

# DEVELOPING YOUTH COUNCILS

Three Cases from Southern Africa



A ceremonial atmosphere surrounded Lusaka City Council's Junior Council when 38 youth councillors were elected in November 2024.

## Background

With nearly one in four people on the planet aged 15–24, local governments that ignore young people’s voices are ignoring a significant part of the communities they serve. It is essential for young people to be actively involved in how their local communities are run and how services are delivered. Under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, this is not just good practice; it is a right. For this to happen, youth councils have become one of the most effective tools to strengthen local democracy and give young people a real stake in community life.

This toolbox has been compiled to **help local government officials and politicians who want to start, improve, and maintain their own youth councils**. It provides both inspiration and a step-by-step guide for setting up and managing these councils. It also **explores the questions and challenges** youth councils often face and **shares some of the lessons that can help** local governments include young people more effectively.

The toolbox uses examples from three Youth Councils – Francistown in Botswana, Lusaka in Zambia, and Mogale in South Africa – all supported by the **Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD)** through the **Municipal Partnership Programme**. These collaborations have become practical laboratories in which methods for youth participation were tested, refined, and shared. The steps and case studies in this toolbox draw directly from those experiences.

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## What is a Youth Council?

A Youth Council is a space where young people can raise their voices, discuss issues that matter to them, and bring their ideas directly to the local government. It is one of the ways local governments can ensure that young residents are not just talked about in decision-making rooms but are present in them.

When a Youth Council is set up within a local government, its main purpose is to create a real and recognised channel between young people and elected representatives. Not a token gesture, but a genuine bridge.

The work of a Youth Council typically rests on **three foundations**:

### **The Policy Process:**

#### *Understanding how things work*

Young people should have the chance to learn how local government operate, i.e. how decisions are made, how budgets are set, how policies move from idea to action. This knowledge is essential if young participants are to engage constructively and influence change in an informed and credible manner.

### **Positive Youth Development:**

#### *Growing as individuals*

Beyond its democratic function, a Youth Council is a place where young people develop confidence, communication skills and leadership. The local government benefits, but so does each individual member and the community they will go on to shape.

### **Commitment to Social Justice:**

#### *Standing up for fairness*

A Youth Council should be a platform where young people can speak up about inequality, raise concerns on behalf of those who are left out, and push for solutions that work for everyone. In doing so, they contribute to a more just and responsive local government.

## How to get started

Starting a Youth Council raises practical questions straight away. Where do we begin? How are the youth councillors selected? How do you make sure it lasts beyond the first election cycle?

These are the right questions to ask, and the good news is that you do not have to figure it out alone. Local governments around the world have already done this work. Models have been tested, mistakes have been made, and lessons have been documented. The steps that follow draw on that that experience.

## Step-by-step guide: Establishing a Youth Council

The following steps guide local governments through the process of setting up a Youth Council. They focus on the key decisions and practical arrangements needed to ensure the council is legitimate, inclusive, and ready to do meaningful work.

### STEP 1: Clarify the Purpose and Political Mandate

Before any structural design work begins, your local government needs to be clear about *why* the Youth Council is being established.

- What democratic gap is it intended to address? What voices are missing?
- Is the council meant to advise, to consult, or to genuinely co-create policy?
- How will it relate to other ways citizens already participate?

A formal political decision — ideally adopted by the council — should set out the purpose, scope, and expected role of the Youth Council. This provides legitimacy, protects it when leadership changes, and makes clear to everyone what they are there to do.

## STEP 2: Define Governance Structure and Terms of Reference

A Youth Council needs a clear home inside the local government. If roles and rules are vague at the start, frustration and disengagement will follow.

Before launching, your local government must answer the following questions:

- Who can join? What age range and eligibility criteria apply?
- How are members selected?
- How long do terms last and how does handover work?
- How is the council organised internally? Who leads, who facilitates?
- How does the council connect to municipal committees and boards?
- How are decisions made within the council?
- Which department or unit provides administrative support?

