

A Seat at the Table

What We Heard Report

August 2025

Prepared by Topent Consulting for the City of Kitchener

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1. Introduction

About this project

The City of Kitchener has a long history of inviting the public to shape decisions that affect their daily lives.

In 2018 the City established a community engagement policy and framework. Since then, much has changed in Kitchener and the world.

As a result, the City is undertaking a comprehensive review of their community engagement practices in order to update the policy and framework, and to develop the City's first community engagement strategy. This will direct how the City improves their engagement practices moving forward.

Part of this work included engagement with the public to understand their needs and expectations and how they want to be involved today. This report provides a summary of what we heard from this engagement process.



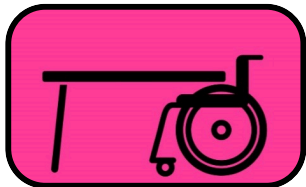
Engagement Overview

Engagement was launched April 30, 2025 and was completed on June 30, 2025.

Over **61** days, **973** people participated in **19** different **community events and spaces.**

A variety of engagement opportunities were offered to gather thoughts, ideas and stories about:

- People’s experiences engaging with the City.
- The vision for the future of engagement in Kitchener.
- The draft values for how the City engages.
- Ideas on how to remove barriers to participation.



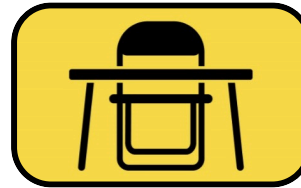
Online

Through EngageKitchener.ca.



Virtual Kitchen Table Talks

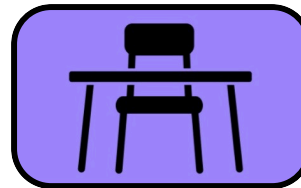
Online, facilitated group discussions via Zoom.



Feedback Fairs

Drop in, all ages interactive events throughout Kitchener.

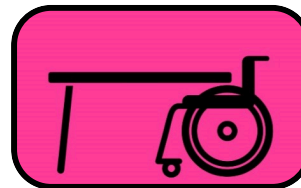
- Victoria Hills Community Centre
- Huron Community Centre
- Stanley Park Community Centre
- Kitchener City Hall



Pop Ups

At existing community events.

- Kitchener Market
- Public Works Week Family Fun Night
- Kitchener Public Library
- Tri-Pride
- Rockway Community Centre
- Youth Camp Leaders Training
- Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Equity and Anti-Racism Advisory Committee
- Mayors Action Council for Kitchener Seniors
- Kitchener Youth Action Council

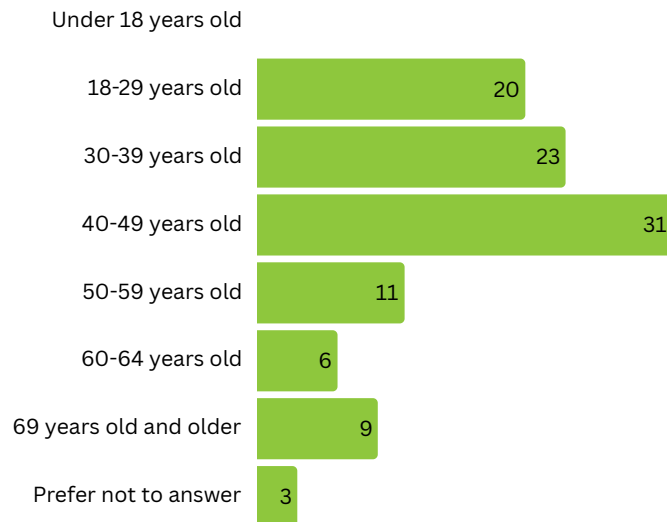


Host Your Own

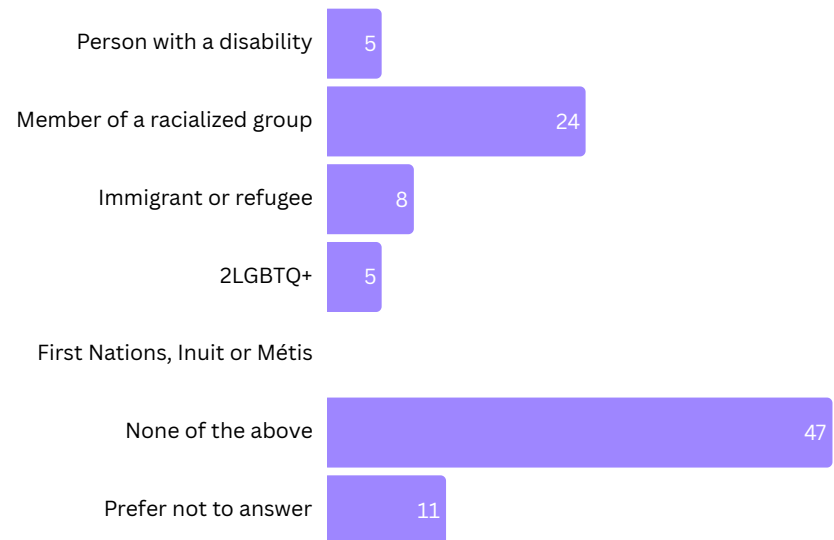
Conversations hosted by community members.

