procedures to support their involvement were lacking, while discussions with officials were confined to narrow consultative topics such as parks and swimming pool projects. Consequently, youth councillors' minimal participation in policy-focused activities restricted their capacity to advocate for youth interests within local government.

This challenge was compounded by a disconnect with the wider youth community, which weakened councillors' ability to gather youth perspectives on civic and social issues.

Both councils adopted a youth development approach to youth participation, evident in their strong emphasis on activities that supported youth development goals. Youth councillors were primarily involved in organising three annual community events for local youth in collaboration Real Education Trust (see Chapter Six), designed to provide youth with opportunities for recreation, connection, and belonging. While valuable, these initiatives aligned more with broader participation objectives than with policy influence, as Belinda explained: "We don't have much involvement with the community. We really just do events to get youth out of the house". (Belinda, youth, Kiwi).

Youth Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko also lacked community engagement strategies based on collaborative deliberation, such as youth summits, to focus on civic and social priorities. Instead, engagement was ad-hoc, discretionary, based on brief online or in-person surveys, rather than routine and structured as Kim explained:

> It usually depends on our time frame. I mean we can put it out to youth, but sometimes we do not always get the best response, we have found. If it is more lengthy-more questions, it is a little bit harder. What do you like to do? That is kind of what we have found. We have been asked about the transport-that kind of stuff to do with Council. We just have our own opinions of what we think youth would want, rather than put it out to wider youth. (Kim, youth, Pūkeko)

Youth participants reported minimal contact with the wider youth community. Apart from a large community-wide survey commissioned by the wider council in Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko, engagement strategies were limited and superficial. They relied mainly on informal networks, school newsletters and assemblies, brief online surveys, or questionnaires distributed at youth council events. In Aotearoa NZ, local councils often defer to youth councils as the primary mechanism for eliciting youth perspectives, with large-scale surveys commissioned

only infrequently. While this reliance underscores the importance of youth councils, it also risks narrowing participation and excluding diverse voices (Smith, 2015).

Without internal mechanisms to process this information, there was no evidence that it informed discussions with council officials or written policy submissions. In Youth Councils Ruru and Tūī, social media was a key tool for canvassing youth perspectives. However, youth councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko said social media was rarely used to build ongoing connections or to engage local youth in council policy submissions. This suggests that although many young people actively use social media, youth councils do not necessarily employ it to foster meaningful civic engagement.

In Kiwi, Ruru and Pūkeko there was little evidence provided by participants of sustained, collaborative project work with local young on local social or policy issues. Survey data obtained from Youth Council Ruru, which examined practice across numerous councils in Aotearoa NZ, similarly revealed an absence of ongoing civic or political projects co-led with youth. Likewise, large-scale surveys of children and young people were commissioned in Kiwi, Ruru, and Tūī, but these were infrequent, typically conducted only every few years. Established networks, effective engagement methods, and deliberative processes are essential to ensuring that youth voices, interests, and participatory rights are meaningfully considered. Results of this research clearly indicate that collective processes are particularly critical for enabling the expression of youth voice and political agency. The absence of formalised mechanisms for collective deliberation reinforced the disconnect between councillors and the broader youth community. This represented lost opportunities to access diverse youth perspectives. Moreover, in Kiwi and Pūkeko without institutional scaffolding to support policy engagement (see Chapter Six), and deliver workshops on civic engagement, youth voice and equity, as occurred in Tūī, councillors were constrained in enacting the justice-oriented principles

outlined in Augsberger et al. (2018a), particularly those concerning voice, participation, and equity.

As noted earlier in the chapter, youth councillors were positioned by councils as a bridge between young people and local government, tasked with ensuring that youth perspectives informed decision-making and community priorities. Website content reinforced this, emphasising their vital role in connecting with local youth and representing their voices in government. In practice, however, these goals were undermined. In Kiwi and Pūkeko, councils prioritised community-based youth development events over policy-focused activity, and mechanisms to support meaningful engagement with policymaking were absent. As a result, youth councillors lacked the means to achieve their representative role. This resulted in frustration for several youth councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko, where the desire to be heard and promote youth voice in local government was a motivating factor in joining youth council for some members. While Tūī councillors were embedded within the youth community, and reported a range of local youth initiatives, outlined earlier, in contrast their counterparts in Tūī appeared disconnected, as Sue explained: "They want to be involved in their community; they just don't know what that looks like". (Sue, adult, Kiwi). Sue conveyed a need to seek new ways for youth councillors to connect with the youth constituencies in civic initiatives:

> We have groups coming in-like army, saying they want to volunteer, is there any marae or any kindy that they can tidy up. It is also about seeing who wants volunteers at the same time. I think the schools are connected with those organisations (volunteer X) - it might be a matter of hooking them to existing beach clean-ups, planting days. It might make them feel that they are more connected with their community and then making connections that way. (Sue, adult, Kiwi).

These findings revealed a clear disjuncture between institutional intentions for youth participation and the realities of practice, as well as a misalignment between councillors' aspirations to represent youth voices and the limited opportunities available to do so. This highlights the need for structural mechanisms to enable youth councillors to enact their representative mandate. Within Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) social justice framework, the absence of such mechanisms reflects a failure to uphold core principles of voice, participation, and equity.

In Youth Councils Pūkeko and Kiwi, the absence of targeted strategies to engage excluded youth highlighted a broader lack of bridging and linking forms of social capital. This was a missed opportunity to reduce inequalities in civic participation and to foster inclusive governance. Youth councillors had little connection with their wider constituencies beyond recreational community events, and there was no evidence of strategic planning to strengthen engagement among diverse youth groups. Nor were deliberative processes established to enable collective reflection on the social and civic issues shaping young people's lives. Consequently, youth councillors received conflicting messages: they were expected to participate in policy processes and advocate on behalf of their peers yet were provided with limited formalised means to undertake these responsibilities.

These findings reveal the limitations of relying solely on a youth development framework as the basis for councils' commitment to youth civic and political participation. While such frameworks may support individual growth, they do little to empower young people to exercise civic agency or influence policy outcomes. Moreover, they fall short of meeting international obligations under the CRC (UN, 1989), which affirms young people's rights to democratic participation and to have a say in matters that affect them.

In contrast to the limitations evident in Kiwi and Pūkeko, youth councillors in Tūī and Ruru reported more structured and sustained mechanisms for engaging with their constituencies. Summits, surveys, and policy submissions provided routine opportunities for deliberation, while training and institutional scaffolding supported councillors to critically reflect on equity and representation. As a result, councillors in Tūī and Ruru were better positioned to embed youth perspectives in policymaking and to develop innovative, culturally grounded initiatives such as Te Anamata. This comparison underscores the unevenness of youth representation across councils: while some were constrained by ad hoc engagement and a narrow youth development focus, others were enabled by institutional support to enact justice-oriented principles of voice, participation, and equity. The unevenness of youth representation across councils, and the structural constraints faced by councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko, highlight the need to consider areas for improvement. In particular, attention must be given to how councils support youth participation, balance advisory and developmental functions, and provide realistic pathways for councillors to enact their representative mandate.

## 7.6 Areas for Development

While earlier sections illustrated that youth councillors in Tūī were more embedded within the local youth community through a range of initiatives, their counterparts in Pūkeko, Kiwi, and Ruru expressed the need for stronger connections and more effective methods of engagement. Similarly, while youth summits convened to deliberate on social, health, and education priorities (Ruru) and to invigorate civic initiatives (Tūī) were valuable, they occurred only sporadically, limiting their impact. Youth councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko were particularly frustrated by their exclusion from policymaking spaces, which constrained their ability to represent youth priorities and the broader youth constituency. They also highlighted

the burden of unrealistic role demands. For example, facilitating three annual community events with Real was labour intensive for Kiwi youth councillors, limiting their capacity to engage more deeply with civic and social priorities. Sue (adult, Kiwi) described councillors as typically time-poor, balancing extracurricular commitments such as sports, recreation, and school-based activities alongside their council role. Kim (youth, Pūkeko) echoed this challenge, noting:

> At the start of the year I was prioritising Youth Council over school work, work, and my own commitments. I suppose this year the team has been able to work together more. It is hard because we have so much on, to expect so much of us. We are helping out, but not a huge amount in return. We give all this advice and it gets squashed to the side. Yes definitely. I mean we have tried to help out as much as we can, but with exams and everything. I wish we could help out more. It is a little bit hard when we have jobs and we don't get paid for being on Youth Council. Personally I think I give a lot of time and try my best. But I have school three level and two part time jobs and sports commitments, so it is a bit hard. The main issue with youth council is that we are so busy compared to the main council. That is their job, so there is a difference in divide a little. (Kim, youth, Pūkeko)

A pathway to strengthen youth councillors' ability to resist tokenistic practices and contest their positioning as mere "providers of a youth perspective" could be the reintroduction of the Aotearoa NZ National Youth Council Conference, which had been disbanded at the time of data collection. Such a reinstatement could build bridging capital and cross-regional learning. Eve (youth, Tūī) reflected:

> There is no longer a national youth council conference which is a shame. There are a few organisations of youth who work to promote civic engagement. Really push that

> understanding of government and politics. Shifting that stereotype around politics. Aotearoa NZ Youth Leadership? I went to a conference a year ago. They put on civic conferences to schools. Some university students ran it. That was how I learnt a lot about national government. I think more opportunities like that, and a bigger focus on the NZ curriculum would be good. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

Addressing unrealistic role demands and the limitations of adopting a youth development approach as the sole participation strategy may also be assisted by separating youth advisory and youth development functions. Sue (adult, Kiwi) suggested exploring this split, noting the potential to engage more young people through targeted services and events:

> I mean a question coming up is do we as Council look at facilitating Youth Council. Do we split the events and advisory roles like Hastings? Tapping into the Youth Council and get Real to engage youth with events. To offer more targeted services in the community. Stuff that will attract young people. How do we engage more young people, and not just a few? (Sue, adult, Kiwi)

These reflections highlight several areas for improvement: the need for more structured and sustained engagement mechanisms, realistic role expectations, and national-level opportunities for cross-regional learning. They also point to the importance of distinguishing between youth development and youth advisory functions, ensuring that councillors are not overburdened with event delivery at the expense of civic and policy engagement. Addressing these issues would strengthen youth councils' ability to enact their representative mandate, resist tokenism, and embed youth voice more meaningfully within local governance. While Kiwi and Pūkeko councillors struggled with limited mechanisms for representation, accounts from Tūī revealed a contrasting picture: institutional scaffolding and community partnerships enabled youth to engage in a wide range of civic initiatives. This section explores those practices.

### 7.7 Local Youth Civic Initiatives

The third research question considered institutional responses that promoted the engagement of diverse youth communities in broader civic initiatives. Accounts from youth participants in Tūī revealed a significant number of local civic initiatives, some of which the youth council was directly involved, and some undertaken by external youth. Molly described how support from the council enabled the youth council to work with local youth in developing local public spaces. The council provided a community space for a large mural project. Youth councillors collaborated with the wider youth community and engaged local iwi to ensure cultural considerations were respected in the design and use of the space. Molly and Eve explained this further:

> Recently we completed some murals in the local domain. There were two toilet blocks. We have finished two/three months ago. It looks amazing, it has made the area look so good. The idea itself was strongly backed by Council. The opportunity was presented through the Parks department in Council. They basically said ‘we have these toilet blocks and we don’t really know what to do with them, and the youth council said ‘we would love to do a mural on them’. Then we worked with young people from the local college. That is the closest area. Got their ideas, and they helped with the designs and the actual painting. They look fantastic. (Molly, youth, Tūī)

> There are lots of different things. There are tonnes of examples. The basketball courts. Youth Council submitted that in the Annual Plan and they got a new basketball Court up there. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

Some activities addressed health-related concerns. For instance, Sally spoke of a youth mental health advocacy programme she was engaged.

> I was part of a programme last year called Future Leaders. That is run by Inspiring Stories. Pretty much you pick something that you think needs to be changed in the community, to something you want to work. Last year a big one was picked was mental health. It was a six-month programme. They held workshops every two weeks throughout the district. I think there was 25 young people from the region on that programme. It was youth only. (Sally, youth, Tūī)

Youth councillors in Tūī were also formally aligned with the Creative Communities. This alignment granted access to institutional knowledge and networks, enabling councillors to design and implement locally responsive initiatives. Eve explained that youth councillors were closely connected with this group:

> Creative Communities is an advisory group for Council. It is like a subgroup of the actual Council. There is one Youth Council representative who sits on there and helps. They give out grants related to creative arts and music. (Eve, youth, Tūī)

With committee support, youth councillors developed a community website outlining local resources and activities for youth. This communication strategy directly addressed concerns about a lack of awareness among new arrivals and young people of accessible local opportunities. These findings underscore how institutional scaffolding, when attuned to youth-led priorities, can facilitate inclusive civic engagement.

The provision of council grants enabled youth councillors to engage more deeply with the local youth community and strengthen civic participation. For example, a community-wide youth summit was convened to support the development of youth-led civic entrepreneurial initiatives, with funding allocated to successful proposals. This initiative encouraged innovation and positioned youth as active contributors to local development. The council also

funded external providers to deliver workshops to the youth council, which councillors then shared with peers. As Eve explained, “We did one workshop on film. Got someone in who is experienced in film making and helped teach that skill to young people. Things like that, really practical” (Eve, youth, Tūī).

These examples illustrate how responsive local government structures can foster social capital and enhance youth constituencies’ engagement in civic life. Institutional support in Tūī was instrumental in cultivating purposeful relationships across social networks. Key officials actively facilitated connections between youth councillors, the broader council, and relevant community resources. As Sally (youth, Tūī) reflected:

> I think a huge thing is, if you want to support something you care about, they are going to support you too, because of who you are. I think it is definitely a huge thing with the adults here. They connect you to the right people. (Sally, youth, Tūī)

These initiatives demonstrate how institutional resourcing, when aligned with youth-led priorities and cultural responsiveness, can foster inclusive civic participation. Within Augsberger et al.’s (2018a) social justice framework, they exemplify advocacy, equity, and youth–adult partnership grounded in relational and place-based engagement.

Youth participant accounts in Tūī also suggest higher levels of associational life within the local youth community. Councillors described a proliferation of youth civic initiatives and groups, some involving the youth council and others operating independently. Youth-led civic groups, external to the council, were also active. Eve described initiatives such as community gardens and SEAR (Societal Environmental Animal Rights Group) at X College, which comprised three sub-groups focused on societal issues, environmental concerns, and animal rights. She noted, “It is entirely youth-led, which is cool” (Eve, youth, Tūī). Molly, Eve and

Sally from Tūī spoke of a wide range of local youth civic initiatives, some council-led, others external to council, noting "there are so many." (Sally, youth, Tūī) Examples included a youth group focused on climate action and initiatives involving community service and volunteering, such as beach clean-up days and similar council-supported activities. These forms of participation reflect the notion of civic engagement as acts intended to help shape the community's future.

## 7.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter explored how youth councillors engaged with the wider youth constituency to ensure youth voices were reflected in local government policymaking. Building on Chapter Six's focus on policy focused mechanisms, Chapter Seven demonstrated that when policy-focused mechanisms are paired with meaningful community engagement, young people's democratic rights are significantly strengthened.

Representation of the youth constituency was uneven across sites. Ruru and Tūī prioritized inclusive outreach, with Tūī youth councillors showing a critical social awareness of the marginalised position of youth and issues of inequitable represented. They subsequently engaged in action to include unrepresented youth, alongside advocacy that resulted in positive collective gains for local youth. In contrast, Kiwi and Pūkeko framed participation through a youth development lens, emphasising individual growth rather than collective representation. Where structured support for consultation was absent, councillors were left to interpret representational expectations informally, limiting equitable inclusion. These contrasts highlight how institutional design, when aligned with social justice principles, shapes councillors' capacity to represent constituencies in accountable and transformative ways. Together, Chapters Six and Seven reveal both the constraints and possibilities of youth

councillors' work, paving the way for Chapter Eight's examination of the tensions and transformative potential of youth participation in local governance.

# Chapter Eight

## Rethinking Youth Rights in Local Governance: Power, Practice, Possibility

Building on the empirical results presented in Chapters Six and Seven, this chapter synthesises the results and deepens the analysis by situating them within the institutional and sociopolitical dynamics that shape youth engagement in local government. This includes engagement with broader debates on youth citizenship, participatory governance practice, and power, highlighting implications for both practice and theory.

Part One examines how institutional logics both enabled and constrained youth access to policymaking spaces, addressing the first research question on the role and impact of youth councillors. The discussion then considers how councillors represented diverse youth constituencies, reflecting the **s**econd research question: What internal processes and engagement strategies do youth councillors use to amplify the voices of diverse youth in government policymaking? In this chapter, the term "diverse youth" refers to the heterogeneity of young people's identities and experiences, including intersections of ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, disability, and geography, as outlined in Chapter Three.

Part Two highlights the structural limitations in local government approaches. This includes councils' reliance on consultation as a primary youth participation strategy, and deficits in community engagement, both of which limit youth agency and equitable representation. These limitations inform the need to embed participatory rights more effectively into governance architecture.

Part Three addresses the third research question: What institutional responses promote the participation of the wider, diverse youth community in civic initiatives? Collectively, the

results demonstrate that youth participation flourishes through civic infrastructure that embeds youth voice, cultivates social capital, and sustains democratic engagement. These insights highlight the need for policy design that builds youth civic infrastructure as a routine, intentional and equitable dimension of local governance.

## PART ONE

### 8.1 Institutional Logics and Youth Participation in Local Governance

The first research question examined the substantive role and impact of youth councillors in local government policymaking, and the factors shaping these outcomes. Most striking was the significant variation across the four council sites (Kiwi, Pūkeko, Ruru, and Tūī) in the extent to which youth councillors engaged in policy-focused practices and exercised voice and autonomy. This variation can be understood in relation to institutional logics that shaped the contours of youth participation, conditioning both practices and outcomes. Two orientations emerged: a youth development logic (Kiwi, Pūkeko), characterised by symbolic inclusion and constrained agency, and a participatory rights logic (Ruru, Tūī), marked by consultation and informed engagement. This divergence illustrates that institutional logics, rather than youth capacity, is the decisive factor shaping youth participation in local government.

