



One City. One Voice. Shared Purpose.

**Strategic communications and
community engagement
five-year plan (2022–2026)**



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About **One City. One Voice. Shared Purpose.**

One City.

City employees work together across departments and services as one organization collectively serving our community. We support each other and collaborate to provide the best value to the people who live, visit, work, and do business in Guelph.

One Voice.

All City employees, regardless of their role, represent one organization, the City, and every interaction we have with people reflects all of us. In this way we share one voice and provide consistent and responsive public service to the people in our community, no matter where we interact or who takes part.

Shared Purpose.

City employees understand how we contribute, individually and collectively, to the City's purpose of delivering responsible and responsive public service to Guelph's growing and diverse community. When we work together to deliver our shared purpose, our community flourishes.

Our vision for communications and engagement

An engaged community that listens to and learns from one another to shape Guelph's future.

Our mission for communications and engagement

We deepen engagement between the City and those impacted by and interested in our work. We communicate truth, nurture relationships, create space for all voices, listen and foster dialogue.

Introduction

The City of Guelph's strategic communications and community engagement five-year plan (2022–2026) provides guidance for how the City of Guelph communicates and engages with people and groups living and operating in our community, our employees, and external agencies or other levels of government including rights-bearing Indigenous governments.

This plan reflects the need for governments to be agile, effective, responsive, and increasingly resilient even as we modernize and streamline our services. It also supports greater consistency, transparency, and collaboration across the organization and in our community.

Driven by the City's values of integrity, service, inclusion, wellness and learning, this plan is deeply and fundamentally connected to Guelph's community plan: A United Vision and the City's strategic plan: Guelph. Future Ready.

It is also through communications and engagement that we tell the story of the community and strategic plans on a day-to-day basis, ensuring we are working towards our goals and priorities as a community, and as the City.



Integrity



Service



Inclusion



Wellness



Learning

**Guelph.
Future ready.**



Working together for our future



While staff in the City's Strategic Communications and Community Engagement department has specific responsibilities for communications and engagement within the organization and the Guelph community, every employee communicates and engages with others in their day-to-day work. City employees, especially front-line workers, are central to sharing information and listening. In doing so, they relay the expectations of our community to the organization, while being ambassadors for City programs and services in the community.

Our community has a role to play in successful communications and engagement efforts too. Building an engaged community that listens and learns from one another to shape Guelph's future requires participation from the people who live, work, and do business here. By working together and being true to our community's values as identified in Guelph's community plan, we have an opportunity to build a flourishing community, a place we are all proud to call home and where everyone is welcome.

This plan will guide all of us as we work to serve and engage with our community and improve access to government through individual accountability and collective responsibility.

A United Vision:
**GUELPH'S
COMMUNITY PLAN**





The role of communications and engagement in organizations

Only by continuous listening can we truly understand our community's values, needs, hopes, concerns and perceptions, fostering reciprocal or mutually beneficial relationships where we listen as much or more than we talk, and responding or adapting to what we hear through action or change, not simply words.

At the City, strategic communications and community engagement are critical functions that serve the public interest and ensure that City services meet community needs. It is through communications and engagement that the community has opportunities to share their hopes and concerns and provide input into the decisions that impact them. Strategic communications and engagement is deliberate, planned, data-driven and research-informed work, evaluating what the City is doing against what's needed, expected and supported.

Now, more than ever, the City needs to focus on active listening, so we are able to respond to the changing and diverse needs of a world in constant flux.

The following principles for effective communications and engagement guide the City:

- Audience-centric
- Data-informed
- Digital by design
- Inclusive and accessible
- Powered by stories
- Purpose-driven
- Results-based

Communications and engagement services

All City employees communicate and engage with people in the Guelph community at various times through the delivery of City services, during meetings, workshops, events and open houses, or by phone, email and conversation.

