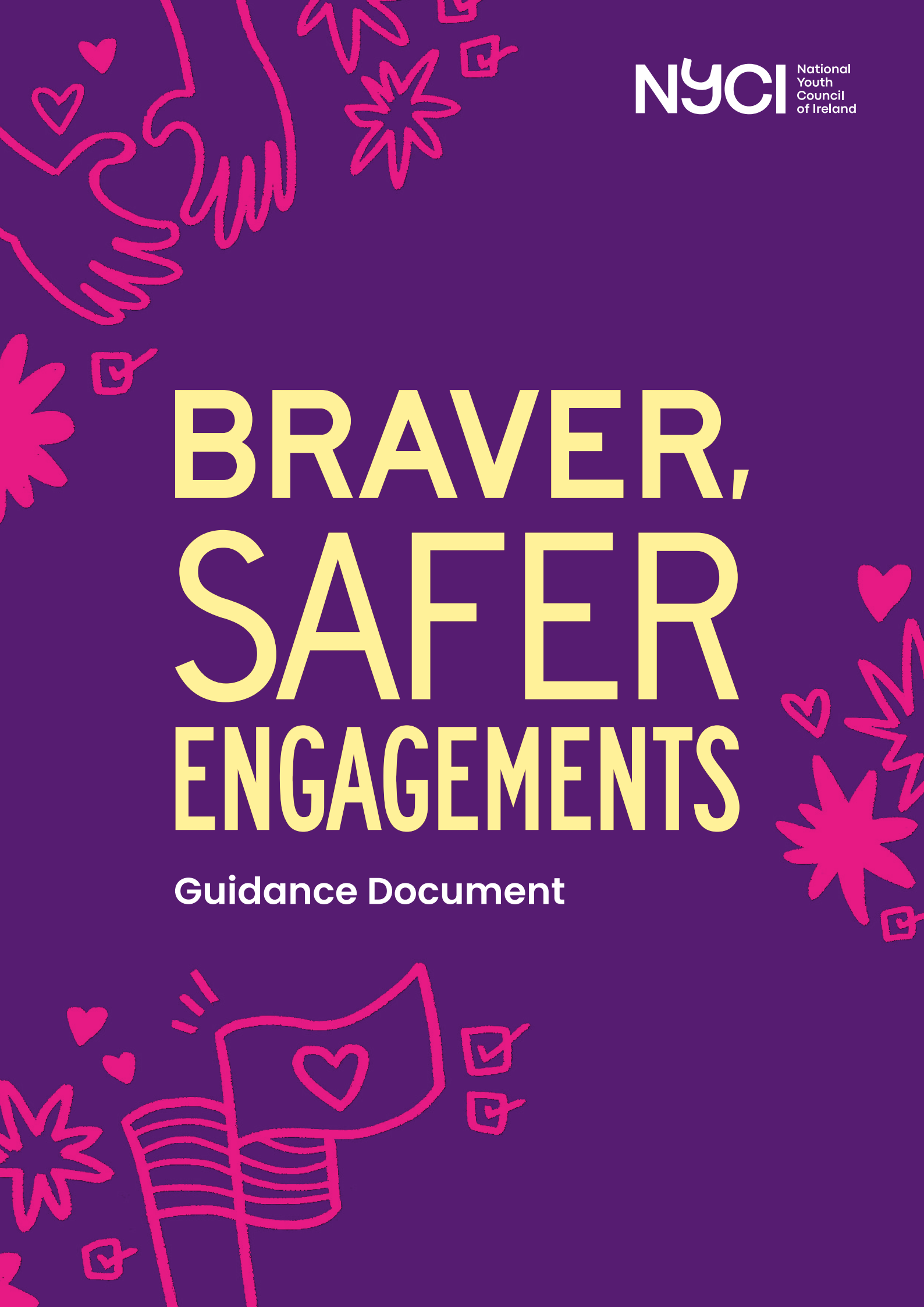


BRAVER, SAFER ENGAGEMENTS

Guidance Document



National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for national voluntary youth work organisations in Ireland. It represents and supports the interests of voluntary youth organisations and uses its collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people. www.youth.ie

Policy and Advocacy

Guided by the sectoral Vision for Youth Work and NYCI's Strategic Plan, NYCI's Policy and Advocacy team advocate on issues which impact on the lives of young people, on our member organisations and on the youth work sector.

