

City of Hamilton Mayor's Task Force on Transparency, Access, and Accountability

Transparency, Accountability & Access: Best Practices from Municipalities

Presented for review on May 15, 2024

Overview

To enhance transparency, accountability, and access in municipalities, several best practices have been identified in the literature. One key approach is the implementation of open data policies, which involve making data publicly available to increase transparency, accountability, and operational efficiency (Romer & Kroesen, 2019). Additionally, the use of e-government-enabled transparency has been highlighted as a means to reduce information asymmetries, increase public trust in political players, and enhance municipalities' reputation (Romero & Araújo, 2020).

Training local journalists on the right of access to information and improving media coverage of municipal activities have been recommended to promote transparency and accountability (Tweissi, 2014). Moreover, the use of Web 2.0 and social media tools in municipalities has been suggested to increase transparency and social participation, although the practice of corporate dialogue with citizens may still be limited (Neves et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the publication of policy documents online, promoting open government data initiatives, and enabling citizen participation in data processes have been emphasized as strategies to increase transparency and accountability in municipalities (Jetzek et al., 2019). Additionally, promoting corporate social responsibility in public administrations has been recognized as a way to improve transparency, governance, and the efficient allocation of public resources (Abellan-Gimenez et al., 2021).

In conclusion, by adopting open data policies, leveraging e-government-enabled transparency, training journalists, utilizing social media tools effectively, promoting open government data initiatives, and fostering corporate social responsibility, municipalities can significantly enhance transparency, accountability, and access for their citizens.

The Canadian Context

To enhance transparency, accountability, and access in Canadian municipalities, several best practices can be drawn from reputable sources. One key aspect is the importance of transparency in governance processes. Municipalities with high transparency levels tend to have more law-abiding entrepreneurs and foster an environment conducive to fair practices (Riaz et al., 2022). Open government data is another crucial element, allowing for better discoverability, access, and reuse of information (Roche et al., 2020).

Additionally, initiatives focusing on stewardship and sharing of data can strengthen research excellence and improve access to valuable information (Persaud et al., 2021).

Efficiency is also a significant factor in municipal operations. Identifying well-performing municipalities and mirroring their best practices can help less efficient municipalities improve their performance (Mahabir, 2014). Learning from each other's practices and establishing benchmark municipalities for best practices can lead to overall efficiency improvements (Mbonigaba & Oumar, 2016). Moreover, municipal autonomy plays a role in influencing transparency practices, highlighting the importance of administrative openness and diversity in fostering transparency (Keuffer & Mabillard, 2019).

Regarding governance quality, municipalities with low corruption, high transparency, and accountability are better equipped to address challenges effectively, such as those posed by forced migration (Aksoy & Tümen, 2021). Implementing integrated community sustainability planning is another effective approach that Canadian local governments have been adopting to incorporate sustainability into daily practices comprehensively (Collins et al., 2017).

In conclusion, by emphasizing transparency, open data practices, efficiency improvements, and good governance quality, Canadian municipalities can enhance their operations, promote accountability, and increase access to essential services and information for their residents.

Summary of Best Practices from Municipalities

Municipal governments around the world are increasingly adopting innovative practices to enhance transparency, accountability, and public access. Here are some examples:

1. **Open Data Initiatives:** Many municipalities are publishing datasets related to government operations, finances, and services. This allows citizens, researchers, and businesses to access and analyze information, fostering transparency and accountability. Examples include New York City's Open Data Portal and London's Datastore.

Many Canadian municipalities, such as Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, have established open data portals that provide access to a wide range of datasets, including information on government spending, infrastructure, and demographics. These portals promote transparency by making government data freely available for analysis and reuse by citizens, researchers, and businesses.

2. **Citizen Engagement Platforms:** Municipalities are using online platforms and mobile apps to engage citizens in decision-making processes. These platforms enable residents to provide feedback, report issues, and participate in discussions about policies and projects. For instance, Madrid's Decide Madrid platform allows citizens to propose and vote on projects for city funding.