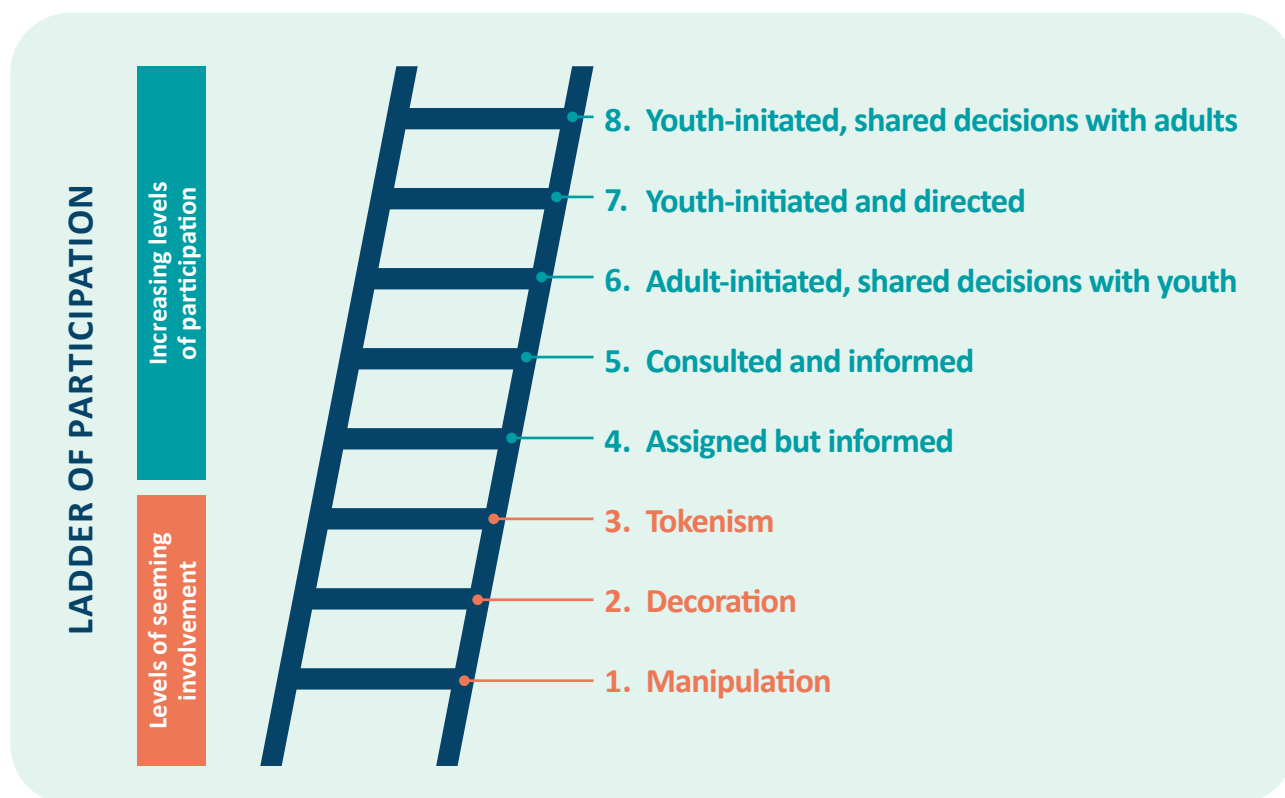
The answers should be written up as a formal Terms of Reference, approved by the local government. A clear written framework protects the council from being changed on a whim, and builds trust among the members themselves and in the wider community.



The youth panel in Falun. Photo Emilia Otterstam

## The Ladder of Participation: Not all participation is equal

A young person invited to attend a meeting is not the same as one who shapes the agenda. Both count as “youth participation”, but they sit at very different levels of real influence. The ladder below, adapted from Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992) (which developed from Arnstein’s original Ladder of Citizen Participation from 1962), offers a practical way to reflect on where your Youth Council currently sits, and where you want it to go.



### Where should a Youth Council aim to be?

A newly established council will often start somewhere between rungs 4 and 6 and that is a reasonable place to begin. Most councils start lower than they would like, and that is honest. The goal, over time, is to climb toward genuine co-decision-making (rung 6), and eventually toward youth-initiated action (rungs 7–8). Progress is rarely linear. It depends on political will, institutional support, and the confidence and skills of the young people involved. A useful question for every annual review: Have we moved up a rung this year? If the answer is no, it is worth asking why, and what would need to change.

### STEP 3: Secure Sustainable Resources

A Youth Council cannot function effectively without resources. Local governments should put real support behind it:

- Dedicated staff support (e.g. a coordinator within the administration)
- A modest but reliable annual budget
- Access to meeting facilities and digital tools
- Resources for training and capacity building

Councils that are under-resourced quickly become symbolic. If the local government is serious about youth participation, that commitment needs to show up in the budget.

