



What We Heard Report

October 2025

Prepared by Topent Consulting for the
Township of Centre Wellington

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	03
2. What We Heard	10
2.1 What is working well	10
2.2 Areas for improvement	11
2.3 Barriers to engagement and how to address	14
2.4 Hopes for engagement	17
2.5 What makes engagement meaningful and effective	18
2.6 Communicating about engagement	21
3. Evaluation of Engagement Success	23
4. Next Steps	26
Appendix A: Current Issues Important to the Community	27



1. Introduction

About this project

The Township of Centre Wellington has made a commitment to advancing its practice and culture of engagement across the organization.

While departments are already frequently engaging with the community on a variety of topics, there is no standard framework for how to do this in a consistent, transparent and effective way.

This project aims to fill this gap by establishing the Township's very first Community Engagement (CE):

- Charter
- Strategy
- Staff Toolkit
- Action Plan

Part of this work included engagement with the community to understand their experiences, needs and expectations for when the Township engages with them. This report provides a summary of what we heard during this engagement process.

Inputs to inform CE

A variety of information is being used to help inform and shape the Township's CE program:



Public and staff input from this engagement process.



Research of success and learnings from other Canadian municipalities.



International standards of engagement

What Is "Engagement"?

"An intentional process with the purpose of working in inclusive and respectful ways to shape decisions, actions, impacts, or change. It is: purposeful and goal driven, trust and relationship focused, values based and people centred, inclusive and equity centred, and impact and outcome oriented."

- As defined by The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2)



Engagement Overview

Engagement was launched June 14 and was completed on September 21, 2025.

Over **99** days, **530** people participated in **39** different **community events and spaces**.

A variety of engagement opportunities were offered to gather input about:

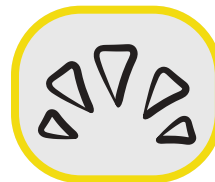
- Current engagement experiences, expectations, areas of excellence and ideas for improvement
- Barriers to participation and measures to address
- Principles and measures of success for community engagement
- How best to communicate about engagement



Community Conversations

All-ages workshops throughout the Township.

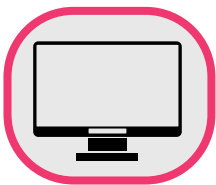
- Fergus Legion
- Jefferson Elora Community Centre (daytime + evening)
- Belwood Hall
- Victoria Park Seniors Centre



Pop ups

Interactive engagement at existing community events.

- Volunteer Fair
- Home and Leisure Show
- Key Township Meeting
- CW Volunteer Fair
- Strawberry Festival
- CW Pride Community Celebration
- Elora Fergus Downtown Shuttle
- Elora Farmers Market
- Twilight at Templin Gardens
- Multicultural Festival
- CW Chamber Business Night
- Belsyde Avenue Apartments
- Fergus Seniors Centre
- Jefferson Elora Community Centre
- Elora Public Library
- Downtown Fergus
- Stait Park



Online Engagement

A survey and discussion boards on ConnectCW.ca.



**1,076
Visitors**



Virtual Lunch Talks

Online, facilitated group discussions over lunch time via Zoom.





Targeted Conversations*

Community members offered to bring groups together and invited us to facilitate discussions:

- CW Food Bank
- CW Toastmasters
- Pine Meadows Retirement Community

Targeted one-on-one and on-request interviews were also held with community members

**An additional opportunity to connect with CW Pride was being explored at the time this report was written.*



Township Conversations

- All-staff workshops
- Advisory Committees: DEI, Healthy Communities, Economic Development Prosperity & Growth, Joint Accessibility



Host a Conversation

Guides provided for community members to host their own conversations.



Coffee Chats

At various coffee shops across the township.

Equity Considerations

An equity lens was used to design an inclusive engagement process to support hearing from diverse and often missing voices. Barriers to participation were identified and the following strategies were used:

- Go to places in the community where people are already going.
- Provide multiple in-person engagement options, over multiple weeks, at different locations, days and times of day.
- Allow for participation at any time, online.
- Make events family/child friendly and communicate this.

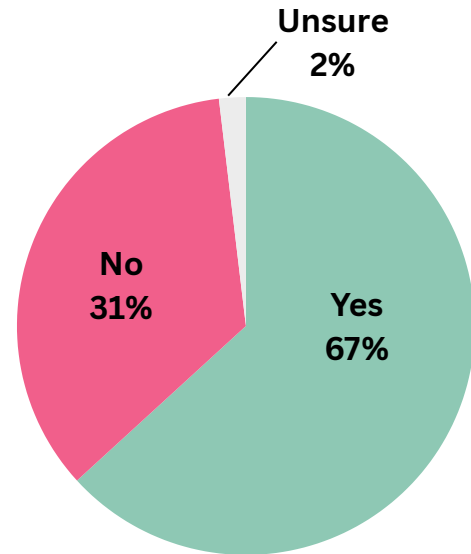
- Hold events in accessible facilities.
- Extend the offer for alternate formats, supports and accommodations.
- Invite people various ways, including in-person.
- Invite community partners to host conversations to reach specific groups.
- Explain the project purpose, importance of input, decision-making factors, commitment to using feedback, and timelines.
- Report back what was heard and impact on decisions.



