

## The voice of the Voluntary Arts

# Young Adults & Voluntary Arts: Three models to promote participation

**New energy, the opportunity to pass on skills and experience, and ensuring succession are some of the reasons that volunteer-led local arts groups seek to recruit and retain young people as members.**

However, many voluntary arts groups find themselves in a position where their membership has remained virtually unchanged for a number of years. Does this sound familiar? Has your group made moves to target potential younger members and found either no interest or brief interest that did not last after the initial introduction? Have you wondered why – and what you could do about it?

This briefing will help you address these issues in three ways:

1. highlighting barriers which reduce the chances of young people participating in voluntary arts;
2. giving guidance to voluntary arts groups on how to prepare to extend their membership to younger people;
3. introducing three models for voluntary arts groups to successfully include young adults in their groups and/or activities. These are:
  - Mixed Age Group;
  - Separate Youth Wing;
  - Partnership with a Young People's Group.

Based on lessons learnt from the Young Adults & Voluntary Arts (YAVA) project managed by Voluntary Arts Ireland, its contents will be of use to both voluntary arts groups who would like to recruit and retain younger members and to young people's groups who would like to work in partnership with arts groups.

### Barriers to Taking Part

The following barriers to involvement by young adults have been identified by arts groups and young adults:

Barriers which **arts groups** identified include:

- fear of change, disruption of routine;

- worries about lack of respect, insufficient commitment from young people;
- fear that young people may be from different backgrounds;
- lack of will to engage – 'we are fine as we are'.

Barriers which **young adults** identified include:

- fear of change, new territory;
- lack of confidence in their capabilities;
- perception that some artforms or arts groups are exclusive;
- fear of being labelled as being different for being involved in the arts.

### Preparing to work with young adults

Voluntary arts groups seeking to increase their membership and expand their age range first need to have a clear idea of what they want to do. Your starting point, therefore, is to gain an understanding of how your group currently operates. This will help you identify features that you can enhance to ensure engagement and retention of younger people.

A meeting of your group to consider the topics for discussion (see below) will help you gain:

- a picture of the group's current position;
- a clear understanding of why the group wants to involve younger members – the benefits to the group and the benefits to the young people;
- the beginnings of a marketing plan to introduce the group to prospective younger members and an engagement plan to include them in your activities.

### Topics for discussion and things to consider

**History:** What is your group's history? What do you do? How are you organised? What skills and resources do you have at your disposal? Does your constitution restrict you in any way?

**Aims:** Why is your group seeking to work with young adults? What needs are you hoping to meet (yours and theirs).



**Outcomes:** What will be the benefits for those involved?

**Time:** What is the timeframe of the planned activity – whether expanded membership, new group or partnership?

**Accessibility:** Where will activities take place? Is this venue open and accessible to all prospective participants? Is transport an issue?

**Activities:** Are the activities appropriate and realistic? Do they meet the needs of all involved?

**Management:** Who will organise and manage the project/group?

**Finance:** Is there need for additional funding? Who will be responsible for raising any additional funds? Will this new direction open up new funding avenues?

**Other Resources:** Is any special equipment needed? Where will this come from? Who will be responsible for acquiring it?

**Training:** Are there any training needs that will need to be met before commencing the project?

**Inclusion:** How is your group going to ensure your plans promote inclusion of people from all backgrounds?

**Staffing/Volunteers:** Are staff/further volunteers required? Who will be responsible for managing their role?

**Monitoring/Evaluation:** How will the project be monitored and evaluated? Who will be responsible for this?

**Accountability/Liability:** Are all parties covered by existing insurance? Who will be accountable?

Having discussed the issues suggested above, you will be clearer about where your group stands, your future aims and the resources you will require. You will now need to decide how you will engage with young people.

## Three Models of Engagement

Three models of engagement have been piloted as part of the YAVA project. Each offers different benefits and levels of engagement. These are outlined in brief here with some suggestions on using each model.

### A. Mixed-age Group

**Definition:** Members of all ages come together to pursue their chosen art form.

**Benefits:** All ages are fully engaged in every aspect of the group's activities.

**Challenges:** This model may appear to be the most straightforward. However, as with intergenerational or cross-community work, the Mixed-Age Group model needs good communication between members and mutual respect for the commitment, talents and interests of all age groups in order for it to work. Both the established older members of the

group and the newer younger members must adjust to the new dynamic. This can involve change which can be unsettling, particularly for those who may not be completely committed to the new approach.