Who We Heard From*

Age - % of respondents

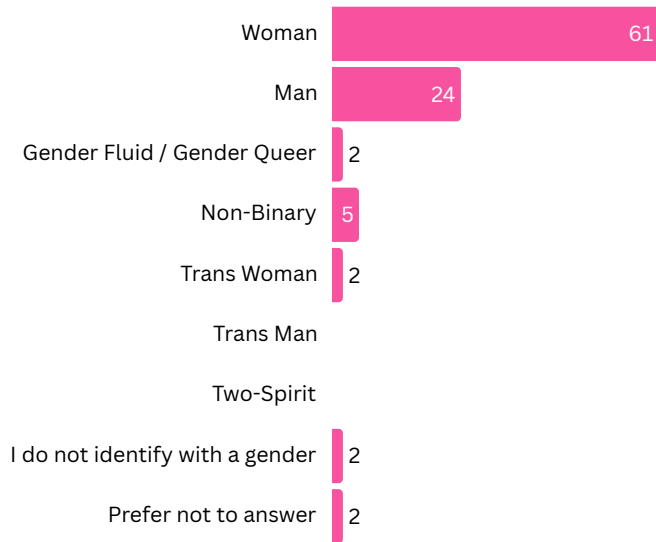


Identity - % of respondents



* Demographic information was not provided by all participants, n=42.

Gender identity - % of respondents



Methodology Limitations

The data and process implemented included some limitations that should be taken into account when reviewing this What We Heard Report.

- The engagement questions focused specifically on gathering feedback on people’s experiences and ideas. The data sometimes results in tensions where some participants feel Kitchener is doing well in an area and others do not share that sentiment.

- The values-based input collected is not market research and is not a statistically representative sample of opinions at this point in time. The engagement process focused on gathering input and ideas to inform possible ways forward.
- Not every participant provided input to every question.
- Not every participant evaluated their engagement experience or shared demographic information about themselves.
- As most engagement events were open to the public and demographic information was not always collected, the data is not segmented by demographics, except for insights gathered from a targeted youth event.

Thank you

We sincerely appreciate everyone who took the time to participate in this engagement initiative. Your thoughtful feedback is invaluable and will directly help improve how the City connects with residents in the future.

We would like to acknowledge Kind Minds Family Wellness and the ICNA Sisters Canada (Kitchener chapter) for hosting kitchen table talks with their communities.

2. What We Heard

2.1 What is working well

Participants highlighted several key areas that have contributed to a positive experience when engaging with the City in the past. The youth experience was found to be similar to the rest of participants, and is captured in the following themes.

Feel heard and valued

Many participants felt genuinely listened to and that their feedback was taken into consideration. They felt City staff were professional, responsive, polite and listened to them.

“Was energizing to be a part of something I care so much about, and I was excited to be asked to be involved.”

“Sense that I was listened to and feedback was taken”

Convenient and easy opportunities

“Engage Kitchener is an easy way to follow projects and responses.”

“I like that you can see everything (engagement activities) the city is doing in one place.”

Participants appreciated the different ways of engaging that are offered, both in person and online. Events hosted in communities or at events people are already going to (ex. markets, street parties, community centers) makes it easy and feels open and welcoming. EngageKitchener, the City’s online engagement platform, is easy, quick and convenient to use. The email notifications subscribers receive makes it easy to become aware of, learn about, contribute to and stay updated on projects.

Tailored and diverse engagement methods

Participants appreciated it when the City adapted and used less formal engagement methods to fit the community. Examples included providing paper surveys at community centers for seniors, hosting informal coffee chats and organizing community events like the Rockway redevelopment BBQ, which was noted as "FUN for everyone". In-person community engagement creates connections, a chance to hear different ideas and perspectives and opportunities for dialogue.