The Strategic Communications and Community Engagement department supports the organization to communicate and engage effectively by providing:

- Strategic communications and community engagement research, planning, implementation, and evaluation
- Reputation and issues management planning and response
- Values-based insights and strategic advice based on listening and environmental scans
- Crisis and emergency communications planning and response
- Digital communications and engagement solutions
- Media relations outreach and analysis
- Visual communications and design services
- Communications and engagement training and coaching
- Employee communications planning and implementation



Where we've come from: **past successes**

The City's communications practice has become more strategic because of the direction of the City's 2010 Communication Plan. The current community engagement framework was borne out of that plan, as was the City's issues management framework which helps the organization identify and take action to address gaps between our community's expectations and what the City is doing. Together, both frameworks contribute to a more responsive and responsible local government where people in our community can participate in decisions that affect them, helping create more sustainable policies, programs and services.

There has also been exceptional growth in digital technology, including rapid changes through the global COVID-19 pandemic, which required us to be innovative and agile in our communications and engagement approaches. We're finding a new balance between in-person and digital connections, knowing that different channels, tools, mediums, and tactics work for different communities.

Delivering the best service to our community means staying at the forefront of communications and engagement best practices and being innovative and agile in a fast-changing practice that is heavily influenced by digital technology.



Where we are: current influences

'One City. One Voice. Shared Purpose.' is a dynamic plan. As we action the plan over five years (2022–2026), we will be agile and flexible in adjusting our priorities, timing, and direction to meet the changing needs of the Guelph community and our organization, and to reflect updates to the community and strategic plans.

Social justice

Social justice has taken centre stage among issues our community cares about. The anti-racism movement spurred by George Floyd's murder by police in 2020 and Canada's renewed commitment to delivering on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action highlight the need to bring more equity and inclusion to the City's communications and engagement approaches.

Doing so will help the City honour its obligations to Indigenous communities, listen to all voices in our diverse community, and address barriers we know exist today. Inclusion, however, does not stop at the construct of race. Gender identity, abilities, mental health, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, and socioeconomic status are among other important issues being discussed in the social justice space.

Misinformation, disinformation, and information overload

In the 1970s it was estimated people were exposed to 500–1,600 ads a day, reaching 5,000 a day in 2014 (Subramanian, 2015); today unoffi-

cial estimates put that number at upwards of 10,000 a day. People are inundated with information: television, radio, news channels, streaming services, signs and billboards, books and magazines, social media, and the internet. Not only is there a lot of information available, but the quality, truthfulness, accuracy and reliability of the information we are exposed to on a day-to-day basis varies widely.

Misinformation (unintentionally incorrect information) and disinformation (deliberately misleading information) make it hard for people to know what content is reliable and which sources are trustworthy. This is especially true as perpetrators of disinformation become more skilled at presenting their content as fact.

With so much information competing for attention, what we share needs to be relevant, timely, and easy to read and understand. People also need to know they can trust the source of information, which requires openness and transparency.

Trust in public institutions

Trust in public institutions is at an all-time low across North America (2022 Edelman Trust Barometer). The City strives to be a resource our community can count on for honest and accurate information about our projects, programs and services. Using clear language, explaining the 'why', making data and information accessible and understandable, and reporting back on how the community's needs and inputs are factored into decisions are vital to building relationships and fostering trust.



What we heard: listening to understand

In preparation for this plan, we conducted research, interviews and workshops with City employees, community organizations, and local journalists; we reviewed surveys and engagement inputs including the City's satisfaction survey and the wealth of community input collected through community plan engagement activities; we explored best practices and trends for communications and engagement, and we learned from peers in other municipalities, near and far.

This plan is the culmination of all of these inputs.

The businesses of the City expect its in-house communications and engagement professionals to bring deep business value gained by listening, to be agile and collaborative, to be a bridge connecting them to others inside the City, and to help them deliver excellent service to the community.

Our community expects the City to communicate clearly and openly, to show how tax dollars are spent and how we're responding to community needs, to explain decisions and report back on how community input is being used to inform and shape decisions, and to be accessible in the digital and physical spaces that work for them.

