Comprehensive report on community engagement: The City of Guelph Community Engagement Framework and practices

May 1, 2023

Authors

Glen Lombard, Manager, Community Engagement

Kelly Guthrie, Community Engagement Coordinator

Tracy Suerich, Community Engagement Coordinator

Table of Contents

Comprehensive report on community engagement:
The City of Guelph Community Engagement Framework and practices

Introduction and overview

As part of One City. One Voice. Shared Purpose. (OCOVSP), the Strategic Communications and Community Engagement (SCCE) department's multi-year strategy, City staff recently embarked on a thorough review of the City's Community Engagement Policy (Policy) and Community Engagement Framework (Framework).

The Policy and Framework were first approved by Council in 2013 and updated in 2015. Guelph was one of the first Canadian municipalities to introduce a Framework for engagement and it became a template for many other communities to develop their own.

The current Policy identifies guiding principles, roles and responsibilities for City staff, Council, and the community as it relates to engagement, and presents operational tactics for monitoring and evaluating engagement across the Corporation.

The current Framework includes guiding principles, frames a model for sustainable decision-making, demonstrates a spectrum of engagement approaches, and provides tools, resources, and supports for staff designing and implementing community engagement.

Since their inception, the Policy and Framework have shaped how community consultations for hundreds of projects have taken shape across the City. After almost a decade of use, it was time to look critically at these foundational documents and assess how they need to evolve to reflect our learnings, a maturing in the field of community engagement, and better address the needs of equity-denied community members.

There were several project objectives:

- identify and correct outdated information in the existing Policy and Framework.
- ensure compliance with relevant legislation and regulations.
- re-align the Framework with ever-evolving best-practices in community engagement and public participation.
- examine our engagement principles and approaches to ensure matters of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility are clear and embedded in our work.
- ensure the form for the modernized Framework (and all accompanying resources and tools) align with the desired functions and audience needs.
- build upon the innovative spirit of the initial framework and re-affirm the City of Guelph as a leader in engagement across the sector

The review was structured to take place over four phases of work, two of which involved community engagement (Phase 1 and Phase 3). This report is a summary

Comprehensive report on community engagement:
The City of Guelph Community Engagement Framework and practices

of what we did and what we heard during all engagement and how it shaped the evolution of these key documents.

- Phase 1 (November 1, 2022 – March 1, 2023)
  Broad engagement and review of best practices related to community engagement
- Phase 2 (March 2023)
  Leveraging insights from phase 1, develop draft Policy and Framework
- Phase 3 (April – May 2023; CoW, June 6, 2023)
  Validate drafts with key audiences and prepare for Council approval
- Phase 4 (July 2023 and beyond)
  Implementation and rollout

Phase 1 engagement: What we did

Approach to and scope of Phase 1 engagement

Phase 1 engagement focused on collecting key audience's feedback and ideas about the Policy and Framework and about the City's engagement practices.

During the period of November 7, 2022 to February 17, 2023, we connected with diverse community members:

- local Indigenous community members
- community members from equity-denied groups
- community members from the broader public and the "silent majority"
- community members that frequently engage with the City
- community partners, organizations, groups, and associations
- business owners and operators
- city Councillors
- City staff
- public participation consultants, academics, and experts
- other municipalities

A diverse approach to engaging these audiences ensured there were ways for community to engage in groups, one-on-one, in-person, virtually, anonymously, and over the phone—with specific effort to reach across various spectrums of diversity (e.g., geography, age, ability, cultural context, equity denied group):

- in-depth, one-on-one interviews
- small group Focused Conversations
- workshops
- a public and partner workshop focused on elevating equity in City engagement
- a public and partner workshop focused on inspiring innovation in City engagement
- online polls, discussion boards and "ask us anything" forums on Have Your Say

- targeted postcard mailers to postal codes that are typically under-represented in our online engagement activities through Have Your Say
- community popups at various locations across the city
- drop in call sessions throughout the engagement period
- a validation and "digging deeper" survey to share preliminary insights with the community and surface additional context

These largely qualitative engagement techniques created space to have real conversations, for people to take the conversation where they wanted to and allowed insights to emerge organically and iteratively.

The City also used a wealth of relevant engagement data and expertise that's accumulated over a number of years through supporting the design, delivery and data analysis for hundreds of City projects. For example, insights from engagement on projects like the Community Plan helped give shape and meaning to the community's priorities related to community engagement. Leveraging these data meant reducing what this project might have contributed to engagement fatigue.

Phase 1 engagement data

Leveraging Grounded Theory—an approach to qualitative research—City staff reviewed every element of phase 1 engagement with intention and rigour. Staff used a grounded approach which sets out to discover themes from data rather than sorting data based on pre-existing categories. In this way, a story emerges organically from the data that reflects and honours each voice that contributed.