Some participants noted that having multilingual surveys and translated materials available for some projects in the past has been helpful.

"Events like this format, with color (visuals), time to think, relaxed atmosphere."

Feedback and updates provided

Participants valued receiving feedback on what the City heard from them and project updates.

Overall positive engagement experiences

There was a general sentiment that the City is doing a good job engaging with community.

"Kitchener is better in terms of community engagement than other cities."

"More dialogue like this."

"Keep doing what you're doing."

"The City is doing a great job at this."

2.2 What and how to improve

Participants were asked for their ideas on how to improve on their past engagement experiences.

Demonstrate accountability

While some participants noted that follow up was being done well, others felt this needed to be improved. Participants were unsure whether they were heard, if their feedback was used or what the outcomes were. They would like to receive this information directly, in a timely way.

“If we participate.. email us with engagement results so I don’t have to seek out what happened with my feedback.”

“Make sure we hear back from you.”

“Loop back outcomes, not just to Council but to the public.”

“Let us know you are acting on suggestions.”

“What really happens is that planners state what is ok from a technical perspective but the views of residents are not viewed as important.”

“More accountability for decisions when it’s not what we asked for.”

“People fear their input won’t matter (tokenism).”

Promote and increase awareness

“I have lived in Kitchener for 12 years and didn’t know I could give feedback to the City.”

“Communication of events, but also motivation to attend the “why” people should be attending.”

“Keep it simple and clear how to get involved.”

Participants would like to see more and earlier communications about engagement opportunities, using different methods and formats to reach different audiences. Aside from social media (particularly noted by youth), participants rely on information from their community networks to be informed about events. Share information directly and ask others to distribute on the City’s behalf, such as using street signs or through community centers, community groups, neighbourhood associations, grocery stores, churches, newspapers, universities, colleges, libraries.

Promote information not just about specific projects but also about how to engage with the City overall, especially for those to new to Kitchener and new to Canada.

Be clear about what and why they are being asked to engage on, make it relevant and interesting.

Increase accessibility through communities

“Something like this works great - getting feedback from residence where they already are, at community centers.”

“Newcomers are used to people coming to them.”

Participants want to see more events in their own communities to make it easy to become aware of and to participate. A variety of examples were provided:

- Community centers, during child programming
- After school, include students
- Grocery plazas, shopping centers
- Community events (markets, festivals)
- Parks, splash pads, basketball courts, soccer fields, trails
- Youth centers
- Libraries
- Places of worship
- Local ethnic centers
- Seniors centers
- Cultural associations
- Community rooms at housing and apartment complexes

Inclusive and welcoming

Community members want to see greater differences in perspectives and demographics among those participating, and more tolerance for these differences. Some participants felt left out of projects and others said that a focus on building relationships needs to happen first.

“Inclusive events that represent the faces of the city to feel welcome.”

“I wanted to have a conversation about a change in my neighbourhood but you didn’t ask.”

“Build trust before we extract feedback, or expect involvement.”

“Creating events where the goal is just to build trust.”

“It was boring! Not everyone who wanted to, got to speak.”

“I like the autonomy of online feedback rather than in person.”

“The City needs to honor the treaties and meet with Six Nations.”

“Opportunities to come together, with others, facing similar issues, sharing stories/struggles, find connection in safe, respectful ways.”

“I would attend if someone from my community, who speaks my language, invited me or was even part of those meetings.”

Get creative and offer multiple opportunities

Experiment with different engagement methods and experiences (ex. fun activities, recreational, game or activity based events, family friendly). Offer opportunities on different days and times of the week (daytime, evening, weekday, weekends). Offer options for quick participation for those short on time. Some people prefer in person opportunities and others online.

Provide youth specific opportunities

Several participants expressed the importance of engaging with youth, from school aged to young adults.

“More awareness for youth that they can get involved. I didn’t know I could get involved until I was 16.”

“Do we need youth ambassadors? Better youth-focused social media campaigns? More youth at Council meetings? There should be a more significant role for youth overall. Youth will care more about the city when they are actively a part of it. KYAC is great but youth are not one single group.”

Address needs of specific groups

Depending on who you are engaging with identify and address barriers they may face. For example, in person opportunities may be preferred for some seniors but online may be more accessible for those with mobility issues. Other examples of accommodations include family friendly events, language translation, child minding, logistics support, transportation, food, quiet spaces.

“City meetings are often in English, during working hours, or in inaccessible formats.”

