

CLOSING THE LOOP

Volunteer Advisory Committee Review

Summary Report

August 2025

WHY THIS WORK WAS DONE

In July 2023, the City of Hamilton initiated Phase 1 of a comprehensive review of the in-effect **Volunteer Advisory Committee** model, where local residents apply for and are selected as representatives for specific committees during that term of Council. The intent was report back to Council with municipal best practices and present recommendations for strengthening community-based, civic engagement options to inform City decision making.

From January 2024 – April 2024, City staff worked with the **Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton** to conduct research and learn from the experiences of volunteer advisory committee members, staff who support the committees, and members of Council.



Social Planning and
Research Council of
Hamilton

Civic engagement is about getting involved in your community and participating in political decision making. It can include a range of activities – like voting, volunteering, attending public meetings, or even speaking to City Councillors about issues you care about.



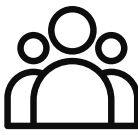
13
CITY DIVISIONS
CONSULTED



66
ONLINE
PARTICIPANTS



10
INTERVIEWS



2
FOCUS GROUPS



10
MUNICIPALITIES
REVIEWED



WHAT WE DID

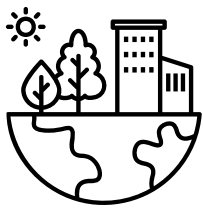
To better understand how the Volunteer Advisory Committees were functioning and how community-based organizations help to advise on City-led initiatives, Phase 1 of the project used multiple research methods.



To learn more from direct participants, the Social Planning and Research Council implemented surveys, interviews, and focus groups with three specific audiences:

- City of Hamilton staff supporting the Volunteer Advisory Committees;
- Former and current Volunteer Advisory Committee members; and,
- Members of Hamilton City Council.

[Read more: Appendix A to Report CM23025\(b\)](#)



City staff completed a review of other municipalities' practices for volunteer committees, including Toronto, Ottawa, Brampton, and Victoria. Other municipalities are moving away from the formal structure of advisory committees and toward resident working groups.

[Read more: Appendix B to Report CM23205\(b\)](#)



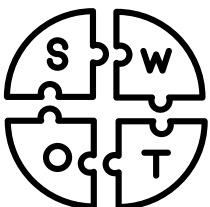
City Staff also compiled a list of all other advisory tables consulted by the City of Hamilton on projects, including community-based task forces, steering committees, and working groups.

[Read more: Appendix C to Report CM23205\(b\)](#)



Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton performed a scan of community tables, organizations and local collaboratives across Hamilton that have mandates similar to those of the City's Volunteer Advisory Committees.

[Read more: Appendix E to Report CM23205\(b\)](#)



A City-led SWOT Analysis highlighted the need to streamline procedures and improve flexibility in civic engagement opportunities, and indicated the opportunity to improve volunteer motivation and satisfaction through training programs and recognition.

[Read more: Appendix F to Report CM23205\(b\)](#)



WHAT WE LEARNED

The information gathered through the 2024 research into Volunteer Advisory Committees provided a lot of helpful insight into what was working and what was not, highlighting a need for significant improvements. Key findings included:

- **Meaningful Engagement** – Right now, the way things work feels slow and overly complicated. There are rules that make it tough for people to really get involved and share their ideas in a meaningful way.
- **Increased Transparency** – People want to see more transparency – especially around how decisions are made, how outcomes are shared, how volunteers are recruited and chosen, and how IDEA (inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility) principles are used in those processes.
- **Role Clarity** – It's not always clear who's responsible for what. There needs to be a better explanation of what each committee does, what they are responsible for, how they connect to Council, and what role staff play in supporting them.
- **Structural Changes** – Some rules make it harder for members to participate. Things like rules about group size, attendance requirements, private meetings, and legal obligations can be barriers.
- **Enhanced Training and Development** – Many of these challenges could be eased with stronger training – both for staff supporting the work and for new members when they join. Examples include enhanced onboarding for volunteers, and ongoing training and skill building efforts could go a long way in making sure participants feel confident in their role.
- **Development Opportunities** – People want opportunities to gain skills, grow, and learn from others while being part of a committee. They also want to know they can get staff support when they need it.
- **More Flexibility** – Making meeting times more flexible and creating easier ways for community members to get involved would help bring in a wider range of voices.