National Child Protection Programme

The National Child Protection Programme supports and resources the youth work sector to meet its safeguarding responsibilities through the provision of training, events, practice sharing spaces, resources, advice, and advocacy. Supporting organisations to take a whole organisational approach and embedding safeguarding across youth work settings is key to our work.

Equality and Intercultural Programme

The Equality and Intercultural Programme supports the youth work sector to embed equality, inclusion, diversity and interculturalism in youth work settings through its unique and innovative suite of training programmes, resources, policy development, advice, research and networking opportunities. Central to our work is hearing the voice of minority and marginalised young people and youth workers.

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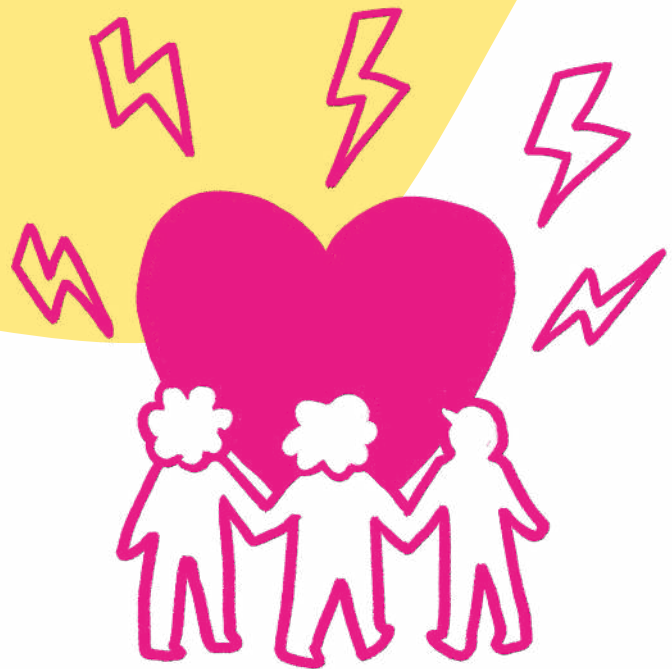
BRAVER, SAFER ENGAGEMENTS

Guidance Document

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INTRODUCTION



Youth work settings are places of safety, connection and belonging for young people. They are also brave spaces, where social and political issues are discussed, debated, and worked through. Youth workers play a key role in facilitating these discussions both formally (by planning activities or events around a topic) or informally (when topics arise organically within the group).

Outside influences impact young people, and at times guests may be invited in to engage with the young people within the youth work organisation. This could be anything from a meeting hosted with a mental health expert at a youth mental health event, to a political panel of candidates around election time. There is much to be gained from these types of events – connection to local community, infusion of knowledge from experts and exposure to new perspectives for young people.

Youth work is also not isolated from the challenges faced by wider society. Within a context of concern around mis and disinformation, hateful narratives and toxic debates, how can youth work continue the practice of hosting guests or taking part in external events, while maintaining a level of safety and bravery that young people expect and deserve?

The answer to the above will depend on the circumstances, and young people along with their youth workers, are best placed to decide for themselves. This document, produced by NYCI's Child Protection, Equality and Intercultural and Policy and Advocacy teams, aims to support you in this journey, by providing you with questions and considerations to guide your decision making and planning for such events. Much of the below will already be embedded in your practice, and we hope that it is equally affirming as it is intended as a helpful tool.