This study contributes new insight by demonstrating how institutional logics shape the form, meaning, and outcomes of youth engagement in local government. It extends existing youth council scholarship, which notes that council practice and operations are often guided by multiple, loosely articulated frameworks. For example, adult practitioners often base practice on what when before, that is established institutional norms, rather than a coherent framework

or systems of logic (Augsberger et al., 2024; Cushing & van Bliet, 2017). This research has shown that practice frameworks materialise as distinct institutional logics that structure practice. These orientations or logics were mediated by the varying quality and consistency of factors such as institutional structures, internal mechanisms, conceptualisation of the youth citizen, scaffolding from adult allies, communicative practices, and the availability of meaningful participatory initiatives. The following discussion situates these dynamics within existing literature to illustrate their broader significance and impact.

### 8.1.1 Rights-Based Participation and Normative Implications

The results showed that youth participation in Ruru and Tūī was underpinned by a rights-informed logic that moved beyond symbolic inclusion toward meaningful influence within local government spaces. These results broadly support scholarship that calls for more nuanced understandings of participatory rights in public sector contexts, particularly the ways young people interpret and enact their roles as civic actors (Canosa et al., 2022). Across both Ruru and Tūī councils, incremental progress toward rights informed participation was achieved through mechanisms such as informal discussions with officials, written policy submissions, and verbal presentations. These avenues enabled youth councillors to articulate priorities and advocate for change in areas including annual and long-term plans (LTP), representation reviews, and regional or national policy. The submission process was viewed by adult and youth participants as a key mechanism for expressing youth voice, underscoring its importance as a structured pathway for influencing policy. These results are significant because it demonstrates that rights informed practice is not only a theoretical aspiration but can be operationalised through everyday participatory mechanisms embedded in institutional routines.

The study highlights that institutional scaffolding, including clear communication structures, sustained dialogue, adult allyship, and responsive governance processes, played a critical role in enabling youth councillors to participate as rights holders. In Ruru, the formation of a consultation working party exemplified a strategic approach to embedding youth perspectives within decision-making and reinforcing youth councillors' roles as informed contributors. These dynamics illustrate how organisational design and adult support create the conditions for authentic youth participation, supporting Tisdall's (2017) argument that youth voice functions as a normative strategy for democratic citizenship rather than a tokenistic gesture. The rights-based governance logic evident in both councils aligns with scholarship arguing that participatory rights require deliberate institutional effort to be realised (Lundy, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2010). It demonstrates that rights-informed participation is not simply a matter of providing opportunities for involvement but of constructing enabling conditions that position youth as legitimate political actors. Building on this, institutional scaffolding emerged as a central theoretical theme. Meaningful participation requires information, space, voice, and influence, conditions that must be actively created by adults and institutions (Lansdown, 2011; Lundy, 2018). The submission process can also be understood as a form of discursive participation (Komulainen, 2007), enabling young people to shape policy narratives and assert their legitimacy within governance spaces. This demonstrates that when young people are provided with structured avenues to contribute, they can influence not only decisions but also the discursive framing of issues, an important dimension of rights-based participation often overlooked in practice.

The emergence of a participatory rights-based logic was evident within Ruru and, to a lesser extent, Tūī. Through practices such as adult allyship, youth-led agenda setting, and the aspirations of Josh (Official, Ruru) to extend youth engagement from consultation to policy creation shows that institutional logics are not static. They can shift incrementally, coexist in

tension, and be strategically mobilised by young people and supportive adults, reflecting broader insights into institutional complexity and hybridisation (Reay & Hinings, 2009; Thornton et al., 2012). This result demonstrates how youth participatory rights-based participation can develop within existing structures rather than requiring wholesale institutional redesign. It also offers a practical pathway for councils seeking to move beyond symbolic inclusion, echoing critiques of tokenistic youth engagement (Hart, 1992; Wong et al., 2010).

The results resonate with theoretical perspectives such as rights-as-practice approaches and relational perspectives on participation, both of which conceptualise youth rights as negotiated, co-constructed, and embedded in everyday interactions (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). This aligns with Lister's (2007) argument that citizenship is a relational and negotiated practice, enacted through social relations rather than guaranteed solely by formal entitlements. These perspectives emphasise that participation emerges through ongoing intergenerational negotiations of power, a dynamic well documented in Wyness's sociological work on adult–youth relations (Wyness, 2015). In both councils, youth councillors' engagement with officials, through informal conversations, written submissions, and verbal presentations, illustrated how rights were enacted through iterative, dialogic processes.

Ruru and Tūī councils' practices align only partially with what Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) describe as intergenerational co-governance, where adults intentionally redistribute power and enable young people to participate with confidence. In practice, this level of shared authority was not consistently evident across either council. Instead, genuine co-governance emerged most clearly in Tūī's involvement in establishing the youth development centre, where young people contributed to agenda-setting, decision-making, and the design of the centre. This represented a qualitatively different form of power-sharing because youth were not merely consulted but were centrally involved in shaping the direction

and substance of the initiative, a shift from advisory participation toward co-production (Tisdall, 2017; Percy-Smith, 2010, 2015). Tūī Council's approach is therefore better understood as a move toward co-governance, rather than a fully realised model of intergenerational power sharing, consistent with critiques that highlight the rarity of sustained, structural redistribution of power to young people (Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001).

Collectively, the results from Ruru and Tūī demonstrate that incremental institutional change can meaningfully transform youth participation, shifting councils from tokenistic consultation toward rights-informed practice in which young people exercise active influence. Small but deliberate adjustments, such as clearer communication channels, structured submission processes, and adult allyship, accumulated to create environments where youth voice was not merely heard but acted upon. These results challenge dominant critiques of youth councils as inherently tokenistic (Collin, 2015; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Matthews, 2001a; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020) and show that authentic participation depends not on young people's willingness or capability, but on institutional commitments to embed youth voice within governance structures. The results offer new empirical insights into the policy focused mechanisms and institutional supports that enabled youth agency, autonomy, and political citizenship at the local level in Aotearoa NZ.

While existing research has examined youth voice, civic engagement, and positive youth development (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; MYD, 2002; MYD, 2023; Nairn et al., 2006; Wood & Milligan, 2016), less attention has been given to the institutional arrangements and governance practices within local government that shape young people's political agency. This study addresses that gap by identifying the factors that constitute a rights-based institutional logic for youth participation.

While Ruru and Tūī demonstrated incremental shifts toward rights informed participation, embedding youth perspectives through policy submissions, consultation groups, and adult scaffolding, youth councillors in Kiwi and Pūkeko were positioned as peripheral actors, largely confined to organising social events and symbolic recognition. The next section turns to Kiwi and Pūkeko, where a developmental logic prevailed, privileging visibility and wellbeing over governance and producing markedly different experiences for youth councillors.

### 8.1.2 Youth Development Logic: Symbolic Inclusion and Constrained Agency

The results from Kiwi and Pūkeko illustrate how developmental logics translate into institutionalised marginalisation. Much of the existing scholarship critiques youth councils for reproducing tokenistic or symbolic forms of participation (Collin, 2015; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Matthews, 2001a; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Munyede et al., 2021). However, the results reveal how these dynamics are produced through the dominance of a youth development logic that prioritises visibility, wellbeing, and cultural celebration over political agency. In both councils, this logic materialised in practices such as annual social events, cultural performances, and public speaking opportunities. These activities fostered identity, belonging, and wellbeing, yet simultaneously restricted access to policy processes. Councillors were excluded from strategic discussions, lacked formal submission pathways, and were consulted only at officials' discretion. Also, in Pūkeko, adult-centric agendas often prevailed, with the interests of youth side-lined if their advice conflicted with the views of more powerful business groups, a concern reported in the literature (David & Buchanan, 2020; Tisdall, 2015). This further constrained youth councillors' ability to exercise political agency and shape decision-making, and in doing so limited their recognition as legitimate political actors.

The results indicate that by constituting young councillors as “developing citizens”, youth development logics limit participation, producing the very subjectivities that justify their exclusion (Bessant, 2004; 2014; Collin, 2015). The results reveal the way youth citizenship is institutionally constructed, demonstrating empirically how communication practices and adult decision-making routines reproduce youth as symbolic actors rather than rights-holders. The findings also deepen Hart’s (1992) critique of tokenism by illustrating how “participation as decoration” persists even in high-profile moments, such as Kim’s public appearance alongside the Prime Minister, where visibility masks the absence of influence.

At the same time, the results complicate the dominant narrative that developmental approaches are inherently tokenistic (Collin, 2015). Across all four councils, developmental orientations generated meaningful cultural and social value, particularly in regions where creative arts and recreational activities are central to community identity. Appointing a dance studio operator as Kiwi’s youth council coordinator, together with engaging Real as a youth development provider, demonstrates how councils integrated youth wellbeing into their institutional priorities.

These results contribute nuance to the literature by showing that developmental logics can generate genuine social benefits even as they constrain political agency. While scholars have noted that youth participation initiatives often prioritise wellbeing, confidence, and social development over political influence (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Tisdall, 2017), the duality of social enrichment alongside political exclusion remains under-examined. This study extends these critiques by demonstrating how this tension is produced through institutional logics within local government settings.

A synthesis of the results suggests that youth participation is less a procedural problem than a challenge to institutional structures and to the kinds of knowledge officials recognise as

legitimate. The barriers to meaningful youth influence arise not solely from poor implementation but from the dominance of particular logics that define what youth are imagined to be and what forms of participation are considered legitimate, resonating with work on the production of youth political subjectivities (Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Gordon & Taft, 2011). By conceptualising youth citizenship as something produced through these logics, the study provides a new explanation for the persistence of symbolic inclusion and offers a theoretically grounded basis for reform. A proposed hybrid model, retaining the social strengths of youth development while embedding rights-based mechanisms for policy engagement, aligns with scholarship on hybrid organisational forms (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). It advances new thinking about how local government can more effectively meet its CRC obligations (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009) and realise the democratic potential of youth representation.

In summary, this research demonstrates how institutional logics actively shape the possibilities for youth agency within local government, moving beyond familiar critiques of tokenism to explain why symbolic inclusion persists. At the same time, the research revealed that developmental logics in youth councils also generate meaningful cultural and social value, complicating assumptions that they are inherently tokenistic (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). By identifying the coexistence of developmental and rights-based logics and documenting incremental rights-based shifts within councils such as Ruru and Tūī, the study extends the theoretical application of institutional logics theory to youth council practice and offers a nuanced account of how youth citizenship is institutionally produced. Together these insights provide a framework for understanding youth participation and a practical foundation for designing hybrid models that support both wellbeing and substantive political agency.

### 8.1.3 Conceptualisation of the Youth Citizen

Building on the institutional logics identified earlier, this section draws on the three conceptual positions of the youth citizen outlined in Section 5.10 to interpret how adults' conceptualisations of youth shaped the scope, purpose, and legitimacy of youth participation. These positions are "youth as developing citizens", "youth as providers of a youth perspective", and "youth as participatory rights-holders". Across the four councils, officials' discourse and council documents revealed three dominant constructions of the youth citizen, which operated as institutional logics embedded in discourse, documents, and practice. These framings shaped not only how adults understood youth capability but also the institutional arrangements through which participation was enacted. This finding extends existing youth participation scholarship by showing how adult perceptions become embedded within local government organisational routines, producing patterned forms of participation (Collin, 2015; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Hickey & Pauli Myler, 2017; Matthews, 2001a).

The predominance of "developing citizen" and "provider of perspective" framings in Kiwi and Pūkeko illustrates how deficit-based and managerialist logics structure youth participation. These constructions positioned youth councillors as external informants rather than embedded civic actors, legitimising practices that restricted access to decision-making and reduced youth councils to information-gathering mechanisms. This aligns with scholarship that conceptualises adultism as a structural and institutionalised form of power embedded in governance practices (Bell et al., 2008; Bessell, 2009; Checkoway, 2011; Hickey & Pauli Myler, 2017; Tisdall, 2017). The present study advances this work by showing how these perceptions are reproduced through institutional documents, consultation processes, and communication practices. In this way, adultism is not simply interpersonal prejudice but an institutional logic that shapes participatory equity.

In contrast, Ruru demonstrated how a rights-based logic can emerge within existing structures when adult allies conceptualise youth as participatory rights-holders. Josh's mentorship and his aspiration to expand the youth councillor role into policy creation exemplified how this framing reconfigures participation from consultation to collaboration, enabling youth councillors to develop policy submissions, present to council, and begin shaping policy agendas. This finding contributes new insight into the mechanisms through which rights-based participation can be enacted in local government, an area where the literature has called for greater clarity (Canosa et al., 2022). It also illustrates how adult positionality, power, and commitment can catalyse institutional change, even within constrained systems.

Overall, the results from the four councils demonstrate that officials' and documents' framings of the youth citizen directly shape the scope of youth involvement, the expression of youth voice, and the extent of influence in governance. Deficit-based perspectives restrict participation and undermine agency, while rights-based framings enable deeper integration of youth into policymaking. Josh's claims for youth participatory rights and efforts to extend engagement from policy submissions to policy creation illustrate how institutional power can be resisted and incremental change achieved (Gallagher, 2006). Yet such progress often relies on committed adult allies, and this dependence is precarious given staff turnover and the persistence of officials who do not perceive youth as rights-holders (David & Buchanan, 2020; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017). Achieving substantive outcomes requires a broader re-conceptualisation of youth as complex, agentic actors rather than passive recipients of policy (Cadvill & Dadvand, 2018; Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005). However, entrenched adultism and contested understandings of youth citizenship mean that change is unlikely to be immediate. While debate continues over whether youth councillors' consultative roles should extend to policy creation, the literature is clear that structural reform is needed to move beyond

consultation and embed participatory rights more deeply in governance (Canosa et al., 2022; Collin & Vromen, 2010; David & Buchanan, 2020; UNICEF Innocenti, 2024).

Taken together, the research results show that conceptualisations of the youth citizen are not neutral descriptors but active forces that shape the expression of youth voice, the distribution of influence, and the authenticity of participatory practice. Deficit-based and managerialist framings restrict agency and reinforce symbolic inclusion, while rights-based framings enable deeper integration of youth into governance. The study therefore contributes to youth participation scholarship by demonstrating how institutional logics of youth citizenship produce divergent participatory outcomes and by identifying the conditions under which rights-based practice can emerge. This advances theoretical understanding of youth participation as an institutional phenomenon and provides a foundation for redesigning participatory structures that recognise youth as complex, agentic civic actors.

This study shows that adults' conceptualisations of youth function as institutional logics that shape participatory practice, producing distinct and unequal forms of youth citizenship. It extends existing scholarship by identifying three dominant constructions of the youth citizen within council operations: developing citizens, providers of perspective, and participatory rights holders. It demonstrates how each framing creates different opportunities for voice, agency, and influence. The analysis also offers new empirical evidence of how deficit-based and managerialist logics become embedded in documents, routines, and decision-making processes, entrenching symbolic inclusion. At the same time, it reveals how rights-based logics can emerge within existing structures through adult allyship, showing a pathway for shifting practice from consultation to collaboration. Collectively, these insights generate a new conceptual framework for understanding youth participation as an institutional phenomenon

and lay the groundwork for designing governance arrangements that recognise young people as legitimate civic actors with substantive participatory rights.

#### 8.1.3.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This study identifies a participatory rights-based institutional logic operating within youth councils, a dimension not previously articulated in the youth participation literature. Although rights-based approaches are well established (Canosa et al., 2022; Lundy, 2007; Tisdall, 2017), neither youth council scholarship nor institutional logics research (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012) has theorised rights-informed practice as an organisational logic. By conceptualising rights-based youth participation in this way, the study extends both the theoretical and empirical foundations of institutional logics research in youth governance. Recognising rights-based participation as an institutional logic reframes youth councils not merely as developmental spaces but as governance sites where rights, power, and organisational norms intersect. This re-conceptualisation opens new avenues for analysing how institutions enable or constrain young people's political agency and provides a framework for designing participatory structures that embed rights more systematically within local government practice.

In addition to identifying this new institutional logic, the study responds to calls for empirical applications of institutional logics theory within youth participation research**.** Although Augsberger et al. (2018a) conceptualised youth development and symbolic participation as logics, the empirical application of institutional logics theory to youth participation remains under-developed. Their work highlights the importance of linking practice to underlying logics (youth development, social justice, policy process, and symbolic tokenism) and explicitly calls for research examining how these logics operate in organisational

settings. This study addresses that gap by demonstrating how youth development and rights-informed logics coexist, interact, and shift within local government. In doing so, it extends the theoretical base of youth participation research and provides new empirical evidence in a field where institutional logics have been acknowledged but not systematically operationalised. It also contributes new understanding of how youth councils can transition from consultative bodies to representative democratic actors through integrated systems of outreach, deliberation, and policy engagement.

## 8.2 Representation through Reflexivity, Advocacy and Outreach

The second research question examined internal processes and engagement strategies that youth councillors used to amplify the voices of diverse youth in government policymaking. To address this question, this section synthesises the results in relation to the way reflexive participation styles, procedural mechanisms, support from officials, inclusive outreach and sustained engagement, collectively shaped a system which enabled youth councillors in Tūī and Ruru to advocate for and extend democracy to the broader youth constituency. Building on the discussion of bonding and bridging capital in Chapter Three, this section examines how youth councillors used reflexive engagement and outreach to strengthen bridging ties with the wider youth community.