Who We Heard From*

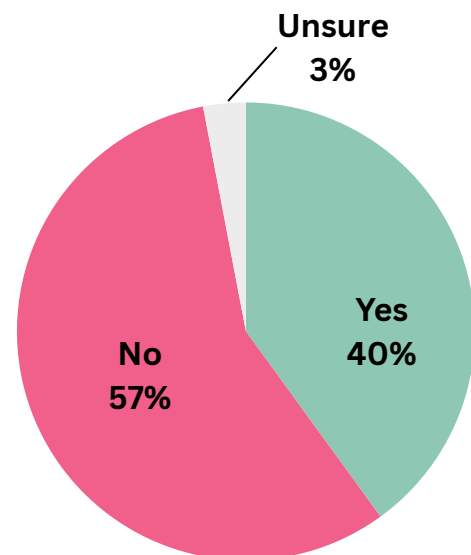
* Demographic information was not provided by all participants.

Those **who've participated** in a public engagement activity with the Township of Centre Wellington **in the past:**



n=157

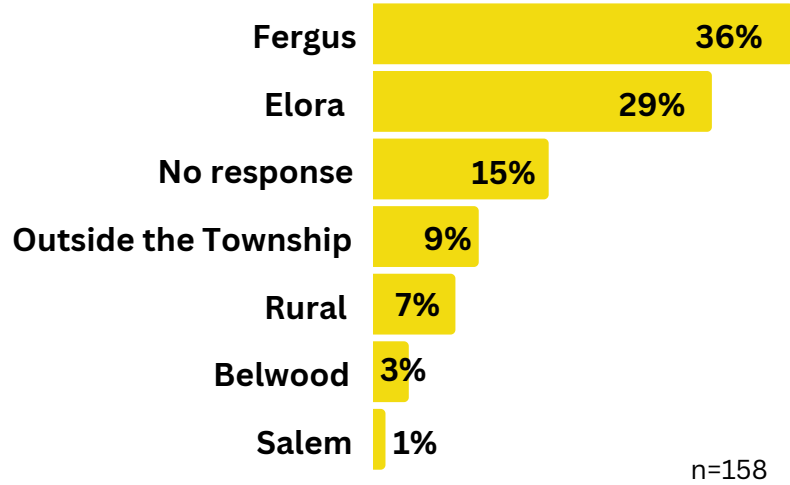
Those **who've visited ConnectCW** in the past:



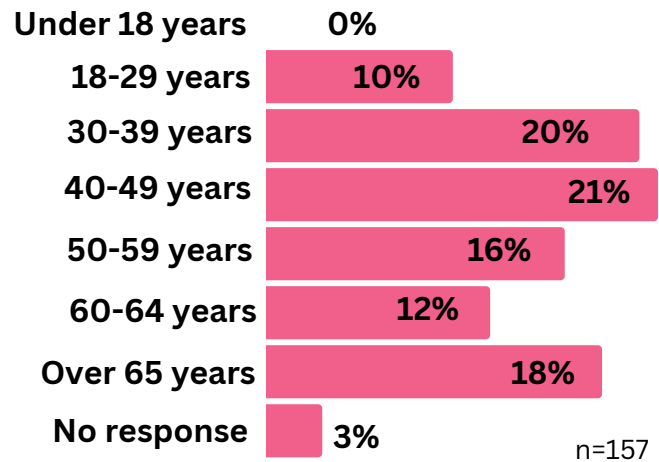
n=143



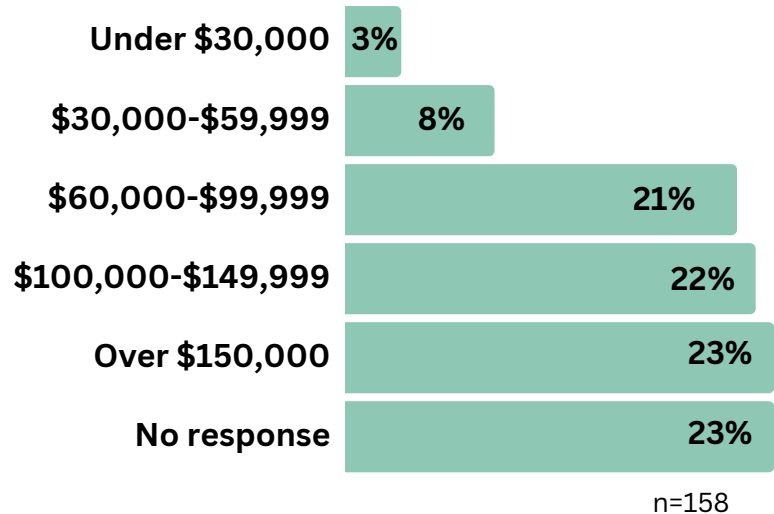
Where participants **live**:



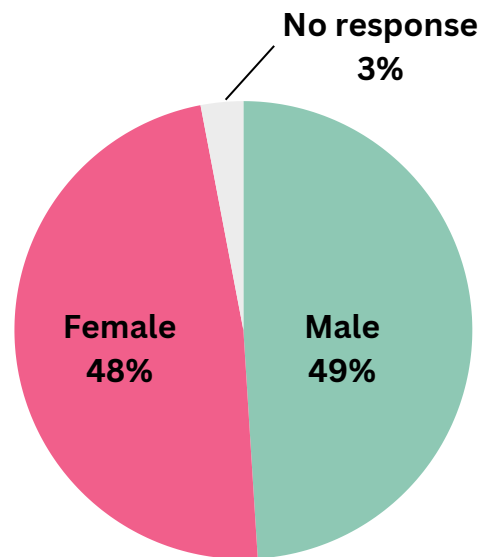
Age of participants:



Household total income before taxes:

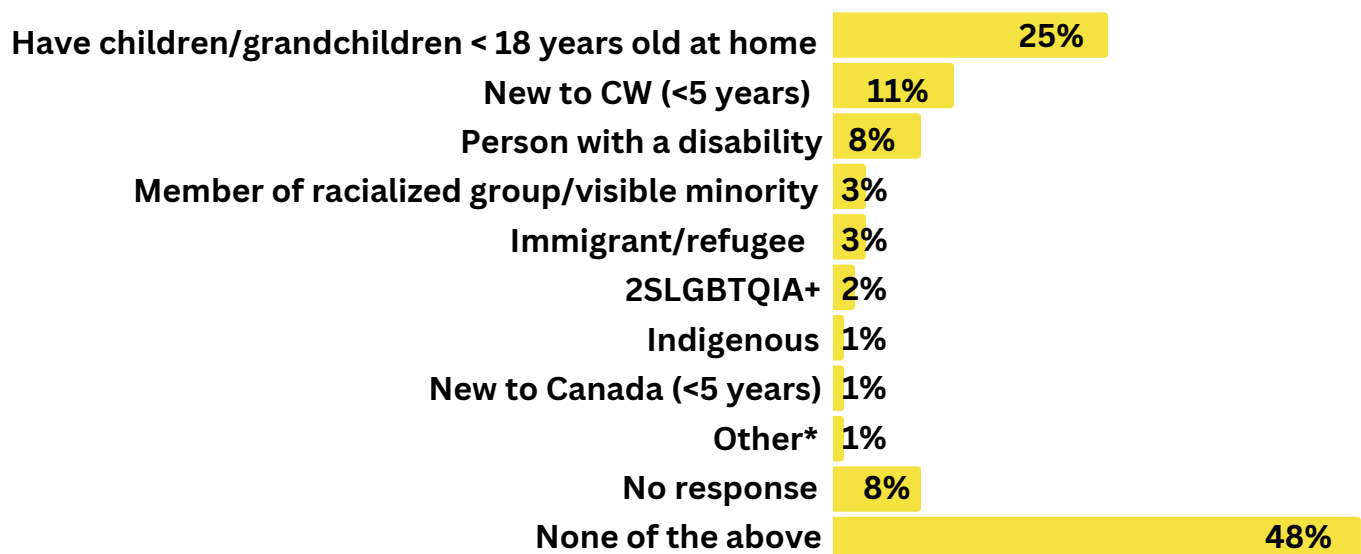


Gender identity:



n=158

Other identities:



n=151



Methodology Limitations

There were some limitations in the process and data collected that should be considered when reviewing this What We Heard Report.

- The engagement questions focused specifically on gathering feedback on people's experiences and ideas. The data sometimes results in tensions where some participants feel the Township is doing well in an area and others do not share that sentiment.
- The values-based input collected is not market research and is not a statistically representative sample of opinions at this point in time. The engagement process focused on gathering input and ideas to inform possible ways forward.
- Not every participant provided input to every question, including demographics and evaluation.
- As most engagement events were open to the public, and demographic information was not always collected, the data is not segmented by demographics.
- Community partners were contacted to reach the youth voice; however, these opportunities were not completed before this report was written.
- Participants mentioned issues not in the scope of this project; these can be found in Appendix A.



With Gratitude

Thank you to everyone who showed up, gave their time and shared their experiences, frustrations and hopes with us.

You didn't just give us data, you gave us perspective about what matters most to the community and about how the Township needs to show up when it engages with you in the future.



2. Findings

2.1 What Is Working Well

Participants highlighted several key areas that contributed to a positive experience when engaging with the Township in the past.

