

SUBJECT: Advisory Committees of Council Governance Framework

TO: Committee of the Whole

FROM: Legal and Legislative Services
Legislative Services

Report Number: LLS-08-26

Wards Affected: All

Date to Committee: May 11, 2026

Date to Council: May 26, 2026

Recommendation

Approve the Advisory Committees of Council Framework attached as Appendix A to legislative services report LLS-08-26; and

Direct the Director of Legislative Services/City Clerk to conduct a review of the Advisory Committees of Council portfolio, applying the Framework to make recommendations on whether to maintain, combine or wind down committees and report back to Committee of the Whole in Q1 2027 to align with the new term of Council; and

Direct the Director of Legislative Services/City Clerk to update terms of reference, the Public Appointment Policy and other related documents as required to support the revised committee portfolio and governance framework.

Executive Summary

Purpose of report:

Advisory Committees of Council (ACOC) are volunteer-based committees established by municipal council to provide advice, diverse perspectives and recommendations on specific topics. Some advisory committees are required by provincial legislation (i.e. accessibility advisory committees), while others are enabled by provincial legislation (i.e. heritage advisory committees). Several non-legislated committees are established by city council to support a specific need for community input on a strategic direction, plan or policy. ACOCs are an

important tool for civic engagement and provide one form of community engagement to support council in its decision making.

The city has engaged the community on opportunities to enhance the advisory committee structure since 1997, with the most recent round of engagement occurring in 2019. Throughout the consultation, several consistent themes emerged. These include concerns that ACOCs are not well integrated into the city's decision-making processes, that there is a lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities, outdated or unclear terms of reference, limited training opportunities, gaps in representation and diversity of perspectives and insufficient staff support and resources.

The purpose of this report is to build on information gathered through engagement. Clerks and engagement staff believe the insights and feedback from past engagement remain relevant and aligned. This report proposes a framework to guide the city's decisions about ACOCs going forward. The framework provides guidelines to review the current committee portfolio and to determine when to establish an ACOC in the future. The framework supports the development of an effective and inclusive committee portfolio that aligns with Horizon 2050 - the community's long-term vision and strategic plan, and the city's Community Engagement Charter.

Recommendation Report

Background

Council, at its meeting on December 17, 2018, directed staff to conduct a comprehensive review of citizen advisory committees. Report [MO-01-18](#), *Council Member Appointments to Boards and Committees*, directed staff to “conduct an overall review of citizen advisory committees, including consultation with the public and citizen advisory committee members, and report back to Council with recommendations and options for any changes to improve effectiveness by Q2 2019.”

During Q1 2019, clerk’s department staff worked with the internal engagement team to plan and implement a community engagement strategy aimed at gathering a broad range of input from across the community. Information was collected through online surveys, interviews with committee members and staff, and citizen action labs. In September 2019, a Review Team consisting of five community members was assembled to analyze the data received through the engagement.

At a Council workshop held on February 25, 2020, the Review Team presented its findings through report [CWC-03-20](#), *Report of the Volunteer Members of the Citizen Advisory Committee Review Team*.

The final staff report, [CL-17-20](#) *Advisory Committee Review*, was presented to Council at its meeting on September 28, 2020. This report and its recommendations represented the fourth occasion when residents and stakeholders were asked to provide advice to council on ACOC reform since 1997. Throughout this extended period of consultation, consistent challenges continue to be identified:

- Limited connection between advisory input and Council decision-making
- Unclear roles, mandates, expectations and alignment to city priorities
- Outdated or inconsistent terms of reference
- Gaps in representation and diversity of membership
- Insufficient staff support and subject matter expertise

Collectively, these challenges have limited advisory committees’ ability to operate at their full potential. The engagement revealed that ACOCs were not being used as effectively as they could be. Additionally, the ACOC model is not well aligned with the current engagement environment or the City’s evolving strategic priorities.

Analysis

The City of Burlington's experience with ACOCs is not unique, with many Ontario municipalities engaging in reviews and seeking reform. In 2023 the City of Guelph undertook extensive research and engagement to review its Advisory Committees of Council. The work included a review of academic literature and government documents, as well as extensive engagement with Council and the community through surveys, interviews, and public sessions. This review resulted in a well-researched governance framework for advisory committees that was approved by Guelph City Council in Nov. 2023.

Like Burlington, the City of Guelph acknowledged there were few resources available to guide them on how to create, design, operate, evaluate, reform and dissolve ACOCs and they sought to improve how ACOCs functioned having identified concerns regarding how well committees were serving Council, how they fit in with other community engagement efforts, how best to support their work and how to bring clarity to their role. Guelph's approved Framework responds to the concerns, fills the gaps and provides a guide to the city's future decisions about ACOCs.

Staff propose that Burlington build from the community engagement of 2019 and the work completed by the City of Guelph to adopt a similar framework model.

Guiding Principles:

The following are guiding principles for the development of future ACOCs and the evaluation of current ACOCs in Burlington:

- **Alignment with the Community Engagement Charter**

ACOCs should be viewed as one tool within the broader suite of engagement options outlined in Burlington's Community Engagement Charter spectrum of participation. An ACOC should be considered when the level of engagement identified meets the criteria for Involve/Collaborate on the spectrum. To ensure the most effective alignment with the Community Engagement Charter, staff should assess the intended level of participation and determine whether an Advisory Committee of Council (ACOC) is the most appropriate mechanism, or whether other engagement approaches on the spectrum would better achieve the desired outcome. This assessment should prioritize a coordinated, collaborative approach that leverages existing engagement tools, avoids duplication, and ensures clarity of roles between ACOCs and other engagement activities.