Engage prior to making decisions

Participants felt engagement sometimes happens too late in the process, or after decisions are made, making engagement irrelevant.

“They already had drawings and approved plans, seemed already approved by City.”

“It feels like decisions are made before we are asked.”

Engage on meaningful and relevant issues

Participants wanted to be part of issues that are most important that will make significant impacts to the quality of the City. Some requested for more ongoing engagement, or opportunities where the community could identify the issues to discuss, rather than having the City always determine the topics.

“Create opportunities for conversation around identifying issues and problem-solving together rather than always coming to us with predetermined topics.”

“I want to be part of finding solutions for real issues like poverty and mental health.”

“Neighbours are always first to identify an issue, but other than writing your Councillor (which might not even get a response) there is no way to raise the issue or even to communicate with staff who could do something about it.”

Meaningful survey experiences

Improvements are needed to survey designs, use shorter and open-ended questions to allow for further details or information not directly asked for.

“Survey is too long. I don’t think all of my feedback is valuable.”

“Don’t like the surveys that are just yes or no. More meaningful questions.”

Build civic engagement

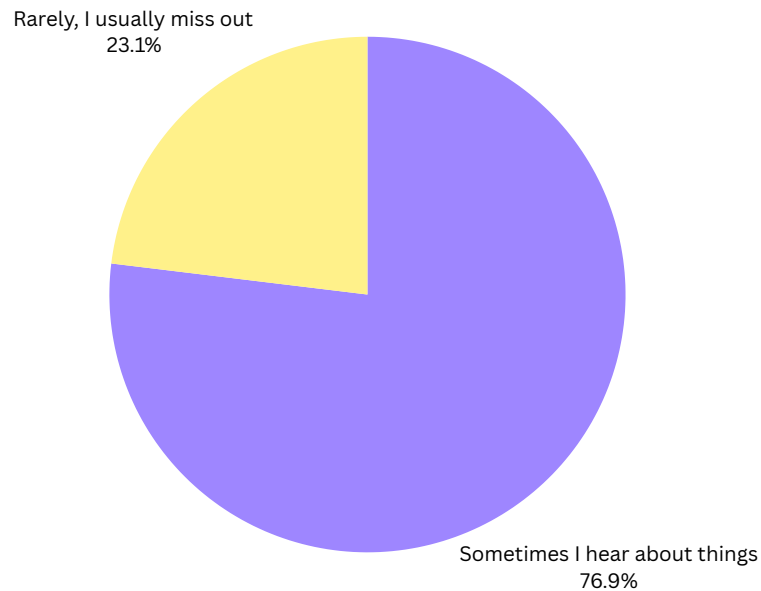
Not everyone understands how decisions are made or how to influence action at the City. Information about what the City, Council and other levels of government do, the different processes and how to be involved would be useful.

“I always thought that City of Kitchener is all about bills, penalty for parking and councils, never knew how much and what departments are there and for us, as some of us are lay people.”

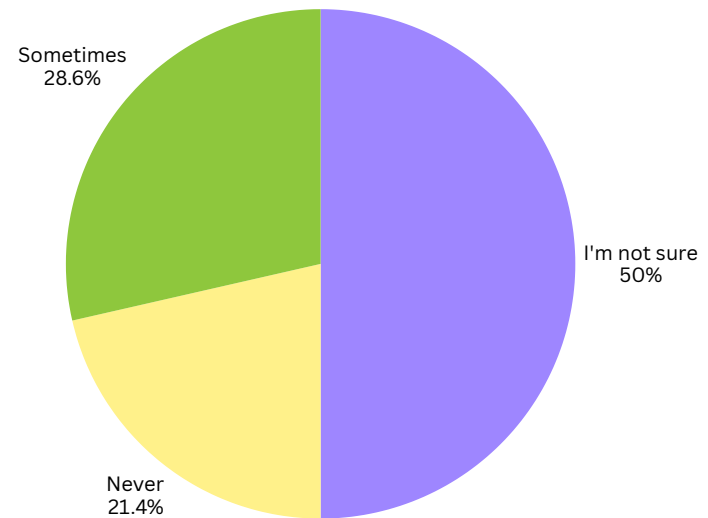
2.3. Understanding the youth experience

During the youth engagement event, additional questions were asked of their experiences and ideas.

How often do they feel like they know what's going on with City events or opportunities for youth?