Engagement opportunities provided

Participants appreciate when the Township provides opportunities for the community to provide their input, noting there seems to be more than in the past. People appreciate the variety of formats, particularly when the Township comes to events where they already are, the opportunity to hear other perspectives and how well planned and prepared they are. Examples included ConnectCW, Key Township meeting, and the Mayor townhall.

"They provide opportunities for us to give feedback on key projects. Feels like there's more opportunities now than previously."

"The coffee chats idea is great, very laid back in a comfortable space, and supporting a local business."

Surveys

Participants appreciate the surveys that the Township offers, finding them to be quick, easy, accessible, simple, understandable and concise.

Effective communications

Many felt that the Township is doing a good job at communicating information to the public, appreciating the multiple formats used (posters, social media, website, newspaper, email, newsletter, subscription for updates, public information centres, ConnectCW, community calendar).

Feeling heard and valued

Some participants feel listened to and heard, recognize the Township's sincere effort, and see their input used, resulting in improved outcomes.

Access to staff

Participants appreciate in-person engagements for the connections and the ability to speak directly to staff who they feel care, are receptive, respectful and responsive.

"I'm really happy with the staff that have come out to Belwood."

Information shared openly

Through engagement experiences, participants have received useful information that has improved their

"Disclosure builds trust."



2.2 Areas for improvement

Participants were asked about what could be improved when engaging with the Township.

Open and transparent follow up

The most frequently mentioned issue identified by participants was the lack of follow up after they've provided input. They are left wondering what happened with their input and what was the final decision. When decisions are communicated, it's not always done clearly or with an explanation of how they were made and why. The decision making process is unclear.

"The Township listens to us but there's no explanation of how decisions get made and we don't know why."

"When you say you can't do something tell me why."

"Even if news is bad or not desired, share it as much as you would the good news. Be transparent and don't hide."

"Acknowledge what has been heard."

Consider input provided

Given the lack of follow up, participants often feel that their concerns have not been addressed and that their input has not been considered or reflected in the outcomes. There is often a sense that engagement is happening too late in a project to have any meaningful

impact and that decisions have already been made. As a result, participants feel unheard.

"Budget engagement a lot of time and effort went into giving input, express concerns, but no impact."

"Frustrated by experiences when input is asked and then you find out your input has no place in the decision process."

"Why even ask us – looks like you don't care, waste of time and money."

"Check box engagement to say it's done but not actually used."

"I'm concerned staff make decisions and Council just approves to make the decision easy."

"I felt that a decision had already been made before the public survey went out and throughout the engagement process, there lacked transparency. At no time, was any explanation provided as to why the least preferred option (at least from the public survey) was selected and there was evidence that the Mayor and Council at that time were 'influenced' by a local advocacy group."

Accountability

Some noted that when decisions are made, they are not always followed through. Commitments are not always met.

"Who will hold staff and Council accountable to the CE Charter?"



Engagement and information fatigue

There is a feeling that the Township is asking for a lot of input from the community, both in the number of questions they ask for each project and the number of projects being taken to community. Some feel there is a lot information required to understand the context to give meaningful feedback, and not always enough time.

"I don't feel motivated to engage because I don't understand."

Improve communications

Not everyone knows where to find information about projects or how to get updates, and are interested in receiving this information directly rather than having to find it themselves.

Information shared and questions asked are not always clear or in plain language, especially for complex issues.

ConnectCW is useful but some find there is too much information, it's not always up to date or easy to navigate.

"I would appreciate bi-weekly or monthly updates on projects, even if there isn't an official update."

"Not everyone knows how the system works and it needs to be communicated."

"Connect CW and CW newsletters are great to keep people informed, just need to get more people signed up and receiving them."

Be more inclusive

It seems that often the same type of people participate, some voices are often missing (ex. youth, seniors) and there isn't diversity of demographics, backgrounds or ethnicity. Those who are most vocal seem to dominate the conversation and be heard over others. People would like to see different and more voices welcomed, providing spaces that support this.

"Understand what people need to participate, (example food, safe spaces)."

"Child friendly, to create sense of civic responsibility and understand how government works at a young age."

"Things could have gone differently if not only the strong opinions were listened to."

Build relationships

People would like a more relational approach, take time to get to know people and build relationships, interact directly and in person, centre people in design and decision making, give back and create connections among the community.

"CW has changed, we've lost trust, lost relationships."



Be more accessible

Participants expressed accessibility issues related to timing of in-person engagement events, location, lack of transportation, language, non-child/family friendly, engagement fatigue, inappropriate venues (too small, too loud) and not having enough time to reflect and provide thoughtful input.

"Don't do a cookie cutter approach. Not one size fits all approach."

Increase awareness of opportunities

Participants aren't always aware of the engagement opportunities or where to go to find them, particularly those who are not frequently online or who are new to the community.

"Show up at grocery stores, attach information to swim lesson report cards – do everything you can to get information out."