### 8.2.1 Youth Summits and Policy Submissions

A key result from Councils Tūī and Ruru identified that young people's participatory rights were enhanced when written policy submissions were paired with meaningful community engagement. For example, alongside policy submissions, a youth summit convened by Ruru emerged as a second key mechanism for sustaining councillors' orientation toward

local youth concerns. It provided a vital space for local youth to deliberate on civic, social, and political issues relevant to their lived experiences. Importantly, insights from the summit informed both local and national policy submissions and were summarised in recommendations presented to local school principals.

Similarly, youth councillors in Tūī extended democratic representation by drawing on conversations with local youth, brief surveys, and a large-scale survey commissioned by the council to inform written policy submissions, verbal presentations to officials, and a youth council policy strategy. Insights from these surveys also informed the youth council's submission to the LTP, advocating for a youth development centre. Youth-led outreach and reflexive engagement in Tūī and Ruru strengthened the representational legitimacy of youth councils and embedded youth voice in policymaking processes.

These results offer insight into the way representation was enhanced by summits and submissions that provided structural avenues for youth voice, alongside internal mechanisms that attuned councillors to youth priorities and facilitated connections with decision-makers. These practices reflected dual dimensions of agency: procedural agency within institutional systems and relational agency through community mobilisation (Lister, 2008). Convening summits and drafting submissions represented empowered practice that strategically navigated adult-centric systems while maintaining a clear focus on youth-led priorities. In this way, youth voice shifted from symbolic gesture to embedded praxis, woven into deliberative processes, policy submissions, and community initiatives (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010).

Practice results from Tūī and Ruru challenge dominant critiques of youth councils as often inward-facing and disconnected from their youth constituents (Augsberger et al., 2018c; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Munyede et al., 2021; Wyness, 2009), by demonstrating how consultative mechanisms, when paired with community engagement,

can enhance the representation of youth constituencies. This underscores the importance of intentional practice, supported by responsive infrastructure and effective mechanisms, by showing that youth summits, surveys, and policy submissions are not simply procedural tools but mechanisms that can transform youth councils from symbolic bodies into representative democratic actors.

The results demonstrate that when youth engagement is reflexive, outward-facing, and grounded in sustained community dialogue, youth councils can counter the common critique of being inward-looking and instead function as legitimate intermediaries between young people and local government. This shifts the understanding of youth participation from consultation to representation, highlighting that meaningful youth voice emerges not from isolated mechanisms but from integrated systems of outreach, reflexivity, and advocacy. Yet, to meaningfully extend democracy to diverse youth, practice must move beyond mechanisms that amplify voice, such as youth summits and policy submissions. The next section illustrates that to some extent this was achieved in Tūī through reflexive participation styles and sustained advocacy.

### 8.2.2 Reflective Participation Styles

While the use of youth summits, surveys, and policy submissions from Tūī and Ruru reflected local priorities, Tūī placed a stronger emphasis on issues of power and equity through reflexive engagement. A noteworthy finding, particularly in light of literature portraying youth councils as inward-facing and disconnected (Bell et al., 2008; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010)), is that when youth councillors engaged reflexively and developed critical consciousness, they were able to represent their peers more effectively, challenge exclusionary practices within the council, and push back against tokenistic participation. Although scholars have suggested that internal reflexive

dialogue may strengthen representation (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017), there has been little empirical evidence demonstrating this in practice. This study shows that reflexivity itself operates as a mechanism for strengthening representation, offering empirical support for a claim that has previously been largely theoretical.

Youth participants from Tūī articulated a clear awareness of their marginalised status in local government and of the difficulties inherent in representing diverse youth. Officials scaffolded this process through training and workshops that enabled councillors to adopt justice-oriented reflexive practice. For instance, youth councillors reported that they applied Roger Hart's Ladder of Child and Youth Participation (Hart, 1992) to critically evaluate external engagement requests. The ladder functioned as a diagnostic framework to distinguish authentic opportunities from symbolic gestures, allowing councillors to decline misaligned invitations and resist tokenistic demands. This offers a second contribution: it shows how conceptual tools are used strategically by youth themselves, rather than only by adults or researchers, which is largely absent from existing literature.

Youth councillors gained a critical awareness from training which formed the basis to advocate for more representative involvement across the local government region. One councillor, connected to an underrepresented community, initiated culturally aligned outreach pathways for historically excluded rangatahi. Such practices illustrate how socially reflexive conversations, centred on youth priorities and lived experiences (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017), are essential for councils seeking to extend democracy and pursue social justice goals (Augsberger et al., 2018a). Reflexive dialogue, conceptual tools, and training collectively fostered bridging capital (Halpern, 2005), connecting youth across ethnic and social divides. Councillors interrogated participatory rights and systemic barriers, translating critical consciousness into initiatives that challenged exclusion. This provides a third new insight:

bridging capital is not incidental but can be intentionally cultivated through reflexive practice, and the study shows how such cultivation operates as a justice-oriented strategy that expands representation and challenges tokenistic participation.

This marks a shift from passive consultation to empowered engagement grounded in social justice principles, extending understandings of youth councils as potential sites of equitable representation through bridging capital (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 1993; Reid et al., 2021), and offering new insights that contrast with dominant critiques of youth councils as inward-facing and disconnected (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Munyede et al., 2021; Wyness, 2009). In doing so, the results challenge the prevailing assumption that youth councils lack meaningful links to their constituencies, showing instead that reflexive practice can generate outward-facing, equity-oriented representation.

Tūī youth councillors engaged in reflective practice, guided by Hart's model, resisted tokenistic consultation toward more equitable and inclusive participation. This underscores the utility of conceptual tools in shaping practice. Importantly, these tools are best used heuristically, as flexible, interpretive tools for sense-making, rather than prescriptively (Hart, 2008). Practice within Tūī illustrates how reflexive participation styles reflect deeper institutional logics, empower youth, and mediate youth connectedness to civic life. Council-based training supported awareness of marginalisation, representation challenges, and broader inequalities affecting youth (Augsberger et al., 2018c; Evans, 1995; White et al., 2017). With this awareness, councillors were better equipped to engage in critical reflection and devise strategies to enhance the engagement of excluded and under-represented youth.

The councillors' commitment to diversity and inclusiveness was evident in reflexive practices. These enabled them to challenge adult-centric norms and initiate inclusive strategies

to expand participation. Rather than accepting institutional constraints as fixed, they viewed their positioning as open to transformation, aligning with Pateman's participatory democracy (Pateman, 1970). Their practice also resonates with Cornwall and Coelho's (2007) criteria for inclusive institutions, which require critical engagement with representatives' claims and mechanisms for genuine representation. By interrogating these conditions and recognising how politics, social positioning, and inequality shape youth experiences, councillors cultivated agency and enacted empowered practice (Evans, 1995).

This result extends theoretical literature on bridging capital (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 2000). While the literature proposes that socially orientated internal conversations can help youth councillors build bridging capital and move beyond inward-facing practice (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017), empirical demonstrations of this mechanism remain scarce. Results from this research offered explicit examples of the process in which youth councillors gained a critical awareness, which translated to targeted action to engage under-represented youth and resist tokenistic practice. This forms a contribution: it demonstrates the concrete processes through which bridging capital is produced, identifying practical steps for equity-oriented youth participation. By showing that youth councillors actively adapted practices to reach marginalised constituencies, the result highlights how bridging capital is not incidental but can be strategically fostered to advance equity and inclusion. This extends social capital theory by connecting concepts of bridging ties with practical, reflexive strategies for youth participatory justice. Building on these reflexive practices, the next section illustrates how advocacy and long-term engagement enabled Tūī youth councillors to achieve tangible outcomes for local youth.

### 8.2.3 Advocacy and Sustained Engagement

A meaningful result of this research was Youth Council Tūī's involvement in establishing a youth development centre (see Chapter Seven), which exemplifies how positive results for local youth can be achieved through equitable youth–adult partnerships, effective community outreach, advocacy, and representation. The needs and priorities of local youth were identified through councillors' outreach conversations and a large-scale survey. Following a policy submission to the council's LTP, the process spanned multiple youth council terms, reflecting iterative, sustained engagement and deepening collaboration (Tisdall, 2015). It also fostered enduring relationships between officials and youth councillors, built on trust and mutual respect, contributing to an institutional culture that embeds youth participation. Youth participants described the equitable process leading to the centre as an example of the power of youth voice.

The process leading to the establishment of the youth development centre resembles exemplar co-production initiatives in some European countries, where participatory outcomes afford youth greater autonomy in policy design, assessment, and implementation (Tisdall, 2017). Such initiatives reflect sustained engagement in policy projects, equitable youth–adult partnerships, and genuine opportunities for youth to influence outcomes. In contrast, consultative mechanisms, the dominant youth participation strategy in Aotearoa NZ and across liberal Western nations, often limit youth to symbolic involvement, preventing substantive influence or broader structural change (Collin, 2015). While promising, co-production type initiatives (see Chapter two) remain rare, reflecting international patterns of fragmented and uneven youth engagement (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). The persistence of isolated successes underscores a broader challenge: translating exemplary models into systemic, institutionalised change. Although co-production initiatives offer the potential for sustained engagement and more equitable outcomes, they also present challenges to the nature of policymaking in local

government, which often reflects expediency (see Chapter Two). Consequently, initiatives of sustained engagement may be better suited to long-term undertakings such as youth centres (David & Buchanan, 2020). Notwithstanding these challenges, many council-led projects are already structured as long-term initiatives, positioning them well to support sustained youth engagement. Furthermore, equitably designed projects empower youth, enhance policy relevance, and foster more representative urban planning (David & Buchanan, 2020). They signal what is possible and strengthen calls to integrate youth more fully into relationships with professional planners and policy spaces, as the co-creation of policy.

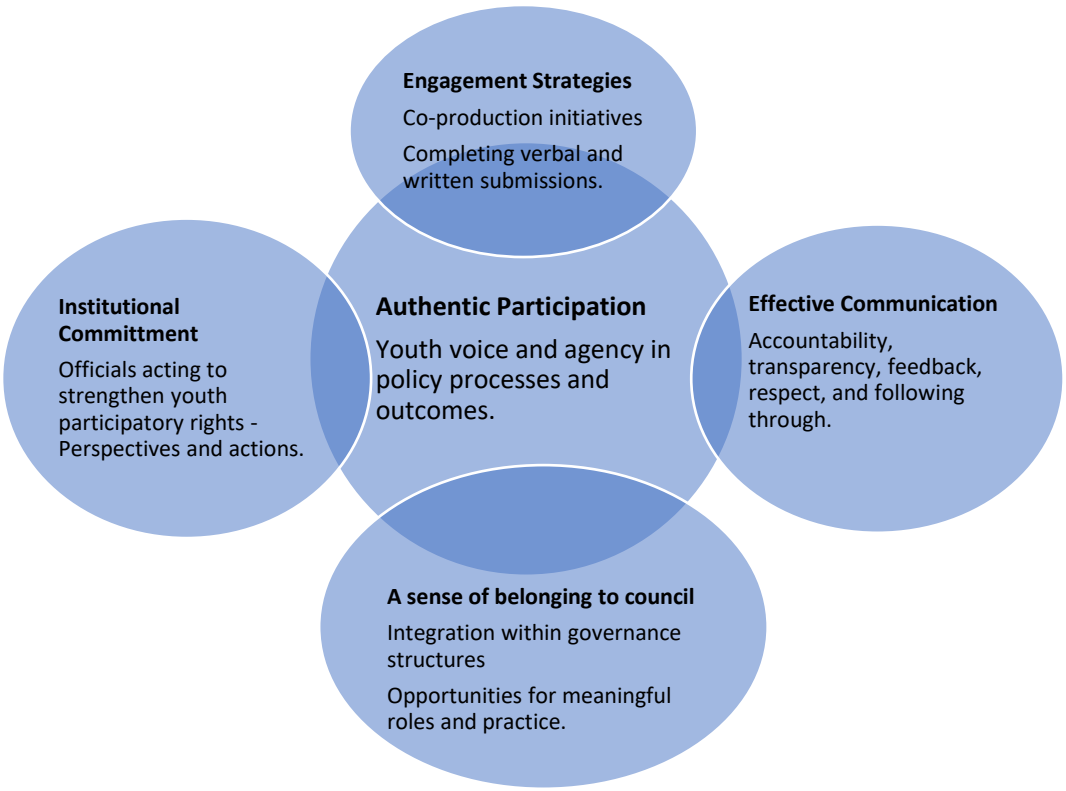
Tūī's work to establish the centre, with its focus on under-represented youth, reflects Freire's (1970, 1998) concept of dialogic action. Through authentic communication and collective engagement, councillors fostered mutual learning and critical reflection. This marked a shift from symbolic voice to embedded praxis, where youth were recognised as legitimate political actors shaping deliberative processes (Pateman, 1970). Tūī's responsiveness to the local youth community also aligns with Lister's (2008, 2017) concept of inclusive citizenship, which calls for recognition of difference, relational engagement, and the creation of spaces where diverse voices are heard and valued. In this context, youth representation becomes not only a democratic right but also a practice of recognition and belonging.

Collectively, the results across institutional logics, conceptualisations of youth, and representational practices reveal both the promise and fragility of youth participation in local governance. While rights-based logics, reflexive practice, and sustained advocacy illustrate how youth voice can be embedded in policymaking, these gains remain uneven across sites, and often contingent on supportive individuals or isolated initiatives. Participation continues to be framed primarily through consultative mechanisms, and community engagement

strategies are inconsistently applied, constraining the representative capacity of youth councillors.

Adapted from these empirical findings, Figure 8.1 below illustrates the interconnected components that support authentic youth participation in local government policymaking. Centred on youth voice and agency, it highlights four key domains: participatory strategies, effective communication, institutional structures, and adult support, that collectively enable meaningful roles, trust-building, and policy influence.

*Figure 8.1 Policy Process Frame - Elements of Authentic Practice*




The following section turns to these structural challenges, examining how the limitations of consultation and community engagement restrict the authenticity and reach of youth voice in local government.

**PART TWO**

## 8.3 Structural Limitations

This section examines the structural limitations in local government approaches to youth participation, drawing on findings from the two preceding sections. These limitations stem from an overreliance on consultation as the primary strategy for youth participation and from deficits in broader community engagement. Together, these factors shape the extent to which youth councillors are able to express youth voice, exercise agency, and meaningfully represent their peers.

### 8.3.1 Participation as Consultation

The divergent trajectories across the four council sites highlight the importance of responsive institutional design in shaping youth councillors' capacity to inform policy and represent diverse constituencies in accountable ways. In Tūī and Ruru, mechanisms such as policy submissions, verbal presentations, consultation working parties, scaffolding and close connections with key officials, structured deliberation, youth summits, committee alignments, and reflexive internal participation were evident. These processes were pivotal in moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward realising youth voices, interests, agency, and participatory rights. Yet such mechanisms did not guarantee consistent gains across regions. In Pūkeko and Kiwi, the limits of "participation as consultation" and discretionary inclusion were most apparent. Officials controlled agendas, youth councillors felt unheard, and policy-facing structures to support meaningful input were largely absent.

The exclusionary practices evident in Pūkeko and Kiwi councils reveal a paradox of youth participation. Youth councillors were highly motivated to represent and advocate for

their peers, addressing priorities such as climate change, transport, public spaces, safety, mental health, and vaping. This reflects broader scholarship on young people's interest in policymaking and their readiness to engage when opportunities are provided reinforced by their involvement in civic activism (Gordon, 2025; Harris et al., 2007, 2010; O'Toole, 2003; Watson, 2022; White et al., 2017), Yet critiques of youth councils as disconnected and reproducing inequalities highlight how institutional frameworks simultaneously invite and constrain youth voice (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Wyness, 2009).

Divergent outcomes across council sites show that consultative mechanisms, while symbolically important, remain structurally insufficient when participation is discretionary. This paradox underscores the disjuncture between youth councillors' aspirations and the institutional realities of council structures, pointing both to a theoretical tension around power and representation and to a practical challenge for local governments: the need to move beyond symbolic consultation toward embedded, resourced, and accountable mechanisms that enable youth councillors to exercise genuine influence (Augsberger et al., 2017; Collin, 2015). In sum, this paradox of participation highlights the disjuncture between youth councillors' aspirations and the realities of council structures. It underscores that consultation alone cannot deliver authentic representation. To situate these results, it is useful to compare Ruru and Tūī's experiences with global trends, which reveal similar tensions between youth aspirations and governance structures.

### 8.3.2 Global Comparison

Building on the paradox evident in Kiwi and Pūkeko councils, Ruru and Tūī's incremental progress through informal discussions, written submissions, and verbal

presentations mirrors global trends in youth council engagement. Global studies consistently show that while youth participation has grown in visibility and young people are increasingly present in governance spaces, they continue to face structural barriers, tokenism, a lack of resources, and adult gatekeeping that restrict substantive impact (Lansdown, 2005; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Munyede et al., 2021). For example, the UN's Policy Brief on Meaningful Youth Engagement stresses that while youth are increasingly consulted, their contributions often remain advisory, with limited binding influence (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). Input into annual and long-term plans, representation reviews, and regional/national policy by youth councillors aligns with findings from the Global Youth Council Guide (National Democratic Institute, 2021), which documents youth councils worldwide contributing to municipal planning and advocacy, though often with limited authority. Likewise, the Cambridge Handbook of Community Empowerment (Christens, 2024) noted that youth councils frequently influence agenda-setting but rarely control outcomes. Similarly, the European Economic and Social Committee's 2024 study emphasises that meaningful youth participation requires a rights-based approach, embedding youth voices into formal structures rather than relying on ad hoc consultations.

Ruru and Tūī's trajectory reflects this global reality: participation is happening, but rights-informed frameworks are not yet fully embedded. Their use of consultative mechanisms aligns with earlier models of youth participation, which were regarded as both markers of progress and best practice in their era, when the field was still developing (Lansdown, 2005; National Democratic Institute, 2021). However, contemporary frameworks emphasise that consultation alone is insufficient. Best practice now points toward rights-informed participation, requiring youth voices to be embedded in formal decision-making structures and critical governance documents, including long-term plans, representation reviews, and

statutory frameworks (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024; European Economic and Social Committee, 2024; Christens, 2024).

