



CASE STUDY | GUELPH'S COMMUNITY PLAN: EMBRACING A YEAR OF LISTENING

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A Community Plan is a comprehensive, long-term planning process designed to set a broad vision and strategic direction for an entire community. Over the past three years, the City of Guelph has undertaken the development of a Community Plan where the process was truly authentic, emergent, community-owned, integrated across City departments and community partners, and anchored in utility.

OVERVIEW

The City of Guelph set out to use the Community Plan process to learn about the community, together with the community, in order to collectively shape the direction for the entire city over the next 10 to 20 years.

They wanted to collaborate deeply with partners and stakeholders, citizens and business leaders and make the shared community direction visible and understandable for all to use. The Community Plan would serve as a foundation to advocate for the community's wishes and as a tool to track community progress. They were adamant that this would not be a plan that would just sit on the shelf after it was written—it needed to be a plan that is used, that is referenced, and that acts as the starting point for future City and community strategic planning.

As such, the guiding principles for the community plan were:

- 1) Use work not make work;
- 2) Every voice has value;
- 3) Balanced and representative;
- 4) Practical, product-driven, utility;
- 5) Simple and succinct;

- 6) Firm yet flexible;
- 7) Work in the open; and,
- 8) Be playful.

Guelph’s community planning process involved months of project planning, over a year of listening to the community, and then several months of building and validating the plan. They are now involved in the ongoing work of putting the Community Plan into action. The project was overseen by City council, an executive team, and community and staff round tables, and work was carried out by a dedicated project team. The project governance was designed to promote an inclusive and effective engagement process. The round table approach was used to support staff and community leaders to take a hands-on, testing orientation in a workshop setting where members were actively shaping and testing the project plan, engagement and research tools.

TIMELINE	ACTIVITY
July 2017	Council approves Community Plan project
October 2017 to February 2018	Project planning and research
January 2018 to February 2019	Engaging the community in a year of listening
January 2019 to April 2019	Building and validating the Community Plan
May 2019	Present the Plan to City Council
May 2019 onward	Putting the Community Plan into action

The foundation of the Community Plan process rested in three parallel, complementary and iterative processes with engagement embedded at each step:

1. **RESEARCH AND TRENDS** – Analyzing data from Statistics Canada and sources across the community to create a [Village of 100](#) profile to help people understand the demographics of Guelphites so that conversations could be based on key demographics and trends. Community data experts were engaged to share their data and help build the community profile.
2. **STRATEGIC PLAN SCAN (See here)** – Developing a database that pulled together 35 strategic plans from across the City and grouped them by domain and focus area to identify and incorporate existing priorities, uncover new opportunities, and understand the relationships and overlap of existing plans. Staff and external strategic plan owners were consulted on multiple occasions including a strategic plan speed dating workshop to properly understand and map the plan relationships.



3. **ENGAGEMENT ANALYSIS (See here)** – Gathering insights from 110+ events, meetings and workshops, a household telephone survey of 600 people, five sector workshops, 4,200+ visits to digital engagement platform, results from social media engagement and conversations with 6,200+ people. The principal questions that guided the engagement strategy and design were:

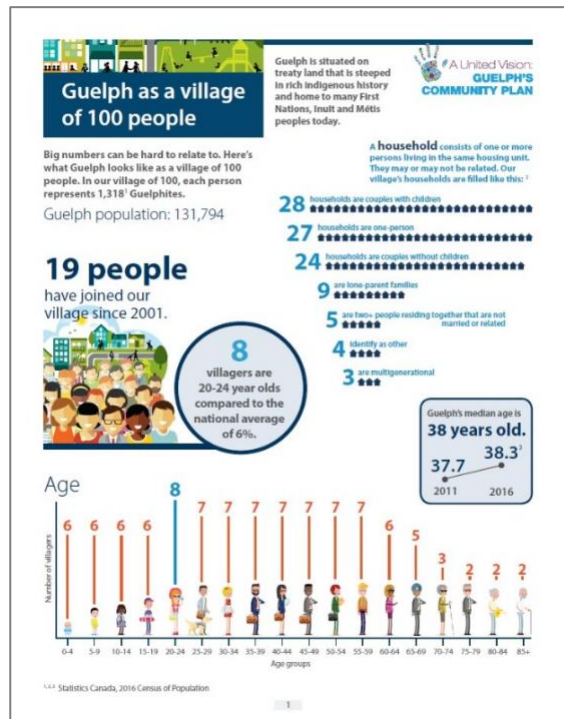
- What do we want Guelph to be? What matters most to you?
- What’s in the way? What are the barriers?
- Where are the opportunities? What are our strengths?