"Market engagement and brand it to have it be part of the public's consciousness."

"Have a person responsible for sharing info in their community."

Other concerns:

- Not knowing who to contact in the Township (ex. Council, staff).
- Not understanding who is responsible for an issue (ex. Township, County, other government).
- Staff are not always able to answer questions, are not the right people, there is no further followup to get the information.
- Lack of Council presence at engagement events to help their understanding of community concerns.

"I want Council here to hear our feedback."

- Slow, or no response to calls and emails made to staff and Council.
- Not knowing how to participate in Council meetings or how to discuss issues not on the agenda.
- Not enough time to prepare for Council meetings.
- Difficulty understanding bylaw notifications.
- When issues are submitted through Report It, there is no acknowledgement or follow up.
- Township website is not easy to navigate.

"Educate people about the Township civics, levels of government, municipal, county, provincial, federal government. Do this ongoing. Make it a part of every engagement opportunity. Talk about how government works to address misinformation."



2.3 Barriers to Engagement and How to Address

The top three most significant barriers frequently mentioned and suggestions for solutions included:

BARRIERS

Unaware of opportunities

Many have never been asked to participate, don't know where to find out about opportunities, find out too late or aren't on social media or on sites the Township uses.

"We lost our neighbourhood delivery boy and now we don't get the paper to our house."

SOLUTIONS

Advertise in community

- At convenient locations where people are already going (ex. mall, libraries, post offices, community hubs, Township facilities, stores, grocery stores).
- Use community partners to promote.

Promote in multiple ways

- Use multiple channels, online and off line (ex. ads, emails, radio, website, bill inserts, letters, social media).
- Encourage others to share.

Develop branding for engagement

- Promote ConnectCW.



BARRIERS

Participants don't believe it will make a difference

Many have not felt, or are uncertain that they will be listened to, that they can influence change, that their opinions matter or that the issue is important or relevant to them. There is no transparency or followup and a lack of trust that anything will happen.

*"Will it really matter if I participate?
I'm just one voice. I'm not sure they'll
listen."*

"It's a waste of time."

SOLUTIONS

Be transparent and follow up

- Make information clear and readily available.
- Provide sufficient information (ex. background, history) and how it impacts people.
- Explain how decisions will be made.
- Consider input.
- Report back on outcomes.
- Explain why decisions were made and why things may not be moving forward.
- Provide key contacts to follow up with.

Access

Participants identified the following limitations that impact their ability to participate: day and time, location, technology, lack of options, engagement fatigue, lack of transportation, no in person opportunities, requires too much effort or time and being busy

"I don't want to e-mail or write my responses, I want to say them out loud with people, not online. We've lost one-on-one touch, connection and relationships".

"Opportunities also need to be easier, the Township should come to us, not the other way around."

Provide multiple ways that make it easy to engage

- Convenient locations, go to where people are (events, neighbourhoods).
- Different days and times.
- Provide choices of different ways to participate.
- Provide in-person opportunities, not just online.
- Keep surveys short.
- Provide drop boxes.
- Use QR codes to quickly scan.
- Make it fun and interesting.
- Provide transportation.



OTHER BARRIERS:

- Fear of having different opinions, disagreements, conflict, retribution, anonymity.
- Don't feel respected.
- Staff not responding to calls or questions, not having or sharing information.
- Information overload.
- Language.
- Lack of relationships with the Township or others in community.
- Being excluded from providing input (ex. renters, visitors, staff).

OTHER SOLUTIONS:

- Reach out to youth, youth centres/programs, young adults and young families.
- Build relationships.
- Create champions/connectors in each neighbourhoods.
- Prepare staff.
- Ensure anonymity.



2.4 Hopes for Engagement

Participants were asked to share their hopes for what engagement with the Township could look like:

The most commonly heard response is that the community **feels heard**. Their perspectives are understood, **appreciated**, responded to and acted on openly and honestly.

Transparency of long-term plans based on shared community priorities, demonstration of how input is considered and explanation of why decisions are made builds **trust** and confidence.

Inclusive engagement means all parts of the community are considered, barriers are addressed, marginalized groups are included, those who want to can and feel welcomed to participate and that their input matters.

Community building and **shared understanding** result from hearing from each other and working together.

Opportunities are **accessible**, timely, frequent, easy and provide choice.

"We felt we were understood – it was a human process based on trust."

"CW finally ends the backroom politics. No more secret meetings. No more rubber stamps. No more pay-to-play politics. Residents over revenue."

"You felt that your effort had helped to bring about a successful vibrant community."

"Everyone had the same weight in their opinions. Ex. residents opinions hold the same power as corporate entities etc."

"People could visualize the impact of their input."

"Residents and stakeholders felt informed, empowered and part of the process so they can stand behind the decisions made and they felt collaboration with Township staff."

"Decisions made are transparent from a diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) lens supporting all citizens all demographics."

"Spirit of community built through sharing and hearing each other's voices."

