

CITY OF HAMILTON

# Mayor's Task Force on Transparency, Access and Accountability

Consultation Report

# Letter From the Task Force

The Mayor's Task Force on Transparency, Access and Accountability (Task Force) was created to provide a path forward for the improvement of trust and transparency between the City of Hamilton and Hamilton residents and diverse communities, as well as to "solicit concerns and opportunities from citizens about public access, transparency and accountability at the City of Hamilton and provide actionable recommendations to the General Issues Committee for improvements."

We were charged with recommending a path forward to improve trust and transparency between the City and its many communities, with two primary components to this project and report: soliciting feedback and perspectives, and formulating recommendations.

In striking this Task Force, Hamilton City Council agreed this mandate was important, and that making meaningful progress on these topics can improve the City of Hamilton's performance, helping build resilience and capacity in the face of challenges.

The objective of this Task Force was not to audit specific situations. However, over the course of this project, topics such as the major cybersecurity incident, tiny shelter procurement and sewage spills were cited by contributors and identified as significant opportunities for the City to improve and do better at achieving its mission and vision "to be the best place to raise a child and age successfully."

From the time of the inception of the Task Force in early 2024 to the completion of this report in March 2025, Hamilton has faced many challenges. City of Hamilton staff and councillors, as well as community members and organizations, have been confronted by local, regional, national and international issues — including political uncertainty, a struggling economy, major concerns related to public safety, drugs, access to housing and much more.

In the face of the complex operating environment faced by its leaders, the City of Hamilton is nonetheless committed to a mission "to provide high-quality, cost-conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community in a sustainable manner," and holds significant responsibility, authority and financial capacity to lead.

## **This project — and its aftermath — is critical to the future of the City of Hamilton.**

The feedback we garnered from a broad cross-section of the community was concerning. Through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, discussions with community members, written submissions, delegations in public meetings and a public survey through Engage Hamilton, we heard the relationship between Hamilton's municipal government and the people it represents is fractured in several ways. One result that highlights this issue is that 80 per cent of survey respondents gave the City a negative rating in the trust department.

We understand the frustration community members are feeling. This frustration isn't just tied to major items where the City may have fallen short on its obligations to the community such as the ["failure to disclose the Tradewind Report"](#) relating to the Red Hill Valley Parkway. It also includes simple interactions at City Hall, and ensuring good customer service when someone comes in with a question or is seeking help or direction.

Fostering trust includes finding the right balance between the concerns of community members and the needs of the businesses in the city.

We should aspire to make City Hall a place where anybody living in the City of Hamilton is welcomed, accommodated and can feel heard. We need to ensure we are reaching out to and connecting with underserved and equity-deserving communities to ensure their voices are heard.

Progress needs to be made to realize this intention.

One contrast between the City of Hamilton's objectives and the experience of community members is the City's five principles for public engagement. Weighing what we heard through this process against those principles, it is evident there are a number of gaps in realizing these intentions:

1. *Build trust and relationships* ... however, the level of trust in the City is very low.
2. *Every voice is valued* ... however, there are many voices across many communities that don't feel heard.
3. *Clear, timely and transparent information* ... but the City is not perceived to freely share information, and that which is expected to be publicly available is difficult to access.
4. *Adapting along the way* ... but the perception is that there has not been sufficient change.
5. *Continuously improving* ... but people do not feel the situation is getting any better.

We were pleased that the internal participants we spoke with at the City of Hamilton expressed a commitment to their mandate and a desire to drive progress. It should be highlighted that this report was being developed during the time the City was recovering from the cyberattack, which presented many difficulties in the execution of the work. It was cited, for example, that hiring systems were disrupted, making it difficult to effectively acquire the talent needed to fill roles, and that budgeting and other processes needed to be done manually.

Internal leadership noted that they were also viewing the cyberattack as an opportunity and using the disruption as a catalyst to review and reconsider several aging systems within the City and to implement new, modern systems and processes expected to be able to better deliver outcomes.

City leadership also indicated they feel they have been making meaningful changes to the City's operations which may not yet be fully implemented or have been communicated publicly. The Task Force encourages the City to see this as an opportunity to communicate and engage with the public so there is an understanding and appreciation of progress that is being made.

The Task Force also appreciated that City leadership expressed an openness to receive the results of this report, and to thoughtfully consider how to incorporate its recommendations.

## Our Work

This report contains a significant amount of information that has been distilled from a broad set of qualitative and quantitative data generated from our extensive engagement activities. We are confident the data reflects the perspectives of a wide-ranging set of members of the community and leadership at the City of Hamilton.

We encourage City Council and senior leadership to read and consider the specific points and recommendations contained in this report. However our Task Force has identified three primary areas of focus to make the City of Hamilton more transparent, accessible, accountable and ultimately, highly trusted and effective:

1. **Communications** – This was the most recurrent theme across internal and external participants. Communications of varying forms were cited as being inconsistent, not timely, not comprehensive, not sufficiently transparent and not effectively managed. It was clear that poor communication is resulting in frustration, a lack of trust, underperformance and confusion. It was

generally not clear who is taking responsibility for overall communications leadership and coordination at the City of Hamilton.

2. **Reporting and Strategic Management** – While the City of Hamilton has a clear and aspirational mission and vision, as well as defined 2016-2025 strategic priorities, there is a notable gap between these high-level priorities and having defined enterprise-level annual objectives that can be measured and observed. As a result, interested parties are not able to determine whether the City of Hamilton is performing well and being accountable to its mandate. Often, the perception was expressed is that it is not. Further, without this layer of strategic guidance, staff and council are unable to calibrate their work to achieve alignment and high performance.
3. **Organizational Culture** – Both internal and external parties cited a perception that organizational culture was an impediment to achieving ideal levels of transparency, accountability and access. The City of Hamilton states that “our culture guides the conduct, behaviours and actions to which we hold each other accountable.” Participants expressed that the City of Hamilton’s organizational culture would not be described as transparent. A specific gap often cited was the lack of a customer service mindset, leading to experiences where engaging with the City of Hamilton was often seen as a challenge instead of an empowering and constructive experience. It is well established that an aspirational, positive, collaborative and high-performance culture drives results.

One of the key guiding principles of the Task Force was to ensure the recommendations that we make are *practical*.

Nobody wants to go through this kind of work just to have the report shelved because it prescribes things that can’t be done.

Our basic definition of a practical recommendation:

1. Is it reasonable considering the support and resources available?
2. Is it achievable given staff expertise, availability and timelines?
3. Is it measurable, in order to meet the aspirations of the public engagement process?

The detailed observations and recommendations in this report also cite certain case studies that demonstrate the possibility of enacting the recommendations — which will take an investment of time, money and resources. Transparency, access and accountability must be pursued intentionally. Achieving progress requires a dedicated and concentrated effort to change the way the City operates.

## Our Recommendations

We are making five broad recommendations to the City to kickstart this process, summarized below and outlined in detail in **Section VIII: Recommendations**.

### 1. A Digital Transformation

Launch a digital transformation in the City of Hamilton, including an overhaul of the City’s website and a concerted effort to digitize historical records that will facilitate easy public access to public information.

For many of our recommendations, digital capacity is needed. This means better organization and storage of significant data sets and comparative reports, with public-facing portals to facilitate access. This information must be easily accessible and scalable to keep up with Hamilton’s pace of growth.

The City of Toronto has had an Open Data Portal for 15 years. Vancouver also has a public access point for city reports, data and information. These portals are central storing places for information on various aspects of a city's operations, such as transportation, public health and urban planning. To ensure the information remains relevant and useful, the portals are regularly updated with new data sets and encourages public requests for specific data.

Hamilton's, by contrast, could use improvement and promotion.

## **2. Restructure Communications**

Hamilton needs to re-build both its infrastructure for communications and its approach.

Effective and efficient communications are critical to ensuring transparency, access and accountability.

We've heard communications from the City is a patchwork of processes and approaches. Pieces need to be put in place to facilitate coordinated communications across departments and offices. Staff reports and City communications should be presented in plain language. All City communications should ideally also have translation services available.

The Task Force strongly recommends the City of Hamilton quickly develop and execute an enterprise-level initiative with clear ownership, leadership and timelines to definitively improve communications.

## **3. Equity**

Equity has to be a foundational principle guiding all operations in the City of Hamilton. Hamilton is made up of distinct communities, and it is important for the City's government to both reflect and be respectful of that, with a stronger emphasis on building sensitivity into its language, considering the diverse needs of Hamiltonians.

This means making a comprehensive and strategic approach to ensure opportunity for everyone is a fundamental consideration. Engagements with equity-deserving communities should be a priority, generating valuable insight into the decision-making process.

Equity in the City of Hamilton should also seek to be reflected in the composition of its workforce, particularly at the senior leadership level. An inclusive city seeks to ensure that decision-makers reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, fostering a deeper understanding of the lived experiences, challenges and strengths of all residents.

Other municipalities across Canada, such as Toronto and Vancouver, have recognized this as a best practice, implementing strategies to pursue representation in leadership through targeted recruitment, mentorship programs and accountability measures.

By prioritizing equitable hiring and leadership development, Hamilton can build a more responsive, innovative and just municipal government that effectively serves its growing and diverse population.

## **4. Professional Development**

Professional development is a key strategy to ensure the City of Hamilton is best equipped to lead and execute in a complex and rapidly evolving environment.

City Councillors and staff should be aware of and properly trained on new processes, procedures, technology and equity to more effectively engage with community members. This is critical to building a more inclusive City.

Ensuring elected leaders and staff have appropriate training to deliver on their mandates with a high degree of fluency and competence is a path to improving the way the City both operates and is viewed by the people it is there to serve.

This includes staying abreast of new and emerging technologies, and new approaches to improve service delivery and public engagement.

To be effective, the training has to be high quality, based on evidence and sensitive to the community realities in Hamilton.

The Task Force is recommending that political leaders and staff are sufficiently trained on processes, procedures and equity to support better innovation, performance, customer service, stronger community connections and a more inclusive city.

## 5. Action on Accountability

The ability to confidently measure and report on progress and activities is critical.

Reporting mechanisms are an important piece to rebuilding trust in the community.

These tools have to be accessible to the public, regularly updated and presented to council at pre-determined intervals.

This will be a huge step towards closing the “feedback loop” and letting community members feel like their voice has been heard.

The Task Force recommends The City of Hamilton:

- Develop an enterprise-level scorecard with clear accountability frameworks that connect to and influence department-level plans and execution.
- Consider an approach that supports enterprise-level strategic management excellence, including internal culture and capabilities, internal performance and efficiency, customer satisfaction, and financial performance.
- Consider creating an Ombudsperson’s office to manage complaints and concerns from the community and pursue fairness, inclusion, equity and accountability.

## Acknowledgments

The Task Force would like to thank the City of Hamilton staff who worked with us, who were very engaged and supportive in helping the Task Force work through the unique complexities of a project of this nature and the requirements of conducting our work under the parameters of the *Municipal Act*.

We also thank and acknowledge all those who gave their time and energy to contribute insights to this process.

Our engagements validated that both members of the City of Hamilton corporation as well as the broader community desire a successful Hamilton, but are also very concerned about the state of our city.

Some participants expressed frustration and concern that their feedback and the recommendations of this Task Force would not be heeded. Many conveyed the significant gravity that the decisions and performance of the City of Hamilton have on their life and livelihood.

Our thanks is also extended to the City Councillors who responded to our invitation and participated in the process:

- Maureen Wilson (Ward 1)
- Nrinder Nann (Ward 3)
- Esther Pauls (Ward 7)
- Brad Clark (Ward 9)
- Craig Cassar (Ward 12)
- Ted McMeekin (Ward 15)
- Cameron Kroetsch (Ward 2)
- Tammy Hwang (Ward 4)
- John-Paul Danko (Ward 8)
- Mark Tadeson (Ward 11)
- Alex Wilson (Ward 13)

All Councillors were invited to share their thoughts; those who did not participate are Matt Francis (Ward 5); Tom Jackson (Ward 6); Jeff Beattie (Ward 10); and Mike Spadafora (Ward 14).

A special thank you to our partners, the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and Enterprise Canada for planning, managing and executing our consultation process.

The Task Force has discussed whether or not it should continue as a committee.