While the previous section highlighted the structural limitations of consultation, which mirror global trends in youth participation, these constraints are compounded by weaknesses in community engagement and outreach. Consultation may provide visibility, but without sustained and responsive infrastructure to connect youth councillors with their wider constituencies, participation risks becoming inward-facing and tokenistic. The following section examines how these deficits in engagement further fragment youth voice, reinforcing inequalities and limiting representative capacity.

### 8.3.3 Limitations in Community Engagement

Building on the structural limitations of consultation outlined in the previous section, this chapter now turns to the equally significant constraints in community engagement and outreach, which further fragmented youth voice and representative capacity. Uneven representation was evident across the four council regions. In councils Pūkeko and Kiwi, contact with constituencies was confined to organising local social events, with youth summits and policy submission processes missing. Without institutional scaffolding, councillors were left to interpret representational expectations informally, resulting in uneven, inequitable opportunities for youth representation. These results confirm existing studies of youth councils as inward-facing, with close-knit internal networks (bonding capital) but lacking bridging or linking capital through community engagement. Such exclusionary patterns limit the ability of youth councils to extend democracy to youth constituencies and reinforce existing inequalities (Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Wyness, 2009). This lack of responsive infrastructure raises questions about the authenticity of participatory commitments. It reflects an ongoing concern

of a lack of awareness, or unwillingness, among institutional actors to reconfigure governance processes to accommodate youth voice as political agency (Freeman & Aitken-Rose, 2005; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019).

Even in Ruru and Tūī, where responsive infrastructure was evident, structural limitations constrained democratic potential. Policy mechanisms fostered purposeful engagement, yet community connectedness remained sporadic. Aside from summits and the establishment of the youth centre in Tūī, there was little evidence of sustained community projects on civic issues with local youth, reaffirmed in George's nationwide review of youth council activity (Ruru). Importantly, youth councillors themselves voiced a desire for deeper, more inclusive engagement with youth communities, echoing concerns raised in prior studies (Augsberger et al., 2018c; Coffey et al., 1999).

All four councils relied largely on indirect methods to capture youth voice, such as website pages and infrequent district-wide surveys conducted every few years. While large-scale survey instruments and emerging digital technologies can generate useful policy data (Reid et al., 2021), they lack the relational depth required for meaningful engagement. Such approaches are often perceived as remote, reinforcing the disconnect between councils and youth communities (Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2015). There is a distinction between consultation, where youth views are solicited, and collaborative approaches that involve sustained engagement, shared knowledge-building, and co-created outcomes. The latter are widely recognised as more empowering. In contrast, one-off consultations such as adult-constructed surveys are often critiqued as tokenistic, offering minimal scope for youth influence (Faulkner, 2009; Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2015). Collectively, these results show that limited and sporadic community engagement constrains the representative capacity of youth councillors, reinforcing inequalities. These limitations highlight the need for

institutional infrastructure that supports ongoing, routine, youth-led engagement and co-created projects. Without such mechanisms, representation risks remaining symbolic rather than substantive, undermining youth rights as democratic citizens (Collin, 2015; Tisdall, 2017).

A normative realignment toward participatory justice is required, embedding youth voice as a democratic right rather than a peripheral gesture. Rights-based models situate youth as legitimate stakeholders in governance, entitled to influence policy across domains (Canosa et al., 2022; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020), fulfilling obligations under Article 12 of the CRC. This shift is essential for realising maximal notions of youth citizenship (Lister, 2008) and resisting deficit-based attitudes that continue to shape institutional practice. Moving toward rights-informed participation requires embedding youth voices into formal decision-making structures, such as policy submissions, rather than relying on ad hoc consultations as occurred in Kiwi and Pūkeko. Ruru and Tūī's trajectory demonstrates that, while progress is gradual, it aligns with international best practice and signals a shift toward more meaningful, rights-based youth participation in policymaking. Tūī's incremental progress reflects the global reality: participation is occurring, but rights-informed frameworks are not yet fully embedded, and substantive influence on policy outcomes remains isolated rather than routine and consistent across contexts. The following section outlines practical strategies to address these limitations and strengthen youth participation within everyday governance processes.

### 8.4 Strategies to Strengthen Youth Participation in Local Government

The limitations in consultation and community engagement outlined above underscore the need for structural reform. Addressing these constraints requires moving beyond ad hoc consultation toward embedded, rights-based approaches that institutionalise youth voice within governance frameworks.

### 8.4.1 Embedding Participatory Rights and Social Justice Goals

Results from Tūī and Ruru show that while mechanisms such as policy submissions and youth summits can foster engagement, they remain vulnerable to tokenism and discretionary inclusion. International evidence has demonstrated that explicit legal provisions or municipal youth policies foster sustained engagement, while their absence risks rendering councils symbolic and undermining legitimacy (UNICEF, 2024). Applying these lessons to Aotearoa NZ suggests that institutionalising youth participation through a Participatory Rights Charter would move practice beyond symbolic gestures toward rights-informed engagement. Conceived as a living document, the Charter should be embedded within LTPs, reviewed annually to ensure relevance, publicly endorsed, adequately resourced, and operationalised across departments. Co-developed with youth councillors and community stakeholders, such a charter could embed equity and representation into LTPs and mission statements, ensuring accountability across political cycles (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Tisdall, 2015).

A synthesis of the results suggests that embedding rights-based principles in key council plans would institutionalise youth participation, strengthen accountability, and ensure sustained commitment to participatory rights. Anchoring these principles within LTPs, urban planning frameworks, and council mission statements would structurally embed youth participation, reducing reliance on individual champions or shifting political will. Such an approach aligns with the study's evidence that rights-based logics emerge when youth are positioned as co-creators of public life, indicating that institutionalising these principles could transform youth councils from symbolic consultative bodies into legitimate sites of democratic citizenship.

**PART THREE**

## 8.5 Networks, Trust, and Participation: The Role of Civic Infrastructure

The third research question examined institutional responses that promoted participation of the wider, diverse youth community in civic initiatives. Building on the earlier discussion of bonding and bridging capital in Chapter Three (see Section 3.7), this section shows how civic infrastructure can actively cultivate bridging ties and expand youth participation. It draws together the empirical findings and theoretical frameworks to demonstrate how civic infrastructure shapes youth participation and social capital formation. Results from Tūī demonstrate how responsive council infrastructure enabled youth councillors to extend their reach and foster inclusive civic engagement. Integration within the Creative Councils Committee provided access to networks and resources, equipping councillors to implement initiatives with tangible community impact. With committee support, they developed a community website to improve awareness of local opportunities for youth, and convened a youth entrepreneurship summit, exercising autonomy in allocating grants. These practices illustrate how institutional scaffolding, when aligned with youth-led priorities, fosters social capital formation and embeds youth voices in governance.

Results from Tūī reflects Lister's (2008, 2017) emphasis on relational citizenship, where recognition, belonging, and participation are co-constituted through inclusive practice. It diverges from critiques portraying youth councils as disconnected (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019), showing instead how responsive infrastructure can embed youth participation within wider networks and cultivate transformative practice. Within Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) social justice framework, these initiatives exemplify advocacy, equity, and youth–adult partnership grounded in relational and place-based engagement.

These results helped the researcher make sense of the broader research topic by illustrating how civic infrastructure actively shapes the possibilities for youth participation. Rather than viewing youth engagement as an individual or voluntary act, practice in Council Tūī demonstrated that participation is deeply relational and structurally mediated. Seeing how the wider Council, including the Creative Councils Committee, provided networks, resources, and some measure of decision-making autonomy to youth councillors, clarified how institutional scaffolding can transform youth councils from symbolic bodies into meaningful sites of influence. This guided the researcher's relational interpretation of citizenship (Lister, 2008); not just as a theoretical lens but as a practical dynamic unfolding through trust, recognition, and shared decision-making. It also enabled the researcher to understand why some critiques of youth councils do not hold in contexts where infrastructure is responsive and aligned with youth-led priorities. In this way, the Tūī findings illuminated the central role of civic infrastructure in enabling equitable, connected, and socially grounded youth participation.

Much of the early social capital literature, notably Bourdieu (1986), Fukuyama (1995a, b; 1997; 1999; 2000; 2001) and Putnam (1993; 2000), was adult-centric, overlooking the unique interests and marginalised status of youth. Subsequent scholarship has begun to explore how social capital operates in youth engagement. Most studies of youth councils highlight tokenism, representational limits, or bonding capital, with some work touching on bridging social capital in broader youth civic participation (Camino, 2000; Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Flanagan & Christens, 2011; Furlong, 2016). Few studies, however, explicitly connect Putnam's seminal insights on associational life and governance effectiveness to youth councils as civic infrastructure. This research makes that link directly, demonstrating how youth-specific civic infrastructure cultivates social capital through associational life, bridging networks, and institutional scaffolding, thereby positioning youth associational life as central to democratic vitality. These dynamics also raised broader questions about how youth

participation is theorised, particularly in relation to the structural production of civic networks. This led the researcher to engage more critically with social capital literature, which has traditionally centred adults and overlooked youth-specific civic infrastructures.

The research results respond to the gap in social capital theorising in youth council practice gap by showing that youth-specific civic infrastructure, such as committee integration, youth-led summits, and council-supported outreach, actively generates forms of social capital that are uneven across regions but nonetheless significant in shaping democratic outcomes. In doing so, it demonstrates that social capital is not merely an interpersonal resource but an institutional product: it is cultivated when councils provide networks, resources, and scaffolding that enable youth to build bridging ties, expand associational life, and participate meaningfully in governance. This positions youth civic infrastructure as a structural condition for social capital formation, rather than treating young people as passive recipients of adult-defined networks. It also advances youth participation research by showing how institutional design can either enable or constrain the development of civic networks that underpin equitable representation.

An important and unexpected result was the marked regional variation in youth civic initiatives. In Tūī, councillors reported a vibrant civic community, including council-led projects and independent youth groups such as community gardens, SEAR at X College, climate action initiatives, and volunteering activities. These forms of participation align with Adler and Goggin's (2005) definition of civic engagement as acts intended to shape the community's future. By contrast, participants in Kiwi and Pūkeko were unable to identify local youth civic initiatives involving youth councillors. This divergence indicates differing levels of social capital formation across regions. Putnam's Making Democracy Work (1993), often cited as the seminal text that popularised the concept of social capital in political science,

provides a powerful backdrop for interpreting these findings. The contrast between Tūī's vibrant networks and Kiwi/Pūkeko's weak civic ties underscores how associational life shapes democratic outcomes, extending Putnam's insights into a contemporary, youth-focused context.

This regional divergence makes the contribution of this research clear: youth civic participation is not simply a reflection of young people's motivation or community culture, but a product of intentional institutional choices. The presence of vibrant youth initiatives in Tūī was not incidental; it emerged from deliberate council investment in programmes, partnerships, and structures that enabled social capital to form. Conversely, the absence of comparable initiatives in Kiwi and Pūkeko illustrates how limited institutional support constrains the development of civic networks. These findings demonstrate that councils play a decisive role in shaping the conditions under which youth participation can flourish, highlighting youth-focused civic infrastructure as a critical lever for cultivating social capital and strengthening democratic engagement (Furlong, 2016).

In contrast to the strong associational life observed in Tūī, the limited youth civic activity in Kiwi and Pūkeko underscores how weak civic infrastructure restricts opportunities for participation, echoing Putnam's (1993) insight that governance effectiveness depends less on formal structures than on the vibrancy of civic networks. Taken together, these results extend the social capital tradition by showing that youth-specific civic infrastructure is central to democratic vitality. Building on Putnam's argument that associational life underpins effective governance, the study demonstrates that when councils intentionally invest in youth networks, they generate forms of social capital that strengthen representative capacity and equity in local government. Situating youth participation within this intellectual lineage advances social capital theory beyond its adult-centric origins, reframing young people's

associational life as a cornerstone of democratic health (Furlong, 2016). These insights highlight the need for policy design that embeds youth civic infrastructure as a routine and equitable dimension of local governance, ensuring that youth participation is sustained not through isolated initiatives but through enduring institutional support. Collectively, these results demonstrate that youth participation flourishes not through isolated initiatives but through civic infrastructures that embed youth voice, cultivate social capital, and sustain democratic engagement.

### 8.5.1 Building an Institutional Culture of Participation

Embedding participatory rights in governance frameworks is essential, but structural reform alone is insufficient. Institutional culture determines whether youth participation is tokenistic or transformative (Braithwaite & Deane, 2023; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Halpenny et al., 2014; Holdsworth et al., 2007). The results from Ruru and Tūī show that when participation becomes an organisational ethos, youth are repositioned as civic actors and trusted contributors. Officials in both councils increasingly recognised youth as legitimate partners. Integration into policy submissions, consultation working parties, and subcommittees, supported by scaffolding from officials, enabled youth councillors to exercise voice and agency in substantive ways. When participation is embedded across departments, it signals to young people that their voices are valued; without this, it risks remaining peripheral or dependent on individual champions (Halpenny et al., 2014; Holdsworth et al., 2007). This demonstrates a key insight: institutional culture, not programme design, is the decisive factor shaping whether youth participation becomes meaningful.

Youth councillors were entrusted with purposeful roles: preparing submissions, co-producing a youth development centre (Tūī) and convening civic summits (Ruru and Tūī). In Ruru, a summit created deliberative space for collective engagement with social and political

issues. In Tūī, another summit stimulated youth entrepreneurship, with councillors exercising autonomy over grants. Notably, Eve's appointment as youth council coordinator, a role traditionally held by an adult, exemplified growing confidence in youth capabilities and repositioned young people as competent actors in governance. These practices reflect a shift from deficit-based approaches to rights-informed, equity-focused participation. This reveals how institutional cultures change when youth are given substantive, not symbolic, responsibilities (Holdsworth et al., 2007; Zeldin et al., 2016, 2018).

Entrusting youth with substantive responsibilities moved their contributions from peripheral consultation to central civic engagement, reshaping institutional expectations (Zeldin, 2018). This repositioning fostered intergenerational trust, disrupted adult-centric hierarchies, and sustained motivation (Flanagan & Christens, 2011). It also created fertile ground for bridging social capital (Camino, 2000; Evans, 1995). For example, Youth Council Tūī spearheaded efforts to enhance participation of underrepresented youth, discussed earlier in "Reflexive Participation Styles." This shows that bridging capital can be intentionally cultivated through institutional support, rather than emerging incidentally, a contribution that extends social capital theory into youth governance contexts.

Growing civic confidence, supported by scaffolding from officials and recognition by decision-makers, aligns with Cornwall and Coelho's (2007) criterion for inclusive institutions: participants recognising themselves as citizens and primary actors. In Tūī, councillors embraced this positioning, engaging actively in governance and community initiatives. This study demonstrates how institutional cultures are transformed when youth are entrusted with substantive responsibilities (Holdsworth et al., 2007). This provides an explanation for how democratic legitimacy is built: through intergenerational partnership and institutional trust, not merely through consultative mechanisms.

Integration into council subcommittees, such as the Creative Council Committee, reinforced youth councillors' sense of belonging and reflected Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) social justice framework, in which "youth and decision makers are closely connected." Neglecting this risks reinforcing exclusionary cultures resistant to youth inclusion. These appointments signalled partnership-based approaches, where youth were treated as collaborators rather than advisors. Meaningful roles affirmed civic agency and deepened trust between youth and officials. Practices such as consistent feedback, transparency, and accountability (Marshall et al., 2015; Tisdall, 2015) fostered positive relationships. As one councillor in Tūī reflected: "You want to be heard; you want to have a conversation. You don't want to be pushed aside." Trust hinges on whether youth feel their concerns are acted upon (Molloy et al., 2002). Without reciprocity, participation risks becoming tokenistic (Halpern, 2005). It reflects Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) social justice framework criteria: "youth and decision-makers are closely connected". Such practices signalled a collaborative, partnership-based approach in which youth councillors were entrusted with greater responsibility, fostering deeper trust between youth and officials.

Officials' proactive scaffolding further reinforced inclusion. For instance, a submission by Tūī on transport issues received a letter of support from the mayor, signalling institutional commitment. In Ruru, Josh's mentorship and incremental reforms expanded youth influence, engaging them in policy creation rather than limiting input to scheduled submissions. In both councils, youth councillors had clearly demarcated roles, completing submissions, participating in committees, and engaging in decision-making protocols, which enabled meaningful engagement with governance (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). By integrating youth into regular council processes rather than peripheral advisory boards (as in Kiwi and Pūkeko), they experienced greater capacity to influence decisions. Collectively, these results show that

institutional cultures shift when youth are recognised as civic partners, and that this shift embeds equity and participatory justice into governance.

Institutional culture, not just structures or mechanisms, is the decisive factor that transforms youth councils from symbolic consultative bodies into genuine sites of democratic citizenship (Holdsworth et al., 2007). The results demonstrate how local council cultures shift when youth are entrusted with substantive responsibilities, supported through scaffolding, and integrated into core governance processes. The results also confirm that intergenerational trust, partnership-based roles, and consistent institutional recognition are the mechanisms through which young people move from peripheral consultation to central civic engagement (Zeldin, 2018). While existing youth council scholarship has largely focused on structural barriers rather than cultural transformation (Freeman & Aitken Rose, 2005; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019), this study shows that institutional culture can be intentionally reshaped to embed equity and participatory justice. Together, these findings offer a conceptual and practical framework centred on institutional culture, intergenerational trust, scaffolded responsibility, and partnership-based governance for designing youth participation systems that recognise young people as legitimate civic partners.

