



VOLUNTEER ADVISORY COMMITTEE REVIEW JURISDICTIONAL SCAN SUMMARY

Executive Summary

In September 2023, Hamilton City Council approved a motion for a review of the Voluntary Advisory Committees (VAC), including a best practice scan of municipal VAC's and related alternatives. Analysis of advisory bodies was done across other jurisdictions in Ontario (London, Kingston, Toronto, Ottawa, Brampton, and Windsor) as well as in Canada (St. John's, Edmonton, Victoria). Some common themes emerged.

The jurisdictional scan demonstrated that cities who recently conducted reviews are moving away from the formal structure of Advisory Committees that Hamilton currently utilizes and toward working groups in one form or another. Support staff were a key factor in the success of any advisory body, as was embedding principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion in recruitment and approach. Training for volunteers, including both initial orientation and ongoing resources, was highlighted as essential for ensuring the success of these advisory bodies.

The scan also supported a reduction in the overall number of Advisory Committees. This shift would be better in line with both the municipal best practice and be a more structurally permissive model for civic engagement.

Analysis

Types of Advisory Bodies

In some jurisdictions, Advisory Committees have been replaced by the efforts of Working Groups. By comparison, these working groups put less of a burden of procedural understanding on volunteers, increasing the likely effectiveness of recruitment and retention. Compared to Advisory Committees, working groups are typically established around a specific project or goal and at the conclusion of which they adjourn (although in some cases these Working Groups were also tied to terms of council).

In their 2012 review and then again in their 2023 review, the City of Ottawa has shifted focus to department-led working groups. These were formed to help inform staff recommendations to council, rather than being formed by council. These departmental working groups are more easily able to fit into staff workplans early enough to contribute effectively as tools for public engagement. In a 2023 report Ottawa also identified that working groups, unlike advisory committees, would not be considered local boards, opening members up to fewer procedural requirements for participation.

In the City of Toronto, a distinction is drawn between Council Advisory Bodies (CABs) and Program Advisory Bodies (PABs). CABs are tied to terms of Council, have specific terms of reference, and report to council like the current Hamilton Advisory Committees. PABs are staff-created, helping to inform recommendations but ultimately not reporting formally to council, with terms of reference that include what staff they report to. At the discretion of staff, Toronto PABs may hold closed meetings and may recruit selectively from targeted groups without an open application process.

Expert Panels, populated by subject matter experts, and Task Forces, defined by narrow mandates, each also provided a useful tool for civic engagement in some municipalities. In Kingston and Ottawa, panels convened with equity-deserving groups and people with lived experience were offered honorariums to offset the burden of participation. Narrower mandates helped inform recruitment, and the City of Windsor found that these panels, with their focus on subject matter expertise, often better aligned with the needs of council and staff consultation.

While staff led working groups did not need the same support from clerks as publicly held/streamed meetings, staff capable of training and supporting volunteers on project plans were identified as critical to the success and attendance of volunteer bodies. While working groups do not have the same quorum requirements, are not required to meet publicly, and offer more flexibility to members, in some ways they required more staff support with more focused project deadlines to produce more tangible outcomes.

In understanding the criteria and form an advisory body may take, the City of Windsor offered that their council asks:

1. is the subject matter still relevant?
2. what form of advisory body will this group take?

Table 1 offers a comparison of the types of advisory bodies most used by municipalities across the jurisdictional scan, along with their roles and guiding principles.

Table 1	Role	Principles
Advisory Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides citizen and Organizational expertise on matters relevant to the Committee’s mandate. • Involved in the development of solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports to a committee of council. • Has a Terms of Reference. • Duration tied to term of council. • Minutes and Citizen Committee Reports disclosed to reporting committee.
Working Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide citizen or organizational expertise or oversight in the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assists in the development or delivery of an approved plan or strategy. • Term tied to project or goal.

	development or delivery of a program or project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May report to staff or council.
Task Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide citizen or organizational expertise on a specific set of defined topics/issues • Involved in the receipt of information and providing feedback on the specific topics/issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a defined timeline and goal. • May develop Terms of Reference. • May recommend items for implementation.
Experts Panel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides expert opinion on topics or issues within a defined mandate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May or may not have a defined timeline. • Report to Standing Committee

At the City of Hamilton there are recent examples of alternative bodies being formed, either as staff directed groups or as council directed groups. This includes a Mayor’s Taskforce on Economic Recovery, and a Mayor’s Task Force on Transparency, Access, and Accountability. The task forces are council-directed bodies, that meet publicly with the support of clerks and other municipal staff and behave similarly to existing Advisory Committees. Task forces typically have a shorter intended term, however because of the structure are prone to the same structural limitations of existing Advisory Committees at the City of Hamilton.

