

Staff Report

Corporate Services Department



www.kitchener.ca

REPORT TO: Planning and Strategic Initiatives Committee

DATE OF MEETING: October 27, 2025

SUBMITTED BY: Victoria Raab, General Manager, Corporate Services
519-783-8991

PREPARED BY: Sue Weare, Community Engagement Consultant, 519-783-8985

WARD(S) INVOLVED: All Wards

DATE OF REPORT: October 16, 2025

REPORT NO.: COR-2025-435

SUBJECT: Community Engagement Review

RECOMMENDATION:

That staff be directed to update the Community Engagement Policy (GOV-COU-2010), as outlined in Corporate Services Department report COR-2025-435, to be brought forward through a future Corporate Policy review update report.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- The purpose of this report is to provide Council a summary of the findings and recommendations from a review of the City's community engagement policy, framework, and practices.
- The key finding of this report is the need for a clearer framework to guide staff when engaging the public.
- There are no financial implications associated with this report.
- Community engagement included a multi-method engagement process to understand resident experiences, values and expectations.
- This report supports Fostering a Caring City Together: Enhancing the city's engagement practices.

BACKGROUND:

Enhancing the City's engagement practices is an action item in the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan. To implement this action, staff completed a thorough review of the organization's community engagement policy, framework and internal practices, which included extensive internal and external engagement.

REPORT:

Review Process

*** This information is available in accessible formats upon request. ***
Please call 519-741-2345 or TTY 1-866-969-9994 for assistance.

The Community Engagement Review commenced in 2024 with an environmental scan of best practices, policies, and frameworks from other municipalities, as well as a review of industry standards in public engagement. Together with staff from the City of Mississauga and City of Ottawa, City of Kitchener staff conducted a survey of Canadian municipalities. Kitchener staff also held interviews with Canadian municipalities. Concurrently, extensive internal engagement with both corporate leadership and key staff was undertaken to better understand current internal practices, strengths, challenges, improvement opportunities, and to discuss operational implications of the environmental scanning results.

In 2025, staff community engagement process, titled 'A Seat at the Table', was carried out. Staff engaged a consultant, Topent Ltd., who supported the planning and delivery of this process. It officially launched on April 30 and continued through June 30. The objectives were to assess residents' experiences engaging with the City (what worked well and identifying areas for improvement), understand barriers to participation, and gather ideas for enhancing current engagement practices. Residents also shared their vision for the future of public participation in Kitchener and provided feedback on principles or values that should guide how staff engage.

To raise awareness and gather early feedback, the project team presented to four advisory committees: Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee, Equity and Anti-Racism Advisory Committee, Mayor's Advisory Council for Kitchener Seniors, and Kitchener Youth Action Council. These committees were selected based on their representation of underserved communities and their local knowledge to help ensure the engagement approach was as inclusive, accessible, and low-barrier as possible.

To hear from a wide cross-section of Kitchener's communities and residents, multiple and various participation methods were offered. These integrated advisory committee feedback in both design and delivery, and included:

- **Virtual Kitchen Table Talks** – Two staff-facilitated group conversations held online to gather in-depth feedback.
- **Pop-up booths** – Held at community events and public spaces across Kitchener, including Public Works Family Fun Night, Tri-Pride, the Kitchener Market, Rockway Community Centre, and a youth camp leaders training session. Participation took place through brief intercept interviews and an ideation exercise.
- **Feedback Fairs** – Family-oriented events featuring four interactive stations where residents could share their thoughts and ideas in multiple creative ways. These were hosted at Victoria Hills Community Centre, Stanley Park Community Centre, Huron Community Centre, and a Newcomer Event at City Hall.
- **'Host Your Own' conversations** – A resource guide was provided to support resident-led discussions and enable hosts to share collected feedback with staff.
- **Online** – Comments tool, ideation tool, and survey hosted on Engage Kitchener.

Findings and Key Themes

In total, 30 Canadian municipalities took part in the survey and 10 in interviews for the environmental scan. Key learnings included:

- Types of internal staffing structures and roles to support community engagement functions, as well as the various benefits and drawbacks of each type.
- Best practice tools, templates, guides, and training that build internal capacity and consistency, including examples of successful approaches for reaching underrepresented or hard-to-reach groups.
- Most municipalities have an engagement framework to guide staff and, of those that did, most were organized around the lifecycle of engagement processes.
- Most municipalities have an online engagement platform, and use a combination of digital, virtual and in-person methods tailored to participant needs.
- The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)'s evidence-based approaches are widely adopted by nearly all Canadian municipalities. IAP2 is a global association of public participation professionals and the leading international organization dedicated to advancing the practice of public engagement. Our nation's chapter is IAP2 Canada.

With regards to the internal scan, a total of 17 interviews were conducted with City staff members from divisions involved in delivering public engagement. Key learnings included:

- Staff engage the public on topics including but not limited to master plans, capital projects, infrastructure upgrades, policies and by-laws, community programs and services.
- Staff use a wide range of methods in various formats (digital, virtual and in-person), just a few examples being: surveys, ideas boards, arts-based storytelling, interactive maps, interviews, workshops, and public meetings.
- Overall, staff expressed the need to establish a clear, practical City-wide framework that enables divisions flexibility to interpret standards within their unique contexts.
- Staff also suggested improving coordination across divisions to avoid engagement fatigue, build long-term relationships, and use public input more strategically.
- Staff identified capacity-building opportunities including training, more centralized resources, shared toolkits, and dedicated supports to meet gaps in staff skill, knowledge, and confidence.

