



Employing a Youth Consumer Advisor (YCA)



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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau
NEW ZEALAND

What is a Youth Consumer Advisor?

A Youth Consumer Advisor (YCA) is a young person with a personal experience of mental illness and/or addiction who is employed by a service to provide this perspective. The primary role of a YCA is to make sure that services are youth friendly and meet the needs of young people. To do so, a YCA may set up a youth advisory group to help review and improve the service or create an event for youth in order to gain their perspective on mental health and addiction services for improvement.

Having a YCA is often a new experience for team members and people may not understand the benefits of having a YCA, or what role they will have on the team and within the wider service. The job of the YCA is dependent on the employer and the service environment, and it is important that there is a clear understanding of the role of the YCA and what they can add to a service.

Flexibility in the role is important to give the YCA an opportunity to work to their strengths and develop the role as their own. It is essential to ensure that YCAs have the support of management and the team to effectively carry out their role.



Preparing for a YCA

Setting up a team to work with a YCA

Prepare your team to work with and support a YCA. Carefully consider what a YCA in your service can do. Consider whether their work is tightly defined, or open to interpretation and innovation. Provide as much clarity as possible so that when they start, they have the confidence to embrace the role and know where they fit with the team. It's a good idea to really get to know your YCAs and to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses so that you can provide opportunities and situations where they can thrive.

The YCA is a member of the team in a paid position and should be treated with the same consideration as other employees. How they are welcomed to the team, and introduced to wider services, sets the scene for future interactions.

Before the YCA starts, talk with the team about the best place for the YCA's workspace and who will be their 'go to' person. Think about what resources the YCA will need, and how they can access the things they need, such as transport, project codes, online access to data and files, a computer and printer, etc. The YCA should feel that the team is prepared for them to start and ideally, all resources are ready when they arrive.

The first day of the job is often formative and has a lasting impression. Demonstrate that you value and respect the YCA with a pōwhiri or other welcome ceremony and an opportunity to meet each team member one-on-one. Relationship building is very important as the YCA needs to feel confident and safe to raise issues, bring forth ideas and offer potential improvements.

Their role requires this often, so it is important that they build this foundation first within the team.

Again, YCAs are fully functioning team members and attend team meetings and are included in all aspects of team life.

The Employment Process

When recruiting a YCA, it's important to develop connections to local youth groups as they often have young people who are passionate about mental health and/or addiction. Examples include youth councils, youth workers, youth one stop

shops and youth-led NGOs. They can help to explore and promote the role of the YCA during recruitment and increase the likelihood of getting a good response from engaged and passionate young people with lived experience.

Where and How to Advertise

Young people may not always go to your specific website to find jobs, so advertise in places young people are likely to visit such as community centers, sports hubs, libraries, and churches. Most rangatahi use online services like Seek, Student Job Search, Facebook, and sometimes Instagram. Social media is not just social engagement, it is also for global and local news – the more platforms you can advertise on, the better chance you'll come across people who are passionate about mental health.

Another great way to advertise is by putting your application onto 'LinkedIn,' which makes it easier for people to upload their CV and supporting documents. LinkedIn also provides more information about professional achievements, prior jobs, awards, and the interests of your applicant.

You can also approach youth mental health services, high schools, polytechs and universities to see if they can suggest young people who have used services and have the skills to take on the role of a Youth Consumer Advisor.

The Interview

The YCA role can be the first 'real' job a young person has, and they may not have extensive CV writing skills or interviewing experience. Draft interview questions specific to the position and be prepared to accept answers from a wide range of experiences. Be aware of human rights legislation and what are appropriate questions for a person with lived experience of mental health and/or addiction issues. See below for examples of interview questions.

Hours and Wages

Having a clear understanding of the responsibilities and activities of the YCA will help you figure out the FTE. Often YCAs are students and part-time work

can fit within their schedule, and some YCAs will be available for full-time work. Have clear expectations of the hours and days YCAs will be in the office, which allows the team and the YCA to get in the rhythm of working together, and people know when the YCA will be available.

When the YCA begins working, allow for some flexibility as they get used to being part of a team. Now that COVID is part of our lives, many teams allow staff to work from home as part of their working week, allow the YCA the same privilege and be clear about the expectations of working from home.

Wages can differ amongst YCAs depending on their workload, education level and experience.

Some YCAs may be leading projects, some may be advising on service development and delivery, and others may be attending meetings. The role of a YCA is incredibly diverse and each YCA's workload will be determined by the needs of the workplace.