It is our recommendation that following the delivery and presentation of this report in April 2025, that the Task Force's work be concluded. This process has made clear to us that it would not be pragmatic to have a group of part-time volunteers evaluate a large, complex organization such as the City of Hamilton against broad topics such as transparency, access and accountability on an ongoing basis.

Ultimately, Hamiltonians should be able to expect City Council to take ownership for directing the City in a transparent, accessible and accountable manner, and to hire staff who are capable and motivated to achieve this expectation.

However, the Task Force members are open to supporting any City- or community-led initiatives to continue to advance these topics.

Much of the success of the City of Hamilton is a direct outcome of leadership from both council and staff. Those who have senior leadership responsibility and authority must model and deliver collaborative, constructive, transparent, accountable and high-performing behaviours. While this is not simple to prescribe, it is incredibly important.

In delivering this Task Force report, we specifically recommend that Hamilton City Council receive this report and firmly commit to developing a reply to this plan within 90 days, which outlines the exact plan the City of Hamilton will follow to implement the recommendations.

We realize there is a wide breadth of recommendations in this report, and emphasize the significance of the primary recommendations, and suggest that responsibility for change be delegated appropriately.

As Task Force members, we were honoured to volunteer our time to serve our community over the past 14 months. As our work comes to its completion, we now pass the torch to the residents of Hamilton.

This is not a time to recede; it is a time for change not just for the City of Hamilton, but for all of us who call Hamilton our home.

We encourage all Hamiltonians to get involved in their community by engaging in their city. Volunteer your time, join a group or organization, and speak up when you want to contribute to Hamilton's growth and development.

Finally, this project is dedicated to the memory and legacy of Bill Custers. Bill was an original member of the Task Force, who passed away too soon during our process. We did our utmost best to carry on his spirit and memory, and cherish his contributions that helped get this Task Force started.

Sincerely,

## **The Mayor's Task Force on Transparency, Access and Accountability**



**Joanne Santucci**

Co-Chair — Founder and past CEO of Hamilton Food Share for more than 30 years



**Mark John Stewart**

Co-Chair — Managing Director of Wentworth Strategy Group and Industry Professor at McMaster University



**Madeleine Verhovsek**

Community Member — Professor of Medicine and Pathology & Molecular Medicine, McMaster University and Chief of Medicine, St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton



**Tinashe Wingfield**

Community Member — Founder and Managing Director of Cadence Foresight Innovations



**Bill Custers**

Community Member — Retired Senior Manager, Broadcast and Strategy at Cable 14 Hamilton. He passed away June 30, 2024



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# Executive Summary



**The Mayor's Task Force on Transparency, Access and Accountability (MTFTAA)** was established with a clear mandate: To evaluate and fortify the City of Hamilton's processes concerning public engagement, information sharing and decision-making.

Our mandate was to solicit concerns and opportunities from residents about public access, transparency and accountability at the City of Hamilton and provide actionable recommendations to the General Issues Committee for improvements.

Over the past 12 months, the Task Force, supported by Enterprise Canada and the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, engaged in a comprehensive consultation process with stakeholders — including city staff, elected officials, community groups and individuals. This involved one-on-one interviews, focus groups and public surveys, providing a broad spectrum of perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for improvement.

The objective of the consultation was to gather information from community members from across the City within **three key themes**:

1

### **Transparency**

Stakeholders expressed the need for clearer and more proactive communication of decisions, policies, and rationale behind them. Many emphasized that public trust hinges on timely access to information and increased accountability for decision-making.

2

### **Accessibility**

Barriers to participation (whether technological, logistical, cultural, or structural) remain a significant concern. Recommendations aim to create more inclusive avenues for community involvement and ensure city services and communications meet diverse needs.

3

### **Accountability**

The consultation highlighted the importance of strengthening mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and responsiveness within City operations. Stakeholders consistently underscored the need for accountability measures that ensure follow-through on commitments made to the public.

The Task Force's consultation efforts were thorough and multifaceted, including interviews and focus groups with City Councillors, senior City staff, front-line city workers, Indigenous community members, community groups and members of equity-deserving groups. The broad public was invited to participate in three ways:

- ✓ **Completing a survey available at Engage Hamilton.**
- ✓ **Providing written submissions.**
- ✓ **Attending public delegations held on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024.**

The feedback and responses collected through these consultations have been pivotal in shaping this final report. Many residents expressed a desire to understand how and why decisions are made, underscoring their concern for their neighbourhoods and communities and their eagerness to be involved in shaping their future.

The recommendations derived from this feedback aim to enhance public access to City governance. They seek to ensure that community members and organizations have clear, accessible channels for participation and feedback, thereby fostering a more inclusive and responsive city governance framework. The core recommendations are:



1. Launch a digital transformation initiative, including an overhaul of the City’s website and a concerted effort to digitize historic records that will facilitate easy public access to public information.
2. Develop and execute an enterprise-level initiative with clear ownership, leadership and timelines to definitively improve communications, with the objective to:
  - a. Establish the infrastructure for coordinated communications from Council and across the organization.
  - b. Adopt a “plain language” policy for City reports and public-facing materials.
  - c. Ensure translation services are in place.
3. Make equity a foundational principle guiding operations in the City of Hamilton.
4. Ensure City of Hamilton leaders and staff are trained on new processes and procedures to support better customer service, stronger community connections and a more inclusive city. This includes ongoing training and professional development upgrades to ensure City staff remain ahead of acceptable language use and emerging technology.
5. Develop a reporting mechanism to measure the City of Hamilton overall performance and progress on transparency, access and accountability matters, which should include:
  - a. Develop an enterprise-level scorecard with clear accountability frameworks that connect to and influence department-level plans and execution.
  - b. Consider an approach that supports enterprise-level strategic management excellence, including internal culture and capabilities, internal performance and efficiency, customer satisfaction, and financial performance.
  - c. Consider creating an Ombudsperson’s office to manage complaints and concerns from the community and pursue fairness, inclusion, equity and accountability.



# Objective/Purpose



**The Mayor's Task Force on Transparency, Access and Accountability (Task Force)** was created to engage community members in the City of Hamilton to gather ideas and feedback on ways to increase transparency, accountability and access within the City of Hamilton.

It has been made clear through previous consultation efforts, such as the Reimagining Public Participation Consultation and Our City Survey done in 2022, that many people living in Hamilton feel disconnected from their City. They want to know how and, more importantly, why decisions are made. They care about their neighbourhood and community and want to feel like they are a part of the decisions that will shape its future.

Over the fall of 2024, the Task Force invited community members to participate in this project in three ways:

1

**Complete a survey at Engage Hamilton.**

2

**Provide a written Submission**

3

**Attend public delegations that were held November 13<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024**

The process also involved extensive direct consultations through interviews and focus groups with City Councillors, City staff, and Indigenous community members and equity-deserving groups in Hamilton.

The feedback and responses collected during this consultation are informing this final report and the recommendations contained herein, with the intention to improve:

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#### **Public access to productively engage with the City of Hamilton:**

Ensuring that community members and organizations have clear, accessible channels for participation and feedback in city governance.

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#### **Transparency regarding City of Hamilton activities and decisions:**

Increasing the visibility and openness of the City's operations and decision-making processes to build trust and accountability.

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#### **The City of Hamilton demonstrating accountability to our communities:**

Implementing measures to ensure that the City's actions and decisions are responsive to the needs and concerns of its diverse population, fostering a sense of responsibility and reliability.

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#### **Propose practical steps to enhance trust:**

Developing clear and feasible next steps aimed at building and maintaining trust between the City of Hamilton and its community members.

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# Methodology & Approach



**Consultations for the Task Force** were conducted by Enterprise Canada and the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC).

Enterprise Canada is an integrated strategic communications and public affairs firm. Headquartered in Toronto, it has offices in Hamilton, Ottawa, Edmonton and Halifax and a national team of 100 seasoned political operatives, veteran journalists and creatives. Enterprise Canada offers decades of experience and specialized expertise to deliver a full spectrum of public affairs, public relations, digital and communications services.

SPRC Hamilton is an independent non-profit and community-based research organization that promotes equity, informs policy and planning decisions and increases community engagement to improve social conditions. It accomplishes this through research and program evaluation, policy analysis, community partnerships and program delivery. SPRC is funded by the United Way Halton Hamilton, The City of Hamilton City Enrichment Fund and through independent service contracts.

Enterprise Canada led efforts to engage City Councillors and staff. SPRC was tasked with coordinating and facilitating focus groups with Indigenous communities and equity-deserving individuals, recognizing that there may be barriers to participating in other engagement methods. As an independent third party, SPRC organized, facilitated and analyzed the findings from these focus groups, ensuring confidentiality for all participants.

While our engagement strategy aimed to reach a broad and diverse cross-section of Hamiltonians — especially those who are often underrepresented in civic discussions — we acknowledge its limitations. Despite our efforts to connect through various outreach methods, time constraints made it challenging to engage as deeply and widely as we had hoped. Many voices remain unheard, and we recognize that building trust and meaningful participation requires sustained, long-term efforts beyond the scope of this report. Moving forward, the City must prioritize more inclusive and ongoing engagement strategies to ensure all communities, particularly marginalized groups, have a stronger voice in shaping the future of Hamilton.

## City Councillors

Enterprise Canada executed outreach to every City Councillor with an invitation for a one-on-one interview to discuss transparency, accountability and access in the City of Hamilton.

The invitation was accepted by 11 Councillors; interviews were scheduled and executed between late September and early November, following a discussion guide developed by Enterprise Canada with the support of the Task Force. The discussion guide can be found in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted by two consultants from Enterprise Canada, with a member of the Task Force attending as an observer. Councillors were assured that their names would not be attached to any comments that are used in this report.

## City Staff

Working with the Task Force and staff at the City of Hamilton, Enterprise Canada developed a contact list of target staff from the City's senior leadership team. Enterprise executed outreach to each with an invitation to participate in this project as the subject of a one-on-one interview.

Interviews were scheduled and executed between late September and early November, following a discussion guide developed by Enterprise Canada with the support of the Task Force. The discussion guide can be found in Appendix B.



Interviews were conducted by two consultants from Enterprise Canada, with a member of the Task Force attending as an observer. City staff were assured that their names would not be attached to any comments that are used in this report.

### City Focus Groups

Enterprise Canada organized and conducted four focus groups with front-line City staff and key community members in specific departments and categories:



**Social services**



**Health and public safety**



**Facilities and urban planning**



**Business and economic development**

Focus groups ranged from four to nine participants and were facilitated by Enterprise Canada consultants with a Task Force committee member observing. The conversation was directed by a discussion guide drafted by Enterprise with the support of the Task Force (see Appendix C). Participants were assured that their names would not be attached to any comments that are used in this report.

### Indigenous Focus Group

SPRC Hamilton retained an Indigenous engagement specialist to conduct targeted outreach and recruitment within the Hamilton community, review and provide input into focus group questions, facilitate the Indigenous focus group and to review all Indigenous-related data and analysis. SPRC Hamilton adapted the Equity-Deserving Focus Group Guide (see Appendix D) to ensure relevance and enhanced understanding of issues specific to Indigenous peoples. The Indigenous engagement specialist reviewed the guide and provided feedback. The Indigenous engagement specialist facilitated the focus group of eight people using the guide, and an SPRC Hamilton staff member attended to support the process. A member of the Task Force attended as an observer.

This session was recorded for the purpose of transcription. All identifying information was removed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality for participants. Transcriptions and facilitator notes were used by SPRC Hamilton staff to conduct a thematic analysis of the focus group data. The data was coded to identify a list of sub-themes which were then grouped into thematic categories, outlined in section two of this report. The analysis was shared with the Indigenous engagement specialist who provided feedback for the purpose of accuracy, cultural continuity and clarity.

### Equity-Deserving Groups Focus Group

The target population for the equity-deserving focus groups includes individuals who reside in the City of Hamilton and identify as belonging to at least one of the following equity-deserving groups:

- ✓ Person with disabilities
- ✓ 2SLGBTQIA+
- ✓ Recent immigrant or refugee (2019-2024)



✓ Racialized

✓ Indigenous

✓ Francophone

These categories were taken directly from the public engagement survey launched by the Task Force.

