



# CASE STUDY | WINDSOR-ESSEX'S COMMUNITY SAFETY AND WELL- BEING PLAN: AN ENGAGED COMMUNITY

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Eight municipalities came together to create the City of Windsor and the County of Essex's [Regional Community Safety and Well-Being Plan](#). Their community engagement was broad, meaningful and built relationships with community partners. Many diverse stakeholders now collectively own the plan and have identified the municipalities' role as the 'connective tissue.'

## OVERVIEW

The City of Windsor and the County of Essex's joint Regional Community Safety and Well-Being Plan (RCSWB) was mandated by the Government of Ontario and developed with the seven lower-tier

### About Community Safety and Well-being Plans in Ontario

In 2019, the Government of Ontario [mandated](#) every Ontario municipality to create a multisector Community Safety and Well-Being Plan. Stewarded by municipalities and/or police, with partners across the community, the plans employ an upstream approach to addressing safety and well-being.

The Community Safety and Well-being Framework emphasizes that most efforts and resources should be focused on prevention, early intervention and social development initiatives, with fewer investments in crisis intervention. This is a change from current social, health and justice systems which are often criticized for investing primarily in last-minute crisis supports (e.g., hospital beds, paramedics, prison stays, shelters, etc.)

municipalities of the County of Essex and the expertise and leadership of community partners from all eight municipalities.

Together, they identified a plan that builds from organizations' and collaboratives' current work and where everyone has a role. A collective commitment was developed through thoughtful planning and engagement with diverse stakeholders – many of whom initially had hesitations on how consultation about complex social challenges would be handled.

The partners specifically identified the municipalities' role as being the 'connective tissue' of the many different initiatives throughout the communities, which together support residents' safety and well-being.

The results are being seen as new partnerships find additional financial resources for the community.

## CONTEXT

The City of Windsor and County of Essex are situated in Southwestern Ontario and are home to 398,953 people. More than half of the region's population (54%) resides in the City of Windsor. The County of Essex consists of seven lower-tier, primarily rural municipalities. Each community has a unique mix of opportunities and challenges.

In 2020, [a local data review](#) against eight Social Determinants of Health revealed differences in types of safety and well-being challenges between urban and rural areas. For instance, Windsor and urban regions in Leamington face more immediate, acute risks. These risks include:

- greater variety and severity of crime;
- higher rates of child poverty; and
- more significant impacts of the opioid crisis.

The 2020 data review also found that Essex County communities have higher positive ratings on community safety and well-being indicators. For instance:

- **Amherstburg, Lakeshore, LaSalle, and Tecumseh** consistently ranked as safe communities based on the crime severity index.
- **Lakeshore, LaSalle, and Tecumseh** score in the top 20% of the *least* marginalized communities in Ontario across the 2016 ON-Marg material deprivation index.

As such, the planning process considered each municipality's differing and unique priorities, needs and assets when developing regional recommendations.

In recognition of the work already underway to effect change on acute issues or to maintain the quality of life of residents among changing economic trends, the RCSWB work has direct tie-ins with regional and city-specific initiatives such as the [Housing and Homelessness Master Plan](#), [Pathway to Potential](#) and the [Windsor Works Report](#). The RCSWB team intentionally worked with housing, poverty reduction and economic development across municipal departments and with partners in the community to ensure the plan would be a value-add and would not duplicate existing initiatives.

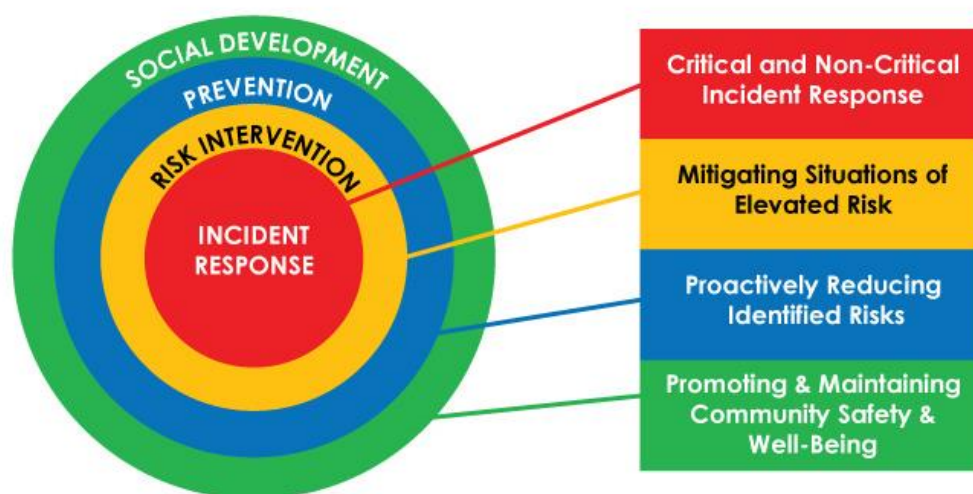
## THE COMMUNITY SAFETY AND WELL-BEING FRAMEWORK