**Example:** Older members of an established choral group wanted to work with younger people but felt they were lacking experience with young people. In order to raise their confidence and skills, two group members attended a child protection course and the group put together a child protection policy. The local youth worker was also invited to visit the group and to discuss youth practice and training options.

### Forming a Mixed-Age Group: The steps

1. Do preparatory work (see 'Topics for discussion') to identify objectives and resources needed. A key requirement of the success of this model of engagement is that worries, fears and discomforts of current group members are aired and addressed, and the worries, fears and discomforts which younger people may potentially experience are also understood and addressed (see example). Further barriers such as cost, transport to where activities take place, accessibility/location of the venue, resourcing and timing of activities will also need to be taken into account.
2. Develop a recruitment strategy that specifically targets prospective younger members. Think about, for example, how young people might feel entering an established mixed age group on their own. It maybe a good idea, therefore, to 'advertise' the arts group's activities in a range of youth-friendly venues (youth clubs, community centres, colleges, etc.) and then invite interested individuals as a group to one or more introductory sessions prior to starting joint work. This means they do not have to face walking in alone, or the fear of having to make a long term commitment from the very start. Giving the young people greater confidence, an opportunity to build relationships and establish expectations are vital for sustained attendance.
3. Plan and host introductory sessions. The initial meeting should ideally take place in the venue where the group's activities take place. The aim of the meeting will be to bring the established arts group and the gathered group of interested individuals together to encourage discussion and development of plans. An outside facilitator, such as a local community or youth leader, may be a useful addition, possibly even a familiar face, to the initial meetings. Follow this up with further sessions to develop relationships and ideas, and to identify how the expanded group will work



together, the responsibilities of each person, and any longer term objectives. Continued reviewing of the process will ensure that any overlooked or new problems are addressed swiftly.

Longer term success of a mixed age group will require fair representation of all age groups on any committee/organisational team. This will ensure that the views and perspectives of all its members are taken into consideration. It is therefore worth thinking at the outset about how, in the longer term, you can help younger members take an interest in learning committee skills. Appointing younger members to your committee is, in fact, a great way to keep it refreshed and sustainable.

## B. Separate Youth Wing

**Definition:** Younger members joining the group work separately on projects suited to their interests but which are still linked to the overall aims and direction of the wider arts group.

**Benefits:** This offers the benefits of new energy and direction but with less disruption to the established programme of activity of the established arts group.

**Challenges:** The arts group must still be willing to take on board the change young people will inevitably bring, and the group of young people must be committed to taking some of the responsibility for the organisation of the youth wing.

**Example:** A local drama group wished to encourage young people interested in drama, to join in order to pass on their skills and experience. However, they felt their programme was not suited to young people on a weekly basis, so they decided to include young people on an occasional basis. To do this they set up a youth drama group. They decided that bringing together a group of young people into a youth drama group linked to their group would be the most beneficial plan of action for all concerned.

### Developing a Separate Youth Wing: The Steps

1. Do preparatory work (see 'Topics for discussion') to identify objectives and resources required.
2. Identify a group of young people who would benefit from and enjoy the opportunity to join your group. There are two elements which are vital to the success of this approach; finding an interested group of young people (see below) and offering a tangible benefit to them by virtue of being members of your group. Young people might be found through:
  - local youth clubs where members have shown interest in arts activities of this nature previously;
  - school drama clubs or amongst those who have taken part in school productions;

- church groups that put on plays;
- young people who have shown an interest in the group's activities previously;
- young people's groups which use the same venue as the arts group, or other venues where similar arts activities take place, such as community centres or colleges etc.