"Democracy is not a spectator sport. Thanks for engaging with your Township."



2.5 What Makes Engagement Meaningful and Effective

Accountability

- Respond to community concerns and questions.
- Explain how community input will be used and then explain how it was used.
- When decisions do not align with what was heard from the community, explain why.
- Keep commitments and follow through on decisions made.
- If it's not possible to follow through, be open and proactively explain why not.

"Consider long-term consequences of decision-making, especially if Township or community have to take over responsibility of the project in future."

"Councillors need to be more available to address concerns, and not have empty promises. Or they need to come to these meetings fully educated."

"Example with the cannabis survey, how did it go from a survey telling staff/Council that over 60% of the community wanted cannabis stores to... Council made the decision to not move forward? What are all the contributing factors? And why aren't those communicated?"

"Standby decisions and apologize for wrong ones."

"I expect to be heard, I don't expect the Township to do what I say."

"Communicating decisions that stem from larger strategic plans would be beneficial."

"Give us feedback, couldn't do it because..."

"Locals will tolerate a lot IF you are honest, transparent, and acknowledge them upfront."



Variety of engagement opportunities

- Multiple ways to provide input.
- Provide options for people to choose how to engage that include both online and in-person.

"Some people want to be heavily involved, some just want to learn. Providing multiple options for the community."

"Different types of engagement for different demographic audiences."

"Have more meetings like this."

Follow up

- What was heard from community and how it is being used.
- On the outcomes and results.
- Use a variety of formats to reach people (ex. online, paper, in person).
- Respond to questions and concerns in a timely way.

"Tell us why – gives me incentive to be OK with paying taxes and continue to share more."

"Continual follow up of items which have not been finalized."

Early and ongoing engagement

- Engage early before decisions are made.
- Opportunities to engage on what our priorities are rather than just on projects the Township decides are important.

"Why aren't there more opportunities to sit with mayor and Council to address concerns? It doesn't have to be a town hall, but even a "Council BBQ" for the community to come together and chat."

"Provide opportunities to all sit together and chat about community issues – not a "Town Hall" or a "Key Township Meeting" but a chance to voice concerns and actually be heard."

"Why aren't residents made aware of long term plans? Can't help feeling resentful towards the local government, staff and Council when it feels the wealthy are prioritized."

Inclusion

- Input is received from a wide number and different types of people representative of those who live in the Township (ex. youth, vulnerable populations, Indigenous people).
- Input is received from those who are affected by the issue.

"More voices! It's hard to get those "hard to reach" or un-engaged people, but putting in the extra effort to get feedback from those sectors shows that you respect the community as a whole."

"Consider how a decision affects different demographics."

"Equity begins at the Council level – staff make it a priority."

"Residents seem to be an afterthought – with tourists/visitors coming first and then residents coming last."



Accessible information

- Information is clear, easy to read and understand in plain language.
- Includes all relevant information community wants and should know.
- Proactive and timely.
- Share information on an ongoing basis.
- Easily available in multiple formats.

"There is no good way to do this. The perfect way to reach everyone doesn't exist."

"Have multiple different ways to spread info to target more people/generations."

"Frame messages to understand how projects affect the future of our community."

Respectful interactions

- Be honest if decisions are already made or ideas from community cannot be actioned.
- Listen and act on input.
- Demonstrate kindness.
- Acknowledge and respect what community shares.
- Provide time to come prepared.

"Be honest, if you can't do it just say so."

"Recognition you are being heard and my comments are important."

"Simple acknowledgement helps build trust."

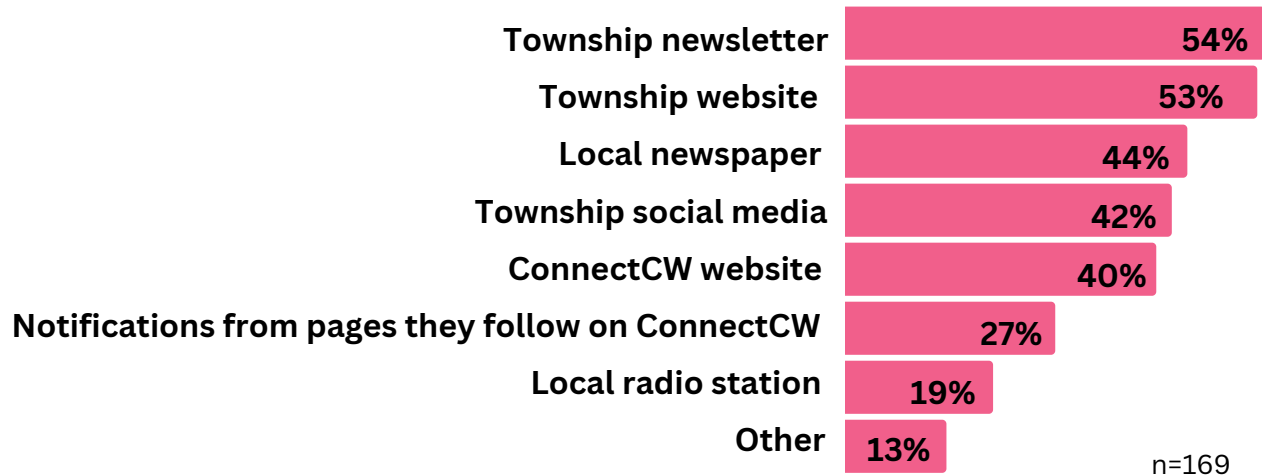
"Communicate with empathy."