YCAs should be paid at least a living wage or higher. It is important to recognize that their lived experience of mental health and/or addictions is important, and that experience is one of the reasons they were hired. In mental health and addictions services/organisations, a young person's lived experience can be viewed as a gift, a koha, given to the organisation. Using one's own experiences and struggles to help others is a powerful and personal thing to do, and it is important that one's mana is respected in the process.



Example of a job description and advertisement for a YCA

BECOME A YOUTH CONSUMER ADVISOR

Are you passionate about youth mental health? Have you used youth mental health or addiction services? Would you like to use your experience to make a difference? If the answer is YES, then we'd like to hear from you!

What to expect:

- You will have an active say
- 24 hours per week
- Auckland CBD based office

Youth Consumer Advisor:

You will have the opportunity to work across several projects to make them youth friendly. You will engage with the Ministry of Health and other health services, non-governmental organizations, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, the mental health and addiction Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Programme, and other youth across a variety of settings. In the role, you can expect to take part on panels to effect policy, advocate nationally/internationally, host events, support others in their advocacy work, and design youth friendly resources.

About you now:

- Passionate about improving mental health outcomes for young people
- Understand what 'recovery' means to you
- Have experience in project work
- Relate, identify, and connect with youth/peers
- Enjoy working in a team
- Effectively communicate information to diverse audiences
- Effective time management
- Self-directed
- Capable of working with Māori, Pacific and other ethnically diverse communities, and understand how the Treaty of Waitangi applies to the mental health sector.

What you will learn:

During your time in this role, you will develop these skills to help you in your future career:

- Professional and networking experiences across a diverse group of young people, service providers and policy makers
- Presentations at a national level in a variety of forums
- Writing to a higher level, communications, guidance, and reports
- Supporting training and facilitating events
- Developing stakeholder engagement

Applications close on the 15th of May. Please note interviews may begin immediately on application, so get in quick!



Interviewing a YCA

Interview Questions

Remember that it is likely that the person interviewing for a YCA position may not yet have the exact experience needed for the role, however they may have the skills necessary to do the job. One way to determine their skills is to focus the interview questions on instances of behavioral or situational events using the STAR method.

The STAR method is an interview technique that is structured like this:

- Situation
- Task
- Action
- Result

The STAR method helps to frame questions in a way that candidates can show their skills and experience in relation to how they manage different situations.

Below are some examples of interview questions. These can be used to create questions tailored to your working environment.

1. What does recovery mean to you?
2. Tell us about a time you experienced struggle. How did you overcome that?
3. How would you advocate for a minority group that you are not a member of?
4. Tell us about a time you felt intimidated when a person disagreed with your beliefs. How did you overcome this situation?
5. How do you cope with stress? How will the people you work with know you are stressed?
6. How can we support you when you are stressed?
7. A colleague has approached you at work and tells you they are struggling. How would you manage this situation?
8. How would you gauge whether a service is effective for young people and their whānau?
9. How could you use your knowledge of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to inform your approach to working with rangatahi?

Supporting a YCA

The job of a YCA can change often and there needs to be adequate support to appropriately guide them. This means having both effective professional and, to some degree, mental health support. There may be some instances where a YCA experiences difficulties sharing their experience of mental health and/or addictions. Having supervisors who are aware of this and can meaningfully engage with a YCA can uplift their voice and empower the YCA to effectively use their lived experience to inform their work.

Supervisors may be people who have their own lived experience, for example if there is a team of consumer advisors, or more senior staff who understand the nuances of being a consumer advisor.

It is important to set clear expectations with the YCA. Regular supervision and check-ins with management are necessary to ensure the YCA feels respected and part of the wider team. As with any new role, the team will need guidance on how to work well with this new skill set. The role of a YCA encompasses many areas and it is vital that the team works together to decide which areas a YCA will be able to apply their ability. When the YCA joins the team, show them how the service works at each stage of the process, invite them to external and internal meetings and expose them to many different experiences.

More than a YCA

When effectively employed, a YCA will outgrow their role over time. Some of the strengths of a YCA are their youth and lived experience and because service delivery is continually changing, a fresh perspective is necessary to keep up with those changes. Therefore, the YCA role may work best if it is time limited. This may be a YCA's first 'real' employment after high school or other study, and they might need support to explore further opportunities before the end of their contract. Make time for conversations about their career aspirations and consider what support is available. This could include:

- Peer support training to move into a peer-support role.
- Policy or governance training to prepare for other roles.
- Support to enter other roles within your organization, which may allow them to mentor the next YCA, ensuring sustainable ongoing youth advocacy within the service.
- Access to an employment agency for career planning, CV writing and support to find a new job.