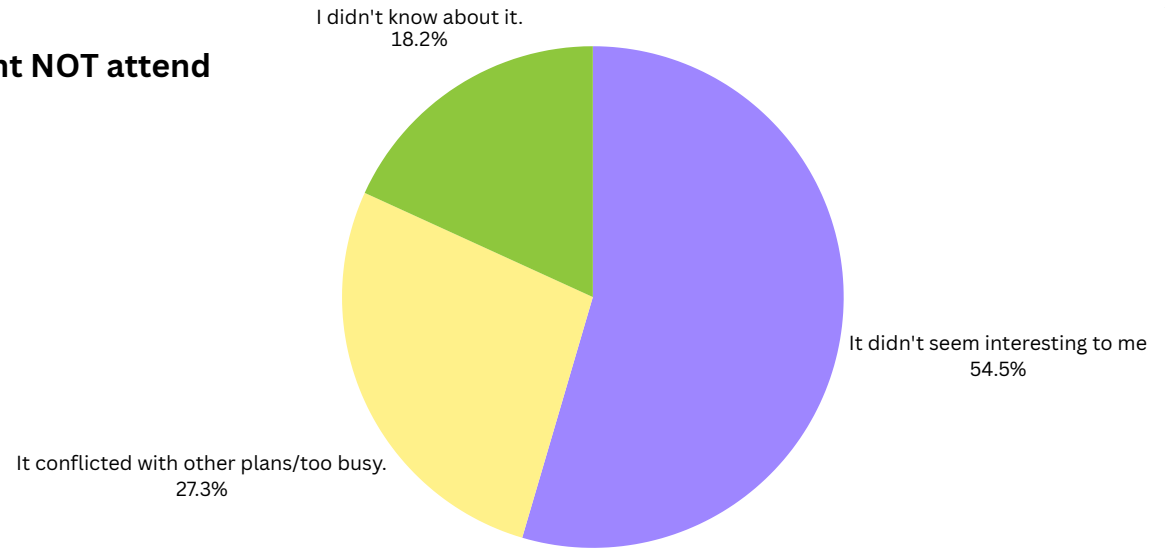


How often do they feel the City asks them for their ideas about projects or issues?

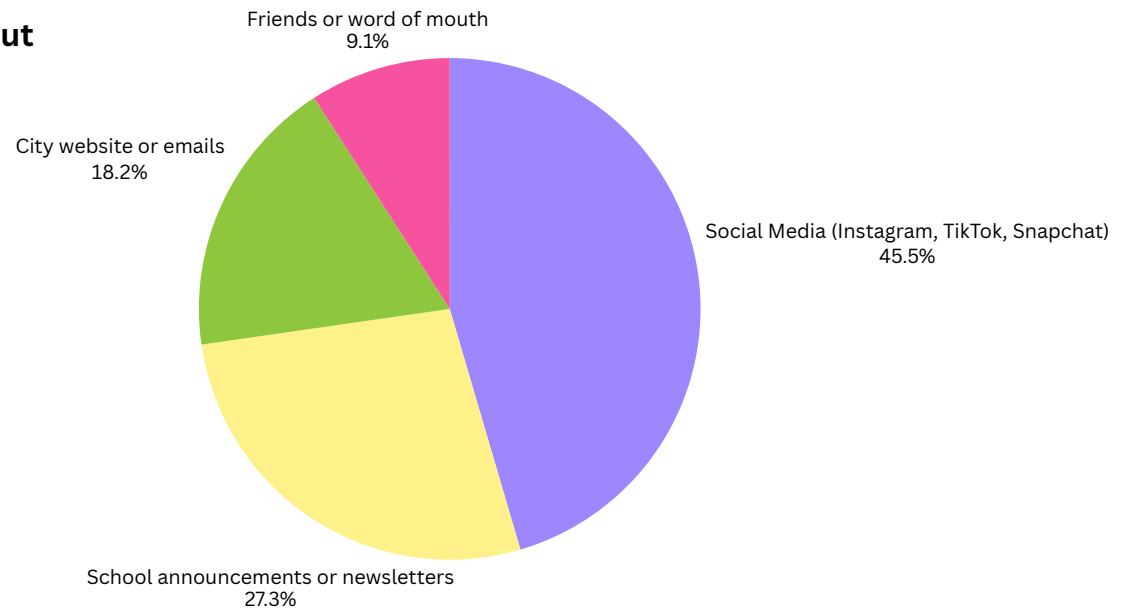


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What's the BIGGEST reason they might NOT attend a City event or program?

