

Plan WITH Us Resident Panel

Report to Council

INTRODUCTION

What do a high school student, a realtor, a computer science grad, a pastoral associate, a newly minted Canadian, and a community health worker have in common? Well, if they are on the Plan WITH Us Resident Panel, they live in Kitchener, they love living in Kitchener, and they want Kitchener to be an even better place to live.

This Panel was an adventure, where a disparate group of individuals came together with common cause to tackle one of the Big Questions we all face: Where are we going?

Purpose of the Report

This report provides an overview of the purpose, composition and process that the City of Kitchener's Plan WITH Us Resident Panel participated in to support the development of the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan. It also describes the experience of participating on the Panel, and recommendations for the future. This report was written by members of the Resident Panel, and is part of our commitment to a transparent process - an open and honest reflection on the public participation in the development of the Strategic Plan.

BACKGROUND

Deliberative Democracy and How It Is Different

Leaders in public participation are shifting the ways some governments make difficult decisions. Encouraging new ways of thinking beyond traditional consultation, to include more deliberative approaches that strengthen trust and confidence and expand resident involvement in building their communities.

Consultation: Municipalities hold public meetings, distribute surveys, and host different kinds of workshops to allow decision-makers to hear directly from the people they represent, or from specific individuals, groups, and organizations that may be impacted by their decisions.

Deliberation: Is a process designed to determine what a group of people can agree to, rather than what as individuals they might like or want. This process produces a set of well-informed recommendations that can form the basis of future policy decisions, rather than generating a list of top-of-mind opinions. Deliberation is useful for tackling complex or controversial issues and empowering a group of citizen representatives to weigh different factors, exercising good judgment, and proposing a solution.

How is the Resident Panel different from a focus group?

Here are six features that distinguish this process:

1. **Duration:** Panelists invested at least 25 or more hours into serving on the Panel, including five in-person workshops
2. **Learning:** Panelists spent several hours of their time at home reading provided material, learning about the topics, and preparing for the workshops
3. **Public service:** Panelists were tasked with understanding and speaking for the needs of their community, even when they differed from their own concerns or preferences
4. **Consensus:** Panelists worked to reach consensus through dialogue on a series of detailed recommendations that were shared with staff after each workshop
5. **Public results:** The Panel's final report is being shared widely to build a public understanding of the panelists' recommendations and participation in the process
6. **Representation:** By using a process to randomly select a cross-section of the community that mirrors the demographics of the City to sit as Resident Panel members, the panelists' recommendations are more representative of the broader public