At Whāraurau, a 'tuakana teina' approach is used where the new YCAs overlap with the more experienced ones and institutional knowledge is handed over as taonga. With this model, the YCAs are supported to learn their role, and service provision is not interrupted during the training process.

What makes a good YCA?

A good YCA fits many different descriptions, and all YCAs will come into the role with different experiences. By its very name, Youth Consumer Advisor, there is an expectation that YCAs have experience of using services to address their mental health and wellbeing. Understanding child and youth mental health, without the lived experience and service use, is not enough to advise on service development and delivery.

A YCA is a professional in their field. Their professional development has come from being a consumer of services and experiencing first-hand the dynamics between services and tangata whaiora and being a young person who has experienced wellbeing difficulties. A YCA's insight becomes invaluable when making services better for those entering them.

A good YCA is engaging, positive, encouraging, and can figure out the delicate balance of sharing insight into lived experience while advising teams on policy building and service development and design. A good YCA also has a unique blend of skills such as critical thinking, writing and oral skills, creativity, courage etc., all of which are beneficial to this role. The YCA

needs time and support to develop these skills and to feel confident in effectively using their lived experience, which is why pairing them with someone more experienced is helpful. A YCA should also keep up to date with issues that affect youth. This could be in the form of staying up to date with news events, making contact with NGOs, and consistently seeking the insight of young people in the community.

How Whāraurau can help

Whāraurau has resources available to use when training YCAs. There is a main YCA Guide which outlines the role of a YCA, how the sector works, and where the position of a YCA sits in an organisation. There are two other resources from the YCA toolbox – How to Set up a Youth Advisory Group, and How to Conduct a One-Off Consultation.

Alternatively, Whāraurau also has Youth Consumer Advisors who are available to help teams find, employ, and welcome a new YCA. Please contact coordinator@wharaurau.org.nz to for the current YCAs' contact details.



How to run a Youth Advisory Group (YAG)

What is a YAG and why is it important?

A Youth Advisory Group or YAG is a rōpu of service users who come together to give constructive feedback about how a service can better meet the needs of young people. YAG members use their experience and knowledge to reflect on ideas to improve other young peoples' experiences. Services must consider the voices of consumers to help ensure they best meet the needs of the people they serve. Consumers have valuable insight about how they have experienced a service and are the most qualified people to give feedback. A YAG gives a neutral space for young people to talk openly, removing the pressure and bias that might exist if their clinician, or other professional, was asking the same questions.

Why and when to have a YAG?

A YAG can be useful for ongoing feedback to keep a pulse on the consumer's experience. Or it can be useful when there is a specific topic that the service wants feedback on, for example refurbishing the waiting room, designing a new space, moving premises, introducing new resources, brainstorming issues or other aspects of the service. A YAG can be held fortnightly, monthly, quarterly, or as needed. It is best that you have an ongoing group with members who return, as well as inviting new members to join.

Setting up a YAG?

YAGs are generally run by people in consumer advisory roles. It is the role of the consumer advisor to understand the ongoing consumer experience, convey that information to management and staff, who use the feedback to assess what is going well and what needs to change.

To develop a YAG, first establish with your service how the YAG will run. The YCA, clinical team and management all need a clear understanding of the expectations and rules of running a YAG. For example, the YAG may run after hours, need a budget, have food available and staff attendance

is by invitation only. Establish the structure and purpose of the group, summarise the content of each meeting, and keep a log of the outcomes.

By letting clinicians and staff know about the YAG, they can help promote it. Ask clinicians to suggest young people who might want to be involved in sharing their experience and ideas of the service. Determine the criteria for the young people attending the YAG, some young people may want to bring a friend, sibling or other family member for support. To work out these types of questions, develop a terms of reference for the group. The terms of reference lays out the membership requirements, how often the group meets, the business of the group and the ground rules for meetings. The members of the group can help develop the terms of reference. It is important for members of the YAG to help develop and finalise the terms of reference to instill a sense of ownership over their behaviours and activities as a group.

Who needs to be at a YAG?

Young people who use the service, or have used the service in the recent past, are the people needed at a YAG. Some services have strict criteria regarding the age of a 'young person'. Having a range of perspectives, such as people from different cultural backgrounds, those in the Rainbow community or young people who have unique experiences of accessing your service is important. Often, the YAG will not be 100% representative of all service users and having a diverse panel of members can be helpful to gain an understanding of young people's varied experiences.