Key themes we heard through our research include:

- Be more transparent about local government decisions
- Make information easy to access and understand—for everyone
- Provide meaningful opportunities to engage and show how community input influences decisions and outcomes
- Collaborate with community organizations on shared priorities and support each other to connect with underrepresented communities
- Find balance between traditional ways of communicating and engaging (e.g., community newspaper, in-person meetings) and newer ways created by advances in technology (e.g., online communications channels including websites, web-based news media, social media, and virtual engagement spaces)
- Ensure we are listening and giving voice to equity-deserving and rights-bearing communities
- Make internal communications more consistent, timely and streamlined



Where we're going: **our priorities**

Over the next five years, the City will reinforce its strategic communications and engagement practice through learning and continuous improvement to enhance how we communicate and engage with people in our community and City employees.

Listen

Elevate

Evolve

Pillar 1

Listen





Pillar 1: Listen

Two-way communications, that is both listening and sharing information, is critical to learning, fostering mutually beneficial relationships and building trust. While listening has come a long way in recent years, most organizations still focus more on sharing information (Macnamara, 2016). The City is no exception.

Improve and increase two-way, audience-centric communications and engagement

Establish a culture of listening

We recognize the need to focus on listening to understand, letting go of assumptions, and learning from our community. This includes understanding what people and communities in Guelph are experiencing and will help to create more sustainable policies, programs, and services that meet our community's needs.

We will do so by:

- Building an architecture of organizational listening that centres the views and interests of the community in our work. This includes formalizing cultural, procedural, political, structural, resource, skill, and technological dimensions of listening.
- Building on the City's satisfaction survey by establishing pulse checks that assess progress on key issues between formal surveys (every two years).

Modernize the City's community engagement framework

The City was an early adopter of community engagement in local government. Our framework has been a model for other municipalities since its inception in 2013, and almost 10 years later, continues to evolve as engagement best practices change, especially in an increasingly digital world. To ensure Guelph's engagement efforts remain

meaningful, accessible and innovative, we will update the framework so our community can continue to have a say in decisions that affect them.

We will do so by:

- Establishing systems to consistently apply community inputs (engagement data, board and committee input, community partner input) to organizational decision-making.
- Building systems for listening to the silent majority, and for listening across cultures and difference.
- Recognizing and focusing on marginalized voices through more open and simplified consultation processes.

Build and nurture relationships

As one organization, we cannot reach everyone on our own. Cross-agency coordination delivers outcomes that best serve our entire community. Community organizations can support one another by collaborating on shared priorities, connecting each other with different communities, and providing valuable insights through their own listening.

We will do so by:

- Establishing a relationship framework that guides how the City works with community organizations, partners, and other levels of government.
- Collaborating within and outside the organization to create a more informed and connected community.



Make data collected through listening accessible throughout the organization

It is in the best interest of the City and those we serve when the inputs we get through all of our public processes are used to inform decisions. Making sure anonymous data, both quantitative and qualitative, from all engagement opportunities is available to everyone in our organization will support sustainable decision-making and reduce engagement fatigue in our community.

We will do so by:

- Evaluating sources of data the City collects including community engagement activities, service delivery, service reviews and surveys.
- Reviewing and evaluating the data we already have and establishing a centralized framework for cataloging it.
- Collaborating on an organization-wide system for sharing public data internally and externally.

Design and deliver excellent client- and customer-centric experiences

Adopt a culture of continuous improvement, embrace innovation, and learn from client-centric service best practice

The City’s in-house communications and engagement professionals serve clients inside the organization (City departments) and customers outside the organization (community members). Agile and collaborative communication service that is strategic, creative and informed by listening helps the City deliver excellent service.