Participants were recruited through invitations posted on social media, sent to people who met the criteria posted above and participated in the Engage Hamilton survey and targeted outreach through existing relationships with equity-deserving community members. Participants were selected based on their diversity representation, geographic location (by postal code) and scheduling availability.

A total of 13 people participated across the three equity-deserving focus groups (exclusive of the Indigenous focus group). Focus group participants came from across Hamilton, with representation from central Hamilton, east Hamilton, the Mountain and Waterdown.

SPRC Hamilton created the Equity-Deserving Focus Groups Guide, which was closely adapted from the questions previously asked by Enterprise Canada, to ensure continuity and consistency, including maintenance of the existing topics: equity, diversity and inclusion; transparency; accountability; and accessibility. The guide was modified to ensure relevance and enhanced understanding of issues specific to equity-deserving groups. The focus group guide is included here as Appendix D.

Each focus group was facilitated by two SPRC Hamilton staff members. Additionally, a member of the Task Force was in attendance as an observer in two of the three groups.

All sessions were recorded for the purpose of transcription. All identifying information was removed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality for participants. Transcriptions and facilitator notes were used to conduct a thematic analysis of the focus group data.



# What We Heard



**Our interview and focus group process was designed to provide** target audience groups the opportunity to share feedback and provide candid answers to questions about transparency, access and accountability at the City of Hamilton.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with City Councillors and select senior City staff; a focus group approach was used to engage with front-line staff in social services, emergency services, public safety, public health, facilities, urban planning, business and economic development.

Participants were assured their responses would remain confidential and be reported in a collective sense to provide context without identifying individuals. Below are key themes that emerged based on interviews with specific groups of people.

## City Focus Groups

- **Business Perspectives** — Business viewpoints in public engagement efforts and processes should not be ignored or downplayed. They are key players in the city, and have an important voice on matters of economic development, community building and job creation.
- **Transparency and Communication** — Participants noted significant gaps in the City's communication processes, including the overuse of technical jargon and the lack of timely, accessible information. Recommendations include simplifying language, improving platforms like Engage Hamilton and establishing clear, consistent transparency principles across departments to build trust and ensure community members feel informed and included.
- **Equity and Inclusion** — Limited diversity in leadership roles and language barriers that exclude marginalized groups indicate the City has challenges achieving equity. To foster inclusion, recommendations include targeted hiring to reflect community diversity, providing multilingual resources and proactively engaging underserved populations to ensure their perspectives are considered in City policies and services.
- **Accessibility** — Barriers like transportation, language and digital literacy prevent many community members from accessing essential services. The City is encouraged to enhance the usability of digital platforms, simplify application processes for social programs and strengthen systems like 311 to provide easier access. These improvements aim to create a more inclusive and user-friendly service environment.
- **Collaboration** — Participants identified siloed operations and the undervaluation of stakeholder expertise as significant challenges. Recommendations emphasize fostering cross-sector collaborations, reinstating facilitators to guide stakeholders through processes and creating structured engagement opportunities. By building trust and leveraging stakeholder expertise, the City can strengthen relationships and improve policy outcomes.
- **Accountability** — The feedback loop is a recurring theme when taking about transparency, accountability and access. People need to feel like their input is being taken and seriously considered. Accountability measures, including progress tracking and formal agreements, should be embedded into City operations.
- **Leadership and Culture** — Starting with City Council, Hamilton's leadership culture should prioritize proactive, solution-oriented approaches; this is considered essential.



## City Councillors

- **Better Engagement Channels** — City Councillors face significant hurdles in effectively communicating and engaging with constituents, particularly due to the lack of mainstream media reach, technological constraints and the need for more streamlined processes for information sharing. There is a strong desire across the board for more modernized communications channels and consistent and clear guidelines that support Councillors using similar tactics and approaches when engaging with constituents.
- **Transparency and Accountability** — Participants felt the City struggles with achieving transparency and accountability within its operations. The existing culture and outdated systems make it difficult for Councillors and the public to access important information, necessitating a shift towards more open and accessible communication practices. Information and processes should be user-friendly, centralized and accessible to the public.
- **Support for Councillors** — Councillors said they require stronger infrastructure support from the City to improve their communication efforts. This includes centralized systems for newsletters and websites, as well as better access to timely and relevant information to facilitate their roles and engage with their communities effectively.
- **Consistency in Communications** — The need for a steady hand to guide the City's communications efforts and ensure customer service is at the forefront was noted by Councillors. A central lead for communications can help break silos that exist between departments and make the delivery of a consistent message to the public a priority.

## City Staff

- **Transparency and Communication** — Routine disclosure and proactive dissemination of information will reduce administrative burdens and help enhance public trust. This includes improving the flow of information from the City to the public, including accessible products that are easy to read and understand; such as executive summaries of committee reports or council decisions.
- **Finding Balance** — Actionable recommendations have to meet public expectations, but they also have to be operationally feasible. Staff are often challenged with feedback from the public that is not realistic or reasonable, for any number of reasons. Staff noted a challenge in accepting feedback and turning that into a workable solution, policy or program.
- **Culture Shift** — Foster a culture where staff feels empowered to innovate and take measured risks without fear of consequences for errors. This will support better integration of best practices, the setting of reasonable expectations, build consistency among staff and set standards that will ensure that consistency carries across staffing changes.
- **Customer Service** — A person's first interaction with the City has to be an enjoyable and pleasant one. It has to set a positive tone and provide helpful service that meets the individual's expectations.

## Indigenous Community Focus Group

- **Accountability** — Participants feel the City needs to take more leadership in its relationships with the local Indigenous community and First Nations and increase its accountability to Indigenous communities and to the Canadian Constitution so that it can start a true path towards reconciliation.



- **Passive vs. Proactive** — It was felt by the focus participants that the City approach to its relationship with the Indigenous community, and reconciliation, is passive, and at times dismissive, rather than proactive. This was the major theme discussed by participants. The process leading to the removal of the John A. Macdonald statue in downtown Hamilton was cited as an example of this. However, it was also noted that the current consultation on statues and monuments across the city is a good opportunity to address the colonial narratives embedded in the city's representation of its history, something very few other cities in North America are doing.
- **Upholding Indigenous Rights** — It was noted there has been a clear shift in recognizing and upholding Indigenous rights by city staff, for rules and regulations like powwows and other Indigenous ceremonies. Examples included removing barriers for fire permits and sacred fires and food permits for traditional foods. Specific individuals and departments within the City were praised for their proactive engagement and support of Indigenous initiatives.
- **Access** — Participants said many community members struggle with navigating city services, due in part to difficulties with the City's website and inaccessible information. For example, currently, the Events section of the City's Urban Indigenous Strategy website is blank, but in previous years, community members could submit event listings directly on the website. Participants suggested the need for a public-facing Indigenous Office at City Hall, staffed by knowledgeable representatives, to support Indigenous communities with services and advocacy.
- **Representation and Inclusion** — A recurring concern among participants was the lack of Indigenous representation in decision-making bodies. Participants criticized tokenism and being labelled a "special interest" and called for meaningful involvement in policy development. The negative reception from many City Councillors regarding the Indigenous community's request for an Indigenous seat on Hamilton's city council was cited.
- **Sensitivity in Language** — Appropriate language must be used in all City communications, especially as it pertains to noting Hamilton's Indigenous communities alongside other equity-deserving groups. Hamilton must be careful not to assume that equity includes Indigenous, given the unique requirements of Truth and Reconciliation and historical context.

## Equity-Deserving Groups Focus Groups

- **Still Work to Do on Equity** — A sentiment echoed by many participants is that while the City has made strides and placed more focus on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), the city's EDI efforts are inconsistent, lack depth and take a more informative approach, rather than an inclusive approach. Many participants referred to the city's EDI efforts as "box-checking." A common sentiment across the focus groups is that EDI issues are not a priority for the city, evidenced by slow responses to these issues, lack of follow-through on specific tangible actions recommended by equity-deserving groups and a perceived indifference on behalf of Council and some staff.
- **Diversity in Representation** — Participants noted a lack of representation of equity-deserving groups in City staff and council. Some participants discussed the need for EDI training, noting that City staff often use outdated language. Others mentioned the need for a more systematic approach to incorporating EDI into its processes. One participant raised the idea of having EDI as a necessary part of every staff report, along with legal, financial and staffing considerations. Participants would like to see more diversity at decision-making tables.
- **Accessibility** — Many participants expressed that even where programs and services do exist, finding or "chasing down" services is a challenge to the folks who need them the most. Participants explained that this creates a major barrier for members of marginalized communities who are often



burnt out from the barriers and discrimination they face in day-to-day life, which results in folks not being able to access the programs and services they need.

- **Lack of Transparency** — It is broadly felt there is a lack of transparency in decision-making on issues equity-deserving communities care about. They perceive that decisions are made by a small demographic, with limited representation from equity-deserving groups. Many participants perceive Council to be unavailable to constituents and would like to see more efforts on behalf of Councillors to reach out and meet with members of equity-deserving groups.
- **Feedback Loop** — A major concern is a lack of transparency on how consultation and engagement data are used. Some participants lend their voices to other city initiatives and have experienced no follow-up or follow-through on various initiatives, leading to frustration and, again, a perception that the city is just “box-checking.”
- **Tailored Communication** — There is potential for the city to improve its approach to getting information directly to residents. Social media, language translation, support for citizen journalism and partnerships with neighbourhood associations were discussed as avenues for this direct communication. Participants noted the city has improved with some of its social media use to advertise programs and city initiatives, but overall, participants would like to see tailored communications approaches, rather than one-size-fits-all, to reach equity-deserving groups.

## Public Delegations

The Task Force heard from six people who made delegations during three public meeting opportunities.

- While much of this report is focused on people who live in Hamilton, one delegate reminded the Task Force that there are many people who don't live in Hamilton, but may own property or do business in the City, and it is just as important that they also enjoy transparency, access and accountability in their dealings. This delegate also noted that working with Hamilton is the most challenging of the municipalities where he does business — suggesting there is too many layers, too much red tape and no resolutions.
- A lack of training for and compliance with the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) was noted by one delegate, with the observation that there are many gaps in complying with AODA requirements.
- There is a call to ensure Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) is part of every staff report, with the further suggestion that it could be included in the same section of staff reports that cover finance, staffing, legal and risk matters.
- Numerous strategic plans and community initiatives, such as the Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan, were noted to lack clear outcomes and follow-through, leading to repeated consultations without progress.
- Delegates noted even effective public engagement efforts often fail to influence council decisions, and there is inadequate communication with impacted communities, leading to frustration and disillusionment.