The approach does not count responses to demonstrate statistical significance, nor does it disregard outlying information. Instead, it stitches together a narrative that reflects the overlapping complexity of individual data points. As engagement continues, inevitably we reach "data saturation"—the point at which subsequent conversations and techniques are not revealing new or additional insights, but rather affirming what has already been heard to date. Data saturation was reached in early February of 2023, at which point emerging insights were shared with the community via a survey hosted on Have Your Say. The survey had two goals:

1. validate the emerging themes and identity missing information
2. identify what meaningful action on the emerging themes would look like, in the eyes of respondents

Each engagement interaction was transcribed and coded to maintain confidentiality:

- we had qualitative interactions with 310 individuals

- an additional 678 individuals were aware[1] and 181 were informed[2] based on Have Your Say metrics.
- we analysed these data and clustered them into 93 thematic areas
- we discovered a series of intersecting insights
- we validated these insights in an online survey on Have Your Say (n=38), and by asking specific questions using the City's social media accounts (on Facebook there 458 engagements and 15 comments; on Instagram the metrics are unavailable due to a technical error)

Together, the engagement formed the basis for evolving the Community Engagement Policy and Framework.

Limitations surrounding Phase 1 engagement

We spoke with people from a variety of backgrounds, equity-denied groups, employment sectors, and education levels, recognizing that each individual person in Guelph wears many hats and their identities are intersectional. A local business owner may also be a mother and member of a faith community, a university student may also be a new Canadian and only child, and a factory worker may also be a partner and homeowner. That said, we didn't speak with everyone and not every demographic and intersectional identity was engaged.

Some limitations also exist that are tied to the main engagement methods. Most notably, in-depth conversations were subject to a certain degree of selection bias. How certain individuals or groups were identified or invited to participate may have influenced what they contributed as well as how representative (or not) their perspectives are of the broader community. We attempted to address this as much as possible by combining methods, geographies, and formats with which we engaged the community.

Additionally, in-depth conversations take both time and presence. Individuals we spoke with offered what they did given the context within which they were entering the conversations. Schedules, life circumstances, commitments, education, job titles, life experiences, and a variety of other factors may have influenced how people participated and what they contributed at that time. People and systems are complex and ever-changing.

Finally, the insights validation survey had a limited response. Though the responses were mostly affirming, the results should not be overstated.

---

[1] Defined by Engagement HQ as a visitor that has made at least one visit to the HYS page

[2] Defined by Engagement HQ as a visitor that has interacted with content on the HYS page (a news article, a photo, downloaded a file)

As the City thinks about delivering on its next Community Engagement Framework, ongoing engagement is critical to ensure the City notices new opportunities and challenges and develops dynamic and responsive approaches to engagement.

Phase 1 engagement: What we heard

From community

As we engaged with the community, we heard that the current Policy and Framework have largely stood the test of time. The aspirations expressed in the Policy and Framework are sound, however there's a desire for the City to focus its efforts and resources to more consistently delivering on the engagement promise. Specifically, we heard a desire for the City to:

- Focus on improving accessibility and inclusivity of engagement across various spectrums of diversity (i.e., by default, planning engagement to meet varying abilities, languages, cultures, gender identities, living and lived-experiences, socio-economic participation factors, locations, digital literacy, time of day).
- Embrace broader engagement with community in their neighbourhoods and on their timelines, versus primarily at City facilities, online, or on a project-by-project basis. The community wants the City to develop deeper relationships in community and to have more of an ongoing presence in the community. For some, building this relationship starts with trust-building (where trust has been lost).
- Reach more diverse community members and support building capacity for greater, more diverse participation.
- Improve the reach of City communications. We heard that communications aren't always reaching the desired audiences, aren't always specific enough to inform concrete action or participation, and that finding information about City projects is a significant challenge.
- Improve practices related to the design, collection, analysis, and presentation of engagement data.
- More effectively connect-the-dots between the scope of current engagement, previously made decisions or commitments, and other relevant engagement data across the City.
- Report back more consistently, effectively and in less technical language about the results of engagement. Specifically, the community wants to know what we heard, and how it contributes to final recommendations and decisions (or not).
- Leverage engagement to spark curiosity and inspire creativity in ways that contribute to placemaking and community building.
- Some community members shared that they would like to be included earlier (during problem definition), and in ways that are toward the more "collaborative" and "empower" end of the IAP2 Public Engagement Spectrum, while from others, a disinterest in engaging unless the project or initiative has immediate impact on their day-to-day lives.
- Evolve the way the City evaluates community engagement beyond measuring how many people participated.

- Clarify the role of Advisory Committees of Council as it relates to community engagement.

Specific to the engagement framework and policy:

- It is unclear who the audience for Framework is.
- The Framework is too long and too technical.
- The tools aren't relevant to the community.
- How enforceable is the Policy? Who does this and what are the consequences?
- Doing this right will take resources. What resourcing will be required to deliver more meaningful community engagement?

