



Meaningful and Accessible Ways to Participate in Planning, Decision Making and Assessment

January 28th, 2014

Open Government Consultation Submission to the Open Government Engagement Team

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Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo Works to Make Participation Accessible and Meaningful

The Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo is committed to promoting social development to achieve a sustainable community in Waterloo Region where all people actively participate in finding solutions to improve quality of life. We work to cultivate community knowledge to advance social justice. Our goals:

- Increase understanding of social resources, assets, issues, needs and context of the local community by those who need this knowledge to take action.
- Increase citizen participation in social, economic and political life of the community.
- Build social cohesion through relationships, collaboration and community action.
- Reduce inequitable access to knowledge resources resulting from emerging technologies.
- Develop the social infrastructure of the community – people, organizations, services and policies.

We believe it is essential that citizens know what services are available to them and that they have access to their government leaders and are able to participate in all areas of the political life of their community. We devote considerable attention to ensuring that this happens and have done so in a range of ways.

We provide services that help people navigate service systems and access information that may be less available to them because of rapidly changing technology:

- We provide a local community information and referral service through which we guide people in finding services, government services included.



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- We initiated ConnectKW, a network of more than 20 public internet access locations in community facilities and agencies to provide free internet access to those who can't afford this access and we provide training to help people use the internet effectively, currently in accessing and assessing information over the internet.

The Social Planning Council Kitchener-Waterloo acknowledges the importance of open data and the incredible potential it holds for our work in general, still, inclusivity and access to information for all is of greater importance.

We have created alternative ways for people to participate in government consultations, often with considerable time to modify technical materials for a more vulnerable audience. Recent examples include¹:

- Multiple community forums to get input into the development of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Plan, including Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultation October 2013
- Four community forums related to the Social Assistance Reform Review process – 2009-2013
- *Extensive input into the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities integrated standards.*
- Social Justice Tribunals of Ontario Consultations June 2013
- *2013 Consultation on Proposed Changes to the Ontario Building Code regarding accessibility – this entailed an intensive 6 week process to support a group with lived experience in reviewing and assessing proposed changes to the Code.*
- *Submissions to the 2013 Ontario Pre-budget consultation.*
- 2014 Waterloo Region Pre-Budget consultations
- *Presentations to the Pre-Budget Consultations on Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, Kitchener January 13, 2014*

We organize opportunities for citizens to learn about and to give input on public policy and decision making. Examples include:

- All-candidate sessions during elections as round table discussions about the issues that are important to people, many of whom are dealing with significance life challenges - candidates listen and learn and then are asked to provide their solutions for the issues identified by the community members.
- Community forums for broad public participation e.g. January 23rd we are hosting a presentation and discussion of the book edited by Alex Himelfarb – 'Tax is Not a Four Letter Word'
- Smaller scale, Kitchen Table Talks to engage citizens in their homes and community settings

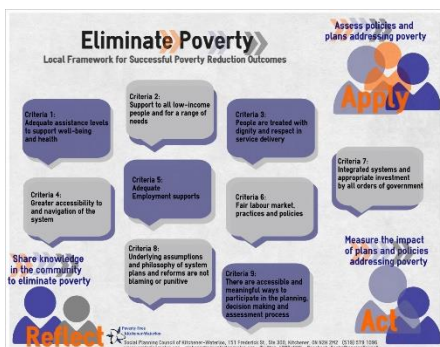




about topics important to them – 2011 series was focused on what is needed for a healthy community and health life and the benefits of tax dollars investments.

Through these various activities we have responded to the interest shown by community members to provide regular opportunities to be involved. A number of community action groups have emerged that give input, explore issues and build group member skills in policy analysis and advocacy. These include:

- Poverty Free Kitchener-Waterloo Action Group (very active in developing and applying a framework for assessing how well policy and programs meet our local community criteria for poverty elimination)
- Disabilities and Human Rights Group (very active group that has been very active in raising awareness of accessibility issues and priorities for inclusion)
- Livable Communities Working Group – seniors and adults with disabilities looking more at key elements of making our community livable – e.g. participants will be meeting soon to plan a Visitable Housing awareness campaign
- Network of Women’s Groups
- Cross-cultural Women’s Action Group



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These groups have followed a number of issues and, in so doing, have contributed to creating tools for reviewing, understanding and setting priorities on community action. The Local Framework for Poverty Elimination is one such tool that the group has built skill in

applying quickly and easily to a range of quite complex policy issues. The title of this submission is the 9th Criteria 9 in this work on the local criteria for successful poverty reduction outcomes.

Recently we have reviewed our various initiatives and models for engaging community in important social and policy issues to determine the key elements in how we have approached our work. Our aim is to be more explicit and intentional in being inclusive and accessible so those directly affected by decisions can understand and influence those decisions. The following are some of what we have learned through our work that we know are important to successful engagement.