WHAT'S NEXT: A PLAN FOR CHANGE

In response to what we learned from during the research process in 2024, the current/existing framework for the City of Hamilton's **Volunteer Advisory Committees will be changing** to become more flexible, transparent, and responsive.

The direction for this change was **approved by Council in March 2025**, and all of the City's Volunteer Advisory Committees will transition to Community Liaison Groups over the following year.

The transition of the City's VACs marks a pivotal moment in the ongoing evolution of public engagement at the City of Hamilton.

The City's fourteen Volunteer Advisory Committees have made valuable achievements over the years, and we now recognize that to remain relevant and effective, we must adapt to the meet the evolving needs of our communities.

This shift will make civic engagement opportunities more dynamic and meaningful, ensuring that we continue to attract and retain volunteers who are passionate about sharing their ideas and engaging with the City on important issues and initiatives.

By embracing change through a new model for civic engagement, we can engage with a wider range of diverse voices from Hamilton and be able to respond more swiftly to emerging community needs and City priorities.





WHAT'S NEXT: OUR PATH FORWARD

Over the coming year, we'll be transitioning from our previous Volunteer Advisory Committees into a model of innovation and collaboration; one which reflects the diversity of our communities, supports the key principles of the City's Public Engagement Policy, and drives the ongoing evolution of public engagement at City of Hamilton.

Together, with staff and community, we plan to create a modern model for civic engagement that will better serve both our residents and the City's strategic priorities.

From July 2023–March 2025, **Phase 1** of the project involved taking a broad look at Hamilton's Volunteer Advisory Committees. Including what elements were effective, which were not, and what improvements and changes could be made. Phase 1 is now complete.

Phase 2 is focused on building on what was learned in Phase 1, and making sure that the new Community Liaison Groups are responsive to the needs of the community voices they represent, and that their mandates are clear.

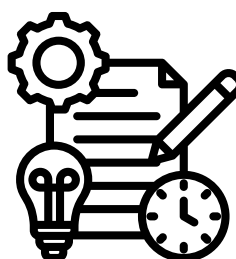
Lastly, **Phase 3**, upon approval from Council, will result in the formation of Community Liaison Groups that aim to be more accessible, inclusive, and rewarding.

PROJECT TIMELINE

Phase

1

**JULY 2023 –
MARCH 2025**

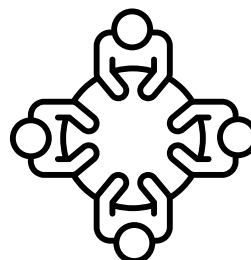


- Council Motion
- Project Initiation, Research and Consultation
- Council Report (Nov. 2024)
- Revised Council Report (Feb. 2025)
- Council Direction for Volunteer Advisory Committee Transition

Phase

2

**APRIL 2025 –
FEBRUARY 2026**

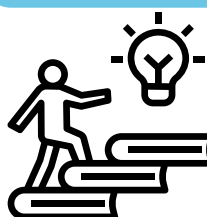


- City of Hamilton staff Community of Practice initiated for staff leads
- "Volunteers Make Waves" public engagement campaign
- Develop draft Terms of References / Mandates for Community Liaison Groups
- Council Reports for Community Liaison Group Direction (Feb./March 2026)

Phase

3

MARCH 2026 +



- Implementation of Community Liaison Groups
- Recruitment of Members



WHAT'S NEXT: GET INVOLVED!

By embracing a new framework to support civic engagement, we can empower our resident-led liaison groups to function with greater agility, shape key City initiatives, and deliver quicker outcomes in more meaningful and valuable ways.

This transition is all about enhancing and advancing what we know is working well for our volunteer committees. We're focusing on creating a made-in-Hamilton approach for civic engagement that is more flexible, responsive, inclusive, and sustainable.

There will be multiple opportunities to engage in this phase of the transition, including at Engage Hamilton as well as in-person engagement events. **Join the conversation** and contribute to Hamilton's commitment to volunteer recognition and involvement!

Visit: Engage.Hamilton.ca/Volunteer and share your thoughts.

Volunteers Make Waves Valuing Volunteer Voices



Contact the Community Engagement Team to learn more!

Lauren Vraets

Senior Project Manager, Community Engagement,
Communications and Community Engagement Division,
City Manager's Office
lauren.vraets@hamilton.ca

Sunil Angrish

Project Manager,
Community Inclusion & Equity,
Communications and Community Engagement Division,
City Manager's Office
sunil.angrish@hamilton.ca