### STEP 4: Design an Inclusive Recruitment Strategy

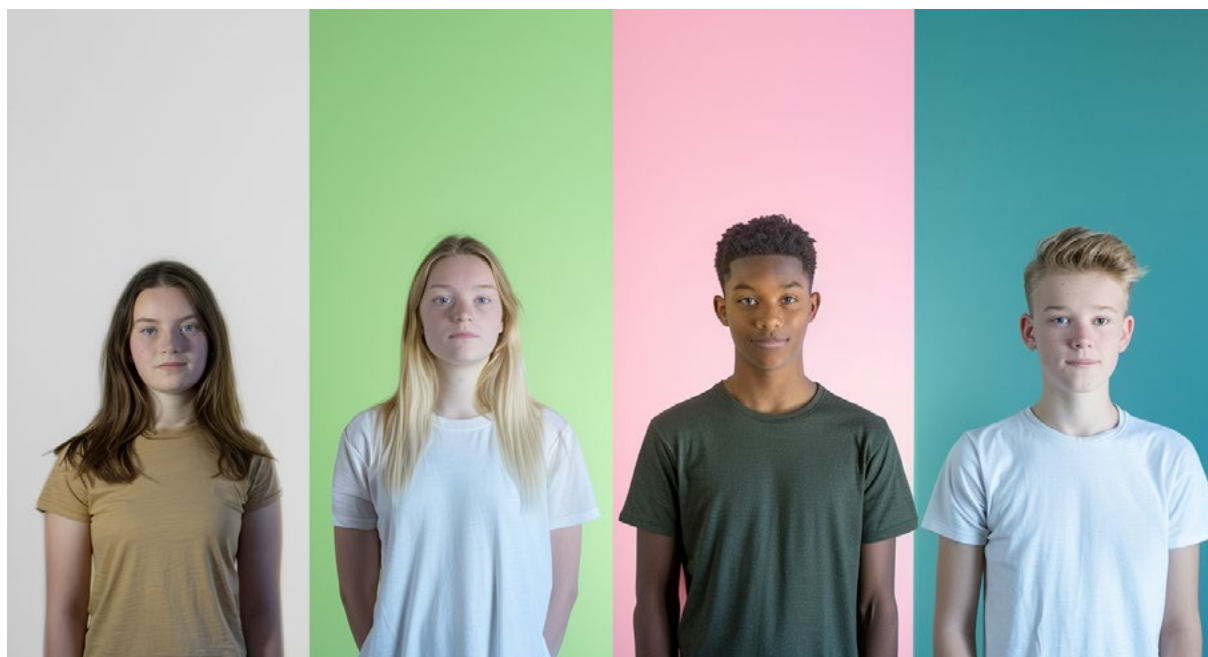
Who sits in the room matters. The council's legitimacy depends on it genuinely reflecting the diversity of young people, including those who do not typically engage in formal civic processes.

Think carefully about:

- Open elections in schools or youth centres
- Targeted outreach to groups that don't typically engage in formal processes
- Partnerships with civil society organisations
- Application processes that are transparent and easy to navigate

Diversity across socio-economic background, geography and gender won't happen by itself. It needs to be designed from the start to not reproduce existing inequalities.

## EXAMPLE:



## The UNIK Method from Falun

UNIK – *Ungt Nutida Inflytande i Kommunen*, or *Young People's Contemporary Influence in the Municipality* – is a participation method developed by Falun Municipality in Sweden, designed to ensure that youth panels genuinely reflect the full range of young people, not just the already-engaged.

Its starting point is a simple but uncomfortable fact that only around **6% of young people** are politically active. Yet these are almost always the ones consulted when politicians want youth input.

The remaining 94%, those who are indifferent, sceptical, or actively disengaged, are rarely heard.

UNIK corrects this by first asking young people to identify their own engagement type, then building panels that deliberately mix all types. In Falun, this runs through two channels: a physical panel that meets in school, and an SMS panel that sends 5–10 simple questions per year, allowing young people to respond on their own terms and in their own time.



SOURCE:  
Falun Municipality  
[falun.se/ungdomsdialog](https://falun.se/ungdomsdialog)

## STEP 5: Provide Induction and Capacity Building

Young people cannot be expected to navigate the municipal system without structured support.

An initial induction programme should include:

- An introduction to governance and budgeting
- Roles and responsibilities of elected members and officers
- Meeting procedures and policy cycles
- Communication and advocacy skills

Ongoing training strengthens confidence and effectiveness. Capacity building should be understood as an investment in democratic literacy and civic skills.