On top of the year of engagement, the team engaged the community to check and validate the engagement analysis as well through round table workshops and a Community Plan City Sprint event.

The iterative nature of these three elements was critical to the success of the process. For example, the [Village of 100](#) research was shared during community engagements to enable a factual community-level understanding rather than conversations being unfairly swayed by unrepresentative personal opinions and experiences.

Similarly, the strategic plan scan served as a relationship-building tool to invite City departments, community partners, and community groups into the Community Plan process and engage them in sharing and building upon their existing data, community understanding, and strategic priorities.

The tone of the process was to continually invite and make space for community ownership of the Plan.



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

DUPLICATION OF WORK

For the project team, it was important to acknowledge and honour the strategic work already happening with City departments and in the community and to develop and deepen relationships. Therefore it was critical to use, lift up, leverage and learn all of the work that was already in place.

It was this desire to understand existing data and recognize the work of community partners that led to making the strategic plan scan a foundational part of the process.

GIVING UP CONTROL

The project team wanted this process to feel different. The team saw their role as connectors, as a conduit for sharing information, and to listen deeply, not to control the conversation or focus on any particular outcomes.

The project team and community round table knew that community ownership of the Plan was critical, so throughout the process they challenged themselves by asking “How can we give up control of the conversations even more?”, and they would ask the community, “What’s the best way to accomplish that?” A small group worked together to encourage more conversations hosted by leaders in the community. As a result of this work and continued outreach, engagement opportunities continued to come forward, which eventually led to the project team extending the engagement phase to continue to add to the diversity of voices heard and the depth of conversations.

The team built on and developed new relationships with community groups so that the project team would be invited in, versus inviting themselves in, whenever possible. Community leaders referred others, and engagement opportunities expanded naturally. To empower community members, the team would co-design each engagement to ensure mutual benefit whenever possible. The team was committed to an iterative process and were keen to learn and develop their approach continually, which included re-designing facilitation plans that weren’t working, shifting questions to go deeper and targeting different groups to ensure a diversity of voices were heard. Further, the team identified existing networks and collaborations doing great work—typically sector-based. They were interested in learning from those networks and using the Community Plan as a platform to encourage connections across sectors between the existing groups.

FOSTERING COLLECTIVE LEARNING

With a multi-year process of developing their Community Plan, it was important that the process was centered on learning. They didn’t want to check a box that they had engaged the community, they genuinely wanted the community to learn about themselves, to challenge their thinking, and discover new ways of working together.

The engagement design focused on understanding underlying values rather than solely capturing opinions. [Storytelling](#) was used as a key method to increase personalization, relevance, and understand nuance. This design choice did make the coding of responses more difficult.

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INFUSING CREATIVITY

One question that the project team asked throughout the process was, “How can we make this more fun?” Some examples included finger painting, lots of Community Plan tattoos, the use of postcards, newspaper headlines, the use of Guelph Bucks, and a Do-It-Yourself Conversation Guidebook, which was full of ideas for activities that community members could use to start a conversation with family, friends, co-workers and neighbours. There was also a playful game called “Cards for Community” that was available to the public to use. They took a shotgun approach to try a lot of different things to see what works and what sticks. They found that some tools were under-used and could have benefitted from more focused attention, communications and marketing.