The [Community Safety and Well-Being Framework](#) brings multiple sectors together to address the root causes of crime and social issues, recognizing that community safety and well-being is complex and must be addressed through systems change and interventions beyond police.

The framework emphasizes that municipalities should focus on upstream actions, such as:

- Social development: Promoting and maintaining community safety and well-being
- Prevention: Proactively reducing identified risks
- Risk intervention: Mitigating situations of elevated risk

Critical and non-critical incident response is an integral part of the framework, but is a lower priority in favour of investing in support to reduce the number of critical situations.



The timing of the province's announcement – which made each municipality responsible for their own Community Safety and Well-being plans – was perfect for the City of Windsor and the municipalities of the County of Essex, as all were increasingly seeing municipal task forces and community groups doing similar things. Taking an umbrella approach to safety and well-being planning could connect initiatives, improve situational awareness and reduce silos in the community and between departments. The desire to use a regional approach across the eight municipalities came from jurisdictional issues and needing collective resources (e.g., data, policy changes) to tackle significant problems such as poverty.

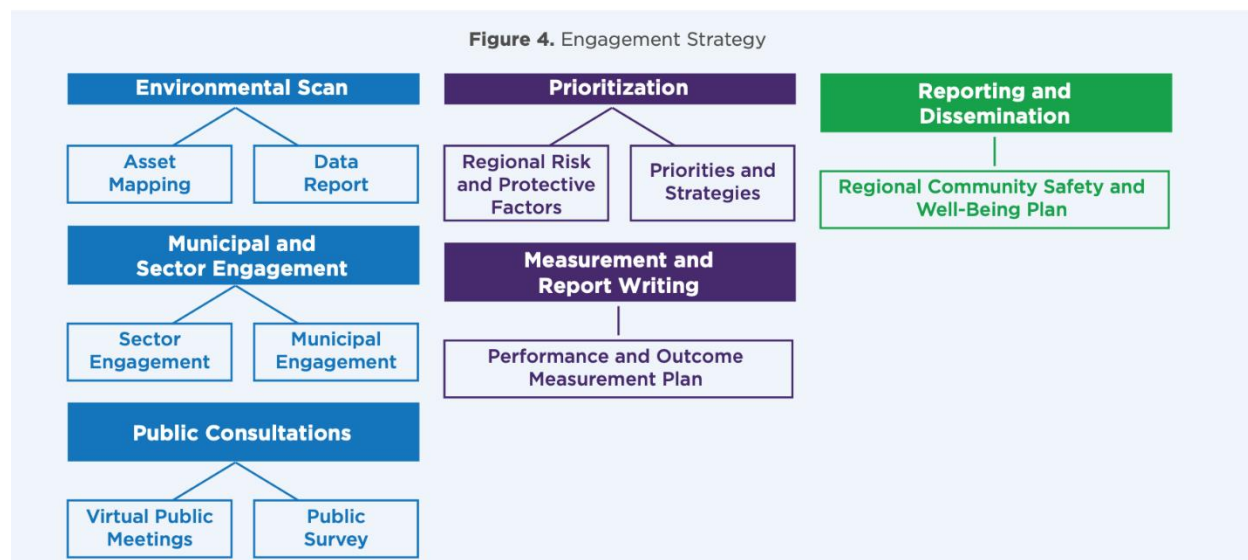
## THE CASE FOR A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED APPROACH

The goals of engaging the community in the development of the RCSWB were threefold:

- 1) The plan would be **representative** of the different municipalities and the work would be tailored to be contextual to their needs, strengths and priorities.
- 2) The plan would be **authentic** and therefore guided by people's lived expertise, rather than simply engaging them in the municipalities' vision.
- 3) The plan would address **root causes**, therefore informed by leaders from historically underrepresented communities and helping to craft the recommendations.