- **Alignment with Horizon 2050**

Alignment with Horizon 2050 strategic pillars is critical to ensuring advisory committees deliver real impact—through sustained contributions to key initiatives and a meaningful role in shaping the City's future priorities. This includes structuring ACOCs around key strategic

themes, ensuring mandates are forward-looking and outcome-oriented and enabling ACOCs to contribute to long-term planning and policy development. This shift will help move advisory committees toward a more strategic and integrated model.

Resourcing and Support

A critical factor in effectiveness is ensuring that ACOC's are adequately resourced and supported. This includes assigning department subject matter experts, legislative services staff for procedural, logistical, and administrative support, and appropriate financial resources. Standardized training and onboarding, along with clear and consistently applied terms of reference, further support this work. Regular review of roles, expectations, and resource commitments helps ensure committees remain aligned with departmental priorities and positioned to deliver informed advice.

Deliberative Input and Continuity

Advisory committees are most effective when engaged early on complex or long-term initiatives, where their input can help inform direction rather than solely reacting to final recommendations. A deliberative approach grounded in learning, consideration of diverse perspectives, and discussion of potential solutions can strengthen the quality and relevance of advice. To be successful, engagement with ACOC's needs to be clearly defined. Establishing the scope, timing, and intent of engagement in advance helps align expectations and ensures committee input supports, rather than delays staff work.

Connection to Decision-Making

It is beneficial for Council to consider input from ACOCs in its decision-making and for ACOCs to understand how their advice is being received. Clear communication between Council and advisory committees contributes positively to the legitimacy of the ACOC and the understanding that their contributions are valued. This can be supported through staff reports that reflect committee advice and regular opportunities for ACOC members to delegate to committee and council.

Diversity of perspectives

Advisory committees will reflect the communities they serve by bringing forward a wide range of perspectives. Barriers to participation should be identified and actively addressed to enable broader involvement in alignment with the city's Public Appointment Policy. Committees will include residents from diverse backgrounds, including different locations, languages, cultures, abilities, and lived experiences, to ensure more inclusive and representative input.

Next Steps: A two-phased approach

Other municipalities have begun evolving their advisory models to reflect similar principles, including reducing the number of advisory committees, appropriately resourcing committees,

aligning them to strategic priorities and introducing more flexible, time-limited structures. The experience of the City of Guelph provides one example of this shift, demonstrating the value of a more structured and strategic framework. Burlington can build on these insights while tailoring an approach that reflects its own priorities, resourcing, engagement charter, and community context.

Following the approach used by the City of Guelph, staff propose a two-phased approach. Phase One seeks Council approval of the framework outlined in Appendix A to this report. In Phase Two, staff will apply the framework to the existing ACOC portfolio to assess alignment and effectiveness.

To inform the assessment in Phase Two, staff will engage and gather input from current and former advisory committee members, community stakeholders participating on ACOC's (i.e. Burlington Public Library) and department staff liaisons. Findings from the framework assessment and engagement will be presented to Committee of the Whole early in 2027. At that time, staff will bring forward a report to advise whether committees in the current ACOC portfolio should be maintained, combined or phased out.

Recommendation Details

Staff recommend approval of the Advisory Committee Framework attached as Appendix A, which establishes clear criteria for determining when an ACOC is the appropriate engagement mechanism within the City's broader suite of public participation tools. Applying the framework from the outset will help ensure committees are established only where they are the right fit, strengthening their effectiveness and long-term success, and dissolved where appropriate

The framework introduces a more strategic, streamlined, and meaningful approach to establishing ACOCs, and is intended to better support both Council decision-making and community engagement. It aligns advisory committees with the City's Community Engagement Charter, particularly the "Involve and Collaborate" levels of the Burlington Spectrum of Participation, as well as the long-term priorities outlined in Horizon 2050. It also reinforces a broader engagement model in which advisory committees function as one component of an integrated public participation system.

Advisory committees remain a valuable part of Burlington's engagement ecosystem; however, the current model requires redesigning to improve effectiveness, strengthen community involvement, enhance decision-making, and better support long-term strategic priorities through appropriate resourcing.

Key Dates & Milestones

- Approval of Advisory Committee of Council Framework – May 2026
 - Engagement on Advisory Committee Portfolio review - Q3 and Q4 2026
 - Advisory Committee Portfolio recommendations to Committee of the Whole – Q1 2027
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Implications

Budget and staff resource implications of the Advisory Committees of Council portfolio will be outlined in the report back to Committee in 2027.

References

[MO-01-18](#) Council member appointments to boards and committees.

[CWC-03-20](#) Report of the volunteer members of the Citizen Advisory committee review team.

[CL-17-20](#) Advisory committee review.

City of Guelph - A Governance [Framework](#) for Advisory Committees of Council

Strategic Alignment

- Designing and delivering complete communities
 - Providing the best services and experiences
 - Protecting and improving the natural environment and taking action on climate change
 - Driving organizational performance
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Appendices:

A. Proposed Advisory Committee Framework

Draft By-laws for Approval at Council:

- None.

Notifications:

City of Burlington Advisory Committee Chairs

Report Approval:

All reports are reviewed and approved by the Commissioner, Head of Corporate Affairs, Chief Financial Officer, and Commissioner of Legal and Legislative Services/City Solicitor.