3. Examine what the group has to offer which makes it accessible and attractive – for example, venue/location of activities; convenient times at which activities take place; range of activities on offer.
4. Highlight the benefits of taking part to prospective groups of young people i.e. specific skills and experience of arts group members, opportunities to strengthen their CV or build arts, management and/or technical skills, the chance to meet other people who share interests and so on.
5. Initiate contact. The following is a range of ideas on how this contact may be made – you may have others.
  - Hold an open day with special invitations to targeted groups/individuals.
  - Organise a short-term project specifically for a group of young people which would culminate in a performance/exhibition/event, etc.
  - Develop a short-term course with a professional tutor specially designed for young people. Additional support could be provided by your group, and could include a session on starting up a new group.
  - Link with existing provision within the education system to offer opportunities to those interested in extending their studies through participation in a youth arts groups.
  - Make contact with schools, churches, youth groups and community groups to ask them to pass on details of any intention to set up a separate youth wing.

Creating sub-committees to deal with particular aspects of the project is often a good idea. This ensures that there is good participation from all members. Seeking advice from another organisation with a youth wing, or local youth group leaders can also help inform the plan of action.

## C. Partnership with a Young Group

**Definition:** An established arts group and a youth group, which may or may not have an arts focus, come together to work on a joint arts project.

**Benefits:** Each group derives the benefits of the energy and innovation of a new project, while still retaining its independent role and status. This minimises the need for longer term adjustment of objectives.



**Challenges:** This approach is most likely to be successful if it is an equal partnership. So each group needs to be flexible. The established arts group may initiate the process but neither group should assume the role of 'lead' partner unless there is consultation and then agreement between all involved.

**Example:** An arts centre recognised that its user base was narrow in terms of age, social background and gender. To specifically address the issue of low participation levels of younger people it approached a local youth worker who was interested in finding creative activities for young people. Having consulted him, staff established a project that gave the young people the opportunity to use the facilities in the centre and meet the centre's staff and volunteers.

### Developing joint projects with a young person's group

1. Do preparatory work (see 'Topics for discussion') to identify objectives and resources required. This approach is similar to the Separate Youth Wing model (though here partnership with an established young people's group is sought). It is important to identify the benefits of the partnership for both groups. It is not necessary to have a specific project in mind. This can be developed in consultation with the partner group, if preferred. Otherwise some of the ideas suggested in the previous model might be helpful or the arts group members may have their own ideas.
2. Identify a youth group with which to work. Again youth/community leaders, schools, churches, local authority arts officers, etc. may be able to suggest young groups in the area who may be interested in becoming involved in the chosen artform of the group.
3. Approach the youth group with the idea of a possible partnership or joint project ideas. It may be useful to get the assistance of a youth leader or other key person to work with you in making the approach.

4. Once contact has been established and a partner has agreed in principle to taking part in a joint project, the arts group should arrange an initial meeting to develop the idea(s) and an action plan. As with the mixed age group, where there are young people and older people from two different types of group, an initial introduction and ideas session is vital. If the youth group has adult leaders, it may be more appropriate for the project leaders from each group to meet to determine plans. In this case both groups need to ensure that all their members are consulted and are committed to the project.

Any joint project should be administered according to the abilities and means of both groups.

### YAVA Project

The Young Adults & Voluntary Arts (YAVA) project is a two year pilot project based in Co. Antrim (excluding Belfast). The project is run by Voluntary Arts Ireland. The initiative was developed to address the under-representation of young adults (16-34 year olds) engaging in voluntary arts in the area. The project is facilitated by Pauline Matthew and ends in 2006. It is resourced by: the National Lottery through the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the Enkalon Foundation, Antrim Borough Council, Ballymena Borough Council, Ballymoney Borough Council, Carrickfergus Borough Council, Coleraine Borough Council, Larne Borough Council, Moyle District Council and Newtonabbey Borough Council and grid studios.

### Further information:

Voluntary Arts Ireland  
PO Box 200  
Downpatrick  
BT30 6WE  
[www.vaireland.org](http://www.vaireland.org)  
E: [info@vaireland.org](mailto:info@vaireland.org)  
T: 02844 839327



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**Do you need this publication in a larger or alternative format? Contact Whitney T: 029 20 395 395 E: [whitney@voluntaryarts.org](mailto:whitney@voluntaryarts.org)**



The Voluntary Arts Network, PO Box 200, Cardiff CF5 1YH

T: 029 20 395 395 F: 029 20 397 397 E: [info@voluntaryarts.org](mailto:info@voluntaryarts.org) W: [www.voluntaryarts.org](http://www.voluntaryarts.org)

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