## 8.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the conditions under which youth participation in local government shifts from symbolic inclusion toward rights-based, justice-oriented practice. Comparative analysis of the four youth councils identified a constellation of mechanisms, policy submissions, youth summits, committee integration, reflexive engagement, and adult scaffolding, that enabled youth agency and civic influence. At the same time, persistent limitations in responsiveness, uneven community engagement, and institutional reluctance to

share power revealed the fragility of discretionary inclusion. When institutional logics remain tied to developmental paradigms, young people are positioned as passive recipients of adult-defined agendas. In contrast, councils that adopt rights-based and relational logics cultivate meaningful roles, communicative reciprocity, and a sense of belonging. The divergent trajectories across the four councils underscore how institutional commitment shapes the depth and quality of youth participation.

Taken together, these results highlight the need for structural reform, sustained youth–adult collaboration, and the embedding of participatory rights within governance systems. Building on these insights, the next chapter turns from analysis to action. It translates the empirical findings into practical implications for policy, practice, and institutional design, outlining how councils can move beyond symbolic gestures toward structurally embedded youth participation. Central to this discussion is a proposed Youth Participatory Charter, which provides a framework for institutionalising youth voice and advancing inclusive, co-creative models of local democracy.

# Chapter Nine

## Conclusion and Recommendations: Tracing the Prospects for Youth Empowerment in Local Government

This research examined how youth councillors in Aotearoa NZ exercised civic and political agency within local government, offering insights into how institutional dynamics shaped both inclusive and exclusionary practices. Drawing on the perspectives of youth and adult participants, alongside documentary evidence, the research advanced understanding of existing participatory approaches and generated findings to inform policy and practice recommendations outlined later in this chapter.

The research was guided by three priority concerns in state-centred responses to youth participation: the limited impact youth have on policymaking and outcomes; inequitable representation within youth councils; and a disconnect between local government and the wider, diverse youth community (Collin, 2015; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Matthews, 2001a; Munyede et al., 2021). These concerns informed the following research questions:

1. What is the substantive role and impact of youth councillors in local government policymaking and outcomes, and what are the determinant factors?
2. What internal processes and engagement strategies do youth councillors use to amplify the voices of diverse youth in government policymaking?
3. What institutional responses promote the participation of the wider, diverse youth community in civic initiatives?

This study elevates youth perspectives, and offers insights into rights-based participation, in a way that responds to local and international calls for justice-oriented research (Canosa et al., 2022; White et al., 2017). It contributes knowledge on how rights-based aspirations are operationalised in practice, demonstrating how adults and youth collaborated as partners to empower youth in policymaking (Canosa et al., 2022). Additionally, the study responds to calls for research into how youth councillors pursue equitable representation and broader social justice objectives (Augsberger et al., 2018; Collin & Vromen, 2010; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017).

Chapters Two and Three reviewed the relevant literature, while Chapter Four examined practice models developed over recent decades to inform youth participation. Chapter Five outlined the study's grounding in social constructionism and a qualitative framework that centres the lived experiences of those marginalised within institutional systems. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with eleven youth councillors and six adult staff across four local councils, complemented by analysis of institutional documents, council websites, and national policy texts. The interpretive analysis was guided by a range of conceptual frameworks, including Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) table of conceptual frames, the three conceptual positions of the youth citizen outlined in Section 5.10, Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992), and social capital theory (Halpern, 2005).

Chapters Six and Seven presented the research results. Chapter Six addressed the first research question by examining the substantive role and influence of youth councillors in local government policymaking, alongside the institutional factors that shaped these outcomes. Chapter Seven addressed the second research question analysing how youth councillors engaged with and represented diverse youth constituencies through internal participation styles and outreach strategies. This chapter also addressed the third research question, examining how councils fostered broader youth civic engagement. Chapter Eight offered an integrated discussion that synthesised the key results and outlined the theoretical and practice implications. This final chapter provides a summary of the key findings and offers recommendations for practice. It proposes a youth participatory rights-based model tailored to the Aotearoa NZ context, drawing on mechanisms identified through the research and literature. Later, the chapter acknowledges limitations, offers directions for future research, and concludes with reflections.

## 9.1 Summary of Key Findings, Implications for Practice and Theoretical Contributions

This section synthesises the study's key findings and outlines their practical and theoretical implications, organised around five overarching themes.

### 9.1.1 Key Finding 1: Institutional Logics Determine Participatory Outcomes

This study demonstrated that institutional logics, together with internal organisational dynamics, determined the extent to which youth councillors were able to substantively participate in policymaking. Two orientations emerged, producing divergent practices across council sites and markedly different participatory experiences and outcomes for youth councillors: a youth development logic (Kiwi, Pūkeko), characterised by symbolic inclusion and constrained agency, and a participatory rights logic (Ruru, Tūī), marked by consultation

and informed engagement. As discussed in Chapter Two (Section 2.8), institutional logics operate as overarching meaning systems that shape what is considered legitimate and possible within governance structures, and this framework helps explain the contrasting participatory outcomes observed across the four councils.

The research identified several practice components that embody a participatory right-based logic by embedding youth perspectives into governance processes. These included written policy submissions, a consultation working party, youth summits, surveys, and structured adult scaffolding. Such mechanisms enabled youth councillors to articulate priorities and advocate for change across annual and long-term plans (LTP), representation reviews, and regional or national policy. The submission process was viewed by both youth and adult participants as a key pathway for expressing youth voice, underscoring its value as a formalised channel for influence. Youth voice was not only heard but acted upon, enhancing both the legitimacy and durability of youth engagement. Officials who recognised youth as participatory rights-holders actively worked to strengthen youth involvement in policy processes, shifting practice toward rights-informed participation. Collectively, these results illustrate how rights-informed practice can move beyond symbolic consultation to embed youth voice within formal decision-making structures. They show that incremental institutional adjustments, such as clearer communication channels, structured submission processes, and committed adult allyship, can cumulatively transform youth participation. Rights-based participation can develop within existing structures rather than requiring wholesale institutional redesign.

In contrast, councils that pursued youth development approaches (Kiwi and Pūkeko), where consultation occurred on an ad hoc and discretionary basis, tended to adopt exclusionary practices that restricted young people's voice and diminished their influence on policy. Although youth development approaches generated cultural, social, and wellbeing benefits for

individual youth councillors, they simultaneously constrained collective policy impact. This logic materialised in practices such as annual social events, cultural performances, and public speaking opportunities, which fostered identity and belonging but restricted access to formal decision-making. Youth councillors were excluded from strategic discussions, lacked structured submission pathways, and were consulted only at officials' discretion, illustrating how developmental logics can produce institutionalised marginalisation.

#### 9.1.1.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study advances understanding of youth participation by demonstrating how institutional logics shape the form, meaning, and outcomes of youth engagement in local government. It extends existing research on youth councils, which are often described as operating across multiple, loosely defined frameworks (Augsberger et al., 2024; Cushing & van Bliet, 2017), by showing how these frameworks materialise as distinct institutional logics that structure practice.

Although Augsberger et al. (2018a) conceptualised youth development and symbolic participation as logics, the empirical application of institutional logics theory to youth council participation remains limited. Their work highlights the importance of linking practice to underlying logics and explicitly calls for research examining how these logics operate in organisational settings. This study responds to that gap by applying an institutional logics perspective to youth councils and demonstrating how youth development and rights-informed logics coexist, interact, and shift within local government. In doing so, it strengthens the theoretical foundations of youth participation research and provides empirical evidence in a field where institutional logics have been acknowledged but not systematically operationalised.

A further contribution lies in identifying a rights-based institutional logic within youth councils, a dimension not previously articulated in the youth participation literature. Institutional logics is widely theorised (Thornton et al., 2012), but with limited application in youth engagement in local government (Kassman & Vamstad, 2019). While rights-based approaches are well established in youth participation scholarship (Lundy, 2007; Lansdown, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Tisdall, 2017), they have not been conceptualised as institutional logics shaping youth engagement in local government practice. By theorising rights-informed participation as an institutional logic, this study expands both the theoretical and empirical scope of institutional logics research in youth governance.

This analysis also clarifies the limitations of existing typologies. Augsberger et al.'s (2018a) "policy process" frame provides a prescriptive account of policy-focused activity but does not offer rights-informed mechanisms capable of addressing youth marginalisation or their limited influence on policymaking. Practitioners operating solely within this frame may inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies unless such approaches are paired with broader strategies for equity and inclusion. The identification of a participatory rights-based logic therefore offers a more transformative alternative.

Overall, this research demonstrates how institutional logics shape the possibilities for youth agency within local government, moving beyond familiar critiques of tokenism to explain why symbolic inclusion persists. By identifying the coexistence of developmental and rights-based logics and documenting incremental rights-based shifts within councils such as Ruru and Tūī, the study extends institutional logics theory and offers a nuanced account of how youth citizenship is institutionally produced. This provides both a conceptual framework for understanding youth participation and a practical foundation for designing hybrid models that support youth development goals alongside substantive political agency.

#### 9.1.1.2 Implications for Practice and Recommendations:

A shift toward rights-informed participation requires embedding youth voices into formal decision-making structures, such as policy submissions, rather than relying on ad hoc consultations, as occurred in Kiwi and Pūkeko. This demonstrates how rights-based aspirations and principles can be translated into empowering practice in local government in Aotearoa NZ through incremental adjustments to council structures. Mechanisms such as written submissions, verbal presentations, and mentorship strengthened youth councillors' participatory rights and positioned them as capable civic actors. By showing how institutional design aligned with rights-based and social justice logics fosters inclusive, accountable, and transformative governance, the study contributes to rights-based theory and provides practical guidance for councils seeking to embed youth voice in policymaking.

The research results suggest that hybrid approaches combining youth development-focused cultural activities with rights-based policy mechanisms could reduce uneven practice across regions and improve participatory outcomes for youth. It offers a practical pathway for councils seeking to move beyond symbolic inclusion, echoing critiques of tokenistic youth engagement (Hart, 1992; Wong et al., 2010)**.** Hybrid models offer councils a balanced framework that preserves social and cultural gains while simultaneously enhancing youth political agency. This result indicates that such models can generate more equitable and sustainable outcomes for youth in local government. By conceptualising youth citizenship as something produced through institutional logics, the study provides a new explanation for the persistence of symbolic inclusion and offers a theoretically grounded basis for reform. The proposed hybrid model, retaining the social strengths of youth development while embedding rights-based mechanisms for policy engagement, aligns with broader scholarship on hybrid

organisational forms (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) and advances new thinking about how local government can meet its CRC obligations (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009) and realise the democratic potential of youth representation.

### 9.1.2 Key Finding 2: Limitations in the Consultative Approach

Policy engagement primarily occurred through consultative mechanisms, completing policy submissions on matters already on the public consultation agenda. This occurred unevenly across sites. While a routine practice in Tūī and Ruru, it was sporadic and near absent in Pūkeko and Kiwi. This reliance on ad hoc consultations limited the consistency of engagement. Consultation across all four councils did not involve engagement with professional planners in policy creation and design. Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond ad hoc consultation and embed participatory rights into critical documents, such as the LTP. This would ensure more substantive, consistent and equitable opportunities for youth voice across regions.

#### 9.1.2.1 Implications for Practice and Recommendations: Institutionalising Commitment

The synthesis of results indicates that to move beyond consultation and discretionary inclusion, councils must consolidate young people's role in policymaking. Two reforms, outlined below, could shift youth participation from discretionary consultation toward structurally embedded, rights-based governance.

#### 9.1.2.2 Embed Rights-Based Principles in Core Council Planning Frameworks

Embedding rights-based principles in the architecture of local governance is a critical next step, allowing core council planning instruments to institutionalise youth participation and reinforce accountability. Anchoring these principles within LTPs, urban planning frameworks, and council mission statements ensures that youth participation becomes structurally embedded rather than dependent on individual adult champions or shifting political will (David & Buchanan, 2020). Such institutionalisation affirms young people as co-creators of public life and supports the evolution of youth councils into legitimate sites of democratic citizenship. A Participatory Rights Charter provides a concrete mechanism for embedding these principles across council systems.

#### 9.1.2.3 Establish a Participatory Rights Charter

A Participatory Rights Charter (Appendix H) offers a formal, co-developed instrument through which rights-based principles can be operationalised across governance structures. Conceived as a living framework, the Charter should be embedded within core council documents, reviewed annually for relevance, and publicly endorsed. It must be adequately resourced and implemented across all departments. By codifying participatory rights and outlining clear expectations for youth–adult partnerships, the Charter functions as both a symbolic and practical commitment to inclusive governance. It provides a reference point for evaluating council performance and guiding funding allocations. Grounded in integrity, accountability, and transformative intent, the Charter embeds youth agency across the full policy cycle, moving beyond tokenistic consultation toward power-sharing and equity. Anchored in Te Tiriti o Waitangi within the Aotearoa NZ context, it positions youth as civic actors within decision-making structures. The Charter operates a blueprint, ensuring

institutional accountability to facilitate inclusive youth participation. By honouring diversity and embedding equity, it becomes a catalyst for structural change.

### 9.1.3 Key Finding 3: Reflexive Practice, Bridging Capital and Equity Outcomes

The study revealed that democratic representation of the wider youth constituency was strengthened by two key factors. First, young people's democratic and participatory rights were enhanced when policy submissions and verbal presentations, which served as youth councillors' main advocacy tools, were grounded in community engagement activities such as youth summits and surveys that generated a clear representative mandate.

Second, training and diagnostic tools, including Hart's (1992) Ladder of Child and Youth Participation, fostered awareness of youth marginalisation within political systems and highlighted the challenges of representing diverse youth groups. These processes cultivated reflexive participation styles, characterised by a commitment to diversity, inclusiveness, and critical self-assessment. Youth councillors became better able to identify and challenge tokenistic adult engagement, assert youth priorities, and take deliberate action to engage under-represented groups. This reflexive awareness contributed to improved social justice outcomes by broadening whose voices were included in decision-making. The findings indicate that youth councils can generate bridging capital, connecting diverse youth across ethnic and cultural lines, thereby increasing equitable representation.

#### 9.1.3.1 Implications for Practice and Recommendations

The findings suggest several practical steps that councils can take to strengthen equity, representation, and democratic outcomes in youth participation. First, councils can enhance democratic and participatory rights by pairing formal policy engagement (such as submissions and presentations) with deliberate outreach mechanisms including youth summits, surveys, and community-based advocacy. These practices ensure that youth councillors are not only contributing their own perspectives but are also representing a broader and more diverse youth constituency. Second, the study highlights the value of training and diagnostic tools in cultivating reflexive participation styles. Tools such as Hart's Ladder can be incorporated into induction programmes, ongoing training, and reflective sessions to help youth councillors recognise tokenistic engagement, understand structural barriers to participation, and develop strategies to include under-represented groups. Embedding reflexivity into routine practice supports more equitable decision-making and strengthens youth councillors' capacity to act as representatives. Third, councils can intentionally foster bridging capital by supporting youth councillors to build relationships across ethnic, cultural, and social lines. This may involve targeted engagement strategies, partnerships with community organisations, and resourcing youth councillors to reach marginalised groups. Such efforts help ensure that youth councils reflect the diversity of their communities and contribute to more inclusive policy outcomes.

Together, these recommendations provide a framework for councils seeking to move beyond symbolic participation toward equitable, community-anchored youth representation. By embedding reflexive practice, strengthening outreach, and cultivating bridging capital, councils can create participatory environments where young people exercise meaningful influence and where diverse youth voices shape local governance.

#### 9.1.3.2 Theoretical Contribution

This research contributes to theoretical debates on bridging capital (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017; Furlong, 2016; Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Existing youth participation scholarship distinguishes between bonding and bridging capital and proposes that socially orientated internal conversations can help youth councillors build bridging capital and move beyond inward-facing practice (Augsberger et al., 2018a; Feringa & Tonkens, 2017). However, empirical demonstrations of this mechanism remain scarce. This study advances the field by providing empirical evidence of how bridging capital is actually produced in youth councils. It identifies the concrete processes through which youth councillors developed critical awareness, translated this into targeted action to engage under-represented youth, and resisted tokenistic practice. The findings show that bridging capital is not incidental but can be intentionally cultivated through reflexive participation styles and equity-oriented engagement strategies. In doing so, this research links structural concepts of bridging ties with practical, reflexive strategies for participatory justice, extending theoretical understandings of how bridging capital operates within youth governance. It offers a conceptual framework that explains how youth councillors move from inward-facing practice to outward-oriented representation, thereby contributing to broader debates on equity, representation, and democratic inclusion.

### 9.1.4 Key Finding 4: Limitations in Community Engagement and Representation

The research identified structural limitations that constrained democratic potential. Representation was uneven across the four council regions. In Youth Councils Kiwi and Pūkeko, engagement with the youth community on civic issues was near absent. There was a

prioritisation of youth development focus, with practice confined to organising local social events, and limited policy-engagement. In contrast, councils Ruru and Tūī were more connected to the youth constituency through youth summits, surveys and the establishment of the youth centre. These were key mechanisms that enable democratic representation, and in the case of the youth centre, positive outcomes for local youth. Across all four councils, there was little evidence of sustained community projects on civic issues with local youth, as routine practice. This was reaffirmed in a nationwide review of youth council activity conducted by Ruru. Importantly, youth councillors voiced a desire for deeper, more inclusive engagement with youth communities.

#### 9.1.4.1 Implications for Practice and Recommendations

An implication from these results is that routine, ongoing connections between youth councils and their constituencies are essential to move beyond episodic or symbolic participation. Youth-led workshop groups are required on long-term policy projects. These results underscore the structural change imperative: councils must embed durable mechanisms that ensure continuity of youth voice and safeguard representation across political cycles.

Addressing the Kiwi and Pūkeko youth councils' limited engagement with their wider youth communities could be achieved through adopting a hybrid model, a balanced framework that preserves social and cultural gains while simultaneously strengthening representation through community engagement. The findings indicate that such models can generate more equitable and sustainable outcomes for youth in local government.