# The Engage Hamilton Survey

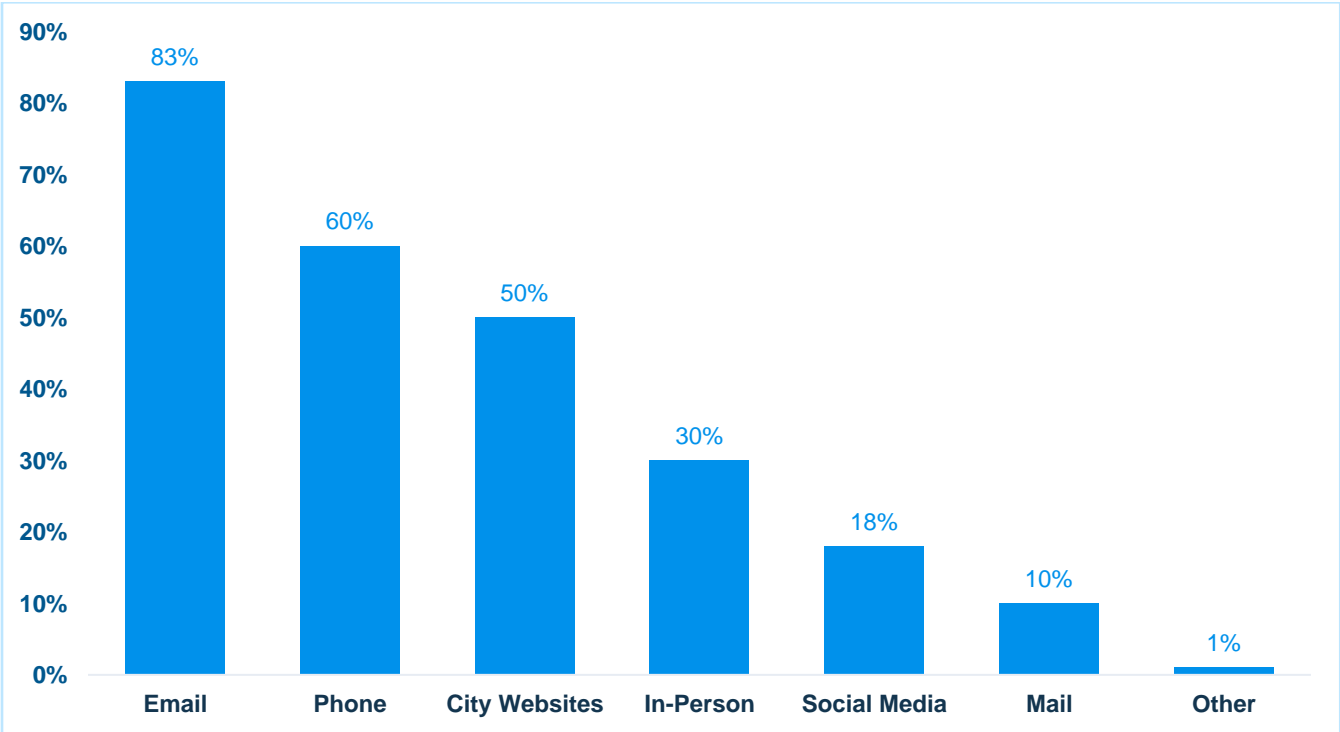


A survey was posted on the Engage Hamilton portal between November 4<sup>th</sup> and December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024; the survey generated 306 full or partial responses. Key highlights from the results include:

### Key Methods of Communication

Three-quarters of respondents indicated they communicate with the City of Hamilton in some way. More than four-in-five respondents (83 per cent) said they prefer to communicate with the City of Hamilton via email, followed by phone (60 per cent) and the city’s websites (50 per cent). Social media and mail ranked lower at 18 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively.

Figure 1: How do you usually prefer to communicate with the City of Hamilton?

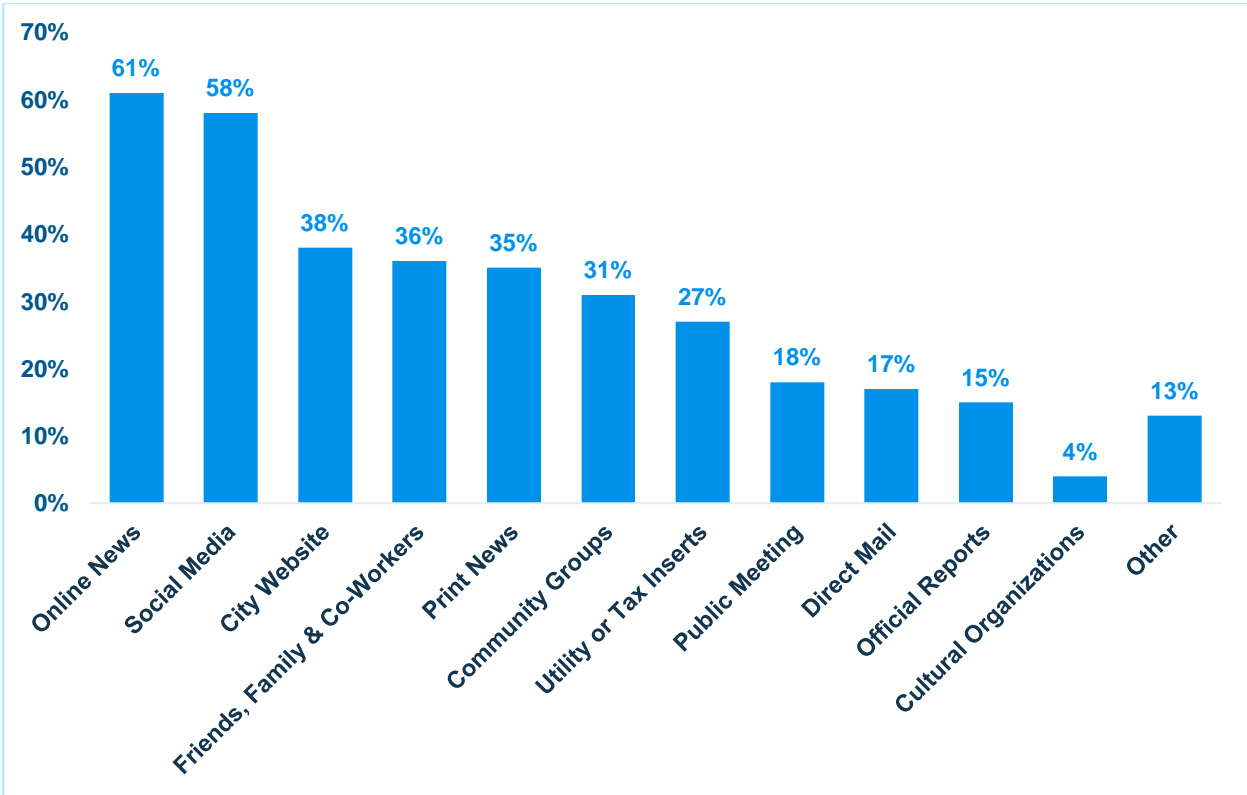


### Online Driven

Hamilton community members are primarily getting their information about the City from online resources, whether that is from an online news source (61 per cent), social media (58 per cent) or the City’s website (38 per cent). About one-third said they rely on print news (35 per cent) and four per cent wrote in that they get their City-related news from CHCH TV.



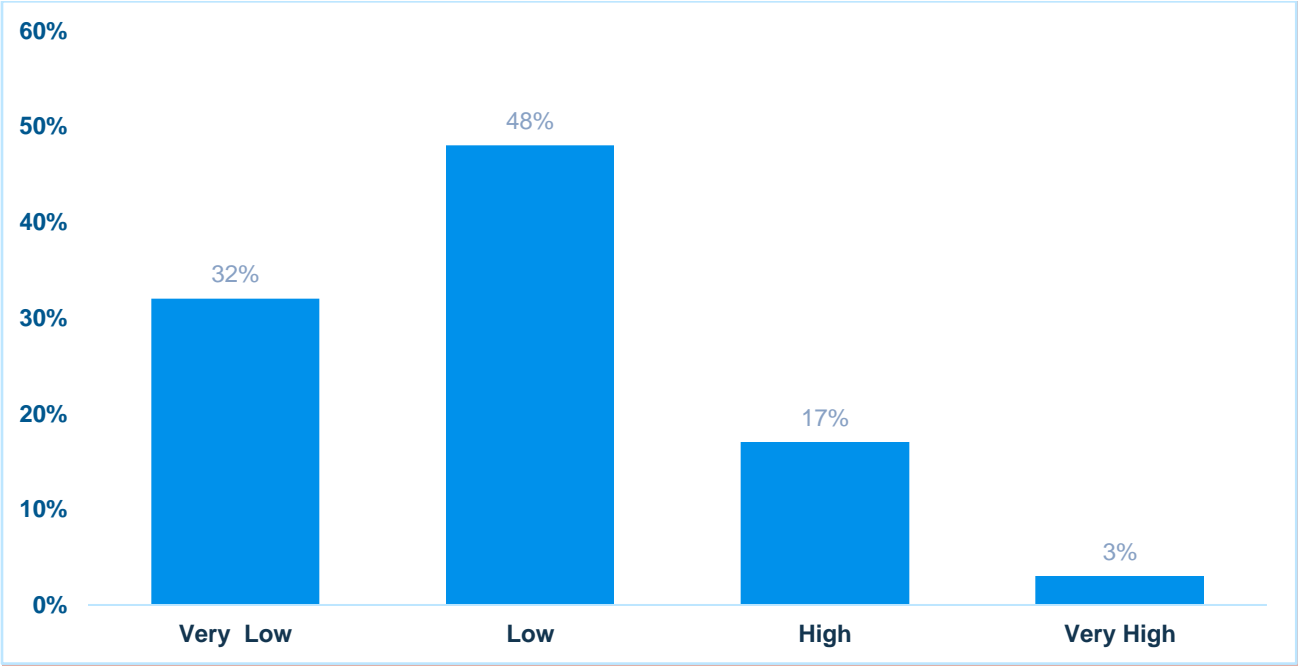
**Figure 2: How do you usually hear about what the City of Hamilton is doing, or not doing, to address concerns in the City of Hamilton?**



### Trust Levels

Fully 80 per cent of survey participants rated their trust in the City of Hamilton as low (48 per cent) or very low (32 per cent). Only 20 per cent reported high or very high trust levels. Accountability for mistakes by City officials (47 per cent), responsiveness to public inquiries (31 per cent) and transparency in budgets and spending (31 per cent) were the most critical factors for building or eroding trust among community members. In written responses, an “insincere” feedback process, disengaged political leaders and a lack of diversity were cited as factors negatively impacting trust in the City.

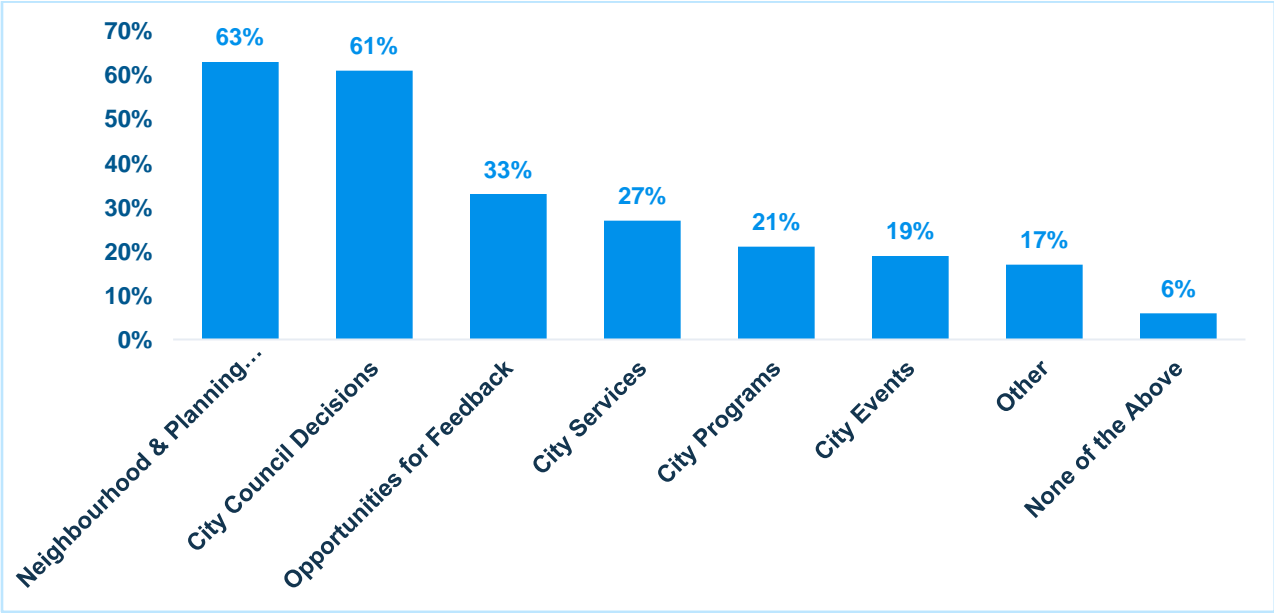
**Figure 3: How would you rate your level of trust in the City of Hamilton to be transparent and accountable to residents?**



**Challenges in Accessibility**

Respondents highlighted difficulty in accessing clear and timely information regarding neighbourhood planning changes, City Council decisions and opportunities for feedback, with 63 per cent and 61 per cent noting challenges in these areas.

