



Municipality of Arran-Elderslie

Community Engagement Strategy – Wards or At-Large Representation

**Final Report
May 12, 2025**

Agenda

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About Us

- Clerks on Call is a municipal management consulting team, offering a range of specialized municipal governance and administration services, including:
 - virtual and onsite facilitator-led training for Councils and Staff
 - community engagement
 - policy and by-law reviews
 - mentoring/coaching for municipal Clerks and CAOs
- Consultant Team:
 - Michelle Smibert
 - Michelle Casavecchia-Somers



Project Overview & Objectives

Project Overview

- Undertook a community engagement strategy to enable the Council to make decisions about whether to maintain the existing ward structure or to adopt an alternative at-large structure.
- Developed and conducted a public consultation process in accordance with the municipality's existing public engagement practices.
- Allowed the public to offer their perspectives on the present ward system and the alternative at-large system.

Project Objectives

Objective:

- To engage the community in determining their 'preferred' electoral structure -- wards or at-large elections.

Key Question:

- *Should future municipal elections be conducted using a ward-based or at-large system?*

Importance:

- Ensures community support for the project outcome.
- Ensures future representation aligns with community needs and values.
- Promotes transparency and trust in the electoral structure.

Community Engagement Guiding Principles

Community Consultation – Principles

Inclusivity/Accessibility

- Ensuring consultation processes are easy to access for everyone, regardless of physical, economic, or social barriers; and that all voices are heard.

Transparency/Clarity of Purpose

- Clearly define the objectives of the consultation and ensure participants understand what is being asked of them.

Respect

- Value all contributions and create a safe environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their opinions.

Accountability

- Demonstrate how community input has been considered and incorporated into the final report.

Collaboration

- Working together with the community to co-create solutions.

Community Engagement – What is it?

Community Engagement

- Community engagement is the process of involving individuals, organizations, and groups from a specific community in dialogue, decision-making, and action to address shared challenges, goals, or interests.

Why Engage the Community?

- Community engagement is fundamental to creating inclusive and effective strategies.
- It helps ensure that initiatives are tailored to the needs and wants of the people they serve.

Community Engagement - Benefits

- Builds trust and transparency and strengthens relationships between stakeholders.
- Encourages informed decision-making by incorporating diverse perspectives.
- Increases the relevance and effectiveness of policies, programs, or projects.
- Fosters a sense of belonging and shared responsibility within the community.
- Promotes sustainable and long-lasting outcomes.

Stakeholder Identification

Who to Engage:

- Residents
- Community organizations
- Advocacy groups
- Business leaders
- Council Members

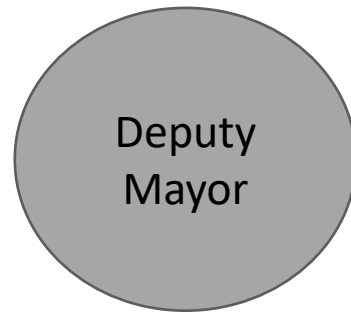
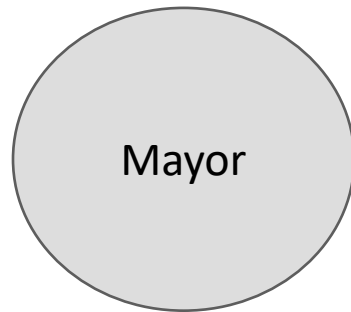
Why:

- Tailored outreach ensures diverse perspectives are included.