We will do so by:

- Helping City departments connect their work to organizational purpose and align it with community expectations.
- Being more agile, encouraging more cross-departmental collaboration and providing consistency to the businesses of the organization.
- Clearly articulating communications and engagement roles and responsibilities across the organization, and the suite of services provided by the Strategic Communications and Community Engagement department.
- Strengthening IT-Strategic Communications collaboration on digital platforms to better communicate with audiences in real time.

Contribute to better customer experiences through communications

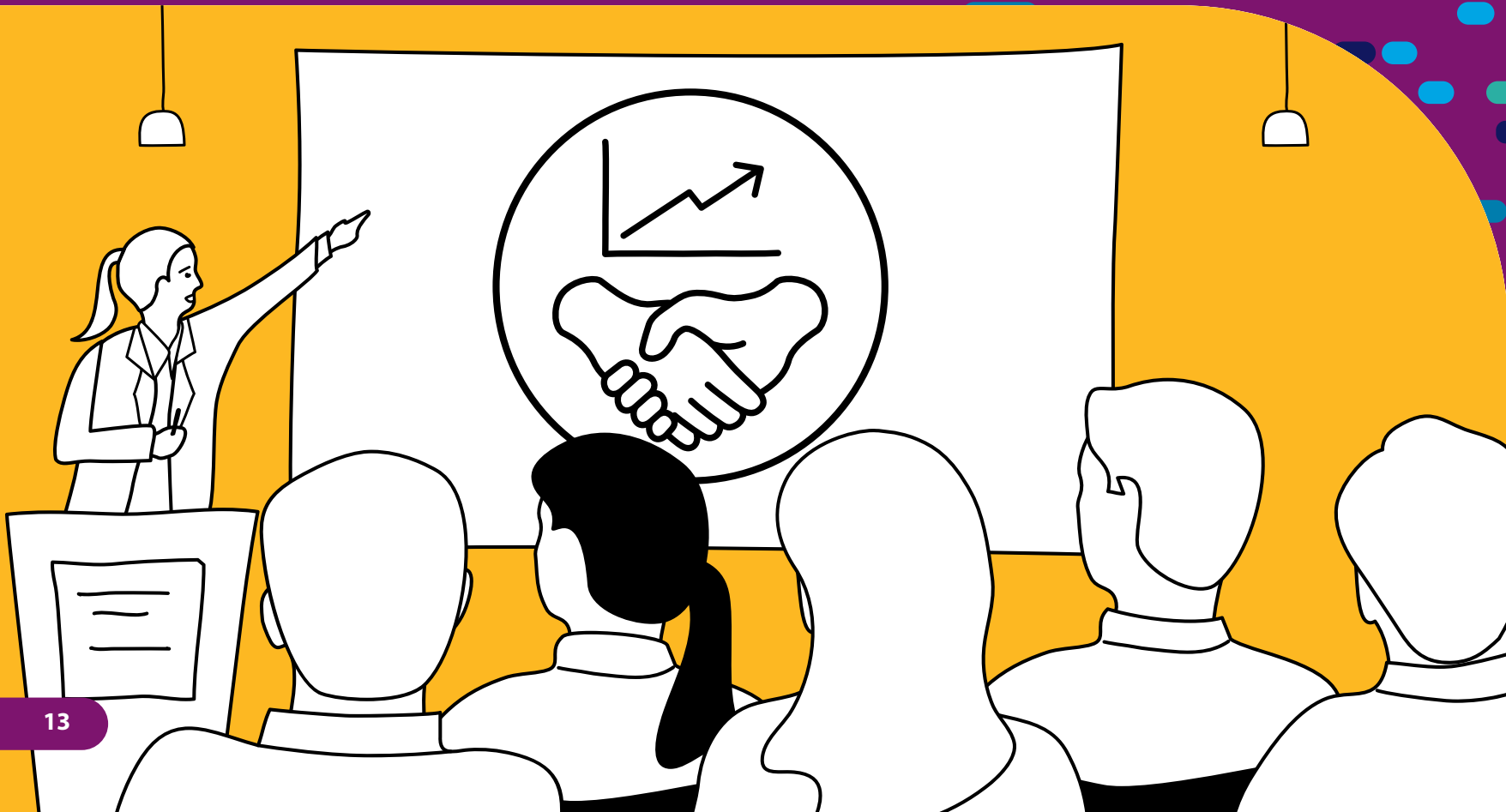
The City’s customer service strategy, Service Simplified, includes strategies to deliver excellent customer-centric experiences through every touchpoint in the customer journey. Communications plays a critical role in the customer’s journey, helping foster strong relationships with the City where people feel heard, involved, and valued, and making access to information easy.