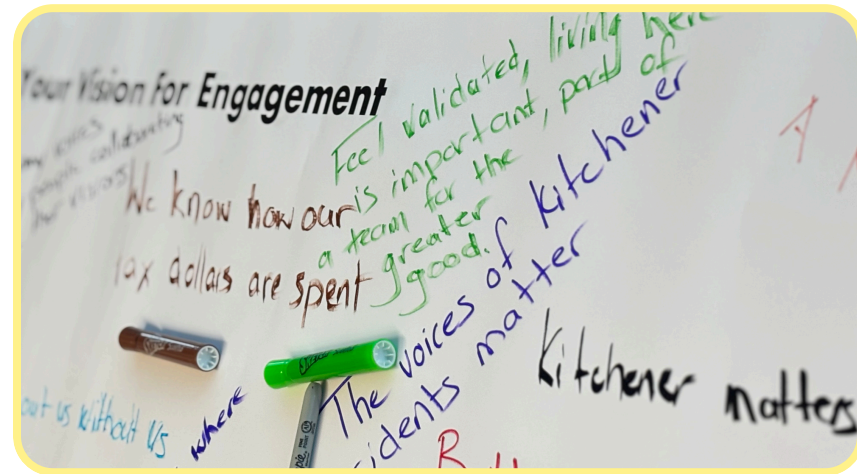
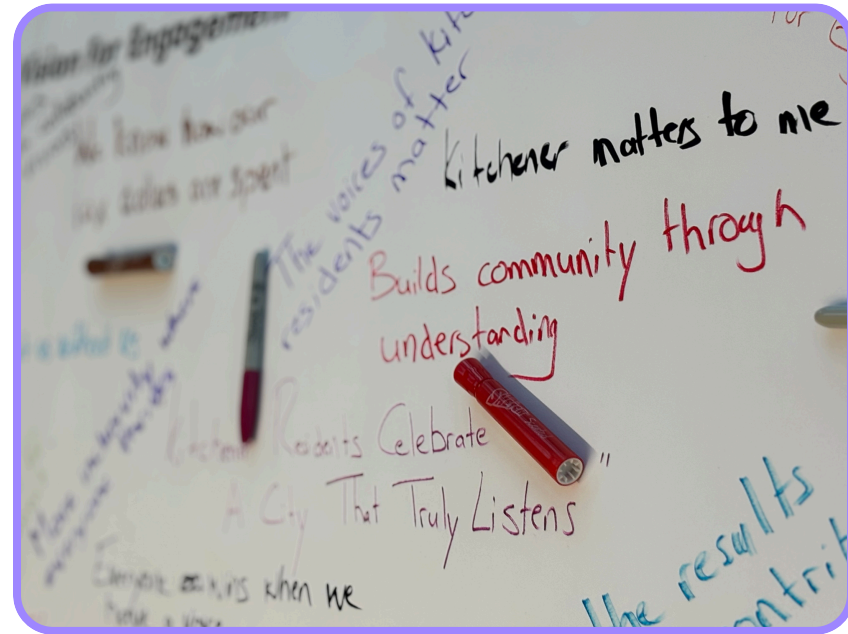
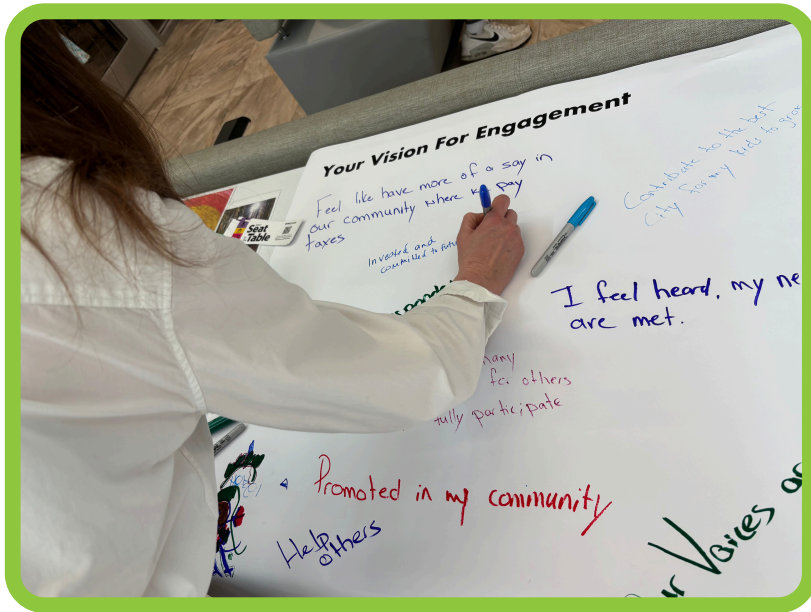


Where do they prefer to get information about things happening in the city, like events or programs?