YCA's, clinicians and staff can work together to find young people to start the YAG. Advertise the YAG in the waiting and clinic rooms and on any social media sites run by the clinic. YCA's build a network over time in the role and the network can be used to develop the YAG. YCA's who are present and available in services encounter young people regularly, and this assists them to build connections.

What happens in the YAG?

A service might have specific information they want to collect from consumers. In this case, take time to prepare for the YAG session by developing questions and discussion topics to use in the meeting. It is important to understand exactly what information is being collected, the purpose of collecting that information and how that information will be used. People are more willing to share information if they know how it will be used. A clear feedback loop provides accountability for the service on how they incorporate YAG feedback into action and empowers YAG members to know exactly how their insights will be used.

In early YAG sessions, they may need attendance, support, and/or facilitation by a non-youth staff member in lieu of a youth facilitator or a YCA. Though this may be necessary, it is salient to be aware of the power dynamics that exist when this takes place. It is important to understand that young people may contribute differently to the conversation when there is an adult facilitator rather than a facilitator who is a peer. If this is the case, it is ideal for the service to either bring in a youth facilitator or YCA to facilitate once that YAG is more established, or that the members of the YAG feel competent and confident to facilitate their own conversation without external supervision.

A YAG session may also be less structured and can be a space for consumers to talk about their experience using services. This is a great opportunity to reflect on whether services are meeting the needs of young people and how they can be improved. But this is not the opportunity for group therapy and due to the nature of the conversation, this may occur. In this case, it can be important to have a clinical staff member on hand to provide support for any members who may be affected by the content during a YAG session. The YAG may decide to develop a project based on the feedback and use the YAG sessions to work on the project.

Creating a safe space

Having a safe space is vital for young people to feel comfortable in a YAG. This means choosing the physical space carefully and being mindful of the atmosphere and mood. A larger room with comfortable chairs or bean bags and lighting that is not harsh to the eyes may be more suitable. Having refreshments like coffee/tea and snacks could help make the space feel more welcoming too. Using a room other than a clinic room is generally a good idea. As well as a safe physical space, it is equally important to establish a safe social space. This can be achieved by whakawhanaungatanga. Valuing interpersonal relationships within the YAG creates a more supportive environment for feedback and participation.

It's difficult to gauge what will happen in a YAG, until the YCA is confident in running the YAG, have a senior staff member available for support if needed.

Information from the YAG

During the YAG, take notes about the things that come up in conversation. Notice the one-off experiences and things that are consistently an issue. After collating the information and any suggestions for improvement, bring this information to the team. YCA's support the consumer voice to be heard throughout the service. Feedback to the YAG the ways in which their information is being used to improve the service.



Running a consultation with young people: A beginner's guide

This guide is written by young people in the mental health sector with experience of attending, planning, and facilitating consultations for young people. It details key principles and provides step-by-step guidance to support anyone to effectively consult with youth.

What do you need to accomplish? Or why are we consulting?

Understanding the reason for a consultation can make it easier to clearly communicate your intentions and produce effective promotional material (whether that's an email or a social media post). This also determines who needs to be there, and what questions need answering. Take the time to consider exactly what information would be useful, as that will influence all decisions going forward.

Who needs to be there?

Consider the range of youth perspectives needed to collect the required information.

Some decisions require input from professionals (e.g., practitioners and service leaders) as well as from young people and whānau. While each of these groups want better outcomes for young people in services, they can use different language and even envision different ways to achieve better outcomes. Bringing them together requires skill to overcome differences in language, outlook, and an imbalance of power. Give thought on how to ensure young people (who are least likely to feel entitled or welcome to be there) feel safe and supported and know that their experiences and perspectives are as important as those of everyone else at the table.

Some consultations may just require young people, while others will prioritize particular perspectives such as: having lived experience of mental health or addiction challenges, experience of using services, or identifying as Māori, Pacific, or LGBT+. Depending on the plan for the day, it might be useful to break into groups to discuss more specific topics with young people who are experts in that area. People often find it easier to speak in a small group, and topics can be explored more fully with fewer people, and themes can be shared with the larger group.

Sometimes talking about issues can trigger an emotional response in people and people can become overwhelmed or upset. It's useful to have people around that can assist participants in these circumstances.