There was an artist in residence who created artwork to reflect the community’s perspectives and another artist who engaged with community members at Market Mornings.



One of the most rewarding events for the team was a unique opportunity to engage with a group of people and their families before and after their Canada Day citizenship ceremony. This involved completely different questions and lots of lemonade.

There was also a Strategic Plan Speed Dating event that allowed for community partners to share and become versed in the 35 strategic plans across the city.

LESSONS LEARNED

ENGAGE AS A PRACTICE NOT A PROJECT

The team didn’t limit their engagement activities to the public facing engagement events and online opportunities. Engagement was a practice that was incorporated at every step of the process. From the initial planning looking at purpose and principles, members of the community were embedded and engaged regularly. Research, in particular, had a strong engagement approach. The Guelph as a Village of 100 project was developed by collaborating with community data experts from a mix of local organizations and City departments. Engagement was baked into the strategic plan scan process as well in order to ensure they had the most up-to-date information and that partner organizations bought into the process and helped make sure they were mapped accurately. The team held to a belief that applying good engagement practice helps take research and analysis into real sense making activities, elevating how they could use this type of data and knowledge.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

The team had planned a year of listening, but part way through they realized that the data they were getting wasn't deep enough to understand underlying values. They had wanted to make it easy for people to engage (often on the move) and this led to a surface level dialogue—which was still useful, but left a lot to assumption. At that stage they decided to change the questions to go wider with the data set, and then used a consultant to take on the additional engagement analysis. They adjusted and it worked.

ENGAGING A YOUNGER COMMUNITY VOICE

It was important to engage youth and children and make sure they knew that their voice matters. One change made in order to hear from a younger population was to bring down the age of the household telephone survey from 18 to 16 years old. Following the “use work, not make work” principle, they went where youth were already meeting, e.g., festivals and events, the City's Youth Council, YMCA camp counsellor training, the public library's youth advisory group, and close to 400 kids from grade 2 to 6 during Local Government Week visits to City Hall.

RE-FRAMING THE CONVERSATION FOR MORE ENGAGEMENT

One sector that was harder to engage in the process was the business sector. After a first session that garnered valuable insight but wasn't very well attended, they worked with additional internal and external partners to increase participation. After re-framing the facilitation plan to focus initially on successes—“What's something you're proud of?”—it invited the business sector to connect their role as an employer with community-building and visioning. The conversation became more fruitful and was successfully transitioned to the other sector workshops.

LIMITING ENGAGEMENT FATIGUE

With over a year of community engagement planned, it was important to attend events and meetings where people were already gathering to make it easy for people to participate, develop meaningful relationships, gain trust, and minimize engagement fatigue. It led to a considerable number of requests for staff to attend different opportunities, which was a challenge to manage with a small engagement team. It has, however, offered relationship-building opportunities that continue beyond the life of the project.

It has also proven helpful for the Community Plan and engagement teams be the holder of all data from the year of listening, so that this data can continue to be leveraged rather than the community being consulted unnecessarily on similar topics. Further engagements won't have to ask the same questions, but rather can dig deeper into their specific subjects.

OUTCOMES

Over the course of the engagement, an inclusive tone was set and relationships grew or were created. Engagements were hosted by the community, in the community, which has resulted in a strong sense of community ownership of the Plan. The collaborative nature of the process has led to the building of relationships across the community, and even between what at times are traditionally opposed groups.

In January 2019, the team started using the findings from the previous year to build the Plan. They created a discussion paper to summarize the themes, directions, goals and language, and invited the community to validate, suggest changes, and help set priorities. This process included asking the community about the population-level indicators they would be looking for in order to monitor progress.

Our Community Plan at a glance

Our community vision
 Guelph. We're grounded in community and our deep connection to the environment. We look out for one another, celebrate our diversity and smile at each other in the streets. We are leaders who shape tomorrow. We tackle local and global challenges through innovation, art and action. And we're committed to inclusive prosperity—because together, we're stronger.

