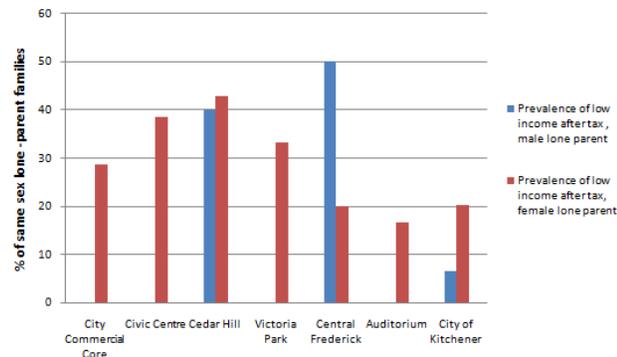


Social Issues That Affect the Quality of Life in Kitchener

The following topics have emerged through the work of the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo (SPCKW):

- Community Social Planning
- Civic Engagement
- Strong Neighbourhoods
- Access and Inclusion
- Poverty Elimination
- Environment
- Digital Inclusion
- Access to Information



This document contains background information used to open discussion on these various topics during the 2014 municipal election. There was strong interest shown by a range of participants to engage further community discussions to better understand the issues and to set direction for taking action on finding solutions.

Since the Fall Municipal Election, all Kitchener and Waterloo City and Regional Councillors were invited to meet to discuss priorities. Also consulted were community reference and action groups supported by SPCKW. Through these discussions, three priorities were set to guide the work done by SPCKW for the next 3-4 years. These topics are:

- Strong Neighbourhoods
- Poverty Elimination
- Access to Information



The background papers for these three issues are included in the next pages. It was understood that the other issues would be addressed through either the topics themselves or in the process by which SPCKW approached these topics.

In addition to the three priorities and approach, there was agreement of the importance of having 'community' based social planning. Hence SPCKW staff and Board agreed to establish a citizen committee that would provide a sounding board for reviewing social development issues to guide the focus of SPCKW's work. The Council had its first meeting in October 2015.

Strong Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood life has changed. There is greater cultural and ethnic diversity. Our lives are less dependent on physical space. Work, education and entertainment opportunities are now spread across larger geographic areas. Communities of interest and convenience are taking over communities based on space and connections are made across the globe thanks to the Internet and technology. Having neighbourhood based supports for people in vulnerable life stages is as important as ever, just as belonging and inclusion are necessary for a meaningful civic engagement.

How a neighbourhood is planned and built defines where people live and what is available nearby. This has an impact on how people live. Both the physical built community infrastructure and the social environment, including programs and services, are important to people's health, sense of wellbeing and ability to connect. A strong neighbourhood is one in which people feel they belong despite their differences. Not only can this foster meaningful civic engagement but greater safety and readiness in times of crisis.

Kitchener is broadening its strategy to encourage people to make their neighbourhoods safer, friendlier and more appealing so they will want to live there and do things with each other.

We've still got a way to go ...

- More public spaces that are accessible & welcoming (e.g. location, cost).
- Improve pedestrian safety and walkability for all ages and abilities.
- Plan for the needs of an aging population so people can choose where they live.
- Build the physical infrastructure of the community so it is equitable across neighbourhoods.
- Intentionally support vulnerable neighbourhoods (e.g. socially diverse, low income or going through major physical infrastructure changes).
- Provide support for problem solving in neighbourhoods.
- Invest in social infrastructure to build relationships (i.e. trust and reciprocity) among those living and working in neighbourhoods to increase safety and disaster readiness.
- Integrate and decentralize services in neighbourhoods to improve people's access to supports, thus creating healthier, more resilient and sustainable places to live.

Things to talk about:

- Why are neighbourhoods important?
- How do we more effectively support people to take initiative, or act collectively, on their concerns for their neighbourhood or on decisions that impact their neighbourhood?
- What role do public bodies, community organizations and community members have to ensure that neighbourhoods are healthy and resilient?



It costs less to keep people healthy and housed than it costs to address social, health and economic impacts of poverty. The loss of well-paying jobs, inadequate social assistance rates and significant cuts to government funded support services mean more people must survive on limited resources.

It has been calculated that *Ontario Works* recipients in Waterloo Region need an additional \$200/month to cover their basic food and shelter costs.¹ Current social assistance rates, and the minimum wage, fail to ensure a decent quality of life that includes adequate shelter, food, clothing, transportation, communication, recreation & culture, and participation in the community.

Each local municipal government (the region, cities and townships) and school board has an immediate and crucial role to play in contributing to quality of life in the community and ensuring dignity and respect for those who live in poverty.

We've still got a way to go ...