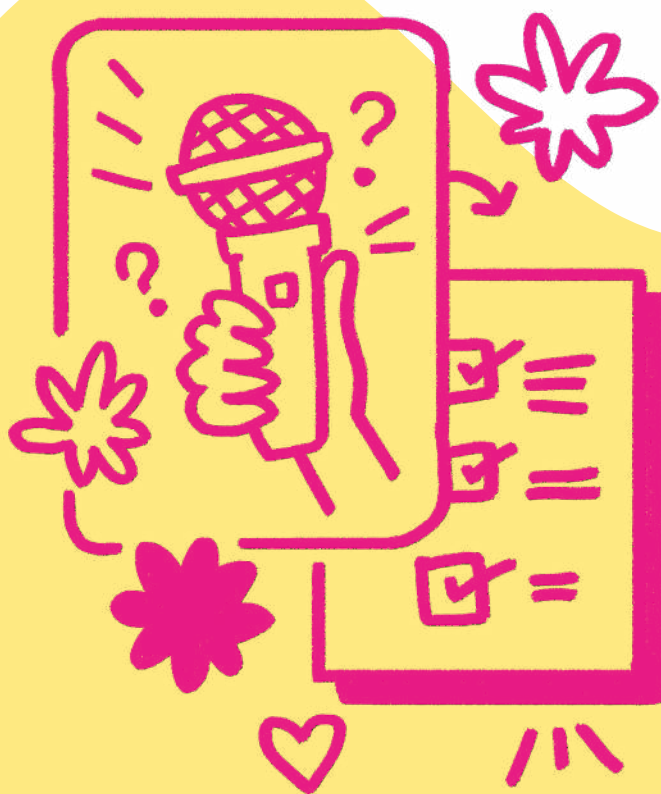
Types of meetings, events, activities and invites that this guide can be used for:

- Inviting guest speakers to an event hosted by your organisation
- Hosting political hustings and engagements
- Responding to requests from external organisations to meet with groups of young people
- Responding to requests from young people to invite figures into the youth service

How to use this guide:

Go through the questions and considerations throughout this guide, ensuring that:

- Young people are involved in this process by including them in all stages of planning and decision making – give them a copy of this guide if useful.
- There is sufficient time to complete this process, so all angles and perspectives are given due consideration.
- Answers to the questions and actions that have been agreed are captured within other planning documents, for example the risk assessment for the event/activity.



STEP 1



Before anything is planned or agreed, explore the following:

- What is the purpose of this event/ inviting this person in to speak to our young people/accepting this request from an individual or organisation to speak with the young people in our service?
- Who will benefit from this engagement or activity?
- Have we asked the young people in our service if this is something they are interested in/want to do?
- Is it something we can safely accommodate in our setting?
- What are the potential impacts on our young people, both developmental and detrimental?
- Will the opinions and beliefs of the guest speaker/politician/ external organisation align with those of your organisation's? If not, how will we prepare our young people to contend with the potential conflict and/or hurt if the opinions and beliefs are shared without respect?
- Is it likely that some young people in the group will be impacted more by what they hear or who they meet? For example, young Travellers in your group who have heard anti-Traveller sentiments from the guest speaker/ politician/external organisation, or young people who have been promised urban renewal projects and those promises have been broken etc. How will this be handled?
- Consider who is not in the room when opinions are being shared, whose voices are missing and how can we include them/stand up in solidarity with them?
- Have we made every effort to learn about the individual or organisation before responding to their invite or inviting them to speak?
- How do we determine whether someone is an "expert" and that their input will not contribute to dis or misinformation?

TOP TIP

We understand that in real life, things don't always go smoothly or happen in a way that leaves you with time to consider all potential outcomes. In those cases, rely on your experience and values to make decisions. One thing that you can do to protect your organisation from such scenarios is ensuring that staff, volunteers and young people have clarity on who has authority and responsibility for decision-making.