From the onset, the RCSWB Team, consisting of staff from the City of Windsor, co-chairs of the leadership table, and consultants from StrategyCorp Inc., established a consultation process that best allowed stakeholders from the entire region to provide meaningful input on the RCSWB, and to avoid the "check box" engagement approach. They sought help to contextualize the data from multiple lenses (resident, cultural, socioeconomic, racialized, frontline staff, executives, municipal, etc.) to identify systemic causes and incorporate those perspectives into recommendations.

The components of Windsor-Essex's Engagement Strategy are visualized below.



Making a case for extra time and the additional effort taken to build relationships with community members and groups from various backgrounds was tremendously important to the RCSWB Team in several ways.

- Diverse representation helped the Team better understand the data needs of the communities and seek ways to be inclusive of all groups in the implementation of the plan.
- Taking time to speak one-on-one with individuals for multiple hours helped the Team identify concerns with the previous consultations processes. In turn, this helped reinforce the case for taking time to lead a community-driven plan. Including more perspectives helped with understanding the strengths and gaps in the community.

Using this community-engaged approach, the RCSWB Team was able to build understanding amongst community groups and municipalities as to why a collaborative response was so important to tackling complex social issues. It also reinforced why the regional approach is most impactful. As a result of the widespread buy-in, resources were allocated to project staff to continue beyond planning and to implement the plan as well.

## RESULTS OF THE COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACH

Windsor-Essex's community engagement process resulted in 91 virtual engagements that took place over 103.4 hours. The 1,900 stakeholders who were consulted to inform the plan

included members of the public, as well as those involved in community organizations and municipal councils.

Systems change outcomes have included the following:

**New partnerships and power dynamics:** The development of the [Enhanced Sector Network](#) (ESN) was a direct result of the RCSWB engagement process. The ESN was developed to seek out historically underrepresented community groups to contextualize existing data trends. To build upon the lessons learned from initial ESN meetings and to avoid duplicating work or creating unintended silos, the RCSWB leadership table and ESN worked together to develop the plan's initiatives, activities and metrics. This was also an effort to balance decision-making power and ensure historically underrepresented groups could directly shape the plan's key elements.

**New partnerships and resource flows:** Breaking down silos within the municipalities and across sectors in the community has led to five new collaborative grant applications being submitted and supported, partnered or directed by the project team. All of these applications involved a partnerships between actors working either within or outside the municipality (e.g., police, post-secondary institutions, health care organizations) that had not worked together previously. As of this case study, the project team has successfully secured three grants, including a new, \$1.5 million partnership to support community safety and further address opioid and substance use through a coordinated place-based planning, public education and training strategy between key partners.

**New practices:** Participants at virtual public meetings remarked that they enjoyed the format and felt heard throughout the discussion. For instance, a young transgendered couple indicated that they felt like their concerns were heard and understood in light of a recent incident involving homophobic and transphobic graffiti at a local community organization. Members of the newcomer and racialized persons ESN groups indicated that they saw their recommendations in the final plan.

With the adoption of the RCSWB, Windsor-Essex has committed to continual community engagement and sharing best practices across municipalities and departments. The leadership table, project team and Human and Health Services senior management team are also looking at utilizing the lessons learned from these consultation practices for future endeavours.

The use of the community-engaged approach also improved buy-in from community groups and is anticipated to expedite implementation.

## CHALLENGES

**The COVID-19 pandemic:** COVID-19 both helped and hindered the engagement process. It reduced the municipal “work culture” hurdles that would have been in place otherwise, especially with the shift to virtual. For instance, prior to the shift to virtual, an in-person presentation process would be the expected standard for all municipal lower-and-upper-tier council meetings. Due to both the concurrent timing and geographic distance of many municipal council meetings, the ability for project team to engage with multiple councils would have been vastly reduced through this process. Through an virtual council engagement process, however, a timeline that was more cost effective, streamlined and incorporated more touchpoints was possible. Virtual meetings were also able to engage hundreds of people quickly and efficiently, and helped project staff to record what was said to confirm the participants’ intended meaning. Virtual access also helped more partners of the ESN to participate more frequently.

Additionally, the opportunity to incorporate assistive technology and translation services became more viable and feasible. While context dependant, the provision of real-time closed captioning and translation and interpretation services during large-scale in-person consultations is often uncommon. At times this can be due to variables related to the capacity – both to analyze the data in multiple languages and to re-translate the information—, availability of service and cost. Through the shift to virtual, the project team was able to reduce barriers to participation by offering phone-in options, closed captioning in multiple languages (English, Spanish, Arabic and French), and American Sign Language interpretation.