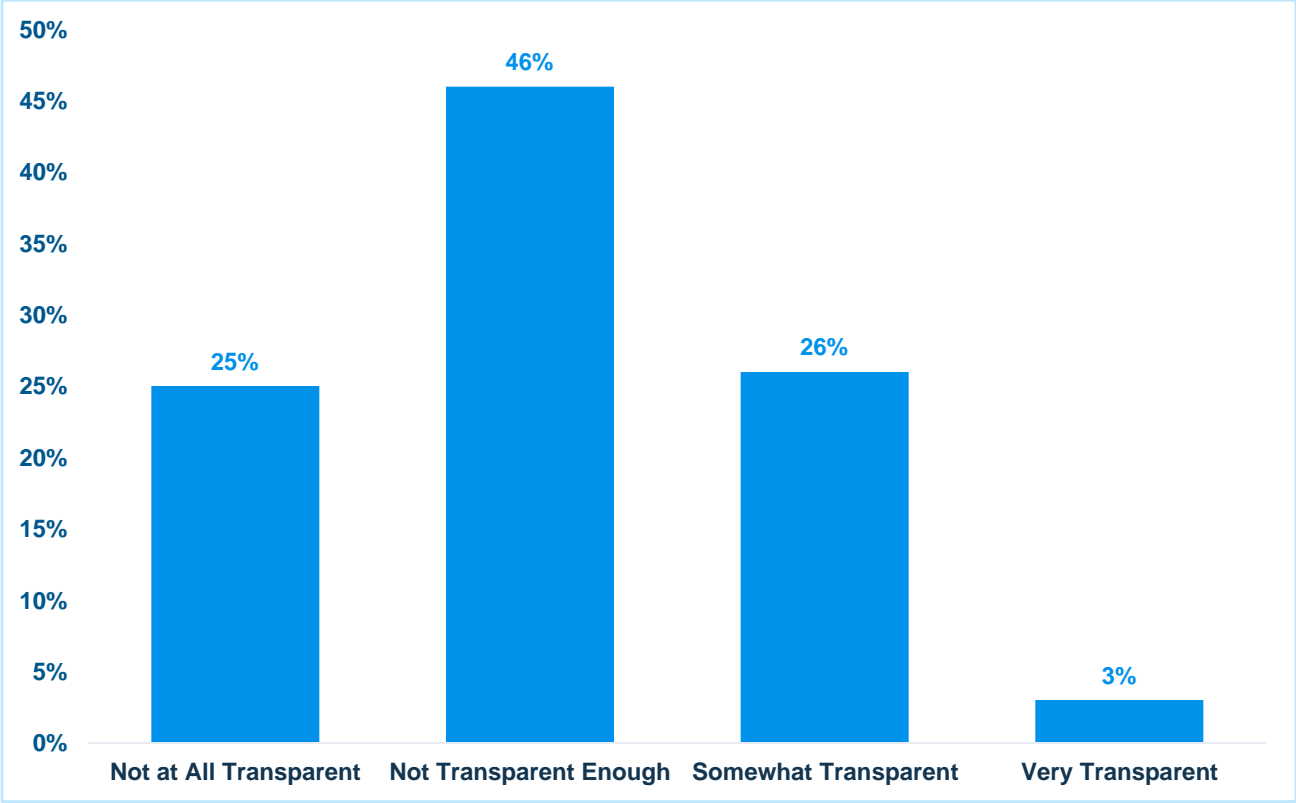
**Figure 4: What information about the city have you had difficulty finding or that you would like more information on?**



## Lack of Transparency

Aligned with the lack of trust in the City, 71 per cent of respondents feel the city is not transparent at all (25 per cent) or not transparent enough (46 per cent). People suggested more common, inclusive language to summarize City reports and complex plans, making records and data more accessible and more frequent. It was also noted that other ways for the city to become better connected to its community members would include clear communication directly from the Mayor and Councillors, an accessible, user-friendly website and a better public engagement process.

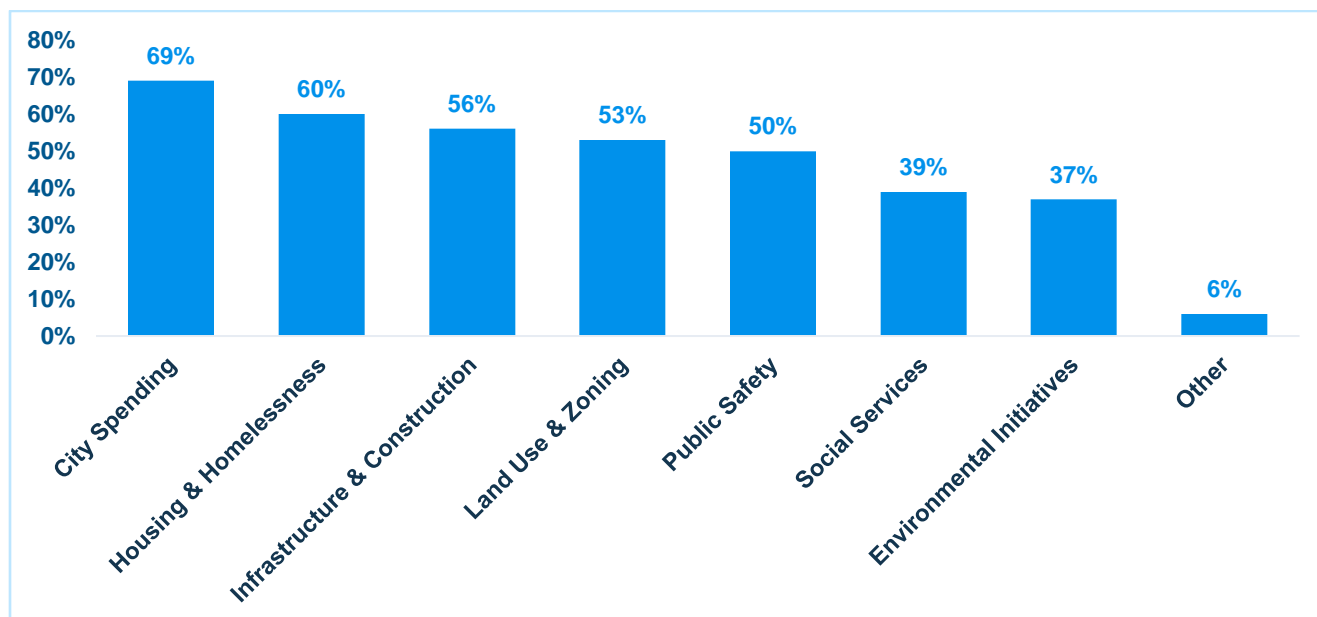
**Figure 5: How transparent do you believe the City of Hamilton is in its decision-making processes or when communicating to the public related to City issues?**



## Top Issues

Survey respondents were also asked about key issues that have their concern and those about which they would like more information.

**Figure 6: Which City of Hamilton activities or decisions would you like more information on?**



## Suggestions for Improvement

The survey provided an opportunity for feedback and suggestions on ways the City can build trust and be more transparent with people living in Hamilton. People are looking for quick and easy ways to stay on top of City Council decisions.

A real-time dashboard to track City initiatives was the most favoured suggestion, with 62 per cent of respondents selecting it. That was followed by increased frequency of public communications around decisions (57 per cent), increased channels and methods of public communication around decisions (53 per cent) and a “What is Happening at City Hall” webpage highlighting all the work the City is undertaking (52 per cent).

When asked for written suggestions, the common themes for improvement are:

- Having City leadership be more responsive, accessible and communicative about City issues and decisions.
- Spending tax dollars wisely and ensuring value for money, especially in initiatives that benefit the entire community, not just the city core.
- Addressing delays and inefficiencies in the building department, including permit issuance, inspections and the need to streamline processes.
- Improving cleanliness, safety and follow-up on complaints related to the condition of the city, including issues with homelessness and drug use.
- Facilitating more direct interaction between City staff and community members, including rationale behind decisions and justifications for staffing and bylaw changes.



## What the City is Doing Well

The final section of the survey gave respondents a chance to identify areas where the City is performing well in transparency, accountability and access. It was an open question and many of the responses veered into areas beyond the mandate of this task force, such as praise for frontline City workers. Some people noted they find the website helpful and there was praise for the community partnerships and collaborations forged by the City.



# Observations



In exploring transparency, access and accountability matters in the City of Hamilton, we assessed that most concerns could be broadly sorted into three categories. Our rationale for this is as follows:



### Organizational Culture

Addressing and improving transparency, access and accountability will require a culture change in the way the City operates.



### Community Engagement

Collaboration with the community will be critical to building trust and properly implementing changes.



### Communication

Consistent, clear and understandable communication will be required, as will a change in the way the City communicates.

**Following is a summary of our observations from what we heard in the consultations.**

## Transparency

Transparency is crucial for fostering trust and accountability between the City and its community members. When government actions and decisions are open and accessible to the public, it ensures the administration remains answerable to the people. This openness promotes integrity in the process by providing clear evidence of how decisions are made and resources are allocated. In an era where public skepticism is prevalent, transparent practices reassure residents that their concerns are being addressed and that their interests are at the forefront of municipal priorities.

The foundation for active civic engagement hinges on transparency. This is as true at the municipal level as it is at the federal and provincial levels. When community members have easy access to information regarding municipal activities and policies, they are more likely to participate in decision-making processes and contribute to the community's development. This inclusive approach not only enriches the quality of governance but also ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, making the outcomes more equitable and representative. By promoting a culture of transparency, municipal governments can build stronger, more resilient communities where collaboration and mutual respect flourish.

### Organizational Culture

A recurring theme we heard through this entire process was concern about a perceived culture of secrecy and fear-driven communications practices in Hamilton, and that contributes to a lack of trust among residents. Residents — and even those internal to the City of Hamilton — often struggle to access relevant information, hindered by what was described as outdated systems, siloed operations, inconsistent updates and poor customer service.

This necessitates the need for a culture shift which may require a change in mindset that the City's default is to share more information than not, and that information has to be in a format that is accessible, easy to find and easy to use. When information can't be shared publicly, there should be a clear and understandable explanation as to why.



Some expressed that a “fear-driven” approach stems from a reluctance to release information due to concerns that details may change or be inaccurate, leading to potential scrutiny or backlash. The instinct to delay or withhold information — out of fear of making an error or having to later adjust a public statement — has seemingly created a culture where avoiding blame takes precedence over proactive communication.

The default position of the City should be to share information, with strong and clear justification required when information can’t be or isn’t shared. It appears sometimes the opposite occurs, with a protective veil cast over information that should be readily available.

We will add that we heard there is full confidence that City staff are good at their jobs and do what needs to be done. What is required is a shift in process and approach; the traditional way of operating is blocking the culture change needed for true improvement in transparency, access and accountability.

Culture is certainly impacted by public perceptions, which too often are negative or, at best, hesitant.

The key to strengthening the customer service function of an organization is people. They are on the frontlines interacting with residents, and there is a team behind them expected to deliver on service standard timelines.

To meet any service standards put in place, a strong workplace culture is a must.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **City of Ottawa Delegation of Authority Reports**

The City of Ottawa employs a [Delegation of Authority Bylaw](#) to streamline decision-making by assigning specific powers to designated officials. By extension, these reports provide detailed insights into the decision-making processes within the city’s administration, outlining the powers delegated to various officials and departments.

This delegation supports efficient management of various municipal functions, such as financial approvals, contract executions and administrative actions while ensuring accountability and clarity in governance. Consistent with maintaining clarity, the exercise of delegated authority is reported to the appropriate Standing Committee at least once in each calendar year.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **City of Winnipeg ‘One Team’ Approach**

One example of a shift in municipal leadership culture that has been working well is the City of Winnipeg’s “One Team” approach, a collaborative effort to effectively address resident concerns and enhance service delivery. This strategy emphasizes unified efforts among various City departments and stakeholders to foster a culture of respect, inclusivity and efficient communication.

Additionally, the City’s Project Management Manual outlines a structured framework for project delivery, promoting a unified methodology across departments. This manual emphasizes the importance of comprehensive planning, clear communication and defined roles and responsibilities, ensuring that projects align with the City’s objectives and effectively address community needs. It’s an approach that demonstrates a commitment to collaboration, transparency and responsiveness in addressing resident concerns and enhancing overall service quality.



## Community Engagement

Efforts to be more transparent with the community start with leaders. There exists a general sentiment among those we engaged that decision-making in Hamilton takes place behind a shroud, and that decisions are made by a small set of people with limited representation from equity-deserving groups.

We heard equity-deserving groups want to see more diversity at decision-making tables; but also understanding the City Council table is elected by the people (and the reflection, or lack thereof, of diversity is a byproduct of the voting process), a better effort is needed to ensure the input of equity-deserving groups is taken seriously and incorporated into the decision-making process; at the very least, they need to be assured their input was heard and provided reasoning as to why it was not part of the final decision.