From City staff

Through interviews and workshops with City staff, we heard:

- Recognition that that it takes time, expertise, and budget to deliver meaningful and effective engagement. Though staff feel responsible, many feel like they lack the expertise and time to deliver effective community engagement.
- Desire for more informed participation (not simply more participation) and a recognition that this is increasingly challenging in an environment that is highly polarized, steeped in misinformation and disinformation, and involves multiple levels of government.
- Frustration that sometimes after years of work (comprised of community engagement, technical consultation, and alignment with broader policy objectives) direction can be disrupted by delegates.
- Perception that a lot of engagement begins "from scratch" and we're not adequately leveraging existing data and insights from across the Corporation. There's a sense that this contributes to low participation, engagement fatigue, and a focus on quantity over quality.
- There is tension between leading "statistically significant" and "demographically representative" quantitative engagement (perceived by some as more valid data) versus more qualitative, insight-driven engagement (perceived by some as more actionable, but also more time consuming to analyse, and more open to bias).
- A feeling that staff are sometimes misdirected to "go back to the community" which contributes to engagement fatigue and the community's perception that engagement often doesn't feel authentic.

Specific to the engagement framework and policy:

- Update language to 2023.
- More concise.
- Don't duplicate information that's elsewhere (eg. Plain language guidelines).
- Explain sustainable decision making is important—but update language for 2023.
- Find the balance between signalling to the community what our engagement promise is and giving staff concrete direction about why, when and how to engage.

Comprehensive report on community engagement:
The City of Guelph Community Engagement Framework and practices

- Less educational—tools and resources should live elsewhere.
- Details about how to operationalize the framework shouldn't live in the framework.

How we will use what we learned

Phase 1 engagement helped provide direction for how the City needs to update its Community Engagement Framework and practices.

To be clearer about who the Framework is for, the new Community Engagement Framework will be comprised of different parts for different audiences based on their needs.

For the community, we will establish a Community Engagement Charter that will:

- Clarify how community engagement fits into sustainable decision-making.
- Communicate our community engagement promise which will include our promise to nurture relationships, build capacity for participation and ensure there are meaningful opportunities to influence municipal decisions.
- Clarify the City's community engagement process, and design principles which include:
  - Identifying and addressing barriers to participation
  - Focusing on the needs and experiences of equity denied groups
  - Engaging early
  - Connecting the dots
  - Meeting you where you are
  - Delivering diverse engagement opportunities
  - Sparking curiosity and joy, and
  - Reporting back.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities around community engagement
- We will remove content focused on educating and training City staff (e.g. specific engagement tools, tactics, resources, Standard Operating Procedures).
- Not duplicate information available elsewhere (e.g. plain language guidelines and Accessible document development).

For staff and Council, we will revise our Community Engagement Policy to incorporate learnings from engagement:

- Update the purpose, scope, and policy guidance sections.
- Update roles and responsibilities.
- Incorporate an equity-lens.

Phase 3 engagement: What we did

Approach to and scope of Phase 1 engagement

Phase 3 engagement focused on validating the draft components of the new Framework with targeted groups during a three-week period from April 4 – 25, 2023. This included members of the community, individuals from equity-denied groups, public participation experts, and city staff.

The key question during Phase 3 engagement: Did the direction staff had taken with the draft Policy and Charter—based heavily on what they discovered during Phase 1 engagement—meet various audience's expectations? To answer this question, staff:

- Shared portions of the draft Charter with the community who provided their feedback via a survey on haveyoursay.guelph.ca.
- Shared the draft Charter to a small number of community members from equity-denied groups. Individuals were offered an honorarium for providing feedback through an interview format.
- Sent the draft Policy and Charter to public participation professionals to gather feedback through email or in an interview.
- Attended a meeting of the City's Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) to share portions of the Charter and receive feedback.
- Circulated the draft Policy and Charter to City staff. Staff provided feedback through email, one-on-one meetings, and during two drop-in staff feedback sessions.

Phase 3 engagement data

Each element of feedback was reviewed. The data was cross-referenced with Phase 1 engagement data.

The data was sorted into three categories:

1. Data that validated the direction the draft Policy and Charter had taken
2. Data that suggested revisions or clarifications to the draft Policy and Charter
3. Data that was out of scope

In all, we received feedback from:

- 19 individuals from the broader community, including 4 from equity denied groups
- 15 staff
- 2 public engagement experts
- the AAC

- An additional 154 individuals were aware[3] and 74 were informed[4] based on Have Your Say metrics

Though Phase 3 engagement was fairly limited in scope (response rate), the sentiments and feedback we received were varied—indicating participation represented a range of perspectives in the community.