Existing Council Structure

Existing Council Structure

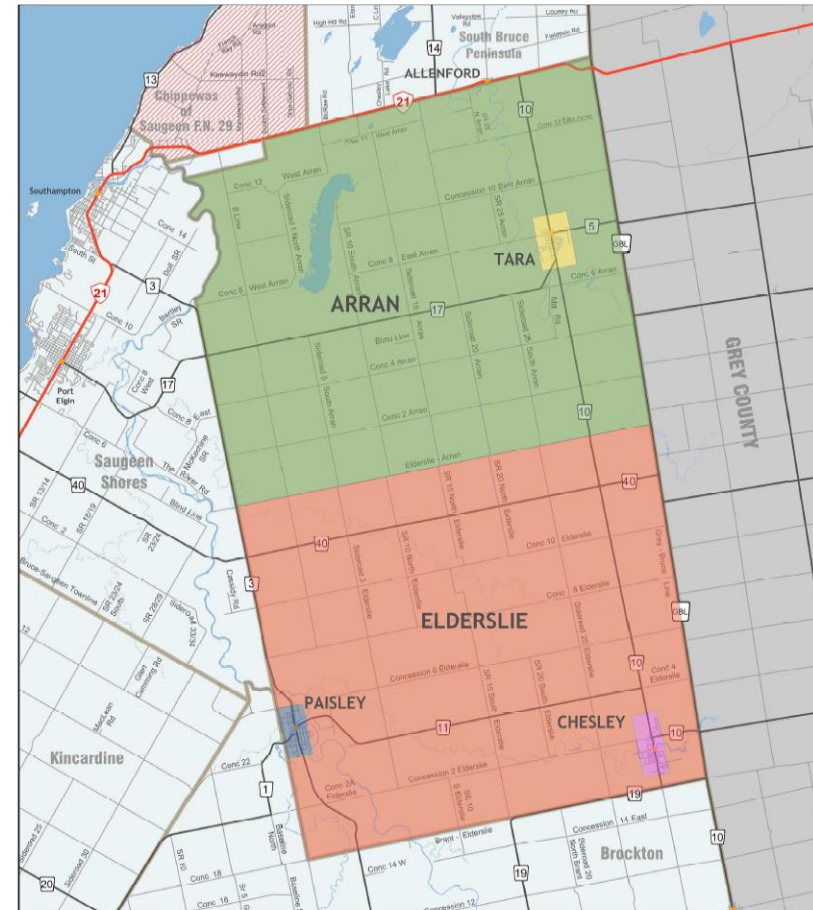
7 Council Members



- Mayor and Deputy are elected at large
- 5 Councillors are elected by ward

Existing Ward Configuration

- 5 ward structure
- based on historical municipal boundaries



Existing Council Structure of Other Area Municipalities

- Understanding how similar communities ensure fair and effective representation can help assess whether a ward-based or at-large system would be best
 - Grey County – all municipalities have at-large systems
 - Bruce County – mix of ward-based and at-large systems

Legislative Framework

Legislative Framework

Ontario's *Municipal Act, 2001* authorizes a lower-tier municipality to:

- define the size of the Council
- determine how Council (other than the Mayor) will be elected – wards or general vote (at-large)
- “divide or re-divide the municipality into wards or dissolve the existing wards”

Legislative Framework

No stipulated schedule, standardized process or established criteria exist for electoral reviews in Ontario

- Each municipality must set its own terms, parameters, guiding principles, etc. to establish an electoral system appropriate for the community.
- Any changes must be made before the end of 2025 to be in effect for the 2026 municipal election

Representation Models - Wards/At-large

Representation Models

Ward-based Representation:

Council members are elected to specific geographic districts, representing the interests of the people in that ward.

At-Large Representation:

Council members are elected by all voters in the municipality, representing the community as a whole.

Benefits and Challenges of Ward-based Representation

Benefits:

1. **Local Representation**
 - It may ensure that each community or geographical area has a voice in decision-making.
 - Representatives may have a better understanding and advocate for local issues and priorities.
2. **Accountability**
 - Elected representatives are directly accountable to their ward residents, promoting transparency and responsiveness.
 - It may foster closer relationships and communication between residents and ward representative as there is a direct point of contact.
3. **Inclusivity & Fair Distribution**
 - Helps prevent the domination of decision-making by larger or more affluent areas.
 - Helps to ensure that diverse communities have representation.
4. **Encourages Political Participation**
 - Residents may feel more involved in governance since they elect someone from their own area.

Challenges:

1. **Unequal Resource Distribution**
 - Some wards may be wealthier or more influential which may lead to disparities in development and service delivery.
 - Limited budgets may lead to competition among wards.
2. **Risk of Parochialism**
 - Representatives may focus only on their wards rather than the broader interests of the entire municipality or organization.
 - Can lead to conflicts between wards rather than fostering collaboration.
3. **Quality of Leadership**
 - Small wards may struggle to attract qualified candidates which could lead to ineffective leadership.
4. **Administrative Complexity**
 - Managing multiple representatives and balancing competing local interests can slow down decision-making.

Benefits and Challenges of At-Large Representation

Benefits:

1. **Broader Representation**
 - Representatives serve the entire community rather than a single ward, which may promote a more holistic approach to decision-making.
 - Encourages Council members to consider the needs of all residents rather than just those of a specific district.
2. **Reduces Parochialism**
 - Minimizes the risk of representatives prioritizing only their districts, leading to more balanced policymaking.
 - Encourages unity and cooperation rather than competition among different areas.
3. **Encourages Stronger Candidates**
 - Elections are typically more competitive, leading to the selection of highly qualified and experienced candidates.
 - Any qualified individual from the community can run for office, expanding the candidate pool.
4. **Equal Voting Power**
 - Every voter has an equal say in electing all representatives rather than being limited to voting for a single local representative.