The lack of representation at both City Council and among City staff may necessitate the need for IDEA training, with several of those consulted noting staff reports and messages often use outdated language.

There also remains a general perception that City Council is not easily accessible to residents. There was a call for Council to empower young people and equity-deserving groups to meet with their local elected representatives, and that Councillors should make more of an effort to reach out and meet with equity-deserving groups in their wards.

We also heard the City's diversity efforts lack depth, with suggestions the approach should be more inclusive, not just informative. That is, people want to feel the City's efforts are more than just "box-checking" to look inclusive, but are actually meaningful engagements with a concerted effort to reach more equity-deserving communities and hard-to-reach groups.

## CASE STUDY

### Halifax Diversity and Inclusion Framework

The Diversity and Inclusion Framework adopted by the City of Halifax is a strategic approach designed to promote equity, accessibility and representation across municipal policies, programs and services. It focuses on creating a more inclusive city by addressing systemic barriers and ensuring diverse communities have equal opportunities to participate in civic life.

The Framework includes:

- A commitment to equity and inclusion that ensures all municipal operations prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) and addresses systemic barriers to full participation in public services.
- Inclusive policies and programs to embed diversity considerations into policy development and decision-making and support programs that cater to historically marginalized groups.
- Community engagement and partnerships that encourage collaboration with diverse communities to shape municipal initiatives. This also strengthens relationships with Indigenous, racialized, LGBTQ+ and disability communities.
- Workforce diversity training that builds a municipal workforce that reflects the diversity of the community and trains City employees to foster an inclusive workplace culture.
- Accountability and measurement to establish benchmarks and reporting mechanisms to track progress. This facilitates data-driven approaches to assess the impact of diversity initiatives.



## Communications

It is widely felt the City of Hamilton has a persistent and ongoing challenge with the appearance of transparency, and that there is a need for systemic changes to improve how the City engages and communicates with its residents.

Residents and stakeholders told us they frequently experience unclear, inaccessible and overly complex communications from the City. Many feel excluded from decision-making processes due to a lack of timely updates, reliance on technical jargon and insufficient translated materials.

However, we must also note that communication is not a one-way street. Over the past few years, there has been a disturbing trend of people attempting to engage with the City and City officials in ways that can only be described as threatening and abusive. Key issues in Hamilton — homelessness, tents in parks, cost of living — tend to spark angry responses from community members.

It must be acknowledged that having to deal with this kind of behaviour can breed reluctance from City staff to engage. A zero-tolerance policy for this kind of behaviour is absolutely acceptable.

However, when people are no longer civil it is yet another strong indicator of frustration, and doing nothing or maintaining the status quo will cost Hamilton in other ways.

## CASE STUDY

### Conservation Halton

Beginning in 2016, Conservation Halton began an overhaul of its operations to ensure it was more responsive and accountable to the communities it services. A key piece of that effort was to restructure the way its team operated and interacted, while improving its IT infrastructure and providing the professional development to use it properly.

Across the board, the organization embraced a new digital culture, with investments made in high-potential technologies that help improve problem-solving and service delivery. Leadership supported this by bringing in outside expertise to determine if various systems were working as they should.

Advancements included:

- Transitioning from an older, Microsoft Access database to a more professional, user-friendly and streamlined project tracking system to cover an application from initial inquiry to permit issuance.
- Publishing mapping online.
- Developing record management protocols to cover electronic storage of files and project records, with an accompanying strategy to destroy historic paper files that are no longer of value.
- Providing design and customer service courses, digital transformation talks and creating a digital Hub in the organization that tracks progress towards the objectives of the strategic plan.
- Investigating a move to electronic application and permit filing, to work in conjunction with future eFiling practices being adopted by municipalities.

Conservation Halton's approach to systemic change also included setting standards on service delivery of permit applications that exceeded provincial guidelines and putting customers at the focus of the process. Meeting these goals required critical changes to Conservation Halton's review and comments process, proactive engagement with applicants and a change in team structure.

Not only did Conservation Halton commit to setting internal metrics, but it also committed to making those results public on its website and to the Board of Directors for all stakeholders (public, municipalities, developers, province, etc.) to analyze. Within a year, Conservation Halton was able to report it was consistently exceeding its benchmarks, with data to support that claim.



## CASE STUDY

### City of Ottawa's Plain Language Guide

Ottawa's Plain Language Guide is an initiative that reflects the City's emphasis on using clear communication in all publicly accessible platforms and documents. Plain language involves using straightforward wording, clear structure and design to ensure intended readers can easily find, understand and use the information provided.

Through this approach — which works to improve professional practices within business, governments and not-for-profit groups — the city aims to enhance accessibility and ensure communications of all forms are easily understood by all residents. It is believed that plain language contributes to financial savings, and links to transparency and democracy.

## Access

Access is the main conduit that begins the process of interacting with the City. It is critical as it has tremendous influence on transparency and accountability. It is imperative that the City improve access as a way towards a more open and communicative format.

Timely access to information is so important for a local government. Public access should not only be facilitated, but should be treated as a fundamental right. Timely access to information is a critical aspect of any public administration. Ensuring the public has access to information promotes transparency and accountability within the City's operations.

## Organizational Culture

A common theme raised through this process was the challenge people had accessing relevant information, and much of that ties back to a culture that is, by nature, wary of over-communicating. We heard there is no infrastructure or support for communications from individual councillors, and that communications falls into the domain of each individual ward office.

A shift in attitude is required when it comes to connecting and engaging with Hamilton residents. It is commonly held that one of the main issues in big, public organizations is that nobody wants to share information. There is a sense that if information is released to the public, it will become a problem.

But, sharing information shouldn't be a choice. Policy should mandate a default to sharing information across the organization, with specific exceptions understanding that some content is confidential for reasons defined in the *Municipal Act*. For any public reports not made public, staff should have to demonstrate the reason(s) why the public can't have access.

It was noted by some Councillors that even they have challenges accessing City reports and data — and if a City Councillor is having problems, the challenge will be that much more for a community member. Improving access to information is the first step in improving the flow of information, and that will help Council build stronger connections to the community, in particular with equity-deserving groups.

Further, there are issues that must be addressed with inclusion. It was noted by focus group participants that racialized folks experience racism from City staff when accessing City services. Further, hostile and dismissive behaviour from individual councillors has been witnessed by focus group participants in response to delegations to City Council from equity-deserving groups. A culture-shift is needed to make it safe for equity-deserving folks to comfortably engage in City processes.



## CASE STUDY

### City of Toronto Open Data Master Plan

The City of Toronto developed an Open Data Master Plan to guide its open data initiatives. Focused on enabling collaboration, this plan provides a strategic framework to increase the quality and efficiency of open data production and formalize the open data program within the City's operations. The plan is anchored on six principles:

1. Open by Default — Data is made open unless there are compelling reasons not to.
2. Timely and Comprehensive — Data is released in a timely manner and is comprehensive.
3. Accessible and Usable — Data is easily discoverable and accessible.
4. Comparable and Interoperable — Data is structured using common standards.
5. For Improved Governance and Citizen Engagement — Open data enhances transparency and accountability.
6. For Inclusive Development and Innovation — Open data is used to promote inclusive development and innovation.

The Open Data Master Plan emphasizes co-developing with the public, focusing on releasing datasets that help solve civic issues, exploring opportunities to improve city efficiency and embracing inclusivity to remove barriers to open data and strengthen resilience.

### Community Engagement

A common theme across our consultation is the need for more systematic engagement at the neighbourhood level. Many participants referred to a need for community ambassadors, representatives and/or liaisons, and some referred to a previous Neighbourhood Strategy initiative as something that should be revisited.

People we spoke with see a role for neighbourhood, faith-based and cultural organizations to assist the city with tailored communications strategies and translation services.

There is also a desire to see the city bridge gaps to reach out to seniors, youth and newcomers and provide support for residents to navigate complicated city processes and procedures. Participants provided the example of the City of Toronto which provides translation in many more languages than Hamilton does.

Interestingly, it was also noted that offering more in-person opportunities for engagement would be welcome, as opposed to doing everything online.

There is a physical element to improving access as well, with City Hall itself noted by some we consulted as a challenge for people with accessibility issues.

## CASE STUDY

### Calgary's Centralized Community Newsletter

Calgary's centralized community newsletter system is an effective tool for driving and enhancing local communication and civic engagement. By consolidating community news, updates and resources into a single, City-managed platform, Calgary streamlines information dissemination, ensuring residents stay informed and connected.

Available in digital and print formats, the newsletter is accessible through a centralized hub where residents can access updates from multiple community associations and municipal departments. The newsletter can also be customized to specific neighbourhood or community interests.



The model has supported stronger, more informed and connected communities in Calgary, supporting increased resident participation at local events, driving efficiencies in information sharing and reducing misinformation by providing consistent messaging from the municipality.

## CASE STUDY

### The Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy

The [Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy](#) is the City of Toronto's action plan to promote and strengthen partnerships across Toronto's neighbourhoods to support their success and vitality. The strategy focuses on improving social, economic and physical conditions by collaborating with residents, community agencies and businesses.

Investments into this strategy are directed toward people, services, programs and facilities in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas to promote community well-being and deliver "local impact for city-wide change."

## Communications

People and groups we consulted said accessing basic information from the City is currently a cumbersome process and needs to be overhauled and streamlined. We heard from several City Councillors that it is difficult for them to access information they need, and that has proven to be a limiting factor in their interactions with their constituents. It makes it difficult for them to respond to resident inquiries in a timely manner and also to prepare for council meetings.

If this is a challenge for Councillors, it would be more so for residents seeking information from the City.

The flow of information has to be multi-faceted to be truly accessible:

- Residents should be able to quickly and easily access publicly-available information.
- Residents should be empowered to provide feedback and input on City initiatives.
- City staff should have strong conduits to share relevant information with residents.
- Councillors need channels to engage with residents.

Adding to the access challenge in communications is the evolving media landscape in Hamilton. Each community in the city used to be served by a weekly community newspaper, and Councillors considered those to be important tools for keeping residents informed. All of these newspapers, along with the city's only news-format radio station, have been shuttered.

However, there remains the *Hamilton Spectator*, CHCH-TV and CBC Hamilton as mainstream media outlets where residents get information on happenings in and around the city.

## CASE STUDY

### Toronto's Open Data Portal

The City of Toronto's Open Data Portal is an open-source platform providing public access to a wide array of information and data generated and collected by City departments and agencies. Launched in





**When government data is made open to the public, new ideas and perspectives unlock exponential potential for it to be reused, analyzed and correlated to help improve the City's delivery of public services, engage with citizens in government decision making, and innovate our approaches to civic problem."**



2009 to remove barriers and set parameters for sharing City information with the public, the portal enhances transparency, fosters civic engagement and has stimulated innovation:

Over the past 15 years, the portal has evolved, but it remains a central storing place for information on various aspects of Toronto's operations, including transportation, public health and urban planning. To ensure the information remains relevant and useful, the portal is regularly updated with new data sets and encourages public requests for specific data.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **City of Vancouver Open Archives Initiative**

The City of Vancouver has implemented several initiatives to enhance public access to its archival and data resources. In collaboration with the Internet Archive, the Vancouver Public Library has installed a specialized Scribe scanner at its central branch. This equipment digitizes rare and delicate collections, allowing patrons to observe the process and access these materials online, thereby preserving Vancouver's rich history and making it accessible to a global audience.

Additionally, the City launched its [Open Data](#) website in 2009, providing free access to a wide array of datasets, including information on city planning, transportation and public amenities. This initiative promotes transparency and encourages public engagement by making data readily available for analysis and application.

Furthermore, the City of Vancouver Archives offers an online search platform that allows users to explore and download digital records, including photographs, maps, and documents, facilitating research and personal exploration of the city's history.

These efforts collectively aim to preserve Vancouver's heritage and foster an informed and engaged community by providing open access to valuable historical and contemporary data.

## **Accountability**

Accountability is the bedrock that upholds trust between the City and its community members. It ensures government actions are transparent, fostering a welcoming environment where people feel their voices are heard and their concerns are addressed. By embedding accountability in its operations, the City can re-build trust and maintain public confidence, which is essential for a thriving, cohesive community.