Do take time to pause and check in with your organisation's core values and policy and procedures. These will guide your decisions, especially when under pressure. Taking time out during a quieter time of the year to have a clear pre-agreed process for managing these things means you're not starting from scratch in the moment. Instead, you're responding with consistency, fairness, and safety in mind.

This guide can be used to create your own internal checklist or protocol in advance that reflects your safeguarding responsibilities, your commitment to inclusion, and the importance of meaningful youth participation.



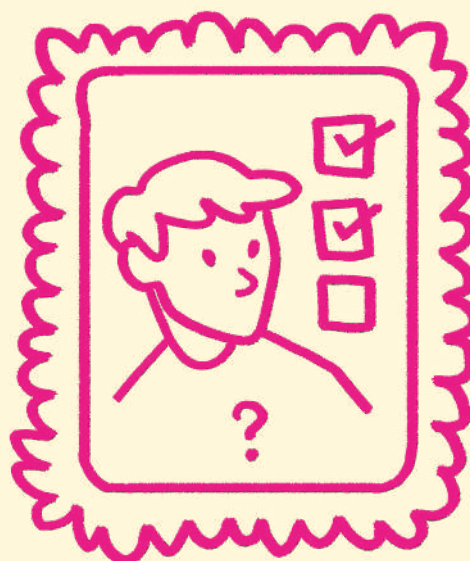
“YOU, THE YOUTH WORKER, HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTIONS TO NAVIGATE THESE CHALLENGES”

CASE STUDY

The youth centre is celebrating 20 years in the community. They are hosting an event for the young people and wider community to celebrate the occasion. The manager of the centre is busy conducting a risk assessment for the event.

While doing this work, they decide to have a drop-in session during a busy period of the centre to have a meeting with staff and young people to plan the event. During the discussion, a volunteer suggests that one of the local TDs, who is a Minister, is invited to open the celebration. They feel it would add to the event by showing recognition by the Government for their work. The young people who are there agree that it would be good to have a politician at the event.

At this point, the youth worker challenges the group to write down the benefits and risks of inviting the Minister. As a part of this, the group looks up recent statements by the Minister online. Facilitated by the youth worker, they chat about what she has said about social issues, what her areas of interest are, and what her connection to the community has been. After their research, and some discussion, the group think that the Minister would be a great guest to open the event. They also decide that they should invite all the other constituency TDs to be in attendance, but not to speak. They don't have time for speaking slots for them all but want them all to get a chance to meet the organisation. They decide that it is appropriate for the Minister to speak, as a government representative, and the rest to be in attendance.



After the group has finished its work, one of the youth workers has an outstanding concern that's bothering them. They know that the Minister has expressed some controversial opinions on drug use. One of the young people, who wasn't at the planning meeting, has parents who are drug users. This young person is not interested in politics and often feels let down by political decisions. The youth worker is afraid that the Minister might say something on the night that furthers this feeling in the young person and upsets them.

From their relationship with this young person, they know they can chat to them openly about it. They check in with the young person separately, to explain this situation, and to ask them what they think before the invite is sent. The young person thinks about it and decides that they'd like to ask the Minister a question about her stance on the evening, if the opportunity arises. They confirm that they'll be in attendance on the day.

These discussions, information, and actions are captured in the risk assessment for the 20-year celebration event.

STEP 2

Making the Decision

The decision to go ahead with an event/ activity or to invite someone into the organisation to engage with young people lies with your organisation. You are best placed to understand the needs, vulnerabilities and strengths of the young people you work with.

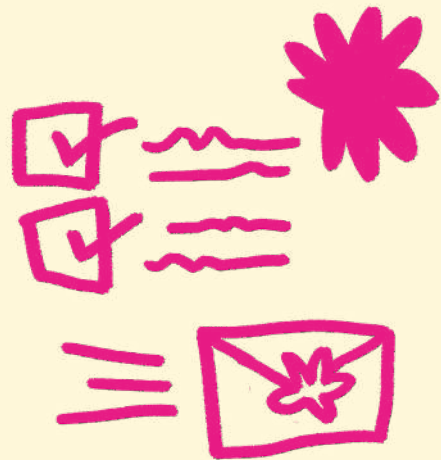
When making difficult decisions, be guided by your organisation's ethos, values, policies and procedures.