- Endorse increases to social assistance and to minimum wage and adopt a living wage.
- Ensure there is an adequate community infrastructure for healthy and resilient living.
- Build & maintain affordable & supportive housing that includes outreach programs.
- Adopt policies that will improve availability of, and access to, healthy food in the region.
- Make sure people get help, when and how they need it, by improving collaboration between social services, non-profit community groups and peer support groups.
- Ensure ample free & low-cost recreation/cultural activities and programs are available.
- Open up or create more public spaces that are welcoming and accessible for everyone.
- Collaborate with experienced community partners to ensure inclusive public engagement for creating and implementing local strategies to eliminate poverty.

Things to talk about:

- What role do municipal governments and school boards have in reducing the impact of poverty?
- How can everyone (local public bodies, community organizations and community members) work together to eliminate poverty?
- What can local elected officials do to advocate for a greater equality of income distribution?

¹ Regional Municipality of Waterloo, 2014

Access to Information

Community information centres have been in Canadian communities for more than 50 years and are important to help understand a community's the social support infrastructure. In Waterloo Region, the first community information program was established in 1972. Technology has changed and, the community service landscape is continually shifting, but the basic information service provided by the Community Information Centre of Waterloo Region is much the same in 2015 as it was in 1972.

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in on-line information access with a proliferation of information coming from a range of sources, some reliable, some not. This situation contributes to information overload that can make it more challenging for people to find the help they need. Thus, there has also been a corresponding increase in the need for direct person to person mediated support to access appropriate, accurate and reliable information and for customized information products tailored to specific needs.

Information access issues were first identified by youth and seniors in 2004. These issues have since been validated for other demographic groups, including persons with disabilities and new immigrants:

- Systems are often difficult to use.
- Information formats are not efficient.
- There is a need for multiple formats and points of access.
- 'Human connectors' are not approachable or knowledgeable.

To be accessible, information must be: timely and available when people need it; current and up-to-date; easy to use; practical and concrete; clear with no jargon; relevant; and complete for people's needs.

We've still got a way to go ...

- Create policies that recognize community information as a public good and a human right.
- Collaborate with the Community Information Centre WR to minimize duplication and to make better use of information that is already being maintained.
- Provide funding to support projects to design systems and information formats for the natural ways people seek and use information.
- Provide support to ensure that training is available to help people use information systems well.

Things to talk about:

- What information do people need to help them in everyday life and in times of need or crisis?
- How can we be sure that trusted, reliable and useful information is available to everyone who needs it, when they need it and in ways that are accessible and meaningful?
- What role do public bodies (governments, institutions) have in ensuring information needs are met and what are the limits to their role?



Community Social Planning

The community needs concrete ways for people to contribute to decision making and be encouraged to take personal responsibility for creating the community they want.

*“Social planning is a local, democratic system for setting priorities, arriving at equitable compromises and taking action. It supports community needs and interests in social, cultural, economic, and environmental affairs. It is a process for building community well-being.”*² Social planning is also community development and capacity building, as it brings together individuals, groups, communities, and governments to work toward enhancing a community’s quality of life. Social planning encourages residents to become active in their community and to develop their full potential.

Social planning was introduced locally through the formation of the Social Planning Council of Kitchener-Waterloo (SPCKW) to provide a community-based foundation for this work in Kitchener, Waterloo and surrounding communities. SPCKW shares four key values³ in common with other groups concerned about social justice, environmental sustainability and democratic renewal:

Equality *Legacy for the future* *Compassion* *Community of voices*

Since the 1960’s, the needs of various population groups have been explored and discussed and significant social issues have been tackled from affordable housing, homelessness and the widening income gap to digital inclusion and neighbourhood engagement. Work of the Social Planning Council has helped to establish Kitchener’s ward system and Compass Kitchener, the Region’s Social Services Department, and Waterloo’s selection as Intelligent Community of the world. In short, the work of this community organization has been instrumental in planning a healthy and viable community.

We’ve still got a way to go ...

- Funding cuts have eroded local community capacity to plan.
- There are multiple entities engaged in social planning, but few have a direct or clear accountability to the community or to those who are most vulnerable within it.
- Significant changes continue to happen in the physical, social and economic environment that impact people’s lives and attempts to respond are often not known, sporadic or not seen as credible by decision makers.

Things to talk about:

- What are the most important social or ‘people’ needs to deal with now?
- How can local social planning processes be better supported, especially for those issues that are not easy to deal with or must have diverse perspectives to resolve (e.g. poverty; inclusion)?
- What needs to be in place now to ensure our community, as a whole, is better prepared to respond to continuing and emerging social needs and concerns?



² Michael Clague (1993). *A Citizen’s Guide to Community Social Planning*. Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia, p. 4.

³ SPCKW (Feb, 2013) *What Drives Your Community Action Forum*