Municipalities across Canada have adopted digital platforms to engage citizens in decision-making processes. For example, Edmonton's Engage Edmonton platform allows residents to participate in surveys, forums, and consultations on various municipal initiatives and policies.

3. **Budget Transparency:** Transparent budgeting practices involve making detailed information about government expenditures and revenues readily available to the public. Tools like interactive budget visualizations and participatory budgeting processes empower citizens to understand and influence how public funds are allocated.

Canadian municipalities are increasingly embracing budget transparency measures to ensure that residents have access to information about government spending and finances. This includes publishing detailed budget documents, holding public budget consultations, and providing online tools for citizens to explore budget allocations.

4. **Performance Dashboards:** Municipalities are using performance dashboards to track and publicly report on key metrics related to service delivery and government performance. These dashboards provide real-time or regular updates on indicators such as response times for emergency services, crime rates, and infrastructure maintenance.

Some Canadian municipalities, such as Calgary and Ottawa, have developed performance dashboards that track key indicators related to service delivery, infrastructure, and community well-being. These dashboards provide residents with real-time or regular updates on municipal performance and help hold government accountable for its actions.

5. **Open Government Portals:** Centralized online portals serve as hubs for accessing information about government activities, policies, and services. These portals often include features such as searchable databases, FAQs, and contact information for government officials, making it easier for citizens to find the information they need.

Municipalities like Toronto and Vancouver have launched open government portals that centralize information about government services, programs, and initiatives. These portals often include features such as searchable databases, interactive maps, and contact information for elected officials and city departments.

6. **Whistleblower Protection Programs:** Establishing mechanisms to protect whistleblowers who report instances of corruption or misconduct within municipal government promotes accountability and discourages unethical behavior. Robust whistleblower protection laws and procedures help create a culture of transparency and integrity.

Several Canadian municipalities have implemented whistleblower protection programs to encourage the reporting of misconduct or wrongdoing within government agencies. These programs typically

include mechanisms for reporting concerns confidentially and protection against retaliation for whistleblowers.

7. **Ethics and Conflict of Interest Policies:** Clear guidelines and regulations regarding conflicts of interest, financial disclosures, and ethical conduct for government officials help prevent corruption and ensure accountability. Municipalities can enforce these policies through ethics commissions or oversight bodies.

Municipalities across Canada have established ethics and conflict of interest policies to ensure that elected officials and public servants adhere to high standards of conduct. These policies typically include requirements for financial disclosure, codes of ethics, and mechanisms for investigating and addressing ethical breaches.

8. **Open Meetings and Public Records Laws:** Municipalities can enhance transparency by adhering to open meetings laws, which require government meetings to be accessible to the public, and public records laws, which grant citizens the right to access government documents and information.

Canadian municipalities are subject to open meetings and public records laws that require government meetings to be open to the public and grant residents access to government records and documents. These laws promote transparency and accountability in municipal governance.

9. **Collaborative Partnerships:** Collaborating with non-profit organizations, academic institutions, and private sector entities can help municipalities leverage expertise, resources, and technology to enhance transparency and accountability initiatives. Public-private partnerships can support the development and implementation of innovative solutions.

Canadian municipalities often collaborate with other levels of government, non-profit organizations, and community groups to develop and implement transparency and accountability initiatives. These partnerships help leverage resources, expertise, and technology to address complex challenges and engage citizens in the decision-making process.

10. **Regular Performance Reviews and Audits:** Conducting regular performance reviews and audits of government agencies and programs helps identify inefficiencies, risks, and areas for improvement. Publishing audit reports and outcomes increases transparency and holds government entities accountable for their performance.

Canadian municipalities conduct regular performance reviews and audits of government operations to assess efficiency, effectiveness, and compliance with regulations. The findings of these reviews and audits are typically made public to promote transparency and accountability.