We will do so by:

- Being more involved in collaborative ownership of the City’s digital assets and taking a leadership role in content creation.
- Supporting customer service employees to deliver customer service through the City’s social platforms.

Pillar 2

Elevate





Pillar 2: Elevate

More focused effort on listening and learning will allow us to keep improving how we communicate and engage. We strive to serve from a culture of curiosity, innovation, and growth so that we support each other and our community members from a place of empathy and understanding.

Contribute to a culture of innovation and service excellence through internal communications

Unite employees around our shared purpose

Employees are an organization's most important audience. Proactive and purposeful communication and engagement starts with an organization's employees. A shared purpose nurtures an innovative, resilient, service-oriented and high-performance work culture. Being purposeful and objective-driven in our work helps us achieve our collective goals.

We will do so by:

- Nurturing employees' sense of purpose in their role and the work they do every day through proactive, purposeful, and consistent employee communications and engagement.
- Collaborating internally to create accountability and a shared responsibility for bringing our purpose to life through performance assessment and meaningful recognition.

Contribute to organizational success through executive and leadership communications

Leaders bear ultimate responsibility for how their organization is perceived and valued. They are expected to be visible not just in the organizations where they lead, but also in public. Leaders are expected to demonstrate their character, to be the face of change, and to speak out about issues that matter to their customers. Visible leadership is a

commitment to listening and transparency, and provides an opportunity to build relationships with other community organizations.

We will do so by:

- Leveraging the CAO's leadership platform to reinforce the City's mission, vision, and values.
- Implementing the leadership outreach plan for the City's executive leadership team.
- Supporting City leadership to ensure the organization's communications, and the attitudes and behaviours of employees, are coherent, consistent, and aligned with our purpose.

Foster stronger internal communication and collaboration

Effective communication within our organization is critical for informed decision-making and delivering the best service to our community. Collaboration allows for greater alignment between departmental initiatives, and between departmental and corporate initiatives; ensures greater transparency at all levels of the organization; and helps us achieve our collective goals and meet community expectations.

We will do so by:

- Championing open, transparent, and collaborative communications within and between City departments.
- Exploring innovative ways for City employees working at all facilities and in all roles to be heard and informed about City initiatives.
- Collaborating on an organization-wide system for sharing data across departments.



Build on communications excellence

Develop a corporate narrative strategy and enhance storytelling

A clear and consistent story helps everyone understand who we are, what we value and why, and where we are going. Our stories connect all we do to the themes of Guelph's community plan and the priorities of the City's strategic plan. Our organizational story should excite others, embody the values of our community as set out in the community plan, and reflect our purpose.

We will do so by:

- Bringing themes and narratives of City projects, programs, and services to life through purposeful and meaningful storytelling.
- Inspiring each other and others through stories, and by sharing our mistakes and our successes.
- Creating and sharing informative and interesting content that is fit for purpose by audience, channel or platform.

Strengthen the City's readiness to communicate and engage in times of crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic provided key lessons for communicating and engaging in a time of crisis. The agile response to a rapidly developing, quickly changing and long-lasting crisis has set a new expectation. Knowing future pandemics could impact the world the same way COVID-19 did, local governments must be ready to respond to different crises quickly and effectively.