Limitations surrounding Phase 3 engagement

Like in Phase 1 engagement, we sought to speak to a diverse group of audiences to gather varied input about the draft Policy and Charter. We spoke with people from a variety of backgrounds but the breadth of engagement was limited by the time and resources available.

Some limitations also existed that are tied to the main engagement methods selected.

In-depth interviews were subject to selection bias. How certain individuals or groups were identified or invited to participate may have influenced what they contributed as well as how representative (or not) their perspectives are of the broader community. They also took time. Despite offering honoraria to individuals from equity-denied groups, this approach to engagement unintentionally favoured participation from those who are not significantly impacted by the time, cost and emotional labour of doing so.

Additionally, the survey posted on Have Your Say took between 15 and 25 minutes to complete, over and above the time it took to read excerpts from the draft Charter. This was likely a factor that influenced the response rate.

Phase 3 engagement: What we heard and how we will use what we learned

From community

- Predominantly validating—nothing we had not already heard about during the Phase 1 engagement.
- There are those that lack trust in local government. Irrespective of what's stated in the revised Charter, some of these community members are skeptical we will do it.
  - o No changes were made as a result of this feedback.

---

[3] Defined by Engagement HQ as a visitor that has made at least one visit to the HYS page

[4] Defined by Engagement HQ as a visitor that has interacted with content on the HYS page (a news article, a photo, downloaded a file)

- o The section "Our Promise" in the Charter was born, in part, out of a desire to respond to this sentiment coming out of Phase 1 engagement. The City recognizes it must create the enabling environment for people to participate. This happens when we nurture relationships and build capacity for participation.
- There are those that feel we're not explicit enough about building relationships with diverse audiences (equity denied groups, older adults, young people, etc.).
  - o Though it was certainly the intent of many parts of our initial draft, we reviewed the Charter again and attempted to make this even more clear.
- There's a tension between community members that want to be involved earlier and those that feel we're already asking a lot.
  - o No changes were made as a result of this feedback.
  - o The draft Charter references "early involvement", "a spectrum of participation" and "connect[ing] dots"—all of which were born out of similar sentiments coming out of Phase 1 engagement and make way for earlier involvement by those in the community who wish to be involved.
- "You need to be building relationships with people not just when there's a project you need to engage on—but all the time. Otherwise, it feels transactional."
  - o We have adjusted the Charter to be more explicit about nurturing relationships with community outside of traditional project engagement. This was the part of the initial impetus behind the inclusion of "nurturing relationships" in the first place and we've tried to make this more clear.
- "Who decides what level of engagement is required and needs to happen?"
  - o We've clarified who and how decisions about depth/level of engagement are made. This is an effort to be transparent and to remind the community that there is significant technical expertise that goes into making these determinations.
- "It's text heavy and could benefit from some visuals."
  - o Once we have approval from Council on the Charter content, we'll design the Charter to be a visually appealing digital document that meets the City's accessible document guidelines. We will also explore what other platforms (digital and print) make sense for sharing this important content with the community.

The Accessibility Advisory Committee (the AAC)

- Mostly validating—endorsed the promise and engagement design principles with a motion.
- Specifically asked us to reframe the engagement design principle that speaks to identifying and addressing barriers to participation to be more positive and to reference inclusive design principles

- o We've referenced use of inclusive design in the community engagement design principles
- o We've clarified in roles and responsibilities the role that staff, community and council should play as it relates to identifying barriers to participation (the onus should not be on people experiencing those barriers)

Public engagement experts

- Predominantly validating
- "Please be clearer about engagement being a community member's right. This is a democracy."
  - o We made an explicit mention of individual rights within a democracy.
- "Remember, the IAP2 spectrum is not a panacea."
  - o We've added language to reflect this current understanding and practice within the City

Staff

- Predominantly validating. Minor editorial changes suggested
  - o A few minor updates to language and document formatting to align with accessibility document guidelines, inclusive language guidelines, and house style guide.

Next steps

The City will seek Council approval of the revised draft Policy and Charter in June 2023.

Following Council approval, City staff will turn their attention to developing other aspects of the Community Engagement Framework:

- Develop a multi-year community engagement plan to establish priorities and key projects that help bring the City's engagement practices in alignment with the Community Engagement Charter (later in 2023). Some of the key projects already underway as part of the City's multi-year Strategic Communications and Community Engagement strategy, One City. One Voice. Shared Purpose. are:
  - o Developing a relationships framework and plan for meeting the community where they are (later in 2023)
  - o Centralizing community engagement data (later in 2023) and finding ways to make insights from these data accessible to staff leading future engagement projects (in 2024 and beyond)
  - o Rolling out an Executive Team approved Community Engagement Honorarium Policy for compensating equity-denied individuals in the community that the City seeks to engage (later 2023)

- Develop a playbook of community engagement resources and training for staff (to be developed in 2024)