2.3 Vision for engagement

Participants were asked to envision a future where their suggestions for improvements were made, resulting in the City and community receiving an award for excellence.



They envision a City where...

People's ideas are listened to and acted on

Community members are asked for and feel free to express their ideas, they are listened to and feel cared for by the City. Input is welcomed and people feel validated, valuable and worthy. Their ideas are used to shape the City and meet needs.

Strong community, relationships and trust are built

Through engagement people are connected, relationships are built, people feel respected as community members, trust in the community deepens and a sense of peace is created. Kitchener is a community where people thrive.

Pride in their City grows

Engagement allows people to help themselves and others, contribute to making their community liveable and making a difference. People learn and understand issues and needs and have confidence in actions that are taken.

Youth are actively engaged citizens*

Frequent opportunities are provided for youth to have a voice, provide their ideas and have them considered in shaping the City that they will be living

in. Connections are made, new perspectives are taken.

* Particularly important from the youth participants.

Everyone is included

Everyone is provided the opportunity to have a voice and influence change. People feel included, welcomed and accepted. Different ways of thinking, including Indigenous ways of knowing, are incorporated.

Engagement is easy, safe and accessible

Barriers to participation are addressed and a variety of engagement opportunities that interest and excite people are readily visible and available.

Decisions are transparent

How and why decisions are made are openly and clearly shared in a timely way. Input received from the public is responded to.

"Every problem in the world is a relationship problem if we create meaningful and strong relationships with each other we can solve them."

2.4 Values for engagement

The City identified six values to guide how they engage with community and asked participants for their feedback. Overall, participants felt that these values are relevant and important, but need some clarification.

Accountable and Transparent.

Kitchener defines this value as: “We will be clear about the reasons why citizens are being involved, their role, and the level of engagement required. We will report back to our community about the outcome of the process.”

Participants defined this value and what it looks like in practice as:

- Accountability and transparency of both process and outcomes.
- Being clear and public about the purpose and process of engagement and how to engage.
- Making commitments and keeping them; acknowledging mistakes.
- Sharing relevant facts and information with participants to ensure input is collected that can be used to inform decisions.
- Build on existing input received from previous engagement; coordinate information sharing.

- Being public about the outcomes.
- Responding to input.
- Explaining openly and honestly why decisions were made, even if messaging is hard or people won't like it.
- Reporting back directly to participants; making it easily available.

“Be clear about how feedback is collected and used.”

“Don't leave us guessing on what's going to happen, proactive communicate what's happening.”

Relationship Building.

Kitchener defines this value as: “We will work with community partners, individuals, groups, and organizations to increase our reach and value various perspectives and experiences. We recognize that respect and equitable processes foster trust and stronger relationships.”

Participants defined this value and what it looks like in practice as:

- Strengthening relationships among community members, not just with the City.
- Spending time building relationships with, and in, communities before engaging.

- Engagement methods used support and enable relationship building.

“You need good tools that enable you to build those relationships, like these Zoom calls. There’s a place for surveys, but doesn’t really do this (build relationships).”

Evaluate and Improve.

Kitchener defines this value as: “We will evaluate our public engagement initiatives, measure outcomes, and look for ways to continuously improve on our efforts by embracing new and improved engagement practices.”

Participants defined this value and what it looks like in practice as:

- Ongoing, constant evaluation.
- Evaluation of outcomes, how well action taken reflects public input received.
- Report back publicly the results of evaluation, progress, next steps and expected outcomes.
- Use results to update engagement practices.
- Evaluate from the public’s perspective, including clarity of feedback, their experiences, who’s participating.
- Re-evaluate these measures and update if needed.

“Use what we hear to improve, step-by-step, and recognize that change!”

“Use these values to measure how effective your listening is and tell us the results.”

“Constant reflection/evaluation on not only if we did improve, but also, if this is the direction we want to go towards.”

Deliberately Inclusive.

Kitchener defines this value as: “We will design and deliver engagement processes by recognizing and reducing barriers to reach diverse communities, and ensure participation is inclusive and balanced.”

Participants defined this value and what it looks like in practice as:

- Addressing physical, social and emotional barriers in design (ex. language, technology, sensory, mobility, anxiety).
- Seeing and hearing different types of people engaging (demographics, abilities, age).
- Plan and design for those often marginalized or oppressed.
- Consider engagement methods and locations to support inclusion.
- Ask people what they need.