Despite these unforeseen benefits, the pandemic resulted in many challenges related to coordinating multiple sectors that were now focused on managing acute and everchanging needs. In consideration of the realities of necessary redeployments, organizations stretched beyond capacity, and the stress of fragile systems of support, all timelines necessarily shifted.

**Online accessibility:** Additionally, some people’s lack of familiarity with or access to online platforms presented a barrier, meaning that engagement could not be as deep as it can be in person. Partner organizations also had difficulty connecting with residents/clients in person to provide print surveys.

**Responsibility:** Community partners had hesitations around ensuring the RCSWB team established appropriate expectations considering their scope and mandate. Similarly, the municipalities were concerned that the onus for solving complex social challenges would fall solely to them. Addressing these concerns included making participants aware of different



government jurisdictions and available levers for intervention and continually emphasizing the onus being on all sectors and at all levels of government.

More importantly, regardless of responsibility, Windsor-Essex impressed how vital it is for community members, individuals from priority populations and those experiencing the direct impact of these challenges to be *sought out* and included. Without seeking these types of engagements, there is a risk of continuing to address the symptoms rather than the root causes of social issues.

While Windsor-Essex's community engagement process was a big step in the right direction, improvements can still be made. As such, a vital aspect of the RCSWB, known as Initiative 2.2, will be actively working with ESN priority groups to establish processes and outcome measurement strategies to assess the efficacy of engagement approaches.

## WORKING IN THE MUNICIPAL CONTEXT

### Council Engagement

A key goal of the RCSWB approach was to ensure each municipality could see their priorities, needs, challenges and strengths in the plan. They were especially mindful of smaller rural municipalities, which often feel left out in "regional" plans. The data review on the Social Determinants of Health revealed a distinct difference between the rural and urban areas. Urban areas face more acute risk, *and* the data is less robust in rural areas, potentially masking their challenges. *Each* municipality had three substantive points of contact within Council as well as Essex County Council to gain feedback. They were involved in information sessions, updates on consultations and focus groups, and a final update to get the approval of the plan.

### Municipal Staff Engagement

In addition to council meetings, the County's Regional Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) table was engaged to ensure each municipality was well aware of the project's progress and decision-making. Appropriately informing and working with the procedures and schedules of many different councils to get feedback and approval was a unique challenge in this approach. Attending all 27 council sessions was predominantly made feasible by moving to online meetings.

### Plan Approval

Regarding approval, though they were able to obtain City-County Council approval, the RCSWB went to *all* lower-tier municipalities in the County and they were walked through the plan's goals, initiatives, activities and metrics. Each lower-tier municipal council unanimously



approved of the plan's parts (goals, initiatives and activities) and requested for County Council to be authorized to approve of the final plan. This was made possible due to the level of council engagement throughout the project.

## THE PLAN

The RCSWB received adoption from City and County councils in November 2021. The plan is based on eight outcome goals with specific activities and short-, medium- and long-term metrics under four domains of work. The plan's priorities include the following:

- 1. Good Governance and Data** – Improve collaboration between RCSWB partners for better data and service outcomes
  - Developing a data consortium
  - Increasing representation of priority populations and those with lived/living experience at the RCSWB leadership table and partner advisory/leadership tables
- 2. Engaged and Safe Communities** – Increase access to safe and affordable housing; and promote safe, healthy and connected neighbourhoods and communities
  - Increasing awareness and utilization of existing housing supports and programs
  - Advocating provincial and federal governments support more affordable housing
  - Increasing access to organized programming in communities
  - Increasing feelings of safety and strengthening social capital by promoting neighbourhood-building initiatives
- 3. Mental Health and Substance Use Supports** – Increase preventative care and early interventions to reduce crisis intervention; increase safe and effective emergency response to those in crisis
  - Destigmatizing mental health and addictions and raising awareness of existing supports
  - Harmonizing communications in the mental health service sector
  - Expanding crisis response teams which include both police and mental health workers
  - Improving community trust in emergency responders by building stronger relationships between service providers (e.g., police and community workers)

- 4. Financial Security and Economic Equity** – Identify existing gaps in the social safety net for those on low-income using an equity and inclusion lens; promote local employment and increase education and training
- Leveraging, expanding or developing targeted economic development and workforce strategies in priority neighbourhoods

[Read Windsor-Essex's full Regional Community Safety and Well-Being Plan here.](#)

## CONCLUSION

Windsor-Essex's RCSWB's consultation process is a good example of how a community-engaged process can bring together diverse partners to build a plan that's owned by the community, and where the municipality takes on a crucial support role.