Our values

- Everyone's well-being
- Environmental stewardship
- Fiscal responsibility
- Integrity
- Innovation
- Inclusiveness
- Respect

Read the full plan at guelph.ca/communityplan

Our focus themes and strategic directions

<p>We are home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing that works A safe city Love our neighbourhoods Big, small city vibe 	<p>We protect our environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect and sustain Reclaim Go farther Prepare for tomorrow Be stewards 	<p>We create value</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global innovation leader Work together, tell our story Leverage our character Inclusive prosperity Harness discovery engines
<p>We feel well</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A great start Good mental health Everyone belongs Nourished community Health infrastructure 	<p>We play and explore</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Play everywhere Grow talent Explore together Invest and innovate 	<p>We move around freely</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easy movement within Active transportation Future-ready infrastructure Connect regionally

It was important to produce a Community Plan that ‘feels’ like Guelph. When the Community Plan was presented at City Council, the six focus themes were each presented by six community leaders. Additionally spoken word artist, Beth Anne Ellipsis, performed a [rendition of the Community Plan](#) that was met by a standing ovation in Council Chambers.

Guelph wanted to ensure the Plan would continue to be used, so as part of the ongoing implementation of the plan they have appointed a Community Plan Activator to help City

departments and groups across the community use the Community Plan for their own purposes. The relevance of the plan is high, and it is already being used by groups across the city to ground in community values and priorities before further planning.

The vision and engagement findings have formed a starting point for the City's new Strategic Plan as well as subsequent major engagements like their Transportation Master Plan, Parks and Recreation Master Plan and Official Plan. The strategic plan scan has been presented in multiple formats for use by staff, the community and consultants working on other City projects. They've used the Community Household phone survey to show staff what can be done with survey data including mapping it with GIS and sharing as an open data set. The survey data is potentially valuable for local businesses to know what matters most to the people in their community.

NEXT STEPS

CONTINUED COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE OVER IMPLEMENTING THE COMMUNITY PLAN: The Plan was designed to be owned and implemented collaboratively by the community. To make this happen Guelph has invited community members to be part of an ongoing Community Round table to guide the continued implementation of the Plan. Already, the community co-creation approach has been replicated as the Community Plan team are working with the community to develop the governance structure for the implementation phase.

SUPPORT PARTNERS TO ALIGN THEIR STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY PLAN: Continue to support the use of the Community Plan across the city. This includes continuing to share the Plan widely and helping partners to understand how to leverage the data within the Plan for their own purposes.

MEASURING AND REPORTING PROGRESS WITH THE COMMUNITY: Guelph is using international frameworks (World Council on City Data ISO Standard 37120) and local frameworks such as Toward Common Ground and The Guelph Community Foundation's Vital Signs to establish a measurement framework for each of the themes and strategic directions. These will be reported through a Citizen Dashboard and a Report to the Community. The City of Guelph has recently been awarded the World Council on City Data's highest level of certification. Through a participatory evaluation framework, the community will determine the evaluation approach, type of indicators and targets.

CONTINUE TO EVOLVE AND ADAPT THE PLAN OVER TIME: The Community Plan is not designed to be a static document, but rather something that grows and evolves as the community does. It is designed to be a platform to continue to convene stakeholders to keep on top of the City's future and their shared efforts to make progress on the things that matter most.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Visit Guelph's [Community Plan site](#)
- Watch the [Community Plan video with theme-focused vignettes from all over Guelph](#)
- Watch [Beth Anne Ellipsis' spoken word rendition of the Community Plan](#)
- This is a fun video of a whiteboard engagement program they did with a smart local company - [The Power of a Whiteboard](#)
- Peruse Guelph's [easy-to-use database](#) and [network map](#) of strategic plans
- Guelph's [household survey](#) as a [GIS map](#) and [open data set](#)
- See the [engagement analysis from a year of listening](#)