We will do so by:

- Leveraging and building on organizational learning and insight acquired during the COVID-19 pandemic and documenting approaches for other potential disruptions.
- Integrating communications strategy into business continuity and emergency response plans.

Assess and monitor reputational risk

Although intangible, reputation is a critical organizational asset. An organization's reputation is directly linked to its social license to operate—the foundation through which the City serves its community. Reputation is built by consistently doing what we say we will, and by being open and sharing the 'why' behind decisions. Taking care of our reputation means being accountable, ensuring we're meeting community expectations, and addressing where we fall short.

We will do so by:

- Identifying and leveraging more platforms for listening and intelligence-gathering to better align what we do with what our community needs and expects.
- Proactively providing contextual intelligence and insights to decision-makers.
- Modernizing the City's issues management framework.
- Establishing meaningful performance indicators for measuring organizational reputation.

Enhance the City's interactions with media

Our local media outlets play an important role in helping keep our community informed about what matters to them. Ensuring we provide the information and resources journalists need and can use in a timely and effective manner helps our community get information about our programs and services, including important changes and impacts. Working more collaboratively with journalists also helps combat misinformation and disinformation.

We will do so by:

- Updating the City's media policy.
- Enhancing our spokesperson and media relations training program.

- Working collaboratively to establish plain language training for report writers.
- Holding annual meetings with local media outlets to listen to their interests, needs and concerns.

Update the City's visual identity program

Reviewing and updating our visual identity program, including the City's brand, will help us understand if our brand is still relevant 15 years after the last refresh and ensure it is inclusive and accessible. A clear and singular brand is also important for recognition in an age of misinformation and disinformation.

We will do so by:

- Validating the City's current visual identity through engagement and consultation.
- Updating the City's visual identity program including corporate identity guidelines, house style guidelines and web content guidelines, and ensuring these guidelines meet all legislative requirements.
- Reviewing visual identity assets and replacing or aligning them with the City brand.

Establish a performance measurement framework for communications and engagement

Measurement and evaluation help us understand the effectiveness of our communications and engagement efforts. The Barcelona Principles (International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communications) set the global standard and will guide us in measuring and evaluating the City's communications and engagement efforts.

We will do so by:

- Regularly presenting communications and engagement outcomes and impacts to demonstrate the value of communications and engagement in delivering public service.
- Adopting methods for measuring, evaluating and reporting on key non-financial and intangible indicators including reputation, relationship health, and alignment of programs and services with organizational purpose, and integrating communications and engagement metrics into the organization's performance reporting framework.
- Building a practice of analyzing what we measure and applying insights that will inform better decision-making.
- Aligning data gathered online (e.g., web-based surveys, Have Your Say engagement platform) and offline (e.g., in-person engagement and Council meetings).

Commit to continuous learning

The fields of communications and engagement continue to evolve rapidly as the world becomes more connected and digital. Communications and engagement professionals must have knowledge of a host of other specialized practices including behavioural science, equity, diversity and inclusion, and ethics. A strategic learning plan ensures the City's communications and engagement professionals have the knowledge and training to support the businesses of the City and deliver excellent service to our community.

We will do so by:

- Regularly auditing the needs of the businesses and of public relations best practice against employee skills.
- Creating and delivering a professional development program to address gaps.
- Continuously learning to help us better serve our community.

Pillar 3

Evolve





Pillar 3: Evolve

Whether it's changes in best practice, advances in digital technology or learning more about the words and images we should use to represent our diverse community, we strive to evolve so that City services, including communications and engagement, are innovative, thoughtful, intentional, and inclusive.

Focus on digital

Create an overarching digital communications strategy

Digital communication is a powerful way of sharing information, listening, engaging others, and collaborating. Digital tools and channels allow us to share information quickly with many, while being cost effective and measurable. However, done without purpose, digital communications efforts are ineffective and potentially frustrating for users. Digital maturity comes from strategic use of digital tools and channels; work that requires thought, planning, and deliberate action.