The partnership Francistown City Council and Lund Municipality. Photo Emma Lewin

## EXAMPLE:

## The Case of Francistown

Francistown’s Youth Council, formally called the District Children’s Consultative Forum (DCCF), has its roots in the **Children’s Act of 2009**, which required Children’s Consultative Forums to be set up across all districts in Botswana. That legal foundation gave the council a clear **political mandate and purpose** from the start. Youth participation in local governance was not a voluntary initiative that could be quietly dropped; it was a formal requirement.

To select members, Francistown used **school nominations and speech competitions** evaluated by a multi-stakeholder. The jury included district officials, youth organization members, and former DCCF members. The process is open to **young**

together with Lund municipality in Sweden, the forum’s function and influence has strengthened. “The project has catalysed how we reach youth (...) the idea that children should be seen but not heard – we’ve worked successfully against it. Leadership now supports the forum,” said coordinator Mandla Hlabando. Nowadays, the DCCF has expanded to improve youth leadership through exchanges on human rights, democracy and youth empowerment.

There has been tangible impact. Youth representatives contributed with their priorities to the **Urban Development Plan and Vision 2046**, the district’s long-term planning framework. Inspired by their

“ *We elect ourselves, speak for ourselves, and present our own proposals—that’s real empowerment.* ”

*Member of the District Children’s Consultative Forum in Francistown*

**people aged 11-17**, and is competitive and visible, which helped establish the forum’s credibility. The selection process also accounted for **diversity and representation** by reserving 4 out of 10 seats for children living with disabilities and those from different social and religious backgrounds.

Operationally, while the Social Department provides legal grounding and logistical support, youth members control their own elections, run their own (quarterly) meetings, and set their own agenda. This balance of **administrative backing without control** allows young people to take ownership while maintaining institutional stability.

Over time, the scope of the DCCF has grown. Following the ICLD-funded Municipal Partnership

exchange with Lund, the DCCF developed a so-called Youth Score Card as a tool for young people to rate services. This highlighted two key issues: Overcrowded offices and a lack of digital access. The partnership has also shifted institutional culture as the Town Clerk now requires all district memos to explain how youth were consulted, and the mayor has committed to including a dedicated DCCF budget line from 2026/2027 onwards.

**What Francistown shows:** A legal mandate gives a forum staying power, but it is the institutional follow-through that makes the difference: Embedding youth input into planning documents, requiring memos to account for youth consultation, and replacing ad hoc funding with a permanent budget line.

## Step-by-step guide: Sustaining a Youth Council

Starting is the easy part. The real challenge is keeping a Youth Council alive and effective once the initial energy fades, when the project budget runs out, the founding officers move on, or political priorities shift. The following steps focus on building the kind of council that can survive all of that.

### STEP 6: Establish Clear Channels of Influence

One of the most common reasons Youth Councils lose momentum is the absence of tangible impact. To prevent this:

- Create formal pathways for council proposals to reach the right municipal committees
- Set up regular meetings between youth representatives and elected officials
- Require written responses to formal proposals (even when the answer is no)
- Build the Youth Council into existing consultation processes

Young people need to be able to see what happened to their ideas. Even when proposals are not adopted, feedback closes the loop and keeps trust alive.

### STEP 7: Integrate into Municipal Policy Cycles

For a Youth Council to be operationally meaningful, it must be embedded in existing governance structures rather than positioned externally. This may include:

- Annual budget consultations that formally include the Youth Council
- Structured input into strategic planning processes
- Seats in thematic working groups, e.g. climate, urban planning, public health, food systems, and more

When the Youth Council is woven into how the municipality already works, youth participation becomes a normal part of governance — not a special project.

## STEP 8: Ensure Adult Allies and Political Sponsorship

Successful Youth Councils benefit from visible support from both political leadership and within the administration.

- Appoint a political liaison or champion who takes responsibility for the relationship
- Designate a senior officer as the administrative point of contact
- Seek cross-party commitment so the council is not tied to one political agenda

That said, adult support and involvement must remain enabling rather than controlling. The Youth Council must retain ownership of its agenda. Adults open doors and young people decide where to walk.



Mogale City Junior Student Council

## STEP 9: Communicate Publicly and Transparently

Public visibility strengthens both legitimacy and accountability. It also shows how seriously your local government takes youth participation.