Inviting young people

Most young people will attend an event because of a recommendation from someone they already know. As a result, the most effective way to increase participation is to work with organisations that already work with young people. Consider contacting local youth services, youth councils, schools, and university organisations to find people that will be able to advertise and recommend the opportunity to interested young people. Ask each organisation to recommend other local groups to contact to cast a wide net.

Using social media could also help you find people for your event. It is important to go to the platforms that your intended audience use. Interest groups on Facebook in your area could be a good place to find people. Instagram could also be used to share information about your event.

Picking a time and location

Work with young people, or organisations that work with young people, to pick a day, time, and venue. Picking the right day and time is essential, and requires consideration of when school holidays are, as well as when extracurricular activities like after-school sport or church occurs.

Young people prefer meeting in spaces that are familiar to them. When working with young people with positive experiences of school, educational settings can be a good option. Some young people don't like school however, and others can feel out of place or unwelcome in a classroom, university, or office. More neutral settings like a local public library or meeting room at a youth-one-stop-shop may be safer options. In our experience, young people preferred casual settings, like rooms in a community hall, the local park, or even the beach. These spaces allowed for creative thinking and brought adults into spaces where young people felt comfortable, subtly shifting the balance of power.

On the day

All consultations should begin with some form of whakawhanaungatanga, or introduction. This allows people to share why they've come, and a little of the background that shapes what they'll go on to say. Doing this effectively gives power to the people who are attending the consultation, allowing them to get to know everyone in the room, and demonstrates that their expectations and aspirations for the day are important to their hosts.

Once everyone is acquainted, take time to outline the purpose and goals of the consultation. It is important to go into the day knowing exactly what you would like to accomplish as you only have a limited amount of time. When crafting questions or discussion points, think carefully about the knowledge participants are currently bringing. It's important to create questions that are either at the level of their thinking, or to prepare a series of questions that guide them to the level of insight you're interested in.

Examples of questions

Being creative in the way young people are engaged in the consultation can have a massive effect. Specific questions can be reframed and posed as activities and exercises.

For example, the purpose might be to gather information about what improvements consumers want in a service. Frame this to the audience as an exercise: If you could design a service from scratch, what would it look like?

By giving permission for creativity without boundaries, young people are more likely to tell what they really desire from the service. Each answer will be informed by that person's values and the aspects of a service that are significant to them.

When seeking advice on a proposal from young people with lived experience, questions about 'what a safe space (or good service) looks and feels like' could help prepare them to critically analyse a proposed idea. Framing such questions allows young people to reflect on their values and think about what is important to them. Using opening ended questions invites creativity, discussion and information.

Good preparation is paramount to good consultation. People will value knowing as much as possible about what to expect on the day, send out information well before the event and let people know the time, length of the meeting, the venue, what food is provided, what the access is like, and the style of presentation.

Valuing the experience of young people

Provide outcomes and feedback after the consultation

To show the value the feedback has, it is important to keep participants informed about how their information is being used. By sharing updates with the young people involved, you can keep them engaged in the process, as well as making sure that the perspective is what the young person intended to share.

Also, when the project is completed, share the outcomes of the work with the group participants so they can see how their time and experience has contributed to your work.

Pay them for their time and expertise

People are asked to share their lived experience because they are experts of their perspectives and experiences, which will help to develop a better service. This expertise is unique, just like the expertise of a consultant or other professional. To make it clear that their time and expertise are valued, offer to cover their travels costs and pay them for their time at a level befitting the unique experience they bring. This could look like a cash koha or voucher. Discuss the terms of participation as part of the invitation.

Work actively to ensure they feel safe and valued

Creating a safe and comfortable space is key to opening a dialogue between the young person, the facilitator and the group. Talking about mental health can be a challenging and vulnerable time which makes it important for the space to be welcoming and accommodating. Paying attention to the physical space that you are in, like comfortable chairs, and sensory factors like lighting and music can all make a difference. The space and toilets must be accessible to a range of abilities.

In summary

Consulting with people who attend or have attended services is an integral part to service design and improvement. Who better to talk about what services look and feel like than the people who are attending these services? Value the people who you consult with and recognize that they may be vulnerable. Do all that you can to prepare for the day and provide information to people well in advance. Have a chill space available and someone with experience of supporting people who are distressed. Pay them, feed them and support them to share their experiences. Be creative and courageous and have an awesome time!

The Whāraurau Youth Advisory Team is available to assist with youth consultation events. Please email coordinator@wharaurau.org.nz for the current YCA's' contact details.



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