Challenges:

1. **Underrepresentation of Local Interests**
 - Specific communities or neighborhoods may struggle to have their unique concerns addressed.
 - Representatives may be disconnected from local, neighborhood-specific issues.
2. **Disproportionate Influence of Majority Groups**
 - Can disadvantage rural or less populated areas if urban areas have more voting power.
3. **Higher Campaign Costs**
 - Running a campaign across an entire municipality requires more resources, favoring candidates with greater financial backing or name recognition.
4. **Less Accountability**
 - With multiple representatives elected by the entire jurisdiction, voters may find it harder to hold individuals accountable for decisions.
 - No single representative is directly responsible for addressing specific community concerns.

Community Consultation Process

Consultation Goals

- Educate the public about the differences between ward and at-large systems.
- Collect data to understand public preferences through surveys, open houses, and discussions.
- Ensure equitable participation from all community segments.
- Build consensus on the most suitable electoral structure.

Methods of Engagement

➤ *Councillor Interviews*

➤ *Public Survey*

- Online & Paper formats
- Sent to taxpayers in Interim Tax Bills
- Distributed at municipal facilities

➤ *Facilitated Open Houses*

- Paisley Community Centre
- Tara Community Centre
- Council Chambers (Chesley)

Methods of Engagement

- *Information shared via Municipality's website and social media channels, including:*
 - a promotional flyer
 - access to the online survey
 - a listing of locations where the paper survey could be acquired and completed surveys dropped off
 - an information video prepared by Clerks on Call
 - Clerks on Call's Council Briefing presentation video and slide deck
 - existing ward structure/map.
- *Information shared via Council Members & Staff existing networks and contacts*

Public Engagement/ Feedback

Council Member Interviews

- Clerks on Call conducted one-on one interviews with each member of Council.
- Feedback determined that the Council is divided on which representation structure (ward-based or at-large) would be best for the community.

Facilitated Open Houses

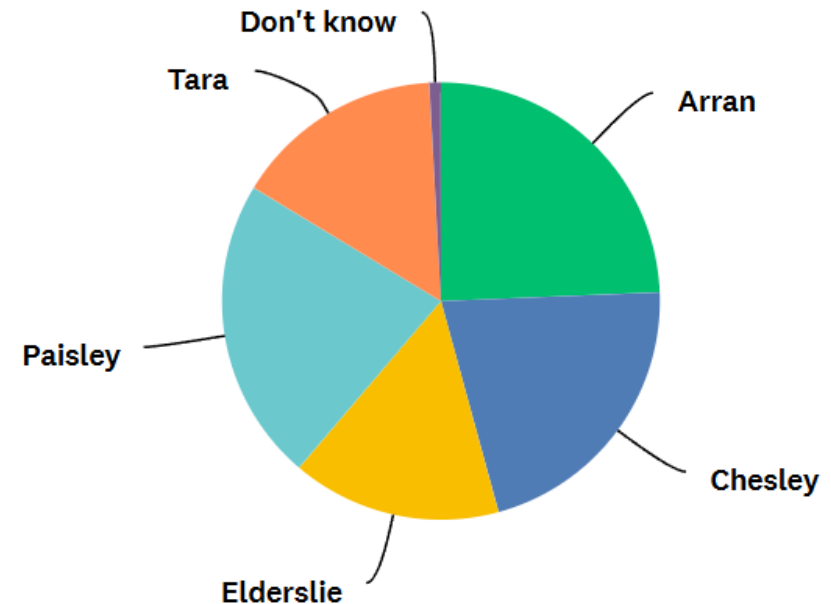
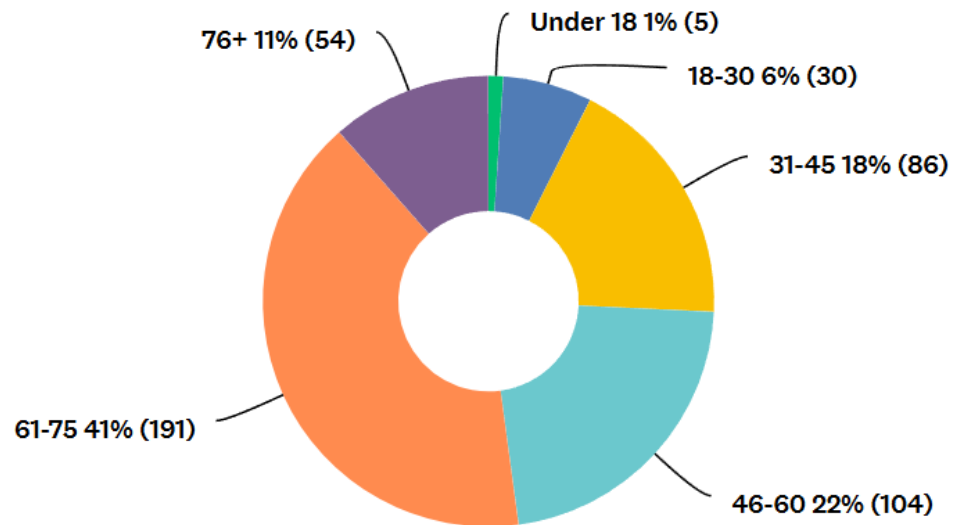
- 3 community open houses held, one each in Paisley, Tara & Chesley
- Not well attended (about 30 residents), but good dialogue and questions answered
- Feedback indicated that public better understood representation models after having attended open houses