"When I can speak to someone directly I feel connected. We need to talk to one another, even when it was a difficult issue."



2.5 Communicating About Engagement

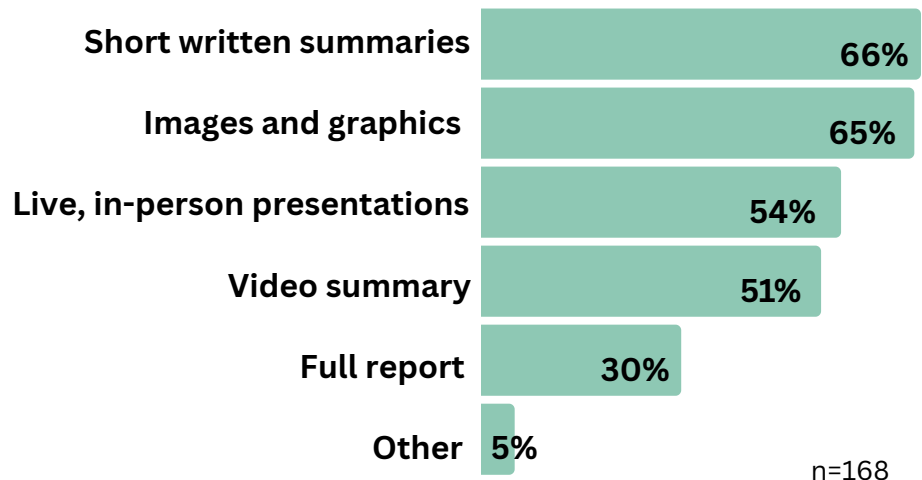
How participants would like to be informed about **upcoming engagement opportunities**:



Other ways:

- Councillor communications, emails, CAO reports, shared by community groups, texts, TikTok, billboards, CW Scoop (internal).

How participants would like to **learn** about **project background** and **details**:

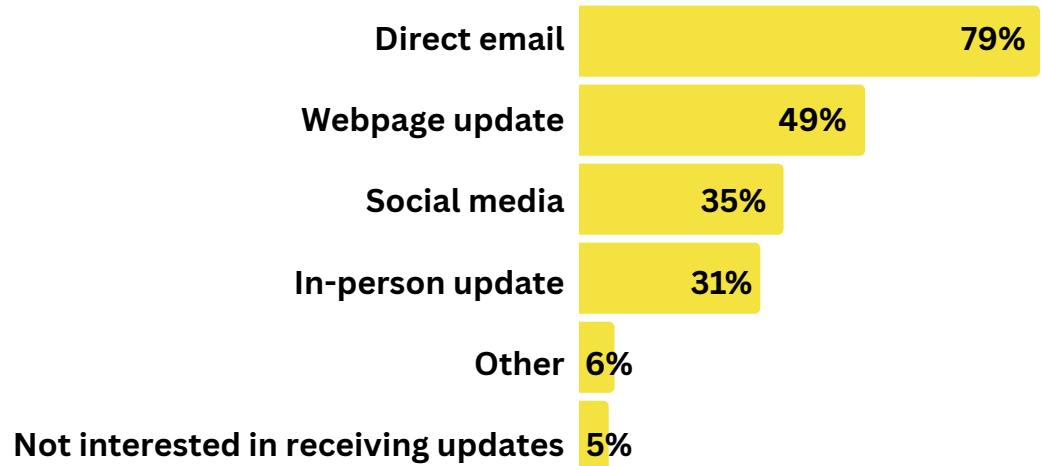


Other ways:

- Online video presentation, executive summary, maps, newspaper summary.