We will do so by:

- Building channel profiles to better understand our digital audiences.
- Collaborating with IT to redesign a user-centric website.
- Expanding the City's use of social media as a tool to listen, engage and drive participation as well as share information.

Adopt a digital skills program for City employees

Our employees need access to training to build digital skills and literacy as the City digitizes more services. Building digital skills is essential for fostering greater inclusion; it can help employees address barriers such as language, or visual or physical abilities, and help us support people with different needs.

We will do so by:

- Working collaboratively with IT, HR, Accessibility, and Customer Service teams to equip City employees with the digital skills they need to perform consistently, responsively, and effectively.

Put inclusivity at the core of City communications and engagement

Make the organization's overall communications and engagement more reflective of our community's diversity

Words and images are powerful and representation matters. The language we use, the questions we ask, and the images we share can create connection or perpetuate harm. Safe psychological spaces that foster inclusiveness require us to give thought to the words, phrases and images we use and do not use. Effective communication requires us to be intentional in how we communicate and engage and consider the impact.

We will do so by:

- Championing the City's suite of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism (DEI+AR) resources and training for City staff and making DEI+AR a key learning requirement for staff in the Strategic Communications and Community Engagement department.
- Staying up to date on local demographics and language needs in our community.
- Collaborating with DEI+AR and accessibility staff internally to adopt or create inclusive language and image guidelines for the organization.
- Building systems and creating opportunities to listen to equity-deserving and rights-bearing communities.



Collaborate with organizations closest to equity-deserving and under-represented communities, and with the urban Indigenous community

Guelph is a connected community where we strive to support and understand each other. The voices of equity-deserving and rights-bearing communities have often been left out of decision-making or have not been given the same opportunities to influence policies, programs, and services that impact them.

We will do this by:

- Collaborating with organizations that work directly with these communities and leveraging their expertise to communicate and engage directly when possible.
- Continuing to build relationships with the urban Indigenous community to listen to and learn from their collective knowledge and lived experience.
- Creating an engagement compensation policy in recognition of the value that input has in making sustainable decisions for our community.

Final thoughts

While this plan is the culmination of the work of many collaborators, both at the City and at the community level, it also marks a new starting point on our collective journey—in how we interact and work with one another to make the City of Guelph a place we can all be proud of.

It presents an opportunity to listen more, and to elevate and evolve our ways of communicating and engaging, so everyone feels they have opportunities to positively influence where we go from here as a community.

It is both exciting and daunting, but the outcome matters too much for us to let it slip away. As the saying goes: we will get out of it what we put in it.

All of us, together.



Acknowledgements

Many people provided input and expertise throughout the development of this plan. In addition to using existing community inputs including feedback collected for Guelph's Community Plan, the City's Satisfaction Survey, employee engagement data, and other formal (Council delegations, HaveYourSay.guelph.ca) and informal community inputs (social media comments, letters to the editor), the City also collected direct feedback from community organizations through interviews, focus and workshops.

We would like to thank the following organizations for their time and insights:

- Business Centre Guelph-Wellington
- 10C Shared Space
- CBC News Kitchener-Waterloo
- CMHA Waterloo Wellington
- Community Living Guelph Wellington
- County of Wellington
- Grange Hill East Neighbourhood Group
- Guelph Chamber of Commerce
- Guelph Mercury Tribune
- Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition
- Guelph Politico
- GuelphToday.com
- Guelph Wellington Seniors Association
- Guelph Youth Council (City of Guelph)
- Innovation Guelph
- University of Guelph
- Wellington Catholic District School Board
- Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health
- Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin

We would also like to thank the many City staff who provided input on this plan throughout its development. This plan is about how we communicate with each other and our community; your input was essential to creating a plan that meets your needs and expectations too.

The City of Guelph is also grateful to Argyle PR for their support in the creation of this plan. Your outside perspective helped us collect objective inputs and make meaning from feedback that we can action for our community's benefit.



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