



CASE STUDY | STRONG AND CONNECTED NEIGHBOURHOODS – WATERLOO'S NEIGHBOURHOOD STRATEGY

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The changing dynamics of neighbourhoods requires a new way of thinking and planning to support neighbourhood development. The City of Waterloo has a long history of connecting and building strong neighbourhoods but realized that new and innovative approaches to resident-led community building were needed to support the growing and changing community. This case study outlines the process that the City of Waterloo took to determine what role the city should play and what broad range of supports were needed to facilitate resident-led neighbourhood community building.

OVERVIEW

Developing a neighbourhood strategy does not happen overnight, it takes time and lots of engagement with partners and residents. Prior to the development of their neighbourhood strategy, the City of Waterloo supported neighbourhood initiatives through grants, staff resources, and other programs that community members valued. However, it became increasingly clear that the City needed to deliver services that responded directly to the changes and growth that neighbourhoods were and continue to experience.

Waterloo's community has changed significantly in the last two decades as the population has grown, become more diverse, new neighbourhoods have been built, and older neighbourhoods have seen intensification. The City responded by updating and creating new plans, including the:

- Community, Culture and Recreation Services Master Plan (formerly Recreation and Leisure Services Master Plan);
- Culture Plan;
- 2015-2018 Strategic Plan

About Waterloo

Waterloo is a city in southern Ontario, Canada. It is the smallest of three cities in the Regional Municipality of Waterloo also home to the cities of Kitchener and Cambridge.

The City of Waterloo is located in the heart of Canada's Technology Triangle with a population of 137,420 including post-secondary students and an increasingly diverse population.

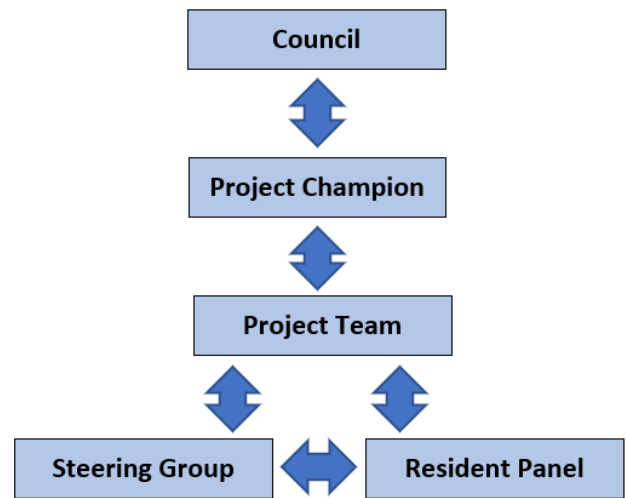
The City has renowned post-secondary institutions, global think-tanks and major employers who call Waterloo home.

A common theme throughout these documents was the need for the development of a neighbourhood strategy to strengthen Waterloo neighbourhoods.

With direction from Council, City staff assembled a community focused plan to develop a neighbourhood strategy in 2016. The strategy was used to help to define how supports for neighbourhoods could facilitate continued growth of environments where community members would be empowered to create strong, connected and vibrant neighbourhoods.

A City of Waterloo staff team was tasked with the behind the scenes work to develop the draft strategy. There were six city staff from policy, community and neighbourhood services, enforcement and cultural planning departments. The work for this group was based on direction from the project's steering committee.

The steering group included representatives from 13 organizations including: neighbourhood associations, United Way, 2 post-secondary institutions, the community foundation, library, public school board, police services and neighbourhood groups, all with a direct interest in Waterloo neighbourhoods.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The City recognized that to have a robust neighbourhood strategy the community engagement process had to be comprehensive. At every stage of the project, the engagement process focused on community needs and what supports, resources and tools would help the community to be leaders in the implementation of the plan. The City consulted with over 1700 community members:

- A **Resident Panel** of community members met seven times over the course of the project to provide in-depth input into the draft neighbourhood strategy. Unlike most public engagement processes, where residents come to a single session like an open house or focus groups, panel members had an opportunity to learn about the current context of neighbourhoods, engage in deep conversations about multiple topics related to neighbourhoods, and to engage in the process of developing and revising the strategy and establishing priorities.
- A **street team** of City staff and volunteers spoke with residents about their neighbourhoods in public spaces across the City (neighbourhood events, Waterloo Public Library pop-up sessions, Artist in Residence workshops, community festivals, and public square events, among others). This allowed input to be gathered from residents while they engaged in community building activities in their neighbourhoods.
- Online **surveys** allowed community members to tell us about their neighbourhoods at their convenience.
- **Focus groups** were held that included targeted sessions (i.e. secondary students, postsecondary

students, older adults, new immigrants) to help make sure the City had heard from the breadth of the community.

- **Open house** sessions gave residents an opportunity to come share ideas with staff in person.
- A Canada Day **contest** asked participants to share what they appreciate about their neighbours. The City also did a youth contest asking participants to share what makes their neighbourhood great.
- Community volunteers hosted **kitchen table talks** (focus groups to gather input from their neighbours for the strategy).
- **Stories** about great things already happening in neighbourhoods were shared on Facebook to encourage residents to think and share their thoughts about strong and connected neighbourhoods.

The City took a four-phase approach over a span of 19 months to develop the strategy. The diagram below outlines the project phases and key actions.



VISION FOR WATERLOO NEIGHBOURHOODS

Waterloo's Neighbourhood Strategy set out to identify how the City can best support community members to create stronger and more connected neighbourhoods. Based on the input from the community, the vision for Waterloo neighbourhoods was developed.