In order to participate, people appreciate:

- Being consulted beforehand so consultations include stakeholder's perspective
- Being informed in an accessible and timely manner
- Being heard and their viewpoints being taken into consideration on ongoing basis
- Consultation reports reflecting what was said and including follow up on actions and timelines
- Pace matters in two ways – not too slow and not too fast:
 - timely follow up on past issues such as raising social assistance rates or minimum wage and not dragging with unnecessary consultations, and
 - sufficient time and support provided for understanding of new or more technical issues such as the functioning of a government Advisory Panel on Minimum Wage, etc.





The Criteria for meaningful and accessible ways to participate:

1) Importance of an issue, topic, or system change

- a. Issue of greater community impact
- b. Issue that has not been resolved
- c. Tying threads of common activities
- d. Clear vision stated for the collaboration/consultation process

2) Accessible format & structure for people to participate and share their ideas

- a. Welcoming environment
- b. Clear criteria for selecting presenters
- c. Accessible locations and infrastructure
- d. Materials accessible in different formats
- e. Simple language and translation
- f. Information chunked and with sufficient detail and background information
- g. Distribution of materials ensured and not only on the Internet
- h. Participatory structure/format
- i. Enough time provided for input
- j. Multiple opportunities for input
- k. Secretarial role ensured for complete reporting

3) Informing and Educating

- a. Adapted documents and learning for different audience
- b. Enough time to discuss and understand the issues
- c. Supportive facilitation available locally
- d. Lived experiences shared and valued
- e. Decision-makers and speakers present and participating in local conversations





4) Diverse Participation

- a. Broad communication and invitation to participate
- b. Intentional inclusion of different stakeholders
- c. Multiple perspectives encouraged looking beyond formal and high level input structures
- d. Broad/Right questions asked

5) Shared Leadership and Power

- a. Agenda created with multiple stakeholder input
- b. Lived experience recognized as stakeholder perspective
- c. Resources and time allocated for stakeholder participation
- d. Ongoing collaboration made possible
- e. Stable staffing to allow for relationship building with institutions

6) Clear Future Action Stated

- a. Immediate report/communication created reflecting back what was heard
- b. Decision-makers will and resource allocation
- c. Action items and deadlines provided
- d. Clear outcomes stated to assess achievement
- e. Ongoing direct reporting to all the stakeholders

In Conclusion

An open government has to recognize social, educational and economic barriers to participation which are not easily resolved through the use of technology or consulting firms. Best results from our experience are achieved when government leaders collaborate with non- government local players, such as the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo.

We play an important role as independent of government and accountability to the community. We have an established track record in community engagement and are able





Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo
Community Information Centre of Waterloo
Region

to mobilize people, adapt materials and facilitate an inclusive process for one-time events and consultations. We build relationships and can support ongoing citizen's groups to empower those who are most vulnerable to participate effectively in access and contributing to government decision making.

There is a network of about 20 community based social planning councils in Ontario that have expertise and a keen interest in playing this kind of role. It takes an incredible investment of time, patience, skill and expertise to design, prepare, facilitate and follow up on important issues. Good practice includes building relationships and skills over time so that consultations are not one-off events that bewilder and frustrate most participants.

Even better, the local partners and local communities should be a part of the decision making about the consultations when they are being designed, not only once they are under-way.

Ultimately is the way language such as 'open government' is put in to practice that will reduce frustration and distrust and enable a well informed citizenry that has confidence and trust in our government leaders and civil services as the source of solutions.

Respectfully,

Trudy Beaulne
Executive Director
Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo

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- 'Multiple community forums to get input into the development of Ontario's Poverty Reduction Plan, including [Ontario Poverty Reduction Strategy Consultation October 2013](http://www.waterlooregion.org/reducing-poverty-for-everyone-message-from-kitchener-waterloo)
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 - [Four community forums](http://www.waterlooregion.org/poverty-reduction) related to the Social Assistance Reform Review process – 2009-2013
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- *Extensive input into the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities integrated standards.*
 - [Social Justice Tribunals of Ontario Consultations June 2013](http://www.waterlooregion.org/sites/default/files/SJTO-%20Submission_June14_2013.pdf)
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 - *2013 Consultation on Proposed Changes to the Ontario Building Code regarding accessibility – this entailed an intensive 6 week process to support a group with lived experience in reviewing and assessing proposed changes to the Code.*
 - [2014 Waterloo Region Pre-Budget consultations](http://www.waterlooregion.org/sites/default/files/Final%20letter_Dec11_2013.pdf)
http://www.waterlooregion.org/sites/default/files/Final%20letter_Dec11_2013.pdf
 - *Presentations to the Pre-Budget Consultations on Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs, Kitchener January 13, 2014*
<http://www.waterlooregion.org/all-party-committee-pre-budget-consultation-in-kitchener>