Accountability stimulates improved performance and service delivery across all City departments. When municipal leaders and employees are held accountable, there is a greater motivation to meet high standards and deliver on promises made to the public. This leads to effective governance where resources are utilized efficiently, policies are implemented diligently, and the public receives timely and satisfactory services.

An organizational culture of accountability creates a feedback loop where the City is not only responsive to the needs of the many communities in the City, but also proactive in seeking their input and making necessary adjustments. This dynamic interaction helps identify areas that need to be addressed, enabling the City to evolve and adapt to changing societal demands.



Ultimately, accountability ensures the City of Hamilton remains responsive, responsible and forward-thinking in its quest to better serve the community.

## Organizational Culture

It was noted regularly during our consultations — and in past consultations — that Hamilton could use a renewed emphasis on a customer-centric focus to community relations.

Improved response times and processes should be ingrained in policy with appropriate training to facilitate better interaction with residents who are engaging with City.

This has to spread across every public-facing aspect of Hamilton, from City Council meetings through public meetings, visits to City Hall or online engagements.

With a policy in place, a mechanism is required to track progress, and that mechanism has to be publicly available.

## CASE STUDY

### Montreal's City Dashboard

Montreal shows its commitment to transparency and public engagement through open data initiatives, including its [City Dashboard](#). The city's open data platform offers more than 300 datasets, including dashboards, raw data, tabular data and interactive maps, all freely accessible without the need for account creation.

With these data sets being continually updated and improved, residents, researchers and developers are able to explore various aspects of urban life such as transportation, environmental sustainability and public safety. Through publicly available data, Montreal encourages the development of innovative solutions to urban challenges while fostering a collaborative environment between the city and its residents. The City Dashboard leverages data and technology to improve urban living and involve the community in the city's development.

## Community

Accountability to the community largely comes down to the City taking a leadership role and being proactive to engage with Hamilton residents, ensuring processes are open and accessible to all. Much of what is outlined in this report leads to this piece — ensuring the community feels the City is providing opportunities for residents to have their voice, is listening to their concerns, is acting appropriately and is providing feedback on a chosen course of action.

To do so, there needs to be benchmarks put in place, and measurement mechanisms to assess progress towards those benchmarks.

As noted elsewhere in this report, the default in being accountable to the community is to over communicate. When information can't be shared, a clear and reasonable explanation should be provided.

## CASE STUDY

### Edmonton's "City as a Platform"

The [City as a Platform](#) initiative in Edmonton focuses on leveraging technology and data to improve municipal services and foster innovation, created in response to the demands of empowered and engaged residents who want to see more from the government.



The initiative, involving a smart city strategy and commonly referred to as the “Open City” initiative, aims to transform Edmonton into a more transparent, open and accessible organization, connected to the public and responsive to their vision for government. It is a “citizen-centric” strategy, as opposed to a traditional government-centered approach, striving to create a unified experience for residents. Edmonton is described as an innovation ecosystem of government, academic, residents and industry, where data informs leaders to make evidence based-decisions that influence how they plan, build and live in the city.

## Communications

Accountability in communications comes from putting action behind words; allowing people insight to the decision-making processes and following through on commitments is critical to rebuilding trust.

However, it doesn’t mean doing everything the public asks of the City.

Starting with City Council, Hamilton’s leadership culture should prioritize open, proactive, solution-oriented approaches with clear explanations and rationale about why the City is pursuing a particular course of action.

It is also important to maintain a sense of reality here; City staff are often challenged to meet public expectations, but those expectations have to be feasible.

This leads into the continued shortcomings with the so-called “Feedback Loop” following a consultation. People need to feel like they are being heard, and too often they don’t feel that way when engaging with the City. Even if someone’s idea is being rejected, or is not within the City’s power to act upon, clear and understandable reasoning should be offered as to why that is.

## CASE STUDY

### Toronto Ombudsman’s Office

Launched in 2009, Ombudsman Toronto is an internal and independent office established to ensure that the City of Toronto treats all members of the public equitably and fairly. The office only has the powers of recommendation — it cannot issue orders. However, it does have a mandate to hold accountable almost all of the City’s divisions, agencies, boards and commissions, including the Toronto Transit Commission and Toronto Hydro.

It has a mandate to investigate complaints about the administrative actions and decisions of the City and its agencies, boards and corporations, including issues such as unfair treatment, poor service delivery and systemic problems within the city’s administration. The office operates with impartiality and confidentiality, aiming to resolve individual complaints and recommend systemic improvements to enhance city services.

The Ombudsman’s Office is characterized as a “last resort,” meaning complainants need to give the City an opportunity to try and address a complaint before the Ombudsman can become formally involved. Their work is independent, impartial and confidential, with services being free for everyone.



# Recommendations



**It is clear to the Task Force that the City of Hamilton has to invest both time and resources** into an effort to be more transparent, accessible and accountable. What we heard, the research we completed and what we have observed over the course of this project have directly influenced the following recommendations.

These recommendations are intended to make the City more open to its community members. By embracing innovative solutions and adopting a proactive approach to community engagement, these proposals seek to address existing challenges and pave the way for sustainable improvement.

Through the course of our work, it was drawn to our attention recent work the City has been doing on its public engagement policy to work towards building consistency, transparency, accountability, equity and inclusivity into City-led public engagement processes. This starts with establishing a clear distinction between “communications” as a one-way action that informs the public and “engagement” as a process that intentionally focuses on relationship development to build trust in City processes and provide input into City decisions and policies.

The recent approval of a new public engagement policy for Hamilton creates an opportunity for the City to better understand the wants, needs and expectations of the community. By intentionally investing and resourcing engagement on/in projects and decision-making processes, Hamilton identified three priorities — and it is encouraging that these priorities align with the recommendations outlined below:

- Achieve better project outcomes.
- Strengthen relationships with community members.
- Build trust and confidence to ensure the City is actively responding to and meeting the needs of our community.

Each recommendation is crafted with the objective of fostering a culture of accountability and responsiveness, ensuring the City meets its commitments and effectively serves all of the diverse and unique communities that call Hamilton home — and create a more inclusive, efficient and transparent environment for all.

## **Recommendation — Digital Transformation**

Launch a digital transformation in the City of Hamilton, including an overhaul of the City’s website and a concerted effort to digitize historic records that will facilitate easy public access to public information.

### **Why we made this recommendation**

Access to public information was consistently noted as a concern and a problem during our consultations. Investments in high-potential technologies will help improve problem-solving and service delivery.

Creating public pathways for people to access public information will not only foster better relations with the community, but can also reduce the burden on staff by eliminating the need for the public to access information through the facilitation of a City of Hamilton staff member.

Digitization also supports stronger, more diverse public engagements, can provide a platform for tracking accountability measures and facilitates smooth communications between City departments, commissions and agencies.



## Implementing this recommendation

There are three key steps the City can take to implement this recommendation:

- **User-Friendly Platforms** — Redesign the City’s website to prioritize user experience, accessibility, and multi-language support.
- **Online Project Tracking** — Review project tracking systems in place and explore user-friendly and streamlined options to cover a public engagement from initial contact to resolution, and provide community members a portal to track the progress of a consultation or a project.
- **Digitize Historic Records** — Launch an effort to convert historic paper, audio and video records to a digital format, and stored in a publicly accessible site. Records management protocols to cover electronic storage of files and project records should be reviewed and refined with the objective to make more information available to the public.

## Recommendation — Communications

The City of Hamilton should quickly develop and execute an enterprise-level initiative with clear ownership, leadership and timelines to definitively improve communications, with the objective to:

- Establish the infrastructure for coordinated and proactive communications.
- Adopt a “plain language” policy for City reports and public-facing materials.
- Ensure translation services are in place.

## Why we made this recommendation

Communications is a complex field, and it requires a lot of seemingly different and independent parts moving in sync to be truly effective.

It is also as important as it is complex. Communications is the connection between the City and its community members, and if not done correctly the damage can be significant. Based on the findings of our Task Force, many of the problems and shortcomings that lead to a high level of distrust among Hamiltonians for their local government can be traced back to poor or insufficient communications. Strong communications is also fundamental to ensuring the City is accessible to all residents in Hamilton.

This is a critical piece for the City to get right.

## Implementing this recommendation

This is a big recommendation that will entail several changes across the organization:

- **Policy Review** — All existing communications policies in the City of Hamilton should be audited through the lens of transparency, accessibility and accountability, with proposed revisions to align with the recommendations in this report.
- **Organizational Audit** — An audit of the City’s organizational chart and communications infrastructure should be completed with the objective to deconstruct silos and establish a centralized communications team to support City Councillors, standardize messaging, coordinate between City departments and ensure timely updates. This should include:
  - A communications professional dedicated solely to councillor communications support.
  - A “one-team” approach to integrate departmental communications, reduce duplication and streamline response times to requests from community members.



- Standardized templates to give all City communications the same look and feel.
- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities, with the intent to smooth processes between departments, balance workloads and enhance customer service.
- Strengthened support for a community engagement coordinator position to help streamline the process of engaging the public, and bring consistency to public participation with the City.
- **Proactive Disclosure Policy** — Introduce a default-to-disclose policy where non-confidential information is released by default and exceptions must be justified under the *Municipal Act*.
- **Plain Language Policy** — Adopt a plain-language policy to ensure all City communications are accessible to a broad audience.
  - Key recommendations should be provided in plain language in a cover letter or executive summary, with special emphasis on what is left to do to reach completion and/or the rationale behind why a particular decision was made.
  - More technical explanations and comments can still be included, but as an appendix to support the more straightforward response.
  - Technical comment memos should be restricted to a maximum of five pages.
- **Establish Customer Service Standards** — Establish a protocol that mandates minimum levels of service when engaging with the public. This should include a requirement that a City response to a resident inquiry should happen within two days 80 per cent of the time; results should be tracked and reported back to Council in an annual public report.
- **Media and Outreach Partnerships** — Build a collaborative relationship with key local media and community organizations to disseminate information and increase outreach.
- **Translation Services** — Invest in professional translation and cultural adaptation services to ensure key documents and communications are accessible to all community members.
  - This should include a “language line” translation service that service providers use for live translation in multiple languages.
  - The City website redesign should include a translation plug-in to have multiple languages easily available for online documents.
- **Strengthen Community Partnerships** — Build strong collaborative relationships with local media, community organizations and equity-deserving groups. This should include:
  - Partner with organizations and community groups whose work is centred around equity-deserving community members to integrate diverse perspectives into decision-making.
  - Collaborate with neighbourhood organizations and faith-based centres to support engagement with underserved communities.
  - Neighborhood-level engagement hubs to bring services and resources closer to residents. These hubs can serve as focal points for community activities and information dissemination.
- **Inclusive Decision-Making** — The City of Hamilton should make clear its efforts to be more inclusive in its decision making, including:
  - Requiring City Councillors to document and report on consultations with equity-deserving groups. This transparency ensures both accountability and that various perspectives are considered in decision-making processes.



- Include equity provisions as a necessary part of every staff report, along with legal, financial and staffing considerations. This will require City Council to explicitly state if they have connected with equity-deserving groups on a particular decision, which groups were involved and how these perspectives informed decision-making.

## Recommendation — Equity

Make equity a foundational principle guiding operations in the City of Hamilton.

### Why we made this recommendation

To foster a more inclusive and equitable City of Hamilton, the City should adopt a comprehensive and strategic approach to Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility. Where communications was cited as a critical piece for connecting with Hamilton's community members, establishing equity as a beacon for City operations is the piece that will connect its people.

Hamilton is a diverse community, and it is important the City operate in way that no one gets left behind.

This involves integrating equity considerations into city planning, decision-making and service delivery. By making equity a core value, Hamilton can ensure that all community members are treated fairly and have equal opportunities to participate and benefit.

### Implementing this recommendation

The following overarching recommendations are derived from our consultations as well as various successful initiatives and practices from other jurisdictions.