Strengthening collective empowerment could also be supported through reinstating the Aotearoa NZ National Network of Youth Councils by Local Government Aotearoa NZ. Such

a forum would enable youth councillors to mobilise collectively to resist tokenistic practice and advance equity in participatory outcomes. Importantly, it would provide a platform for cross-translation of ideas on best practice and promising initiatives, allowing councils to learn from one another and embed more consistent, rights-based approaches to youth participation nationwide. By reinstating this forum, Local Government Aotearoa NZ could ensure youth councils are not isolated but part of a collective infrastructure, strengthening democratic legitimacy and embedding youth voice across regions.

The results from Tūī demonstrate how youth participation can become part of the institutional ethos, integrated across departments and everyday processes. This aligns with literature emphasising that participatory cultures must extend beyond structural reforms to become guiding institutional values (Halpenny et al., 2014; Holdsworth et al., 2007; Zeldin et al., 2018). Overall, these results highlight that community-anchored engagement is not a peripheral activity but a structural condition for equitable youth representation.

### 9.1.5 Key Finding 5: Regional Variation in Broader Civic Engagement

The results revealed marked regional variation in the extent of community-based youth civic initiatives. In Tūī, youth councillors reported a wide range of local civic activities, some led by council and others initiated externally, contrasting sharply with the absence of comparable initiatives in Kiwi and Pūkeko. Responsive council mechanisms in Tūī facilitated these initiatives, including grants for youth civic entrepreneurial projects and a collaboration with the Creative Councils Committee, which provided youth councillors with networks and resources to implement projects with tangible community impact.

These findings suggest that social capital emerged unevenly across regions, shaped in part by the presence or absence of responsive civic infrastructure. Place-based conditions therefore play a critical role in shaping democratic engagement, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive approaches to youth representation. The results highlight the need for policy design that invests in youth-specific civic infrastructure, enabling young people to participate meaningfully in local democratic life.

#### 9.1.5.1 Theoretical Contribution

Building on work by Furlong (2016) and Putnam (1993), the study demonstrates that associational life among young people is equally critical to democratic vitality. By showing how vibrant youth networks strengthen governance outcomes, the research extends social capital theory beyond its adult-centric origins and situates youth participation within its broader intellectual lineage. This positions youth civic engagement as a meaningful site for theorising how social capital is generated, sustained, and mobilised.

#### 9.1.5.2 Implications for Practice and Recommendations: Cultivating Social Capital through Youth-Led Initiatives

The study demonstrates that youth-led outreach, summits, and culturally aligned engagement pathways intentionally build bridging capital, strengthening networks of trust and representation across diverse communities. When supported by institutional scaffolding, such as resourcing youth-led summits, project-based initiatives, and partnerships with community organisations, these practices enhance youth participation, reduce disconnection from local government, and position youth councils as catalysts for wider civic engagement. This contributes to theory by showing how bridging capital can be extended through youth-led

initiatives, and to practice by highlighting concrete strategies for inclusive governance. Together, these insights show that youth civic infrastructure both mirrors and extends foundational social capital theory. They position youth councils as transformative spaces where social capital is generated not only as a by-product of participation but as a consciously enacted resource for equity-focused democratic governance. Together, these results demonstrate that youth civic infrastructure is not peripheral but foundational to democratic vitality, shaping both the quality and equity of youth participation across regions.

## 9.2 Broader Theoretical and Global Contributions

### 9.2.1 Conceptualisation of the Youth Citizen

Drawing on the three conceptual positions of the youth citizen outlined in Section 5.10, this research examined how adults' conceptualisations of youth shaped the scope, purpose, and legitimacy of youth participation within local government in Aotearoa NZ. These positions: "youth as developing citizens", "youth as providers of a youth perspective", and "youth as participatory rights-holders", were evident in practice in diverse and sometimes competing ways. The analysis identified how these discourses structured opportunities for agency, representation, and influence. The contribution lies in demonstrating how broader conceptual frames of youth citizenship become embedded within local government settings, thereby enriching theoretical debates and offering practical insights into the institutional logics that configure youth participation.

### 9.2.2 Global Comparative Insight

An important contribution of this research is the situating of local findings within international frameworks, including UN, EU, and global youth council studies. This research

enriches comparative scholarship by demonstrating that rights-informed practices in Aotearoa NZ reflect broader global struggles for meaningful youth participation. In particular, it shows that consultative mechanisms were sometimes embedded within council structures, but at other times remained ad hoc and discretionary, a pattern that mirrors global trends. This insight underscores both the fragility and potential of youth councils, highlighting the relevance of local practices to international debates on youth rights and democratic inclusion. These contributions position the study within a global movement toward rights-based youth participation, demonstrating how local institutional practices both reflect and shape international debates on youth citizenship and democratic inclusion.

### 9.3 Summary of Policy and Practice Recommendations

The following recommendations outline pathways for local governments to formalise their commitment to youth participation and strengthen democratic outcomes:

1. Adopt hybrid models that combine developmental approaches with rights-based policy mechanisms, supported by ongoing dialogue between youth, practitioners, and institutions to co-define what a rights-based might model look like in practice. This collaborative process is essential for ensuring that participation structures reflect lived experience, uphold youth rights, and are workable within local government systems.
2. Reinstate regional and national convenings, including the Aotearoa NZ National Youth Council Conference, to support cross-regional learning, collective empowerment, and the replication of promising practices.
3. Implement a Youth Participatory Rights Charter, supported by the full set of 18 principles and implementation guidelines in Appendix H, to embed participatory rights within core governance structures and ensure accountability across political cycles.

4. Embed reflexive practice and training, including diagnostic tools such as Hart's Ladder (1992), within induction and ongoing development programmes to strengthen representation, challenge tokenism, and support equity-focused decision-making.
5. Invest in youth-specific civic infrastructure, including youth-led summits, community partnerships, and resourcing for outreach initiatives, to cultivate bridging capital, strengthen civic networks, and anchor youth participation within everyday governance.

## 9.4 Research Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into youth engagement within local government structures in Aotearoa NZ, several limitations shape the interpretation and scope of its findings. A central limitation lies in the broad scope of enquiry. The research questions spanned three overarching themes, enabling a wide-ranging exploration of youth participation, but constraining the depth of analysis possible within each theme. Such breadth is appropriate for an under-researched area, as it supports the identification of emerging issues, conceptual boundaries, and future research directions. However, it also means that the findings should be understood as mapping the landscape rather than offering in-depth accounts of any single dimension of youth engagement. Moreover, a broad scope allowed the researcher to embrace complexity, such as the interconnectedness between the range of institutional dynamics that informed participation outcomes. This trade-off also presents a valuable opportunity for future research: by narrowing the focus to a single theme or question, subsequent studies could generate deeper, more nuanced insights.

There are limitations in respect of the composition and size of the participant group. Although qualitative research does not seek statistical generalisability, the number of participants within each council affects the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn. For

example, only one participant was recruited from Pūkeko Council, limiting the extent to which findings can be interpreted as reflective of that council's wider youth engagement environment. More broadly, the sample did not include disabled youth. The absence of these perspectives restricts the reach of the findings and limits the study's ability to speak to the experiences of this group who may face distinct barriers or opportunities in local governance. In particular, the lack of an Indigenous lens means the findings cannot fully address how youth participation is shaped by Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, Māori governance models, or kaupapa Māori understandings of citizenship.

These sampling constraints affect the proximal similarity of the findings, that is, the degree to which the contexts studied resemble other youth governance settings. All participating youth councils were integrated within the wider council, or local government structures, which constrained the breadth of data, and limited insight into autonomous models of youth governance. During the recruitment stage of this study, the researcher attempted to engage with the only youth council known to function autonomously to the wider council structure. However, this council was located in the region directly impacted by the Christchurch mosque shootings of March 2019, and this council understandably informed the researcher that they were not in a position to participate in research activities. As a result, the findings offer limited insight into autonomous or youth-led governance models. Significant advances in understanding youth participatory citizenship could be achieved by examining youth councils in Aotearoa NZ that operate autonomously.

A further limitation is the timeframe between data collection and thesis completion. The data was collected in 2019, raising potential concerns about currency and relevance. Personal circumstances and the Covid 19 experiences contributed to delays. To mitigate this, the researcher conducted a review of recent literature in the six months leading up to the

completion of this research. This updated scholarship is reflected throughout the thesis and supports the continued relevance of its findings. Notably, recent studies affirm that the contested and ambiguous status of youth in local government remains largely unchanged (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Munyede et al., 2021). The scoping review by Canosa et al. (2022) offers a particularly important contribution, highlighting the need for future research to capture exemplar examples of rights-informed practice. Nevertheless, the temporal gap means that the findings should be interpreted with awareness of possible changes in youth engagement practices or council structures since the time of data collection. Taken together, these limitations do not diminish the value of the study but instead clarify the boundaries within which its findings should be understood. They also point to important opportunities for future research, including deeper, more focused investigations.

## 9.5 Future Research

Researching youth participation within political systems is vital for advancing social justice. Citizenship is a momentum concept, one that must be continually reworked to realise its egalitarian and anti-hierarchical potential, particularly for marginalised groups (Hoffman, 2004). There is abundant room for research to produce knowledge that works to move participation from consultation to more maximal forms of youth citizenship (White et al., 2017).

Further research is required to identify exemplar practice initiatives that capture the context, purpose, and process of rights-informed youth participation. This includes the challenges faced, decisions made, and outcome achieved. Questions could focus on how adults and youth work together in local government as partners to empower youth in policymaking (Canosa et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2019; Zeldin et al., 2018). This is an important

consideration because while critiques of practice are well-established (Collin, 2015; Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Matthews, 2001a; Munyede, 2021), there has been less attention paid to understanding strong youth-partnership approaches in local government.

Importantly, questions could be asked to gain further insights into the way youth participatory rights are understood by youth and adult practitioners. This is an important consideration as constructions of the youth citizen and their legitimate role in policymaking, largely determine the shape participation takes and the outcomes achieved (Hickey & Pauli-Myler, 2017; Holdsworth et al., 2007). Likewise, the way youth perceive their civic and political role and identity is critical to progress empowerment and limit adult-centric understandings. The importance of rights-based research was identified by Canosa et al.'s (2022) in their scoping review of academic and non-academic resources. This work not only highlighted tensions between the rhetorical aspirations of rights-based participation and the realities of practice. It also showed a lack of synthesis regarding the nature, purpose, and evidence base of rights-informed resources, and a need for research that documents how participatory rights are translated into practice across diverse contexts.

Furthermore, studies could adopt critical methodologies with emancipatory goals, enabling youth to contest institutional power and consolidate participatory rights. Such approaches align with calls in the literature to strengthen institutional accountability and implement youth-centric participatory structures (David & Buchanan, 2020; Kassman & Vamstad, 2019; Perry-Hazan, 2016). This is a critical consideration given the marginalised position of youth in state-centred political systems (Collin, 2015).

Bridging capital emerged as a key enabler of youth participation in this study. Further research is needed to establish how council officials and youth councillors, working together

in Aotearoa NZ can further facilitate bridging capital to increase representation, equity, and invigorate local civic initiatives. While there is extensive literature linking social capital to effective local governance, this is largely non-youth-specific (Halpern, 2005; Putman, 1993; Reid et al., 2021).

Future research on autonomous youth-led councils would provide valuable insights into the distinct contributions of youth-driven governance, offering a meaningful contrast with the integrated council model that currently predominates. Examining councils that operate independently from local government structures could illuminate how autonomy shapes youth agency, decision-making power, and representational legitimacy. Such research would also help identify whether independent models foster different forms of civic learning, political efficacy, and community accountability compared with councils embedded within formal governance systems. By exploring these alternative organisational arrangements, future studies could broaden theoretical understandings of youth participatory citizenship and reveal new pathways for designing equitable, youth-centred governance frameworks.

While this research revealed that councils use large-scale surveys to capture children's perspectives, further studies are required to better understand how the voices, needs, and interests of children, as distinct from youth, are represented in participatory planning processes in Aotearoa NZ. This would extend the existing international literature which highlights creative practices of inclusion of children in urban planning (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres, 2015; Smith, 2015).

Importantly, future research would be strengthened by adopting Kaupapa Māori methodologies. Western frameworks, which shaped this study, continue to dominate global literature on youth civic participation (Hart, 2008). Kaupapa Māori approaches offer culturally

grounded, relational, and transformative pathways for research that honours indigenous knowledge and tino rangatiratanga.

Another important area for future research is the role of youth civic groups that operate outside formal council structures, including Māori youth organisations and kaupapa-based collectives. Little is known about how these groups form, what kinds of participation they enable, or how they might connect with, complement, or challenge youth councils. Since formal youth civic groups beyond local government are not well developed in Aotearoa NZ, examining this gap would help identify what kinds of organisational arrangements could broaden youth voice, strengthen rangatahi leadership, and support rights-based participation beyond council-embedded models. Such research would also illuminate how Indigenous and youth-led collectives conceptualise civic action, decision-making, and community accountability in ways that differ from Western institutional frameworks.

These identified research areas in rights-informed research present exciting opportunities for researching youth participatory citizenship in local government in Aotearoa NZ. Such research is required to advance youth participatory rights and maximal citizenship. The importance of this further research is underscored by the significant role that local government has in shaping the political, urban, social and civic landscape, and the investment that youth have as current and future citizens in planning decisions, many of which have long-term implications.

### 9.6 Conclusion

This research examined how youth councils in Aotearoa NZ contribute to youth participatory citizenship, and how institutional, relational, and cultural conditions shape the possibilities for meaningful youth engagement in local governance. Through a multi-site qualitative study, it identified the mechanisms that enable or constrain rights-based

participation, highlighting the central role of adult conceptions of youth, organisational cultures, and community-anchored engagement practices.

The results demonstrate that youth participation is most effective when councils embed rights-based principles within their governance structures, cultivate reflexive participation styles, and support youth councillors to build bridging capital across diverse communities. These practices move youth councils beyond symbolic consultation toward representative, equity-oriented forms of democratic participation. The study also showed that rights-based thinking among officials is both possible and transformative, challenging deficit-based assumptions that dominate much of the youth participation literature.

Theoretically, this research advances understandings of bridging capital by providing empirical evidence of how it is intentionally cultivated within youth governance settings. It also contributes to institutional logics scholarship by identifying a rights-based logic shaping youth participation in local government, an area previously under-theorised. Practically, the study offers a framework for councils seeking to strengthen youth voice through structural embedding, community engagement, and collective empowerment. This research shows that youth councils can cultivate the social capital and civic infrastructure needed for sustained youth engagement. The Tūī case demonstrated how youth councils act as civic intermediaries: building networks, fostering trust, and creating participatory spaces that connect young people to local governance. By strengthening bridging ties and embedding youth voice across departments, youth councils help generate the conditions that enable young people to participate confidently and continuously in public life.

While the study was limited to youth councils integrated within local government structures, it opens new avenues for future research, particularly into autonomous youth-led governance models. Such work would deepen understanding of how organisational

arrangements influence youth agency, representation, and democratic outcomes. Overall, this research argues that youth councils can serve as legitimate sites of participatory citizenship when supported by rights-based institutional cultures and meaningful community engagement. Realising this potential requires sustained commitment from adults and institutions, but the findings demonstrate that transformative, equitable youth participation is both achievable and essential for strengthening local democracy in Aotearoa NZ.

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**Appendices**

**Appendix A**
**Letter of Invitation**




Chief Executive

X City Council

Private Bag X

X Mail Centre

25 February 2019

Dear X

PhD research project-Invitation to Participate

My name is Philippa Wood and I am currently enrolled in a PhD programme in Social Policy at Massey University, Palmerston North Campus. I am undertaking a research project titled the *Role of Organisations in Promoting the Meaningful Civic Participation and Citizenship of Young People in Aotearoa NZ New Zealand.*

This study aims to examine adult and youth perspectives on how organisations create and implement civic opportunities for young people. Specifically, the study aims to investigate adult and youth perspectives on how organisation culture, participatory models, practices and policy facilitates the meaningful civic participation of young people.

For this project, I am seeking to interview six participants from your organisation as a local government or community provider of youth programmes, activities and/or Youth Council in the Lower North Island. I wish to request assistance from your organisation to recruit participants for the study. Participants from each organisation include: one board member and/or programme manager, two youth workers and three young persons. The interviews are anticipated to take about 2.5 hours of time which includes 2 hours for the interview and reading time and a further 30 minutes to review the interview transcript.

In this research study, I am interested in participants' perspectives (such as organisation board members or practice managers) of how organisations create an environment where young people feel a sense of belonging, and incorporate programmes and opportunities that support young people in terms of expressing their views, support the development of decision-making and leadership competencies, and building community connections. I am interested in youth workers' perspectives on developing relationships with, and supporting young people. The

contribution of young people is particularly important for this study such as their perspectives on how they are supported to participate and specific practices that ensure that young people from a wide range of backgrounds are supported to participate.

An aim of this study is to explore and gather information that may contribute to the development of conceptual models of practice in respect of supportive adult-youth relationships. The research also involves exploring the principles of youth civic participation that are embedded in the conceptual frameworks and policies of organisations, and specifically how these relate to and guide the practice of youth civic participation. For this reason, I am seeking permission to access organisation documents of this nature such as policy, strategy and practice guidelines.

If your organisation agrees to participate in this study, it is proposed that I initially meet with an organisation liaison person to discuss and negotiate the research process. This process will involve a mutual discussion and agreement on how best to proceed with the research process, recruitment and sourcing relevant organisation documents. In doing so, it will ensure the organisation has full information about the purposes of the study, what the data collection stage involves, benefits to the organisation and ethical issues regarding potential risks to individual participants or the organisation. I am hoping that using this process will help addressing any concerns or issues about the study, to ensure that it proceeds in the best way for the organisation and the research. It is anticipated that I continue to work with the liaison person throughout the duration of the data collection stage of this study.

I have enclosed copies of three separate information sheets for further information. The information sheets pertain to each group of participants: programme manager/board member, youth worker and young person.