Have you considered the following:

- Who makes the decision for an event to go ahead or an invitation to be extended?
- If new information comes to light about an organisation or individual who has been invited to engage with the youth work service or participate in an event, who makes the decision on whether it can still go ahead or if they should still be included?
- Have you thought about whether any other parties need to be involved in the decision-making? For example, if you are part of a consortium or collective that is running the event, or if it's being run in partnership with another organisation.

CASE STUDY

Based on the planning and risk assessment above, the decision is made by the manager to invite the Minister.



STEP 3

The decision has been made

To not go ahead

The decision to rescind an invitation, cancel an event, or not to proceed with a request should be clearly communicated to the young people, including the reasons why (especially if it was an organisational decision that goes against the wishes of some young people).

To go ahead

The decision to proceed with an event or input from a speaker should be communicated clearly to the young people, including the reasons why (especially if some young people were against this decision).

Consider the following:

- Have we clearly communicated to parents/guardians for under 18s?
 - Have we provided information on the individual/organisation being invited into the service?
 - Have we pointed out any potential risks and support measures we have put/are putting in place?
 - Have we clearly communicated that young people can change their mind and choose not to engage or participate at any time and stated that this will have no negative consequences for them.
- If there is potential for negative consequences from the event, have we received explicit consent from parents/guardians and young people to participate in the event/activity/talk?
 - Have you agreed in advance with the guest speaker/politician/external organisation the nature of their input, ensuring that it is guided by what the young people want to hear?
 - This may include young people being provided with an opportunity to respond to comments made during the input or to ask questions of the individual.
 - Young people may need to have time to reflect on the input and prepare a response and questions, including knowing how they can follow up with the guest speaker/politician/external organisation .

**“REMEMBER IT’S THE
IMPACT THAT STAYS
WITH THE PERSON,
NOT THE INTENTION”**


TOP TIP

Consent: One Size Doesn't Fit All

Having overarching consent to engage with a youth service doesn't automatically mean young people (or their parents/carers) have consented to every type of activity or interaction. Explicit consent may still be needed for certain events, especially when the activity falls outside the usual scope of service (eg. media involvement, overnights, sensitive discussions).

However, in some situations, seeking explicit consent may not be appropriate. For example, if it places a young person at risk, compromises their confidentiality, or conflicts with their evolving capacity and right to make decisions.

Always assess whether the activity/event falls within the scope of the original consent. When in doubt, seek explicit consent from parents/carers. Keep in mind that where explicit consent may not be required, it might still be important to inform parents/carers about what's happening.



The illustration shows a central document with three numbered points (1, 2, 3) and horizontal lines representing text. Four hands are shown interacting with the document: one at the top right, one on the left holding a pen, one at the bottom right holding a pencil, and one at the bottom left. The document is surrounded by decorative elements: a pink flower at the top left, a purple flower at the top right, and two pink hearts at the bottom. The entire scene is enclosed in a dotted purple border.

CASE STUDY

The youth worker works with the young people to draft a letter from them to invite the Minister. Given the work the group has done on researching the Minister's interests, they include some topics that they'd love for her to include in her speech. When her office confirms that she is available to attend, the information is shared with parents and other invitees through social media posts.

STEP 4

Planning for after the event takes place

- Have we dedicated time to debrief young people after the event/input?
- Have we identified what supports we can avail of for young people, staff/ volunteers if necessary?
- Have we dedicated time to reflect on the experience?

REMEMBER THAT VULNERABILITY IS NOT THE SAME FOR EVERY YOUNG PERSON; YOUNG WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE, YOUNG PEOPLE FROM MINORITY GROUPS, YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES AND TRAUMA MAY EXPERIENCE THINGS DIFFERENTLY.