Vision:
Waterloo is a city of caring, vibrant, engaged neighbourhoods where everyone belongs.

The City of Waterloo built a strong foundation for success with affiliated neighbourhood associations, homes associations, community agencies, City staff that supported neighbourhoods, and relationships with thoughtful residents of Waterloo.

The following principles guided the development of the strategy recommendations and will continue to guide the implementation of the neighbourhood strategy:

1. Residents and neighbourhood volunteers are at the root of a great neighbourhood.
2. Every resident is a neighbour and can help build strong neighbourhoods.
3. Neighbourhood community building should be resident-led.
4. Neighbourhood community building should aim to be inclusive.
5. City departments must work together to help support resident-led and delivered neighbourhood initiatives.
6. Collaboration with community partners is key to achieving the strategy's vision.

Building on public consultation input and research, the project staff team worked with the Neighbourhood Strategy Steering Committee, the resident panel and other key stakeholders to develop the Neighbourhood Strategy. The strategy outlines three main goals with actions in each area. Below you will find a summary of the goals.



Street team member

“Resources like the matching fund and cash grants are the best thing the city does to help [neighbourhoods] directly”

Anonymous, engageWaterloo

Goal #1 Encourage neighbourhood interactions

1. Encourage Neighbourliness.
2. Support neighbourhoods seeking to build stronger relationships through a program that sparks neighbourhood community building.
3. Nurture place-based neighbourhood pride, belonging, identity and placemaking.
4. Inspire those living in multi-unit buildings to connect with their neighbours.
5. Continue to build neighbourhood cohesion in areas with a high concentration of post-secondary students
6. Clarify the City supports available to homes associations and residents in these areas.

Goal #2 Empower Neighbours to lead

1. Provide opportunities for neighbourhood groups to connect and collaborate with each other.
2. Develop and share information resources with neighbourhoods through an online portal.
3. Build resident capacity to organize and lead neighbourhood initiatives.
4. Provide additional training and support to neighbourhood groups in volunteer recruitment, retention and recognition.
5. Consider a range of options, explore the feasibility of providing neighbourhood groups with access to affordable event equipment.
6. Identify and improve access to existing indoor space in neighbourhoods for neighbourhood initiatives.
7. Strengthen existing financial and in-kind support to neighbourhoods.
8. Establish a new micro-grant program that provides small amounts of financial and in-kind support for fledgeling neighbourhood projects.

Goal #3 Commit to a corporate City culture that supports neighbourhood led and delivered initiatives

1. Adopt a "Let's Explore" philosophy among the City of Waterloo Staff and across departments.
2. Streamline city processes and revisit select policy directions to make it easier for residents to implement neighbourhood projects.
3. Further shift focus from traditional by-law enforcement towards enhanced by-law education, prevention, and community collaboration.
4. To better support neighbourhood-led initiatives, explore and articulate the city's risk tolerance position, weighing risk against community benefit.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON DEVELOPING A NEIGHBOURHOOD STRATEGY

Developing a neighbourhood strategy is unique to each community. Some lessons learned from Waterloo's process include:

- Keep council involved along the way – after each phase, share with council what is being heard from the community to help them learn about the community's needs and interests
- In-depth public engagement takes time and resources; however, it not only gives great information and ideas upon which to build the strategy, but also generates community support and investment in implementation
- For Resident-led community building to be successful, residents need support not just from staff that work directly with neighbourhood groups, but from divisions across the corporation and other community partners
- Engage residents and other stakeholders early and often to building support for community goals
- Connecting with other cities and adapt their approaches to support your own work.

NEXT STEPS

Over the next 5 years, City staff will work with community members to implement the 18 action items contained in Waterloo's strategy. The City has created an [Implementation Plan](#) to inform corporate budget and business planning. Maintaining existing service levels, while implementing the strategy, was identified as a priority. A Neighbourhood Development Coordinator secondment role was added to the team in September to create the additional capacity needed to move forward with the implementation plan. Since then the neighbourhood team has:



- Begun work to increase supports for affiliated neighbourhood associations (including financial, in-kind, and staff support);
- Explored initial options for event equipment for neighbourhoods;
- Drafted toolkits to empower residents to lead in their communities and better understand city processes (e.g. Neighbourhood Matching Fund, Outdoor Rinks);
- Streamlined the process to make Neighbourhood Matching Fund projects successful in implementation (e.g. review by Staff Feasibility Committee, funding decisions made by Community Grants Committee volunteers);
- Supported eight resident-led projects (totalling \$23,228) through the Neighbourhood

Matching Fund in fall 2018;

- Worked alongside the Town & Gown Cohesion subcommittee to coordinate two events in neighbourhoods around post-secondary institutions;
- Explored opportunities to enhance volunteer resources in partnership with the Volunteer Action Centre;
- Created a terms of reference for a citizen-centered Neighbourhood Leaders Team to build capacity, share information, reduce barriers and facilitate dialogue. This team will be launched in late February;
- Established the Mini-Grants for Neighbours Program (microgrant) to recognize, encourage and support neighbours to enrich community well-being through the support of individual initiatives focused on community building. This program will be launched in March;
- Coordinated preliminary conversations to explore the City's risk tolerance and willingness to support innovative neighbourhood projects and activities;
- Advanced the "Let's Explore" philosophy with internal stakeholders.

LEARN MORE

- [Waterloo's Neighbourhood Strategy: Supporting Resident-led Neighbourhood Community Building](#)
- [Waterloo's Neighbourhood Strategy: Implementation Plan](#)
- [Neighbourhood Matching Fund](#)



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