Local governments should:

- Publish meeting minutes and recommendations openly
- Celebrate achievements and give credit where it is due
- Build digital communication channels managed with youth participation
- Report annually to the municipal council

Visibility reinforces the message that youth participation is integral to local governance.



The Student Council in Mogale, February 2025.

## EXAMPLE:

## The Case of Lusaka

The Lusaka Junior Council was set up by Lusaka City Council as a formal, structured home for youth participation in local governance. Its creation was grounded in Zambia’s Local Government Act, the National Youth Policy, and international frameworks including the UNCRC, which meant the council had a solid legal and policy foundation from day one.

Getting it off the ground was thorough work: a steering committee was formed, multi-stakeholder consultations were held, and 38 members were selected through ward-level processes covering all 38 wards in the city. Members must be city **residents**

in the process where candidates are to submit a motivation letter, sit a quiz, take part in a debate, and submit a short video. The top two candidates from each ward then campaign for the mayoral position before the full cohort votes. New members receive a three-day orientation before taking up their roles, and terms last two years, which is long enough to develop real skills and institutional knowledge before handover.

The council is backed by multi-stakeholder partnerships and a **dedicated budget** that provides sustainable resources and administrative support. Its

“ *Participatory budgeting gave us power not just to speak, but to allocate. That changed everything.* ”

*Lusaka Junior Councillor*

**aged 14–18**, at Grade 10 level, with nominations **drawn from both schools and the wider community**. The breadth of this process is part of what gives the council its legitimacy.

The council deliberately mirrors the structure of the senior council with **a Junior Mayor, Deputy Mayor, and 37 Junior Councillors**. They are organised into eight standing committees with committee chairpersons covering health, environment, infrastructure, legal services, education, finance, and community development. Members attend full council sittings and their committee resolutions contribute formally into the equivalent main council committees for scrutiny and adoption. This is not a parallel structure sitting beside local government; it is embedded inside it with a direct reporting line.

The Terms of Reference set out an ambitious selec-

tion process where candidates are to submit a motivation letter, sit a quiz, take part in a debate, and submit a short video. The top two candidates from each ward then campaign for the mayoral position before the full cohort votes. New members receive a three-day orientation before taking up their roles, and terms last two years, which is long enough to develop real skills and institutional knowledge before handover.

work plans create clear pathways for youth proposals to be formally considered and acted upon. The council’s work spans a wide agenda. One of the standout examples of the council’s impact is its advocacy for a youth food policy council, which was eventually integrated into the Lusaka Food Systems Desk. All meetings are open to the public, and committee resolutions are submitted to the full council before being passed to the relevant main council committees. This transparency is built into the Terms of Reference, and not left to goodwill.

**What Lusaka shows:** A well-designed structure with real committees, a formal reporting line to the senior council, and an inclusive selection process that reaches beyond schools transforms a youth council from a symbolic gesture into a functioning part of local government.

## EXAMPLE:

## The Case of Mogale

The **Mogale City Junior Student Council (JSC)** emerged from a Municipal Partnership with Falun in Sweden that began in 2021. The council itself was launched in June 2023 with political commitment as a driving force behind it. The collaboration was designed to enhance young people's opportunities to influence local governance and to create democratic structures capable of sustaining meaningful youth participation beyond the conclusion of the project. While the partnership provided a framework and opened doors for mutual learning, the determination to make it a reality came from within the municipality itself.

The council has grown to **46 members**, with each municipal school **selecting one boy and one girl as representatives** through a secret ballot process. This is a formal rule that builds gender balance in from the start. Schools from across the municipality are included, from more affluent to more disadvantaged

“ *It's been an eye-opener to be able to make my voice heard like this (...) We actually get to sit down with the mayor and other decision-makers and tell them our views on issues we face. It's given us a broader perspective on what local democracy is about.*

*Ethan, Mogale JSC Member*

areas. Inspired by Falun's experience, **Mogale has applied the UNIK approach**, which is a method built on the recognition that few young people are already civically engaged and that consultation processes which rely on self-selection will always over-represent that minority. Rather than waiting for interested young people to come forward, UNIK deliberately mixes engagement types, reaching out proactively to those sceptical of formal structures as well as to existing enthusiasts.

Members meet quarterly, and their input is formally channelled into the city's Integrated Development Plan through a dedicated youth-sectoral meeting

where the IDP is presented in accessible language. To consolidate operations, governing documents are being formalised, and the council maintains an **active partnership with Johannesburg's Student Council** to promote shared learning and coordination of local initiatives.