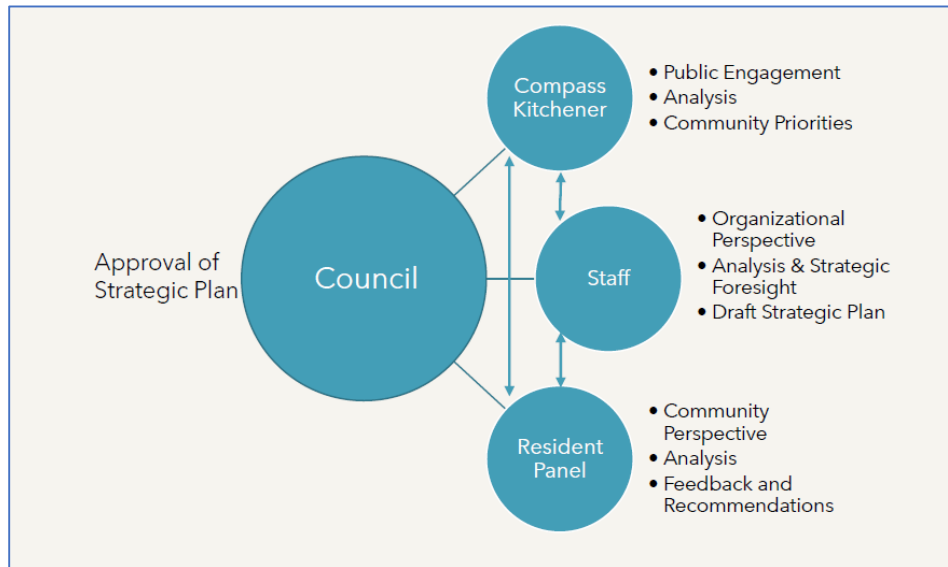
The Plan WITH Us Resident Panel

A recruitment process was conducted in the Fall of 2022, with a desire to recruit a diverse group of residents to participate as volunteers on the Resident Panel. A total of 168 applications were received following broad outreach to the community through social media, local newspaper, and direct emails to networks of community partners. Forty residents were then randomly selected based on demographic criteria that included ward representation, age, gender, representation of marginalized groups etc. Studies have shown that a group of this size can be considered representative of the broader community for the purposes of a Resident Panel.

Initially, some members had a perception that the Resident Panel would be a place for them to focus on expressing their own individual needs and desires, and not so focussed on working with others to come up with a collective response to the strategic plan. Setting the tone at the first meeting was critical to the success of the process. Making it clear that the purpose of the resident panel was to collaborate and engage on the strategic plan and work with City staff on this, allowed those who were not interested in that to drop out. Those who remained were committed to the process and the outcomes.

Resident Panelists had a unique opportunity to see and experience what City staff and Council do when they develop and consider the strategic plan. In the past, the public was consulted on their priorities, and the rest of the work to build the plan was done in the background by staff, and then presented to council for their approval. This time, panelists learned about the issues, saw the results of the public consultation, and made recommendations that were considered as the plan is being created.

Roles of Key Stakeholder Groups



The Resident Panel is one of several Key Stakeholder Groups in the Strategic Planning Process.

Compass Kitchener leads the Public Engagement process, including extensive engagement with the public, Advisory Committees, and hosts the Resident Panel. Compass Kitchener Analyses these inputs and defines the Community Priorities.

Staff bring an Organizational Perspective to the process. They analyse many inputs including the current state of the City, conduct Strategic Foresight, and draft the Strategic Plan.

The Resident Panel brings a broad and diverse Community Perspective. They Analyse the work that Staff have done, and provide recommendations to staff and City Council.

Council receives the input of each of these groups, and approves the Final Strategic Plan.

RESIDENT PANEL PROCESS

The Resident Panel was designed to provide broad and diverse community input as the Strategic Plan components were being developed to ensure staff were getting it right along the way. During each workshop staff would “show their work” and explain their decision making to Panelists, who would then provide feedback and recommendations at key milestones in the process. The recommendations were incorporated into the work, and influenced the next stage of the Strategic Planning Process. The chart below shows how each of the workshops aligned and were incorporated into the final stages of the Strategic Plan.

Prior to the start of the Resident Panel, a great deal of work was done to design the Strategic Planning Process, Implement a Staff Working Group, Conduct Extensive Public Engagement, Conduct a Current State Analysis, Conduct Strategic Foresight. This information was shared with the Resident Panel, and was the starting point for their role.			
Workshop	Date	Objectives	Final Stages of the Strategic Planning Process
1	30-Nov-22	Orientation to Resident Panel, Strategic Planning Overview, Results of Planning to Date, Understanding Community Priorities	ANALYSE COMMUNITY PRIORITIES & FORESIGHT
2	25-Jan-23	Review and Understand 20 Potential Strategic Goal Areas, Review Staff's Recommended Strategic Goal Areas and Principles, Provide Recommendations	DEFINE STRATEGIC GOAL AREAS
3	1-Mar-23	What Happened with the Feedback, the Budget and the Strategic Plan Learning, Review and Understand Strategic Goal Statements and Key Areas, Provide Recommendations	IDENTIFY AND PRIORITIZE KEY AREAS
4	12-Apr-23	What Happened with the Feedback, Housing and Urban Growth Learning, Review and Understand Outcomes Developed by Staff, Provide Recommendations	IDENTIFY POTENTIAL OUTCOMES
5	31-May-23	What Happened with the Feedback, Action Selection Process Explained, Review and Understand Proposed Actions, Provide Recommendations	IDENTIFY AND PRIORITIZE ACTIONS
After the Completion of the Resident Panel, Staff will Present a Draft Strategic Plan to City Council for their Consideration. Once approved, Compass Kitchener Advisory Committee will work with Staff to develop Indicators that measure the City's progress on the Strategic Goals.			