- Communicate broadly to reach diversity of people.

“Invite people to the city’s table, but consider going to their table or gathering space in humility and spirit of learning.”

“So that everyone is included, even people with disabilities – can see people with different backgrounds.”

“Consider people who are minorities, they also want to be heard.”

“Anti- racist, and oppressive not prioritizing white voices. There are a lot of white voices who are more than allies. They want the same thing you do and they grieve things are the way they are and they are fighting for change.”

“Hire more racialized facilitators to lead outreach in their communities. Create a Diverse Community Engagement Ambassador Program.”

Purposeful.

Kitchener defines this value as: “We will carefully select and scope topics for engagement that citizens can provide meaningful feedback on to shape better outcomes for the community.”

Participants defined this value and what it looks like in practice as:

- Making clear and public statements about: 1) why the issues matter; and 2) the goal or vision of the initiative.

- Explain what can and cannot be influenced.
- Explain what cannot be done and why

“Be honest. This is the most important thing. If you can’t do anything about it, explain this upfront. People can live with that if there is a good reason, but not if there isn’t. Sometimes things can’t happen, but if there’s no reason why a popular idea isn’t being acted on, then you have to give a reason why.”

Respectful.

Kitchener defines this value as: “We will foster safe environments to allow for open dialogue and discussions while respecting each others’ perspectives, expertise and lived experiences as we work together to build a city for everyone. We support respectful exchanges of ideas, differing viewpoints, and constructive criticism and do not tolerate instances of harassment, intimidation, or discrimination.”

Participants defined this value and what it looks like in practice as:

- People feel welcomed, are listened to and asked for their input.
- Events are designed, setup and facilitated to foster and support respectful interactions.

A Seat at the Table

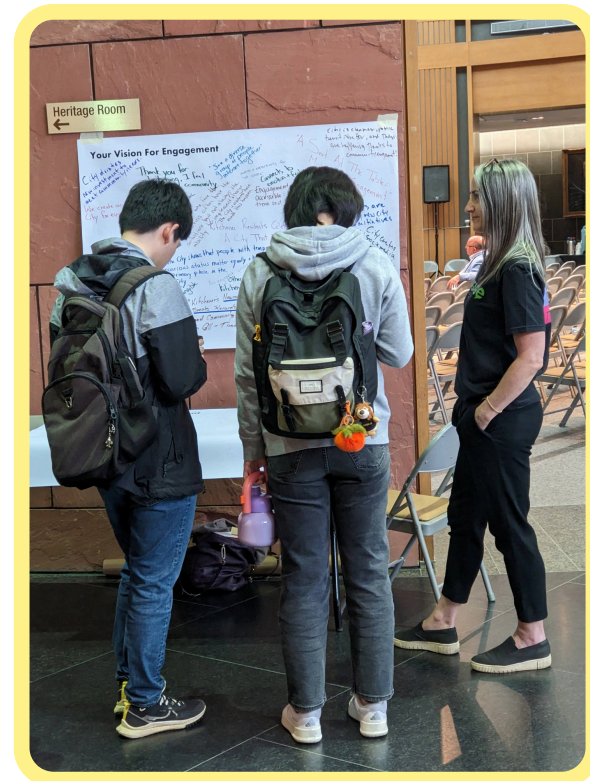
- People receive acknowledgement that they've been heard and how their input was used.
- Respectful language is used, tone and word.
- Respectful engagement creates safety and supports mental health of participants.
- Questions are responded to honestly.

“Helping people to be respectful not allowing frustration and disrespect.”

“Set up in a more circular way, less hierarchical, more listening, reflect back, picture this...”

“Asking us and valuing our opinions is respectful - like tonight's event.”

“Respect ... means truly listening and acting.”



“I like respect, relationship and inclusive, because they speak to what's important to me as a person, not you. What's important to the City or corporation are the other values (evaluate, purpose, transparent).”

3. Engagement Evaluation Summary

92%
Understood the purpose of this engagement

97%
Understood their role in this project

92%
Feels the City values their input

62%
Believe that the City will consider their input

91%
Felt the City made it easy for them to participate

100%
Felt they had an opportunity provide their thoughts

100%
Believe this was an important issue that will lead to better outcomes

97%
Felt safe expressing their views

100%
Felt respected

* Evaluation surveys were only completed by participants at the in-person events, n=71