Comparatively, the Youth Steering Committee, formed in response to the ending of the Youth Advisory Committee, is departmentally led and considerably more agile based on staff feedback. Following a more flexible working group model, the staff-directed relationship of this group makes it possible to meet more flexibly, recruit in an ongoing manner, and host a much larger and more engaged body of passionate volunteers.

Recruitment and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

Common themes regarding recruitment included the use of dynamic social media marketing and an easy-to-fill-out application form. Ottawa emphasized that working group recruitment could look to local community groups, advocates, and subject matter experts in a more relationship-focused approach to recruitment. In Windsor, the city worked closely with a local Instagram influencer and saw significant success producing short recruitment videos, a model they plan to return to for future recruitment.

The City of Toronto identified three key strategies for recruitment: being clear about the work, providing some form of honorarium where appropriate, and accessing diverse, multiethnic promotional resources. The City of Victoria emphasized the need for an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) approach during recruitment to find suitable subject matter experts with lived experience. Staff at the City of Victoria also stressed

the potential failing of advisory bodies assembled for generic EDI needs, noting a lack of intersectionality as a potential challenge.

The current model of recruitment for Advisory Committees could be significantly improved with structural changes. Limits around who is involved in the recruitment process mean it is often not those with subject matter expertise actively interviewing prospective members of an advisory group. This process could be improved by transitioning to a staff-directed, working group model.

Training and Member Orientation

Most consulted municipalities had in place an overview of the terms of reference and handbooks for advisory bodies, be they those reporting to council or those reporting to staff. In municipalities where clerks conducted an official training session for members, it was offered both in person and as a virtual recording. In the City of St. John’s, clerks staff make themselves available to answer questions on procedure and motion crafting, providing an ongoing member resource.

In Ottawa, training for Advisory Committee members was identified by their 2023 review as deficient, especially in the context of the statutory ruling that Advisory Committees are “local boards,” subjecting them to certain mandatory policy requirements. These requirements include behaving according to a code of conduct, stipulations around actions taken during an election, holding open-to-the-public meetings, and others under the *Municipal Act, 2001*. The challenges of organizing and supporting these local boards supported the need for change recommendations in Ottawa, moving entirely away from non-legislated Advisory Committees.

In Hamilton, we do not have legislated volunteer-led Advisory Committees. The Accessibility Committee for Persons with Disabilities (ACPD) is required by the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* but is a sub-committee of Council and not within the scope of the Volunteer Advisory Committee review. This means that a similar shift to what was done in Ottawa would transform all Advisory Committees into departmentally led working groups, if adopted here.

Reduction in Number of Advisory Committees

Across the jurisdictional scan there was a tendency toward a reduction in the number of Advisory Committees. Most did not have as many as the City of Hamilton to begin with, but even among those with close to the same number there’s a tendency toward a reduction.

Table 2 shows some municipalities from within the scan that recently conducted reviews, and the trend among them toward a reduction in the number of overall

committees. Also indicated here are the estimated staffing requirements of their existing process, for comparison across the jurisdictions.

TABLE 2: Municipalities with Recent Reviews				
Municipality	Current Number of Committees	Staffing Support	Date of Recent Reviews	Number of Committees Before Review
Hamilton	14	Clerks assigned to each AC and a staff liaison	2015	14
Kingston	7	Two clerks per committee, with 3 committee clerks handling all 7 ACs	2023	8
London	7	Clerk supports meeting operations and staff support attending meetings when required	2024	13
Ottawa	4	Clerk appoints a Committee Coordinator for each AC. Each AC also supported by departmental staff	2023, 2012	5 (2023), 15 (2012)
Windsor	9	1-2 Staff per committee to provide resources	2023	18
St John’s	11	There is a lead staff assigned to each committee, from the program/topic area, and a legislative assistant from the City Clerk’s office	2015	11

Conclusion

Hamilton has more advisory committees than similarly sized municipalities, in part because of a trend toward alternative models of civic engagement, and in part because of a general shift away from this form of civic engagement. Staff-led volunteer teams are often more effective groups for moving forward workplans and projects, based on the feedback through the jurisdictional scan. Training, both of staff supporting these bodies and of volunteers themselves especially those in the role of chair, was identified as a key element of the success of these groups. For volunteers to be effective in their roles, they need to be resourced and supported effectively.

The jurisdictional scan and the Hamilton-specific context support a restructuring of Advisory Committees. While this structure could look a few different ways, it is both important to consider the leadership structure (council-directed or staff-led) and the form (working group, task force, experts panel).