How the Resident Panel Functioned

A key function of the Resident Panel was to share different opinions, and learn from other people's perspectives. Doing so in a respectful way was supported by developing shared principles for how we work together, getting to know each other over a shared meal during each workshop, skilled facilitation and the thoughtful participation of Panelists.

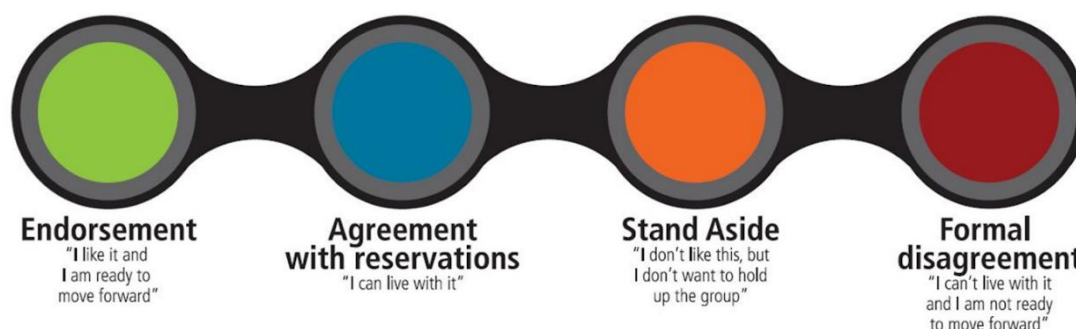
Each of the five workshops were four hours in length, and required Panelists to prepare in advance by reading a package of material designed to provide background information on the topics to be discussed in the session. The packages included videos to watch, charts with detailed information, articles to read etc. to ensure the majority of the time in session could be focussed on discussion and consensus building. The length of sessions and adding a fifth session was necessary to fully complete the process. Members engaged willingly in another session because their input was valued. Time invested is important to the quality of outcomes.

Each session included small group discussions with a staff facilitator. Feedback following Workshop 2 resulted in additional staff participation to take notes at each table, ensuring notes were captured accurately and voting was accurate. This change was an early example of staff's openness to make changes as requested right away, and not waiting for the end of the process. Having staff engage at the tables at the same level with Panelists was very beneficial, balanced and equal. The interactions were less about power and more about collaboration and active listening. We felt the staff were genuinely invested in the process and that their participation didn't feel like lip service. We all wanted to achieve a genuine collaborative outcome.

Staff were also able to speak to each other. For us, having representation from different areas of the City was helpful. City staff even expressed the positive nature of the experience for them

in breaking down silos across departments. Not all staff had the same knowledge or experience – they learned more about each other and their roles, and we learned more about them.

Panelists shared their individual thoughts on each topic area, and a summary of those ideas were shared with the large group. As a first step, table-level consensus was reached, followed by group-wide consensus using the following tool:



The consensus model was foundational to the success of the Panel. Working toward consensus really influenced how the Resident Panel feedback was developed – having a way to share different perspectives and to respectfully disagree with each other. Challenging issues that were difficult to resolve were worked through using the model and helped the Panel keep interactions constructive and not personal. The consensus model challenges people to formulate full thoughts around their point of view and ideas, which in turn creates better understanding by group members of individual perspectives and to openly consider them. The Panel represented very broad perspectives and different opinions, thanks to the diversity of the selection process from the outset. Sometimes seeing other points of view meant getting past our own perspectives to better consider others points of view and what is best for all.

At the completion of each workshop, the full list of recommendations (reached by consensus) was shared with the Staff Working Group and the Corporate Leadership Team. The recommendations were incorporated into the next phase of the Strategic Planning process, and a member of the Corporate Leadership Team attended the next workshop to report back on how the input was used.