As this research forms the basis of a PhD thesis in Social Policy at Massey University, it is a supervised piece of work. If there are any concerns about the research, they can be conveyed to my supervisors:

| | |
|---|---|
| Dr. Polly Yeung | Tel: (06) 356 9099 ext 83514 |
| Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work | Email: p.yeung@massey.ac.nz |
| Massey University | |
| Palmerston North Campus | |
| Dr. Nicky Stanley-Clarke | Tel: (06) 356 9099 ext 83515 |
| Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work | Email: N.Stanley-Clarke@massey.ac.nz |
| Massey University, | |
| Palmerston North Campus | |

If you wish to contact me I can be contacted on cell [redacted] or by email at [redacted].

Yours Faithfully, Philippa Wood

**Appendix B**
**Information Sheet for Staff/Managers**

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

*The Role of Organisations in Promoting the Meaningful Civic Participation and Citizenship of Young People in Aotearoa NZ New Zealand*

Information Sheet for Organisation Board Member/Manager

My name is Philippa Wood and I am currently enrolled in a PhD programme in Social Policy. You are invited to participate in this research study of an exploration of youth civic participation within public community and local government organisations in Aotearoa NZ New Zealand.

Purpose and aims of the Study

There is compelling evidence that civic opportunities provide benefits to young people, organisations and communities. Studies indicate that young people, when supported by adults, actively participate in organisations and community decision-making, they are likely to display greater confidence, self-worth and control over their lives, build stronger social connections and develop an awareness of important social and community issues.

This study aims to investigate adult and youth perspectives on how organisations create and implement civic opportunities for youth. These opportunities may include young people developing their leadership and decision-making competencies, influencing policy and the development of organisation programmes. It may also include providing the opportunity and support for young people to be involved in community activities, issues and decision-making that provide a benefit to the community.

It is envisaged this research study will contribute to the development of conceptual models of practice in respect of supportive adult-youth relationships, that is the role of youth workers in developing relationships with, and supporting young people. The perspectives of board members, and programme managers who are involved in staff management of youth workers, are imperative for your knowledge and experience in respect of planning and decision-making of youth programmes/ activities, and for in-depth knowledge of organisation culture, strategic direction and policy.

Project procedures

This research will also invite other participants such as youth workers and young people in your organisation but this invitation is to seek one board member or programme manager from your organisation to participate in a face-to-face interview.

It is anticipated that the interviews will take about 2.5 hours of time. This includes 2 hours for the interview and reading time and a further 30 minutes to review the interview transcript. The

interviews will be digitally recorded using an audio Dictaphone. In order to ensure that participation is confidential, it is proposed that interviews occur outside of work hours and at the public library or similar public venue.

The research also involves exploring organisation data that includes conceptual frameworks, principles and policies that specifically relate to and guide the practice of youth civic participation. Therefore, I am seeking permission to access organisation documents such as policy and practice guidelines that specifically relate to this stated purpose.

How will the information be stored?

All data will be stored securely by digital recording on my personal computer and available only to me and my supervisors. The written consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home which only I have access to. Following examination of the report all written data including the consent forms will be disposed by shredding. The digital recorded transcripts will be stored on my personal computer and following examination of the final report, will be deleted.

Participant rights

A summary of research findings will be provided to all participants.

The purpose of the study is to obtain data that will contribute to the body of existing knowledge on best practice on youth civic participation within organisations in Aotearoa NZ New Zealand. Specifically, the research seeks to advance knowledge in areas where there is a lack of solid data. For example, there is limited data of the nature of conceptual models of practice on youth civic participation within organisations. The research is in no way concerned with the performance of individual staff or managers. Nor is it a critique of the performance of any organisation. In order to provide reassurance for individual employees I am requesting that organisation managers sign a confidentiality agreement that the research findings will not form the basis for evaluation of individual employees.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question.
- withdraw from the study at any time prior to signing the release of the transcript authorisation form. This can be done through contact with the researcher via email [redacted] or phone: [redacted].
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher.
- the opportunity to review and amend transcripts prior to submission.
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- You can ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.
- You have the right to decline to answer any particular question.

Confidentiality of information will be protected throughout by the following measures:

While the research information outlined in the information sheets may be available to all in the organisation (managers/board members, staff and young people) participation is voluntary and no other person in the organisation will know the identity of each individual participant other than the researcher.

i. The interviews recordings will only be heard by the researcher.
ii. All data that is transcribed will have identifying characteristics removed and pseudonyms provided.
iii. Material from the transcripts may be used in the final report and academic publications. However, all information will be presented anonymously and it will not be possible to identify you in any information that is presented as a consequence of the research.
iv. Individual employees will be protected by a confidentiality agreement signed by organisation managers. This will ensure that the research findings will not form the basis for evaluation of individual employees.

As this research forms the basis of a PhD thesis in Social Policy at Massey University it is a supervised piece of work. If there are any concerns about the research, they can be conveyed to my supervisors:

Dr. Polly Yeung — Tel: (06) 356 9099 ext 83514

Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work — Email: p.yeung@massey.ac.nz

Massey University

Palmerston North Campus

Dr. Nicky Stanley-Clarke — Tel: (06) 3569099 ext 83515

Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work — Email: N.Stanley-Clarke@masasey.ac.nz

Massey University, Palmerston North

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 17/22. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83657, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz

Please do not hesitate to contact me about any aspect of the research. I can be contacted on phone [redacted] or by email [redacted]

**Appendix C**
**Information Sheet for Youth**




*The Role of Organisations in Promoting the Meaningful Civic Participation and Citizenship of Young People in Aotearoa NZ New Zealand*

Information Sheet for Youth Participants

My name is Philippa Wood and I am currently enrolled in a PhD programme in Social Policy. You are invited to participate in this research study of an exploration of youth civic participation within public community and local government organisations in Aotearoa NZ New Zealand.

Project purpose and aims

Studies indicate that young people, when supported by adults, actively participate in organisations and community decision-making, they are likely to display greater confidence, self-worth and control over their lives, build stronger social connections and develop an awareness of important social and community issues.

This study aims to investigate adult and youth perspectives on how organisations provide opportunities for youth. These opportunities may include young people developing their leadership skills or involvement in decision-making on organisation policy and programmes. It may also include support to connect young people to other community programmes and opportunities.

This study aims to explore how organisations can improve on working with young people and making organisations a place where young people want to be involved.

Project procedures

This research will also invite other participants such as organisation board member/programme manager and youth workers in the organisation you are currently involved with but this invitation is to seek three young people who have been involved with the organisation for at least the last three months like yourself to participate in a face-to-face interview.

It is anticipated that the interviews will take about 2.5 hours of time. This includes 2 hours for the interview and reading time and a further 30 minutes to review the interview transcript. The interviews will be digitally recorded using an audio Dictaphone. In order to ensure that participation is confidential, it is proposed that interviews occur at the public library or a similar public venue.

How will the information be stored?

All data will be stored securely by digital recording on my personal computer and available only to me and my supervisors. The written consent forms will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at my home which only I have access to. Following examination of the report all written data including the consent forms will be disposed by shredding. The digital recorded transcripts will be stored on my personal computer for a period of two years following examination of the final report, and then deleted.

Participant rights

A summary of research findings will be provided to all participants.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question.
- withdraw from the study at any time prior to signing the release of transcript authorisation form. This can be done through contact with the researcher via email [redacted] or phone: [redacted].
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher.
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- You can ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Confidentiality of information will be protected throughout by the following measures:

While the information sheets outlining the study may be available to all in the organisation (managers, adult staff and young people) participation is voluntary and no other person in the organisation will know the identity of each individual participant other than the researcher.

i. The interviews recordings will only be heard by the researcher.
ii. All data that is transcribed will have identifying characteristics removed and pseudonyms provided.
iii. Material from the transcripts may be used in the final report and academic publications. However, all information will be presented anonymously and it will not be possible to identify you in any information that is presented as a consequence of the research.

As this research forms the basis of a PhD thesis in Social Policy at Massey University it is a supervised piece of work. If there are any concerns about the research, they can be conveyed to my supervisors:

Dr. Polly Yeung — Tel: (06) 356 9099 ext 83514

Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work — Email: p.yeung@massey.ac.nz

Massey University

Palmerston North Campus

Dr. Nicky Stanley-Clarke Tel: (06) 3569099 ext 83515

Senior Lecturer, School of Social Work Email: N.Stanley-Clarke@massey.ac.nz

Massey University

Palmerston North Campus

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 17/22. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83657, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz

Please do not hesitate to contact me about any aspect of the research. I can be contacted on phone [redacted] or by email [redacted]

## Appendix D
## Interview Schedule for Youth

Introduction

Could you please give me some background information about your experience within this organisation: your role here, time spent here, what activities you are involved with?

Can you tell me about key programmes provided by the organisation to youth?

Building positive supportive youth-adult relationships

This section will explore youth perspectives on how young people and adults work together within the organisation.

Questions:

1. What are the qualities of adult staff and ways of working with young people that you find most helpful? For example, having a say in the type of activity or event run, staff providing instruction/teaching/training on specific issues.
2. Are there qualities of adult staff and ways of working with young people that are not helpful or could be more helpful?
3. Can you give examples of activities or events where young people and adults work together? Did adult staff support you in participating in the activity or event? How?
4. I am interested in your perspective regarding whether there is a focus within the organisation on building supportive adult-youth relationships?

Youth voice

This section will explore youth perspectives regarding processes and practices used by organisations to enable young people to express their voice.

Questions:

1. Do you think that young people are able to express their voice in the organisation? In what ways does this occur?
2. Youth voice in activities-have you had a say in the planning and running of specific programme activities and projects?
3. Have adults have supported you to express your views and opinions in organisation and/or community activities, programmes and events? How? What has been helpful in assisting you to speak up and express your views and opinions?
4. Have you had an opportunity to express your voice in wider community settings (for example providing feedback to adults in authority-organisation and government officials)?
5. Are there any ways would you like to have been able to express your views and opinions but have not been able to?

Decision-making

This section will explore youth perspectives regarding opportunities to be involved in decision-making within the organisation and the processes and practices used by organisations in this regard.

1. What ideas/activities or issues are young people interested in and care about?
2. How do staff and organisations support young people to identify and act on issues they care about? How are youth ideas, or issues youth care about, identified?
3. Are young people able to set agendas, make decisions and take action within the organisation? ? How does this occur? What is the process?
4. How do young people wish to participate? How do they prefer to communicate? What are the referred strategies?

5. Do young people have opportunities to make decisions about activities, programmes or policy within the organisation? Can you provide an example?
6. Do adult staff support youth to be involved in decision-making? If so, can you tell me how this occurs? Are you given sufficient information to assist in making decisions?
7. Are youth involved in service planning, policy delivery or review? Do young people contribute to practical strategic decision-making? How does this occur? Can you provide an example?
8. Do young people decide things in organisations that adults normally decide?
9. Can you tell me about any organisation mechanisms, tools or guidelines that are in place to support youth decision-making?
10. Collective decision-making-can you tell me of any examples/opportunities of how youth collaborate with, work in partnership with adults, in identifying issues, or making important programme, organisation or community decisions? For example, planning programmes? For example, adults-power sharing? For example, with organising programmes and activities. Or decisions that determine how programmes are run, decisions that influence organisation policy, planning, or the community in some way?
11. Do young people have a role in improving organisational programmes strategy? Or designing programmes?
12. Are there mechanisms that enable regular consultation between youth and adults in service planning, delivery or review?

Digital Communication

1. Does the organisation use digital media (social media, internet etc) to facilitate participatory practices? What forms of communication technology is used?
2. How is it used? What purpose does it have?

3. Is it used to solely communicate information to young people, or obtain their views? Does it have community features? Does it have an interactive component? Does it link young people to decision-makers? Does it allow young people to share opinions and opportunities? To form online communities?
4. Does it enable dialogue between youth and staff, perhaps surveys, questionnaires to get an understanding about what matters to youth-their cares and passions.

Leadership

This section will explore youth perspectives on the nature and benefit gained through experience of leadership roles and activities.

Questions:

1. Can you tell me of an opportunity you have had to learn about leadership?
2. Can you tell me about any opportunities in the organisation for young people to practice leadership skills? (Training, presentations, group-decision-making, co-leading with adults).
3. Have you had the opportunity to organise and plan events?
4. Are young people invited to participate in organisational spaces? Because of their knowledge, experience or interest in an area? Do they receive training and resources to be able to do this? Are they supported to engage with other community groups to be able to do this?

Building community connections

This section will explore youth perspectives on their experience of contact with wider social networks and the role of adult staff in facilitating these community connections.

Questions:

1. Have you made any external connections while being associated with the organisation? How did this connection/contact occur? Did you find anything helpful/beneficial about this new contact? Did staff facilitate this connection/contact? How?
2. Have you had an opportunity in highlighting an issue to the wider community?

Benefits of participation

- Do young people translate skills learnt from opportunities provided into other areas of their lives?
- Can you tell me of any benefits you have experienced from your involvement in the organisation? For example:
- Feelings of connectedness to others and to society.
- Made friends and other positive social interactions.
- Developed a wider support network from school, workplace, church, youth organisations, and leaders.
- A sense of contributing something of value to society.
- Personal awareness and feeling comfortable with own identity.
- Learning to organise and plan an event. Leadership skills.
- Developed social skills-being able to communicate with others, appreciate others perspectives, and resolve conflict peacefully.
- Work skills-help with developing a career, gaining relevant skills.
- Thinking skills, including problem solving.

Encouraging the participation of a wide range of young people

This section will explore youth perspectives on how the organisation promotes a sense of belonging and supports the inclusion of a diverse range of young people including those who would not normally be involved.

Questions:

1. Does the organisation encourage a feeling of belonging/acceptance? What has been helpful in this regard?
2. I am interested to know your thoughts on whether you feel comfortable in the programme. Are there features of the programme that make you feel comfortable?
3. Are a diversity of cultural values and practices reflected in the different programmes and practices? Are young people's cultural beliefs and values supported/acknowledged?

Factors that trigger participation

What specific aspects of the organisation do you consider triggers youth participation-for example, culture, environment, the way adults work with youth?

# Appendix E
## Interview Schedule for Staff/Managers

**The *Role of Organisations in Promoting the Meaningful Civic Participation and Citizenship of Young People in Aotearoa NZ New Zealand.***

Questionnaire for organisation staff and managers/board members

Introduction

Some questions are specific, while some are general. They also overlap so you may feel you have already answered a question when considering another question.

Could you please give me some background information about your experience within this organisation: your role here, time spent here, what activities you are involved with?

Can you tell me about key programmes provided by the organisation to youth? And the benefits to young people. For example, do they enhance young people skills, confidence, or connection to the community.

Organisation policy, training, and practice

1. Can you tell me about any policies, training programmes and practice models that guide/inform the practice of working with young people in the organisation?
2. I am interested in your perspective regarding the organisations' mission statement, strategy, or statement of goals and principles. Can you tell me whether these include principles that indicate a commitment toward youth development and participation? Do you think there is a philosophical commitment to youth participation across the organisation? Across business units. How is this expressed?
3. Does the organisation build knowledge on working with youth, through information and research?
4. What resources are utilised for the training needs of staff-what reference is useful?

5. Are there examples of collaborative approaches, and/or partnerships across a range of organisations that utilise the expertise and resources of eternal contacts? For example, young people, parents, youth and social workers, policy-makers, educators and service-providers?

Building positive supportive youth-adult relationships

This section will explore adult perspectives on what is helpful in developing and sustaining adult-youth relationships within the organisation.

Questions:

1. What specific aspects of the organisation (culture, processes or practices) triggers youth participation-for example, culture, environment, mentoring practices?
2. In general terms what skills and benefits do youth develop through involvement in the organisation? This was asked above.
3. What do you consider to be helpful aspects of practice in developing supportive adult-youth relationships?
4. Can you provide examples of factors that are not helpful in building and sustaining quality supportive adult-youth relationships? Can you give examples of specific measures and/or mechanisms in place to enable the building and sustaining of supportive adult-youth relationships?
5. How do you build trust, what are some key principles and practices?
6. Do you think the organisation supports staff in their work with young people?
7. How does the organisation celebrate youth achievements?

Youth voice

This section will explore adult perspectives on the processes and practices used by organisations to enable young people to express their voice.

Questions:

1. Do you think the organisation supports young people to express their views and opinions about activities, programmes and decisions-making within the organisation?
2. In what ways does this occur? What specific practices and strategies are used and have been helpful in assisting young people to express their views and opinions?
3. Are there formal mechanisms in place to ensure young people have a say? If so, can you provide some examples?
4. Does the organisation provide opportunities for young people to express their voice in wider community settings? Can you tell me of some examples?

Decision-making

This section will explore adult perspectives regarding processes and practices used by organisations to enable young people to be involved in decision-making.

Questions:

1. How are youth ideas ascertained? Who defines the agenda?
2. How do staff and organisations support young people to identify and act on issues they care about?
3. Are young people able to set agendas, make decisions and take action within the organisation? How are issues identified? What is the process?
4. How do young people wish to participate? What ideas/activities are they interested in? How do they prefer to communicate? What referred strategies?
5. Do young people have opportunities to make decisions about activities, programmes or policy within the organisation? Are youth involved in service planning, policy delivery

or review? Do young people contribute to practical strategic decision-making? How does this occur? Can you provide an example?

6. Do young people decide things in organisations that adults normally decide?
7. Can you tell me about any organisation mechanisms, tools or guidelines that are in place to support youth decision-making?
8. Collective decision-making-can you tell me of any examples of how youth collaborate with adults in the process of making important programme, organisation or community decisions?
9. Are there opportunities for youth to work in partnership with adults-power sharing? Are there mechanisms that enable regular consultation between youth and adults?
10. Do young people have a role in improving organisational strategy?

Digital Communication

1. Does the organisation use digital media (social media, internet etc) to facilitate participatory practices? What forms of communication technology is used?
2. How is it used? What purpose does it have?
3. Is it used to solely communicate information to young people, or obtain their views? Does it have community features? Does it have an interactive component? Does it link young people to decision-makers? Does it allow young people to share opinions and opportunities? To form online communities?
4. Does it enable dialogue between youth and staff, perhaps surveys, questionnaires to get an understanding about what matters to youth-their cares and passions.