Over 61 days, 973 residents participated in 19 different community events and spaces during the community engagement process. They said what the City does well is:

- Recognize the value of engagement and importance of hearing from many voices.
- Offer various easy, accessible and innovative methods, including Engage Kitchener.
- Use different approaches to reach community members and keep them informed.

Participants also shared opportunities to improve, including:

- Engage and promote the opportunity early in the process, making it clear how to get involved and why it matters.
- Keep using different methods, including more localized, comfortable and creative ones that appeal to various demographics (including youth) and build trust.
- Include underrepresented groups by using inclusive formats, offering language support, and asking about then addressing any unique or underrecognized barriers.
- Clearly demonstrate how public feedback influenced decisions and outcomes for each engagement process.

- Help residents understand how the City works and how to be more civically engaged.

Youth participants said they felt they only “sometimes” (77%) or “rarely” (33%) know about opportunities to engage with the City. The main barriers they identified were: the topic being uninteresting or irrelevant, scheduling conflicts preventing their participation, and a lack of awareness of how to get involved in general.

When asked to describe their vision for the future of public participation in Kitchener, participants said they envisioned a City where:

- Ideas are listened to and acted upon.
- Strong community relationships and trust are built.
- Pride in their city grows.
- Youth are actively engaged.
- Everyone is included and respected.
- Engagement is easy, safe, and inclusive.
- Decisions are transparent and clearly communicated.

Participants were also asked to review and refine a draft set of engagement principles. There was broad support for these, but it was recommended that the wording be revised to better align with how community members would describe and understand them.

Finally, participants were invited to answer an evaluation questionnaire on their experience participating in the engagement process.

- 100% believe this is an important issue that will lead to better outcomes and felt respected while taking part.
- 97% understood their role in this initiative and felt safe expressing their views.
- 91% felt the City made it easy for them to participate
- 92% understood the purpose of this engagement and felt the City values their input.
- 62% believed their input would be considered.

In the comments, respondents said they appreciated being able to participate in a familiar space, at a convenient time. This was true of both respondents who took part online or in-person (often were already there for an event or programming). Participants also expressed a desire for more dialogue-based approaches, stating that these built both understanding and trust.

Overall, evaluation results suggest the engagement design was appropriate, the methods were well-suited to the topic, and participants were highly satisfied with the overall engagement process. The lowest score indicates a gap in trust, which reflects the wider erosion of trust in public institutions that has been well-documented across multiple jurisdictions.

The consultant prepared a final report summarizing the findings from the community engagement process (see Appendix A). Strategic recommendations to staff for enhancing the City’s community engagement practices were also provided.

Recommendations

Given the above findings, staff recommend updating the Community Engagement Policy (GOV-COR-2010) to align with current industry standards, leading best practices, and public expectations. The review findings point to the need for a clear city-wide framework, organized around the lifecycle of engagement and grounded in the IAP2's evidence-based approaches. This would provide greater clarity and consistent guidance to staff – and enable the kind of meaningful participation desired by residents.

Based on the review findings, three high impact changes for a revised policy might include:

- **Adopt the IAP2's practice framework**, which describes four essential elements of a successful engagement process: design, planning, implementation, evaluation.
- **Adopt the IAP2 public participation spectrum**, a conceptual model for assessing, understanding, and communicating the public's influence on an outcome or decision and the overall goal(s) of engagement. The current policy has a modified version of this model, aligning with industry standards would ensure its use is more effective.
- **Include broad guiding principles** as defined by public input, to provide a foundation for more meaningful engagement.

The revised policy would more clearly establish the organization's expectations or guidelines – and commitments to the public – when engaging residents. Including the practice framework provides a structured but high-level outline of the expected steps for carrying out an engagement process, regardless of topic or operational division. The spectrum model is a critical tool for designing engagement, and its inclusion further establishes this as an expectation.

Finally, findings also suggest the need for a new corporate strategy to guide improvements in the City's engagement practices. The strategy would provide clear directions and actions for improving the City's engagement practices based on the review's findings, including a comprehensive guide for operationalizing the revised policy.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report supports *Fostering a Caring City Together*: Focuses on enhancing the city's engagement practices.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

INFORM – This report has been posted to the City's website with the agenda in advance of the committee meeting. The "what we heard" report was also shared on the project's Engage Kitchener page and emailed to key participants.

COLLABORATE – As described in the report, residents were involved in multiple ways, including facilitated group conversations, intercept interviews, ideation exercises, online comment boards, and surveys. Public feedback directly informs the recommendation to update the Community Engagement Policy.

PREVIOUS REPORTS/AUTHORITIES:

There are no previous reports/authorities related to this matter.

APPROVED BY: Victoria Raab, General Manager, Corporate Services

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A – A Seat At The Table What Was Heard Report (August 2025)