An example of how this process worked:

The workshop began with a list of priorities for the strategic plan suggested by city staff, 20 in all, including among others civic engagement, housing, climate adaptation and mitigation, non-profit health, employment etc. After careful consideration, the 20 suggested Key areas were grouped into 5:

Belonging and Participation

Housing, land use and mobility

Environment and climate action

Economic prosperity and opportunity

Good Government

And under each of these areas were three to four key areas for strategic action to happen over the next 4 years. The resident panelists had a lot to share and say about each area and how to incorporate what was felt to be the best goals in each of them.

Some examples of feedback that the Panel shared that was incorporated into the draft strategic plan included:

- Identified language that was “intimidating” and needed to be more accessible
- Request for a greater focus on small businesses and support for industries beyond technology
- Empower, support and develop staff to work cohesively together (not siloed) to fulfill the organization's community-building purpose.
- Encouraged a “Let’s Talk Together” approach to working with residents - get away from the Us and Them – we’re all part of the solution – together we can solve the issue

Over time, the process of planning together became easier. Roles became more clear, trust developed between Panelists and each other, consensus was arrived at more quickly, and a growing appreciation for differences of opinion grew. A Panelist described it as disagreeing about ideas, while respecting each other as people. It also took time to build trust in staff and the process and see that input was being incorporated by staff in a meaningful way. A Panelist described being even more motivated to continue to provide input after staff “scrapped language that didn’t make sense to us and went back to the drawing board.”

Process Related Recommendations

- Future Resident Panels need a better room for community meetings like this – the rotunda, while beautiful, isn’t the best place for group discussions.
- Give people options to participate in person and virtually – hybrid, etc.
- The separate page on Engage Kitchener was helpful for sharing documents, asking questions and engaging between meetings. Promote this usage.
- Drop-off of participation should be evaluated. Perhaps there should be more time invested in the screening of volunteers. Share in advance the expectations for participation, to help them understand what they were getting into. They need to know that this is a collaborative exercise, “not a soap box.”
- We have to make a greater effort to communicate with people who don’t have English as a first language to encourage them to participate. We need to develop advocates or ambassadors within their communities who can share the messages with them in their own language.

IMPACT OF THE RESIDENT PANEL’S PARTICIPATION IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

How our perceptions and understanding of the City and planning processes evolved

Some people don't realize how hard it is to run a city – the trade-offs, planning for the future, different opinions, etc. is a lot to consider. More of that dialogue supported us at every level to build understanding. For some of us, it might have also been a first-time awareness on the limitations the City has with regard to some critical areas of planning, such as housing affordability and environmental/sustainability, that the Province sets the limits in many of those areas, and that the City, in some cases, can only play an advocacy role in the process. It is generally felt that we expanded our understanding of how the City works and the challenges and nuances to consider in strategic planning for a large and diverse population.

How we felt about our involvement and contribution to this deliberative engagement approach

We were engaged. We braved snowstorms, slick roads and COVID to participate, coming by foot, transit, personal motor vehicle, bicycle and mobility scooter. If it was nearly impossible to meet in-person, we participated remotely.

There was that much commitment.

This was an opportunity like we had never imagined. We were humbled and galvanized to participate, to share our experiences and learn from the experiences of others. The Resident Panel is a tool that could help increase communication with the community in the future.

Should this approach be limited to “big picture” items, or could it be used on smaller scale projects, to bring passionate people together to build understanding on issues? This would appear to be a scalable process.

Building relationships with people and understanding them is important. People's opinions of you change when you get to know them, which helps break down barriers and find common ground. Ongoing dialogue is important – that is what makes a difference — getting beyond episodic interactions that are often negative.

Working together on something creates a community bond. It was a great experience to adjust and expand our perspective based on the contributions of others. We became focused on the benefits and the outcomes. None of this would have been possible without the listening, sharing ideas, and deliberation.

This was a venture into authentic engagement, and we learned that making the effort to connect with people on a personal level will move the needle, not just check a box.