The council has had a tangible impact on both participants and municipal decision-making. Young members report a strengthened sense of influence as their proposals are translated into concrete outcomes, fostering trust in local authorities. For municipal officials and politicians, the council provides unique insights into youth perspectives, supporting better-informed planning and more responsive governance.

Concrete achievements include the successful advocacy for the distribution of sanitary products in schools and the organisation of a Walk for Democracy, which brought community members together in support of youth participation. Looking ahead, the

municipality is developing an alumni programme to keep former members engaged and create a mentorship pipeline for new councillors. The process of institutionalisation is ongoing as the establishment of a permanent administrative function and a dedicated budget line will be crucial next steps.

**What Mogale shows:** Political ownership at the highest level can be the difference between a youth council that gets off the ground and one that stays on paper. Yet ownership alone is insufficient. Sustainable structures, a dedicated budget line, and ensuring administrative continuity matter once the initial momentum begins to fade.

## The Role of Institutional Collaboration and Exchange

Municipal partnerships between local governments in different countries have emerged as a significant catalyst in the creation and consolidation of Youth Councils. Evidence from Francistown, Lusaka, and Mogale demonstrates that these partnerships provide both strategic guidance and comparative perspective, enabling local governments to learn from peer experiences.

These collaborations facilitated the exchange of expertise on democratic practices, youth empowerment, and participatory governance. The partnerships were also rare opportunities to test and refine models, benefitting from comparative insights that further improved the youth councils.

Across all three cases, the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) Municipal Partnership Programme (MPP) provided more than technical guidance: it created a space for reflective practice, cross-cultural learning, and experimentation. Young people and local government officials alike gained exposure to alternative approaches, fostered innovation and challenged traditional assumptions about youth participation.



Participants in the partnership Lusaka-Lidköping, May 2025. Photo: Lidköpings kommun

## Lessons Learned: What works and what to watch out for

Several lessons emerge from the experiences of the three Youth Councils, providing practical guidance for municipalities seeking to establish or strengthen their own youth governance structures:

### 1. Be deliberate about who participates

Different selection models were used, from school nominations to ward-based outreach, but all required **clear rules and active outreach**. Without this, Youth Councils risk being dominated by the most confident and privileged, i.e do not rely on “self-selection” alone. Representation across gender, geography, and socio-economic background must be planned, not assumed.

### 2. Anchor the Youth Councils in real power structures

Councils are most effective when their role is formally recognised within municipal structures. **Legal anchoring, clear mandates, and youth-led agenda setting** help move councils from symbolic consultation to meaningful participation.

### 3. Design for survival and growth, not just launch

Many Youth Councils look successful in the beginning because they have project budgets, motivated staff, political attention, and/or external partners. However, for the success to last beyond elections and staff turnover, it is important to build durability into the design. This is achieved through **securing stable funding** (i.e. a small permanent budget line), **anchoring within department or offices** rather than individuals, **creating routines** with regular meetings, annual recruitment cycles and clear handover processes.

### 4. Make influence visible

Youth Councils gain legitimacy when their proposals lead to concrete outcomes. It is thus important that they, for example, **point to a policy adjusted, a plan revised, or a project launched**.

## 5. Keep adult involvement enabling, not controlling

5. Youth Councils that thrive have adult officials and external partners open doors without walking through them first. Young people need support, structure, and resources, but they also need ownership of their own agenda. The moment a Youth Council becomes a vehicle for adult priorities, it loses the trust and energy of its members, so keep checking: *Whose agenda is this really serving?*

## 6. Invest in skills, not only seats at the table

6. Training, induction, and exchange strengthen young people's ability to engage with policy and planning. Participation becomes more effective when youth understand how local government works, i.e. **build civic skills and democratic literacy.**

## 7. Review and adapt

7. Continuous monitoring allows councils to refine their role and mandate, improve representation, and respond to emerging challenges. One practical way to build this in is to review the Terms of Reference annually. Youth participation works best when it is treated as **an evolving process rather than a fixed model.**

## 8. Learn from others and share what you know

8. Some of the most significant breakthroughs come as a result of peer exchange. This is seen in all three case studies presented in this toolbox. Peer learning accelerates progress and reduces the cost of starting from scratch. Connect with other local governments that have been through this, and **when you have built something worth sharing, make it available to others.**

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