CASE STUDY

The Minister opens the event, and the youth organisation is happy with how it went. However, she didn't have time for a Q&A and had to leave promptly after the event. The week following, the youth worker hosts a debrief with the young people. They chat about how it went and decide to send a follow-up email thanking her for attending. They also decide to include some questions, including on the issue of drugs, for her to respond to. They decide that they will use the responses as content for a workshop on politics that they are running for younger members in a few weeks.



EXAMPLES WHERE THIS DOCUMENT WILL BE USEFUL

Example 1:

It's Health Week in the youth project. The youth leaders decide to organise a talk with a local fitness influencer that the group admire. Through the planning process above, it comes up that the influencer has recently been promoting unregulated substances as an alternative to vaccines. While he has a lot of positive tips around healthcare and fitness, the group are concerned about the impact of that message on the younger members. They decide to also invite the local GP to speak at the same event. The GP is on the board of management of the community centre and has connections to the youth group. They give a briefing note to both speakers, which outlines the topics that they'd like them to focus on, mainly fitness tips and healthy eating. Finally, they plan the event for a Friday evening. There is a drop-in session the next day where they can have a debrief if anything controversial is raised.



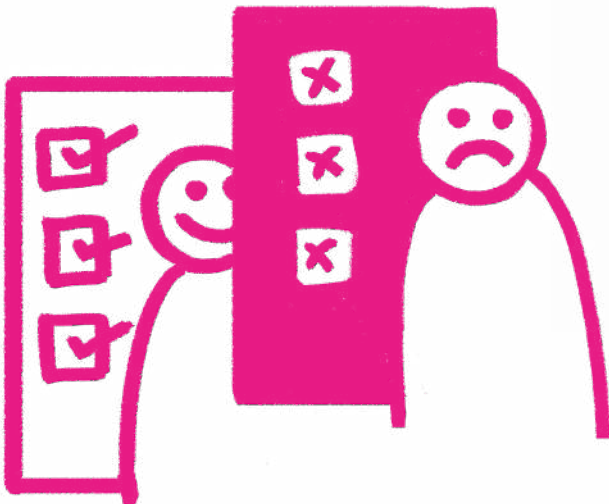
Example 2:

It is election time, and a group of young people want to host a husting with local candidates. One candidate has explicitly expressed hateful anti-migrant views, and there are ethnic minority young people in the organisation. Anti-migrant views are in contrast with the values of the organisation. Using the process in this document, the decision is made with young people not to invite that candidate. The process is clearly documented. The Youth Work organisation also prepare a short public statement explaining the process, and why the decision was made, in case of queries arising.

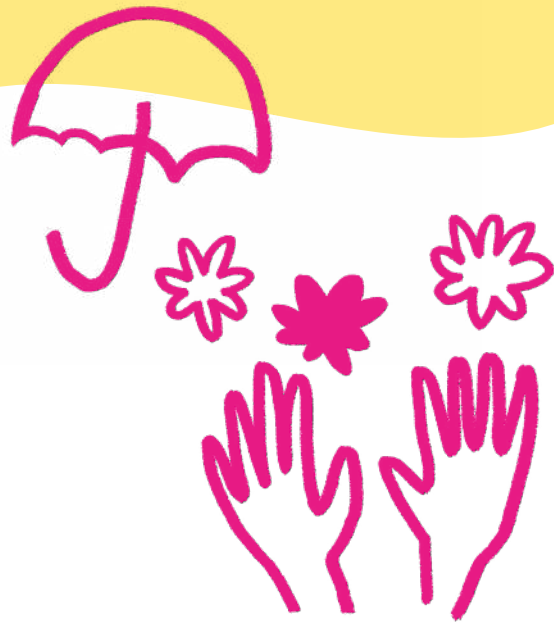


Example 3:

You have invited the Cathaoirleach (chairperson) of the County Council to attend an event to celebrate the work the young people did on an Erasmus+ project. You followed the process above and were confident that all would go well. Three days before the event the Cathaoirleach's assistant contacted the youth service to say that they had been pulled away to another meeting, but they would be represented at the event by the Leas-Cathaoirleach. The Leas-Cathaoirleach has been very vocal in the past against the provision of Traveller accommodation. You revisit the process and decide to engage directly with the Leas-Cathaoirleach to see if their views have changed. When it is clear that their views have not changed you ask that they do not attend the event. At the event you convey the apologies of the Cathaoirleach.



PROMPTS & REMINDERS



Importance of inclusivity and diversity of experience

Inclusivity means actively considering the diversity of young people's identities, backgrounds and experiences, including those who are not in the room and whose voices may be missing. Youth services have a responsibility to create safe, welcoming spaces where all young people feel respected, heard, and valued. This guidance is not about excluding individuals or organisations with different beliefs, perspectives or views, but is about ensuring that any engagement aligns with the core duty to protect young people's safety, wellbeing and rights.

Safety and wellbeing

Youth workers mitigate and alleviate the impact of contentious discussions or environments by implementing trauma-informed practices. This can address past experiences and create a safer, supportive space that prioritises the safety and wellbeing of young people. By proactively recognising and responding to the unique needs of each young person, youth workers prevent escalation, reduce stress, and foster an environment that helps young people process and makes sense of experiences, even in challenging contexts.

Safeguarding risk assessments

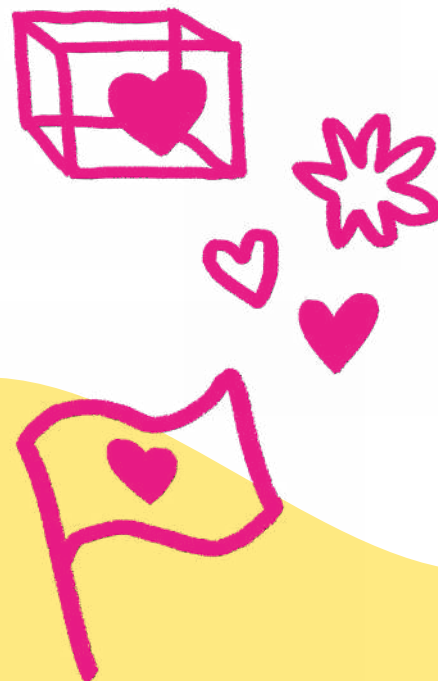
Safeguarding risks assessments play a critical role in guiding decision-making when planning events or activities with young people, ensuring that potential risks and their impacts are identified and mitigated to protect the well-being of the young people involved. By carefully assessing these risks, youth workers and their organisations can create safe and supportive environments that allow young people to engage in meaningful experiences while minimising any potential harm.

Rights of young people

The rights of young people in youth work settings are essential for ensuring their voices are heard and respected, fostering an environment where they can participate in decisions that affect their lives. It is crucial to balance the protection of young people with the provision of opportunities for growth and the promotion of autonomy, ensuring they are supported while being given the space to develop their own identities and make informed choices.

Helpful Resources Available on NYCI's Website

- For more on freedom of speech, creating safer spaces and the ways that narrative can harm and how to work with young people to transform harm see **Transforming Hate in Youth Settings**.
- For more information on how to provide safe environments for young people, please see **Working Safely in a Youth Club**. This guidance assists youth work organisations to develop their safeguarding approach by looking at the different factors that contribute to an environment where you can work safely with young people.



“WE CAN DISAGREE
AND STILL LOVE EACH
OTHER UNLESS YOUR
DISAGREEMENT IS ROOTED
IN MY OPPRESSION AND
DENIAL OF MY HUMANITY
AND RIGHT TO EXIST”

JAMES BALDWIN

YOUTH WORK CHANGES LIVES

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