Public Survey

- Developed to gather:
 - demographic information
 - determine respondent's awareness of the two representation models
 - respondent's opinions on both models
 - whether they had a preference for either one.
- Also asked:
 - if they were satisfied with the current ward-based model used in AE
 - if they feel that the current council represents their interests.
- **484 survey respondents** (but may not represent the views of the entire community).

Demographic Information

- More than 74% of respondents were between the ages of 46 and 75
- Respondents were fairly equally spread amongst all wards



Opinions on Ward-based Representation

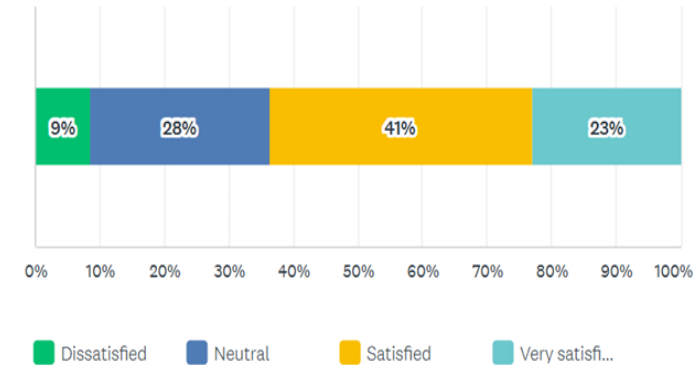
- 82% of respondents believed that ward councillors were better at addressing local issues and felt more connected to them
- 88% felt that having a ward-based representation model ensures that local issues are addressed
- More than 70% believe that ward-based representation provides more focused representation

Opinions on At-Large Representation

- Majority of respondents did not believe (45%) or were unsure (20%) whether council members elected At-Large would be more likely to prioritize the interests of entire municipality over local interests.
- More than 80% of respondents did not believe that At-Large would provide sufficient attention to issues affecting specific wards.
- The most cited benefits of At-Large representation were:
 - any qualified person can run for office, expanding the candidate pool (50%);
 - every voter has a say in electing all Council members, promoting a unified community voice (45%).

Current Council Preferences

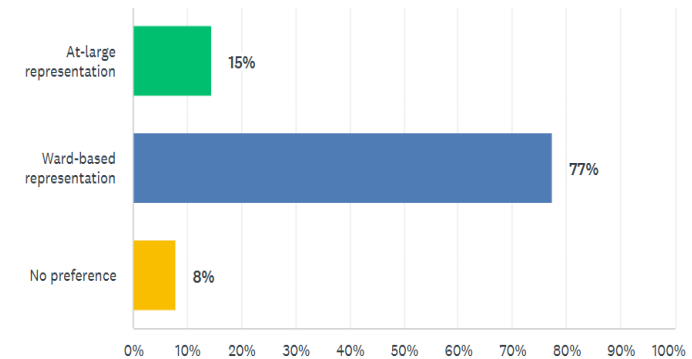
- 64% of respondents indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the current ward-based representation model used in Arran-Elderslie.
- However, only 56% responded that they were either satisfied or very satisfied that the current Council represents their interests.



Preferred Electoral Structure for Arran-Elderslie

Preferred Representation Model

15% preferred the *at-large* model.
77% preferred the *ward-based* model
8% indicated they had *no preference*.



- Most frequently cited reason for preferring the *ward-based* model was that it ensures fair representation for their ward.
- Most frequently cited reason for preferring the *at-large* model was that it promotes the interests of the entire community.

Preferred Electoral Structure for Arran-Elderslie

- A broad community engagement strategy was completed at arms-length from the Municipality in order to provide an unbiased analysis of the public's feedback.
- The key question was: -- *Should future municipal elections in Arran-Elderslie be conducted using a ward-based or at-large system?*

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The majority (77%) of the Arran-Elderslie community that participated in the community consultation do prefer that the existing ward-based electoral system be maintained.

Thank You

Questions/Comments