How participants would like to receive **follow up** from their participation in engagement activities:

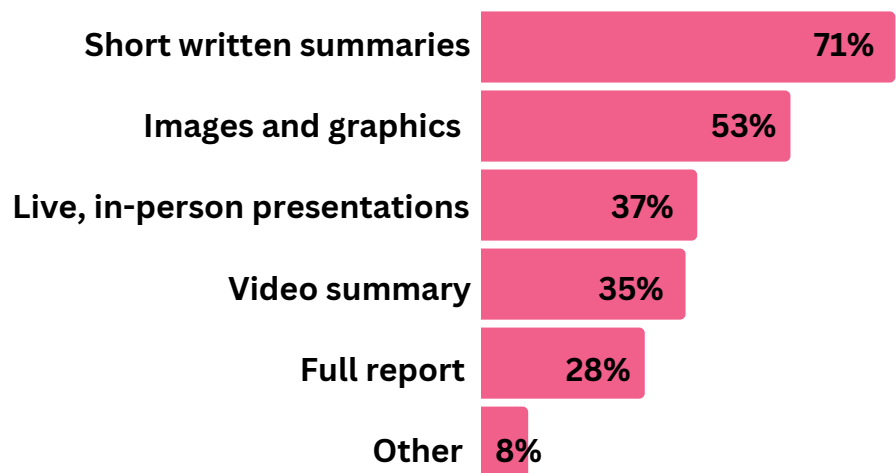


n=167

Other ways:

- Mail, CW Scoop (internal), Townhalls, Councillor communications, posters, hardcopy, newspaper, phone, consider anonymity.

In what **formats** participants would like to receive **follow up** from their participation in engagement activities:



n=165

Other ways:

- Online video presentation, raw data, in between short and full.



3. Evaluation of Engagement Success

To understand the effectiveness of this engagement process, we measured participant experience based on four key indicators:

Transparency and Understanding

52% Learned something new about the Township



64% Understood how their input will be used



81% Understood the purpose of this engagement



Inclusivity and Accessibility

79% Felt welcomed by the invitation to participate



81% Felt the Township made it easy to participate



88% Had an opportunity to share their thoughts



88% Felt included and respected



n=160



Trust and Relationships

56% Believe the Township will **consider their input**



61% Believe the Township **values their input**



69% Felt this was a **meaningful opportunity**



"I'm so impressed that tonight's event is happening. It's a great then you to be aware of what's happening. There's lots of things here that I wasn't aware were a problem."

"It's appreciated that Council is doing the initiative."

n=160



Additional feedback about the engagement process:

"I really hope the residents voices are heard. I understand staff direct most initiatives but when it's not their taxes paying and having nothing personally to deal with it makes it rather frustrating to feel how unimportant resident voices are So in short listen and consider suggestions"

"In future when considering operational decisions on facilities it would be nice to have some input from a day to day operations perspective."

"Keep communicating and seek to remove structural barriers to transparency."

"I feel this was a missed opportunity no Councillor/mayor. Time spent on process not required to cooperate we are not children. The community should have been able to talk about what matters to them people showed up hoping to talk about issues of concern to them and being heard by the decision makers this did not happen. Please do not do the exercises they feel childish you are well intentioned but I am leaving feeling this could have been so much better it felt very channelled/ directed."

"It would be wonderful if community groups example volunteer groups were truly utilized on an ongoing basis by the Township."

"Keep communicating and seek to remove structural barriers to transparency."

"It was a nice way to engage and connect with some other community members. I would think some more info on posts about what this is and will be would be great."

"Answer every email, phone call, etc, stop ignoring residents or blindly sending them information that wasn't what they asked for, begin with assuming that residents are informed and care, instead of surface level answers that have little to do with the deeper nuanced concerns."

"I think the Township can improve easily. Make information fully, transparently available to anyone at any time. For those who want to research give us the information, don't make us work so hard for access to information. Create rules, policies, bylaws and follow them and be held accountable when you don't. There are zero consequences for not following policies bylaws, laws. there needs to be an authority, a neutral party that does not serve to protect the Township."

"Develop a culture within the organization that gives staff a greater sense of purpose and to have trust in them to engage with residents. Many times staff deal with individuals when they are stressed. Empathy first, then action. They should be our superheros."

"Prove to the public you will listen to "all" not just specific groups."

"Please value residents feedback."



4. Next Steps

The information from this engagement process will be used to develop a draft CE Charter and Strategy. The drafts, along with this What We Heard report will be shared publicly for review and feedback before Council approval.

Once approved, a staff toolkit will be created to support the Township in meeting their commitments outlined in the CE Charter and Strategy. An action plan will be developed outlining where the Township should invest its time and resources to most effectively continue to build out its community engagement program.



Appendix A: Current Issues Important to the Community

While outside the scope of this project, participants identified several issues they consider important. A summary is provided below.

- Parking, paid parking
- Tourism
- Waste
- Housing - diversity and affordability
- Increase in population
- Growth and change
- Planning for growth (ex. schools, services, jobs, infrastructure)
- Speeding, speed cameras
- Public transportation
- Traffic safety, traffic calming
- Road closures
- Infrastructure
- Budget
- Taxes
- Air BnBs
- Walkability
- Activities and spaces for kids and teenagers
- Trails
- Potholes
- Development permits and fees
- Environment - biodiversity, invasive species, cutting trees, maintaining natural spaces
- Vision for the Township
- Recreation facilities and opportunities
- Childcare
- Availability of doctors
- Working with the provincial and federal government on issues