- **Establish Equity Training** — This training should be high-quality, professional, ongoing and address various aspects of equity and inclusion.
- **Community Ambassadors** — Consider reintroducing the Neighbourhood Strategy initiative and recruit ambassadors from diverse backgrounds to act as liaisons between the City and underserved communities.
- **Foster a Culture of Openness** — Improve outreach to underserved communities by fostering a culture of openness and transparency. Publicize partnerships with non-profit organizations and actively seek feedback from community members.
- **Empower Disability Communities** — Further amplify the efforts of the Accessibility Committee for Persons with Disabilities or appropriate group. This group should guide initiatives related to accessible public transit, affordable housing, sidewalk and building accessibility and equitable employment opportunities.
- **Prioritize Youth and Diversity Initiatives** — Empowering young people and diversifying voices in municipal processes can lead to more inclusive decision-making.

## Recommendation — Professional Development

Ensure the Mayor, City Councillors and staff are trained on new processes, procedures and equity to support better customer service, stronger community connections and a more inclusive city; this includes ongoing training and professional development upgrades to ensure City staff remain ahead of acceptable language use and emerging technology.



## Why we made this recommendation

Organizational culture change does not happen unprompted — and Hamilton needs a culture change to be a more transparent, accessible and accountable municipality.

It starts with leadership, and filters down through staff with appropriate and adequate training that ensures the Mayor, City Councillors and staff are current with appropriate language, new technology or programs, processes and other elements that are critical to good customer service and an inclusive community.

Training should be high quality, evidence based, effective and community oriented, ensuring it is specific to the needs of Hamilton and its various communities.

## Implementing this recommendation

Building a new culture within the City of Hamilton should include:

- **Internal Training and Culture Shift Initiatives** — Implement training programs that educate the Mayor, City Councillors and staff on the principles and benefits of transparency, data sharing and resident-focused communication.
- **Community of Learning** — Establish a virtual platform where staff can share innovative practices and collaborate on improving service delivery.
- **Invest in Technology and Training** — Provide staff with tools and training in design thinking, digital transformation and customer service to enhance their ability to meet the needs of community members in a timely and courteous manner. Training and professional development should be ongoing with the advent of new technologies, programs and policies.
- **Equity and Reconciliation Training** — As noted in the above recommendation, the City should invest in equity training and contextualized training on reconciliation at the local level, with specific focus on reporting incidents related to diversity and embedding these principles in City operations. This includes staying ahead of appropriate language use and exploring multiple channels of engagement to ensure all communities have a chance to be engaged.

## Recommendation — Action on Accountability

- Develop an enterprise-level scorecard with clear accountability frameworks that connect to and influence department-level plans and execution.
- Consider an approach that supports enterprise-level strategic management excellence, including internal culture and capabilities, internal performance and efficiency, customer satisfaction and financial performance.
- Consider creating an Ombudsperson's office to manage complaints and concerns from the community and pursue fairness, inclusion, equity and accountability

## Why we made this recommendation

The “feedback loop” is a critical piece to make a community feel like it is being heard. Developing a report card for the City's progress on these initiatives is good for both the City and the community, setting key benchmarks and performance indicators towards which the City can work.

An ombudsperson's office is an avenue for community members to pursue if they feel the City is falling short of its commitments. This office would have the capacity to identify and pursue legitimate



complaints and weed out the frivolous or vexatious complaints. However, as with other ombudsperson models this office can only make recommendations – it cannot force action.

### Implementing this recommendation

To build accountability into its operations, the City of Hamilton should:

- **Set Service Standards and Reporting** — Create a set of high-level dashboards and metrics that are reported back to the community at large at pre-determined intervals. Based on the recommendations in this report, it will track and report progress on City initiatives and service standards as they pertain to transparency, accessibility and accountability. The report card should be presented to City Council annually, with a live document — updated quarterly — publicly available online. These dashboards could include:
  - Project and operations accountability audits.
  - Council voting records.
  - Community-focused performance metrics.
  - Inquiry response times.
  - Public-Private Partnership audits.
  - Community Impact Statements for major projects.
- **City Council Code of Conduct** — Create an official document that sets clear expectations for City Councillor behaviour, preventing conflicts of interest, discrimination and misconduct. It should also provide guidelines for resolving disputes and maintaining professionalism.
- **Provide Transparency on City Decisions** — A transparency dashboard will visualize City spending, decision-making processes and project timelines.
- **Develop Tracking Systems for Delegations** — Use digital tools to document public inputs and demonstrate how they are incorporated into decision-making.
  - Provide a section within City reports to explain why certain recommendations or suggestions from public consultations were not incorporated into a final plan or recommendation.
- **Consider creating an Ombudsperson's Office** — This independent official will have a mandate to investigate complaints against the City of Hamilton, its departments, committees, commissions and agencies to ensure fairness, inclusion, equity and accountability. This office will make recommendations for City Council to consider to resolve the complaint.



# Appendix A — City Councillor Discussion Guide



## Core Discussion Questions

### 1. Communication and Engagement with Constituents

- Urban Ridings: Given that your ward is in an urban region of the City, are there unique challenges to communicating that come with serving a diverse and densely populated area?
  - What strategies have proven effective, and where do you see room for improvement?
- Rural Ridings: In your constituency, how do you manage the unique challenges of engaging residents who are more dispersed and may have limited access to digital resources?
  - What strategies have proven effective, and where do you see room for improvement?

### 2. Transparency and Accountability in City Communications

- How do you ensure accountability to your constituents?
  - What steps can be taken to improve it?
- What feedback have you received from your constituents regarding the City's transparency and accountability efforts?
  - Do they feel their input is valued and impactful?
- What challenges or obstacles make it difficult for the City to be open and clear in its operations, communication, or decisions?
  - Can you suggest specific areas where practical improvements could be made?
- What improvements would you like to see in how the City supports councillors in their efforts to connect with and serve their constituents?

### 3. Accessibility and Inclusivity Your Ward

- Can you share an example of where the City has struggled or been particularly successful in reaching equity-deserving communities?
- What tools do you use to ensure you are reaching as broad an audience as possible?
- Are there specific groups or communities within your ward that are typically underrepresented in City engagement efforts? How can this be addressed?

### 4. Councillor Experience and Recommendations

- What are some outcomes from this consultation process that could benefit your ward and the broader community?
- What challenges do you face in your role as a city councillor, particularly in terms of communication and engagement?
- What improvements would you like to see in how the City supports councillors in their efforts to connect with and serve their constituents?
- Can you identify a few council decisions where public engagement efforts were critical to your vote on the matter? How did the engagement influence your decision?
- What suggestions do you have to bridge the digital divide and ensure people who are hesitant to adopt technology still have access to timely and relevant information from the City?



# Appendix B — City Staff Discussion Guide



## Core Discussion Questions

### 1. Internal Perspectives on Transparency and Accountability

- How effectively do you think the City's internal processes support transparency?
  - Are there examples of initiatives or practices that you believe are working well?
- From your perspective, where are the biggest gaps or challenges in making information accessible both internally and to the public?
- How is accountability practiced within your department?
  - How can it be improved?
- Do you feel there is clear guidance and support within your team when it comes to answering and addressing the questions and concerns of residents and community members?
  - What's working, and what's not?
- What challenges or obstacles make it difficult for the City to be open and clear in its operations, communication, or decisions?
  - Can you suggest specific areas where practical improvements could be made?

### 2. Accessibility and Inclusivity in Public Engagements

- Can you share an example of where the City has struggled or been particularly successful in reaching equity-deserving communities?
- What internal processes or resources could be enhanced to better communicate directly with the public?
- What tools do you or your department use to ensure you are reaching as broad an audience as possible?
- Do you feel that your department reflects the diversity of community members and residents?
- How does the City communicate and engage with residents in different wards within Hamilton?
- How do you feel about the tools and strategies currently available for ensuring engagement reaches those who might face barriers like language, technology, or mobility?
- Are there specific methods you think have proven effective in addressing the digital divide (i.e. those who do not have easy access to digital technologies)?

### 3. Staff Experience and Recommendations

- What would you like to see come out of this consultation process?
- What improvements or changes do you think could make the most impact on internal operations and interactions with residents?
- What suggestions do you have to bridge the digital divide and ensure people who are hesitant to adopt technology don't get left behind?



# Appendix C — City Focus Groups Discussion Guide



## Discussion Questions

### 1. Access to Services

Access is a core focus of this discussion, as many residents rely on the services you provide.

- What are the most significant barriers residents face when trying to access City services?
- How effectively does the City provide information about its services and how to access them?
  - Are there gaps you've noticed?
- Can you share examples where your organization worked successfully with the City to improve service access?
  - What contributed to that success?
- What role do you see your organization playing in helping residents access City services, and how could the City better support you in this role?

*Follow-Up Probes:*

- Are there specific communities or groups that face unique challenges in accessing City services?
- How do language, technology, or physical accessibility impact service delivery?

### 2. Transparency in Decision-Making

Transparency builds trust and enables collaboration.

- How transparent do you feel the City is in its decision-making processes, particularly regarding policies or programs that impact your organization or the communities you serve?
- Are there specific examples where the City has communicated well — or failed to communicate — about its decisions?
- How could the City better involve organizations like yours in the decision-making process to ensure clarity and inclusivity?

*Follow-Up Probes:*

- What tools (e.g., websites, reports, meetings) would make the City's decision-making processes more transparent and accessible?
- Are there examples from other municipalities or organizations that Hamilton could learn from?

### 3. Accountability

Accountability is crucial to ensuring the City follows through on its commitments.

- How well does the City follow through on commitments made to organizations like yours?
- Are there challenges in holding the City accountable for its decisions, services, or policies?
- What changes or improvements would you recommend to make the City more accountable to social service providers and the residents you serve?

*Follow-Up Probes:*



- Can you think of a time when a lack of accountability negatively impacted your organization or the community?
- How would a more collaborative approach between the City and social service providers look in practice?

#### 4. Equity and Inclusion

Equity and inclusion are essential for ensuring all residents can access City services.

- From your experience, how well does the City engage with marginalized or equity-deserving communities?
- Are there specific examples where the City has been particularly successful—or unsuccessful—in reaching marginalized communities?

*Follow-Up Probes:*

- What role does your organization play in bridging gaps for equity-deserving communities, and how can the City better support you in this work?

#### 5. Recommendations and Opportunities

Let's close by focusing on solutions and opportunities for improvement.

- What outcomes would you like to see from this consultation process?
- Are there best practices or innovative approaches from other municipalities that you think Hamilton should consider adopting?
- How can the City better support organizations like yours in achieving shared goals for the community?



# **Appendix D – Equity-Deserving Groups & Indigenous Community Focus Groups Discussion Guide**



## Discussion Questions

### 1. Equity and Inclusion

Equity and inclusion are essential for ensuring all residents can access City services.

- From your experience, how well does the City engage with marginalized or equity-deserving communities?
- Are there specific examples where the City has been particularly successful?
  - Tell me more about that.
- Are there examples where the City has been unsuccessful?
- What are some solutions to address this?
- Can you think of some ways that the City could improve communications with equity-deserving groups?

### 2. Access to Services

Access is a core focus of this discussion, as many residents rely on City services.

- What are the most significant barriers you face when trying to access City services?
  - Are there specific communities or groups that face unique challenges in accessing City services?
- Can you share an example of a time the city has been particularly successful in providing access to services for equity-deserving communities?
  - As a follow-up: What contributed to that success?
- How effectively does the City provide information about its services and how to access them?
  - What are the gaps you have noticed?
- How do language, technology, or physical accessibility impact the City's service delivery?

### 3. Transparency in Decision-Making

This next section will focus on the decision-making process used by the City. Transparency builds trust and enables collaboration.

- How transparent do you feel the City is in its decision-making processes, particularly regarding policies or programs that impact you?
- How could the City better involve members of equity-deserving groups in the decision-making process to ensure clarity and inclusivity?
- What tools (e.g., websites, reports, meetings) would make the City's decision-making processes more transparent and accessible?

### 4. Accountability

Accountability is crucial to ensuring the City follows through on its commitments.

- How well does the City follow through on its commitments to issues that you care about?



- Can you think of a time when a lack of accountability negatively impacted you or your community?
- How could there be a more collaborative approach between the City and members of equity-deserving groups?
  - What would that look like in practice?

## 5. Recommendations and Opportunities

Let's close by focusing on solutions and opportunities for improvement.

- What outcomes would you like to see from this consultation process?
- Do you know of any best practices or innovative approaches that you think Hamilton should consider adopting?





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