Leadership

This section will explore adult perspectives around the nature and value of youth leadership and models of practice that facilitate youth leadership.

Questions:

1. Can you tell me about any opportunities within the organisation for young people to learn about leadership?
2. Can you tell me about any opportunities within the organisation for young people to practice leadership skills? (Presentations, group-decision-making, co-leading with adults).
3. Are young people invited to participate in organisational spaces? Because of their knowledge, experience or interest in an area? Do they receive training and resources to be able to do this? Are they supported to engage with other community groups to be able to do this?
4. Are there opportunities to plan and organise events?

Building community connections

This section will explore adult perspectives on working to connect youth with community networks and influential adults.

Questions:

1. Does the organisation provide opportunities to connect young people with wider community networks?
2. Are there any policies, mechanisms and practices in place to connect young people with influential adults outside the organisation (for example business leaders, civic leaders, employers)?
3. Do youth have the opportunity to highlight an issue to the wider community? Is any training opportunities to assist with this skill development?
4. Do young people translate skills leant from opportunities provided into other areas of their lives?

Encouraging the participation of a wide range of young people

This section will explore adult perspectives on organisation culture and practices that makes programmes accessible and supports the inclusion of a diverse range of young people including those who would not normally be involved.

Questions:

1. Do you think measures are in place to gain the interest and retention of young people from different backgrounds? Can you tell me of some examples?
2. Do you think the diverse cultural values and practices evident in the community are reflected in organisation programmes and practices? Can you tell me of some examples?
3. What mechanisms are in place to support the active participation of young people with disabilities?
4. Is there a focus in the organisation of attracting and retaining the participation of young people who may otherwise have difficulty participating for various reasons such as health, financial issues, transport?
5. In what ways are young people's cultural beliefs and values supported/acknowledged?
6. Do you think that the organisation encourages a feeling of belonging/acceptance for young people? What do you consider is helpful in this regard?

# Appendix F
# Analytical Framework

Research Question One:

What is the substantive role and impact of youth councillors in local government policymaking and outcomes, and what are the determinant factors?

Theme One – Orientation to youth participation within each council

Code – Policy-focus frame

- Completing written and verbal submissions on council policy and strategy, representation reviews, and regional and national policy.
- Youth council involvement with local planning initiatives. This included discussions with elected and non-elected council officials about local planning initiatives and taking action.
- Documents that indicated a role for youth councillors in policymaking, decision-making and impacting change in the interests of local youth.
- Youth council membership on local health and other policy-related Boards.

Code – Youth development approach

- Leadership opportunities such as public speaking, and membership on local Boards, as youth representatives.
- Events celebrating youth achievement.
- Facilitating community-based social events for children and youth.
- Council documents that highlight youth development tasks as a function of youth councils.

Code – Social justice orientation

- Adult perspectives and subsequent actions that advanced youth participatory rights.

- Mechanisms that enhanced the participation of diverse groups of youth.
- Youth councillors' perspectives in relation to the representation of diverse groups of youth in local government.

Theme Two – Authentic participation and practices of inclusion

Code – Youth voice and autonomy

- The extent of autonomy youth councillors had in determining the agenda including matters they wished to complete submissions on.
- The opportunity to impact positive change in the interests of local youth.
- Youth voice – the extent to which youth councillors felt their voices were heard and acted on by council officials. This included public speaking and other advocacy worked aimed at social justice issues impacting youth, such as vaping and youth mental health policy and programmes.
- The quality of relations between youth councillors and officials, based on the extent, of effective communicative practices (feedback, transparency), the expression of youth voice leading to positive outcomes, and trust in officials.
- Internal mechanisms that support policy-focused activity.
- The extent to which council goals and intentions for youth participation aligned with the reality of practice.
- The extent to which youth councillors' desired expectations of their role, tasks, and opportunities aligned with the reality of practice.

Theme Three – Tokenistic participation and practices of exclusion

Code – Youth voice and autonomy

- A lack of autonomy in determining the agenda, and matters they wished to complete submissions on.
- A lack of opportunity to engage in policy- focused activity and contribute to positive change in the interests of local youth.
- A lack of youth voice – not feeling heard, with concerns and interests not acted on by council officials.

- Communicative practices characterised by a lack of feedback, transparency, respect, and trust.
- The extent to which council intentions for youth participation aligned with the reality of practice.

Theme Four – Adults' 'ways of thinking' about youth participation, the role of youth councillors, and the function of youth councils

- Adult participants' perspectives in relation to youth participation, the role of youth councillors, and the function of youth councils.
- Actions taken by adult participants to improve the participatory rights of youth councillors.

Research Question Two:

What internal processes and community engagement strategies do youth councillors adopt to enhance the participation of the wider, diverse youth community, and ensure their voices are reflected in local government policymaking and outcomes?

Theme Five – connecting with, and representing the wider, diverse youth community

Code – Internal participation styles

- Internal participation styles and mechanisms that enabled youth councillors to remain focused on the priorities of youth in local government.

Code – Engagement with the wider, youth community

- Youth councillors' perception of engagement with the youth community.
- Strategies that connected youth councillors with the wider, youth community.

Code – Inclusive participation

- Youth councillors' perceptions in relation to the representation of diverse groups of youth.

- Mechanisms that enhanced the participation of diverse groups of youth.

Research Question Three*:*

What institutional responses promote the participation of the wider, diverse youth community in broader civic initiatives?

Theme Six – the role of youth councillors in building and facilitating local youth civic initiatives

Code – A description of the scope and nature of local youth civic initiatives facilitated by youth councils

Code – Institutional mechanisms that enabled youth councillors to implement local youth civic initiatives

Code – Institutional support that connected youth councillors with the wider community

**Appendix G**
**Letter of Ethics Approval**

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Date: 06 September 2017

Dear Philippa Wood

Re: Ethics Notification - SOB 17/22 - The role of organisations in promoting the meaningful civic participation and citizenship of young people in Aotearoa NZ New Zealand.

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Human Ethics Southern B Committee at their meeting held on Wednesday, 6 September, 2017.
On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely



Dr Brian Finch
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethic

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand T 06 951 6841; 06 95106840
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animalethics@massey.ac.nz; gtc@massey.ac.n

# Appendix H
# Participatory Rights Charter

The Charter is presented in three interlinked formats:

a) A charter of principles

b) Visual diagram and a concise summary

c) Summary and a guideline framework for operationalising the principles

The charter centres participatory rights, inclusive representation, and the cultivation of social capital. These priorities align with local councils' responsibilities to strengthen youth councillors' influence in policymaking and ensure the meaningful inclusion of diverse youth constituencies. The Charter is structured around five interdependent domains, each comprising actionable principles designed to guide councils toward inclusive, equitable, and sustained youth participation. Drawing on internationally recognised best practices, including Blanchet-Cohen & Torres (2015) and UNICEF's (UNICEF, 2018) participatory guidance (2018). It includes:

- A declaration of youth as participatory rights holders, with explicit reference to Article 12 of the CRC (UN, 1989)
- Recognition of youth's marginalised status in local policymaking
- Clear strategies for equitable youth–adult partnerships
- Mechanisms to increase youth autonomy and influence over youth-centric agendas (David & Buchanan, 2020; Holdsworth et al., 2007)

This is followed by a visual diagram illustrating the interconnected domains of youth civic engagement, grounded in foundational rights and recognition. Each overlapping circle represents a critical dimension of participatory governance, from inclusive access and ethical power-sharing to youth-led action and sustained infrastructure. This is followed by a summary

and complementary guideline to support the operationalisation of the Charter across diverse institutional contexts.

## Youth Participatory Rights Charter (Principles)

*Full articulation of the Youth Participatory Rights Charter, structured across five domains and 18 principles. Principles are in bold font, followed by operation focus detail in non-bold.*

A. Foundational Rights and Recognition

1. **Recognition of Youth as Civic Actors:** Youth are legitimate political actors with influence in public decision-making.
2. **Right to Be Heard in All Matters Affecting Them:** Grounded in Article 12 of the CRC, youth have the right to express views and have them given due weight.
3. **Commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi:** Te Tiriti should be honoured through partnership, protection, and participation, with rangatahi Māori being recognised as tangata whenua.
4. **Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity:** Youth participation must reflect the full diversity of the community, including ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality, and lived experience. Institutions must actively identify and dismantle structural barriers to ensure intersectional inclusion.

B. Access and Inclusion in Governance

5. **Equitable Access to Decision-Making Processes:** Participatory approaches must reflect inclusive, culturally responsive opportunities for all youth to engage in policymaking, planning, and review. Engagement strategies must prioritise marginalised and underrepresented youth, ensuring their voices shape decisions.

6. Institutional Accountability to Youth: Youth input should be embedded across council functions with transparent, reflexive mechanisms (youth audits, feedback loops, or participatory evaluation).
7. Support for Youth Representatives: Mentoring, training, and structural support should be offered to enable effective representation.

C. Power-Sharing and Ethical Practice

8. Power-Sharing and Co-Production: Consultation should move beyond shared decision-making and co-governance.
9. Protection from Tokenism: Youth contributions must be allowed to shape outcomes, not just processes.
10. Reflexivity, Ethical Practice, and Sustained Engagement: Ethical, ongoing, rights-based youth engagement should be committed to through training, reflective practice, or institutional review.

D. Youth-Led Deliberation and Civic Action

11. Youth-Led Deliberation: Youth should be enabled to facilitate structured, youth-led summits for civic dialogue and policy advocacy.
12. Institutional Trust and Recognition: Meaningful roles and autonomy in civic initiatives and funding should be granted to youth.
13. Connecting Youth Across Civic Ecosystems: Summits and conferences can connect youth across regions and governance levels.
14. Inclusive, Youth-Centric and Evolving Engagement: Informal, responsive youth spaces (e.g., pop-up forums, digital platforms, creative labs) that evolve in line with youth needs and priorities should be designed.

E. Infrastructure for Sustained Engagement

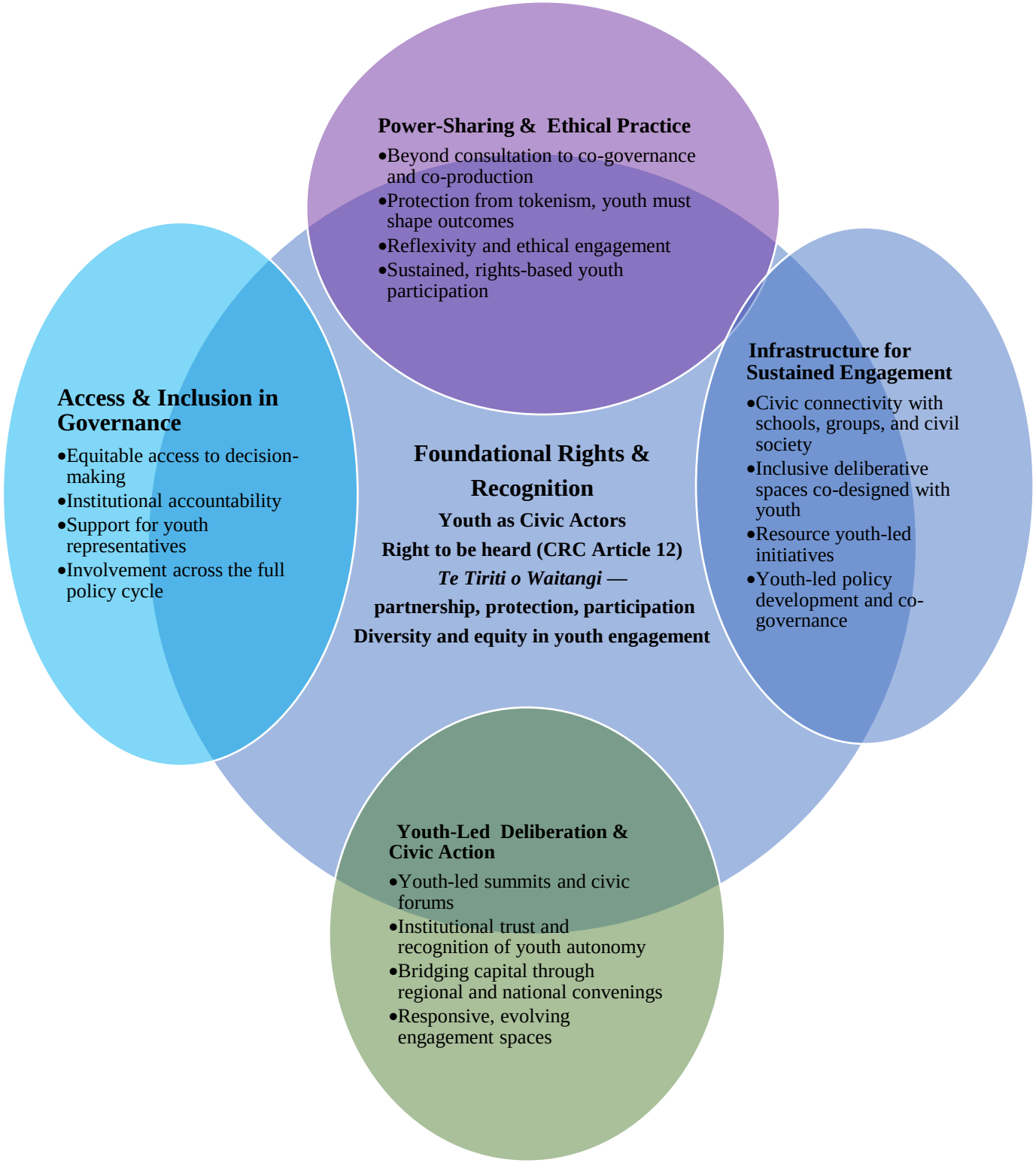
**15.** Strengthen Civic Connectivity: Support youth councils to build sustained relationships with schools, groups, and civil society.

**16.** Facilitate Deliberative Spaces: Facilitate summits co-designed with youth.

**17.** Resource Youth-Led Civic Action: Provide platforms, venues, and funding with youth autonomy in grant distribution.

**18.** Enable Sustained Engagement: Support youth-led policy workshops for long-term civic participation and co-governance.

**Layered Framework for Youth Participatory Governance**




*Note.* The diagram illustrates the interdependent domains of youth participatory governance.

**Youth Participatory Charter – Summary of Recommendations**

- Youth recognised as civic actors with the right to be heard in all decisions affecting them.
- Engagement grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and inclusive, intersectional practice reflecting community diversity.
- Councils accountable to youth through equitable access, transparent reporting, and structural support for representatives.
- Participation beyond tokenism, advancing co-governance, ethical practice, and sustained engagement.
- Youth-led summits and civic initiatives resourced and embedded within governance structures.
- National and regional convenings strengthened to build bridging capital and vibrant civic ecosystems.
- Infrastructure and autonomy provided to enable sustained youth-led civic action and connectivity.

**Complementary Guidelines**

This guide outlines practical mechanisms for councils to implement the Charter into everyday governance. It translates rights-based commitments into institutional practices that ensure youth participation is authentic, equitable, and impactful.

1. Structural Commitment

Structural commitment involves embedding youth participatory rights across council systems and decision-making processes. The complementary guidelines are as follows:

- Integrate Youth Goals Across Council Planning: Embed youth participation in Long-Term Plans (LTPs), urban strategies, and council-wide frameworks.
- Establish Youth–Professional Partnerships: Create formal mechanisms for youth to collaborate with planners, policy analysts, and officials as co-creators.
- Involve youth across the full policy cycle: agenda-setting, design, implementation, and evaluation.
- Allocate Dedicated Funding for Youth-Led Initiatives: Provide sustained, ring-fenced funding for youth summits, civic projects, and co-designed policy initiatives.
- Create Youth Advisory Roles with Influence: Establish youth advisory positions within council committees with transparent decision-making pathways.
- Support Youth Evaluation of Engagement: Equip youth with tools (e.g., Hart's Ladder) to assess the authenticity and depth of engagement opportunities.
- Develop Indicators of Youth Impact: Track and publish measurable indicators showing how youth input influences policy outcomes.
- Build Capacity for Co-Governance: Offer training for council staff and youth on participatory rights, co-governance, and inclusive engagement.

2. Community Engagement Infrastructure

Strengthening broader youth civic engagement requires council infrastructure and support to cultivate social capital in the form of civic networks, partnerships, and youth summits.

- Strengthen Youth Council Networks: Support sustained relationships between youth councils, schools, youth groups, and civil society organisations.
- Facilitate Deliberative Spaces: Host inclusive forums, summits, and civic dialogues co-designed with youth.

- Resource Youth-Led Civic Initiatives: Provide access to venues, digital platforms, facilitation support, and discretionary funding.
- Enable Youth-Led Group Formation: Allocate resources for diverse youth-led civic groups, whether council-affiliated or independent.
- Integration within Wider Council: Establish mechanisms that connect youth councillors to departments, influential actors, and community resources.
- Reinstate National Convenings: Reintroduce the Aotearoa NZ National Youth Council Conference to build bridging capital and cross-regional learning.
- Support Long-Term Youth-Led Projects: Establish workshop groups focused on sustained policy development and co-governance.

3. Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are required to ensure accountability, learning, and alignment with international standards and obligations such as the CRC (UN, 1989).

- Develop Participation Indicators: Assess the authenticity, inclusiveness, and impact of youth engagement.
- Include Youth in Evaluation Design: Involve youth in co-designing evaluation frameworks to ensure relevance and legitimacy.
- Publish Annual Engagement Reports: Document youth engagement outcomes and institutional responsiveness through transparent reporting.
- Benchmark Against International Standards: Use frameworks such as CRC General Comment No. 12 to evaluate progress and uphold youth rights.

Together, these mechanisms provide a blueprint for councils to enact youth participatory rights with integrity, responsiveness, and transformative intent.