

5 ways to maximise participant voices

Using the voices of children and young people means inviting and listening to the views of those you work/volunteer with. Creating a culture where children know that their opinions are sought after, listened to and acted upon has a wide range of benefits.

There are some brilliant ways that you might maximise the voices of children and young people in your sport and there are some key principles that should be considered to ensure the success of any engagement including:

- **Be purposeful.** You should be clear in the aims of what you want to achieve, for example do you want to:
 - Gather views on safeguarding practices within your organisation?
 - Consult with participants on Codes of Conduct?
 - Understand the visibility of Club Safeguarding Officers?
 - Get feedback from participants in respect of coaching/teaching styles?
- **Show commitment.** Consultation and engagement with young people should never be to satisfy 'tick-box' requirements. There should be a real buy-in from all parties with a willingness to act on the feedback gathered.
- **Be transparent.** The ways you engage with and use participant voices should be communicated through policies and regular updates so that everyone involved with the organisation (including staff, volunteers, players and parents/carers) can see the impact that it is having.
- **Be inclusive.** You will need to adapt your strategies to make sure that **every participant** is able to be heard. Choose a range of methods to engage participant voice that reflect the age, needs and preferences of the children.

Why is the voice of young people so important for sport?

As per Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 'every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.'

How to Engage Participants

Every club is different, so you will need to consider your participants and ways to engage participant voices that will work best for you. To maximise effectiveness, you should aim to use a combination of different ways to invite participant voices. The strategies below can be adapted to suit the children you work/volunteer with.

Youth Council

Having a youth council or forum is a popular way to engage participant voices. Youth councils can usually work on the basis of one or two representatives of different ages meeting regularly as a group. They bring issues to the committee and input into some of the club decision-making processes. Representatives usually put themselves forward and are then voted by their peers.

The important element is for the youth council to **play a meaningful role** and for the ideas they bring to be taken seriously. There should be a mechanism for children to raise issues with their representative (this could be provided through an ideas book or suggestion box, for example). The representative then takes that issue or idea to the next meeting.

It is important not to be dismissive of any idea, either. By finding out from children what is important to them, our organisations can better meet those needs.

Committees could task the youth council to help with events, such as fundraising, and they can act as an extremely valuable link to promote bowls amongst their peers. Youth councils now also often form a panel to interview candidates applying for roles within the organisation – giving a valuable perspective as part of the safer recruitment process.

2. Youth Committees

In addition to youth councils, who will be involved across all elements of club life, many organisations have successfully set up additional groups of children and young people who are involved in specific areas. These groups work alongside members of the committee to bring the perspective of children and young people to certain issues and to further these amongst their peers.

Depending on your setting and demographic, such groups could include:

- **Eco ambassadors.** A group of children who meet to discuss how the club and sport could become more **eco-friendly** and to promote and monitor any new initiatives.

- **LGBTQ+ student groups.** As well as being a forum for getting participant feedback on issues affecting LGBTQ+ children and **how to promote inclusion**, these groups can also be a safe space for young people to come together.
- **Wellbeing champions.** Train children to act as buddies to their peers, supporting other children during unstructured times. Meeting regularly with this group can provide insight into any recurring issues or ways to improve participation.

There are many other groups that could be formed, too. As a starting point, ask the youth council for suggestions as to what the children would like to see represented in the club. With all such groups, there needs to be time and resources (including staff/volunteers) available in order to make sure that they are effective. Meeting regularly, co-constructing the group's agenda, gathering feedback and monitoring outcomes is essential.

3. Suggestion Boxes

Some children may not be comfortable with taking on a representative role or speaking in a group. However, you still need to provide ways in which their voices can be heard. Having a suggestion box or an email form on the club website, where ideas or questions can be submitted, are good ways of providing such opportunities. These ideas can then be picked up by members of the committee or the youth council and followed up.

4. Surveys

Surveys are a good way to get a broad insight into the views of the participants. These can be online or paper-based. Set aside some time for children to be able to complete them and make sure that children understand that you really want to get their honest opinion. Anonymising the surveys can help to encourage this.

When constructing surveys make sure you target the questions – are you looking for feedback regarding a specific area of the club or bowls provision?

You should also make sure that the format of the questionnaire is accessible for all. Children with SEND might need the information to be presented in a different way, for example, with more accompanying visuals, or might need to work through the questions with a member of staff/volunteer. Younger children might respond better to choosing a smiley face to express their thoughts, whilst you will want to provide older children with more opportunities for submitting additional information.

Once you have gathered the information, it is important that you share the results with the participants, alongside any actions that might come out of it.

Regular Check Ins

Clubs could organise regular chat sessions with members of the committee, coaches, the CWO or parents/carers to gain informal feedback.

This helps build relationships and monitor children's perceptions of their experience within bowls. It also helps give everyone a chance to engage over the season. It works well with a mix of age groups. The sessions should be short, informal and can be based around simple questions such as 'what is the best thing you've done in bowls this week?' or 'did you have any challenges this week?'

Maximising your engagement with participant voice can bring many benefits, for individuals and for the quality of your provision. There is no single 'right' way of inviting and using participant voice; you will need to adapt your methods to your particular children and young people. We hope that the principles and suggestions covered in this resource will help you to maximise participant voice in your club.