Recommendations to Council . . .

The methodology that created this diverse Residents Panel is worth using again. Because we were engaged with the big questions, we worked to overcome points of disagreement, and weren't focused on our differences as people.

This was a project with defined time limits that gave us motivation to complete it, to engage with one another on important issues. This format for engagement might be a way to make the most of the current volunteer trends where people tend to not commit for long-term roles but want to still have a meaningful impact.

The majority of people who participated in the Resident Panel were not known to council. This was not a group of “the usual suspects.” We had not stepped up before, but now we have. We have all come out of this with a better idea of how the City is run – a major opportunity for the City to take advantage of in the future.

Could Resident Panel members become ambassadors for their communities to connect with the City? Now that we have developed the trust that our opinions are respected, can we buddy up with staff support to offer experience and voices to our peers in the community? And the process showed how people with diverse opinions and experiences can contribute and speak up in a respectful way.

Keep us engaged.

. . . and Recommendations to Kitchener Citizens

Have a different mindset – as a resident of Kitchener, we are responsible for participating in decision-making and moving us forward. It only works if we all participate. Every contribution matters. Stay connected with what is happening in our City, and participate in any way that you can.

We need to get the message out about this process to the media and the broader community. We need to share these positive experiences in a variety of ways because everyone receives information differently. What we accomplished needs to be shared.

In the words of one panelist: “I spoke up and it made a difference.”

A Message From Staff

As a City of Kitchener employee who has worked with the community for over 20 years, I never questioned the value in including residents in the Strategic Planning Process. I have worked with many passionate community members who make a difference in this community every day. But even for me, the Resident Panel was different.

- Representation - selecting volunteers randomly to mirror the demographics of the community was exciting. We often hear from the same people when we engage with residents, this group was composed of almost entirely new voices. It is also the most diverse group of residents we have ever assembled. Not surprisingly, it produced a wide variety of opinions - just like those in our community.
- Showing Our Work - Sharing work with residents that was incomplete, and still in development for their feedback required vulnerability. They sometimes told us they didn't like what we presented. They sometimes told us our language didn't make sense to them. It also allowed us to test ideas that we were unsure about with a group of residents who were well informed and representative of the community. They encouraged us to be bolder than we might otherwise have been without their input along the way.

- Quality Input - In addition to telling us what they liked and didn't like, Panelists provided us with key input that influenced our thinking, and improved the plan significantly. Some examples include their suggestion that we be more flexible in our Strategic Plan - encouraging us to "Swerve within our lane" and be open to changing or adding actions throughout the four years of the plan based on changing circumstances that are not currently known. They clearly supported including a Goal Area focused on the City's internal capacity to improve core service and advance the other Strategic Goal Areas. They also showed great insight into the interconnected nature of the Goal Areas and Actions - sharing that this should be presented in a way that highlights the positive relationships between actions and how selecting some actions to invest in can produce multiple benefits for the community.
- Shared Learning - We knew going into the Resident Panel process that staff would learn a lot from Residents' perspectives. We hoped to provide learning opportunities for residents as well, when we shared information with them on how the City works. What we didn't fully appreciate was the amount of learning they would get from each other. Building consensus requires a considerable effort to understand and appreciate the viewpoints of others. This focused effort to understand, resulted in a strong bond between Panelists and a shared respect - regardless of their differences of opinion. There is a strong message here for communities that can be polarized around issues sometimes.
- Trust and Respect - By "pulling back the curtain" and involving residents in an open and transparent way in the strategic planning process, trust and respect was built between Panelists and staff. One Panelist said "I have a whole new respect for the staff who work at the City, the work that they do for our City." Many Panelists have offered to continue to be involved and work with staff on behalf of the community after seeing what is possible when we work together.

The 2023-2026 Strategic Plan will be transformational for our community, and I couldn't be more grateful for the contributions of the Resident Panel. You have truly made a difference, and I am excited to move forward together over the next 4 years.

Angie Fritz-Walters

Engagement and Program Manager, Strategic Plan