

Leading With Respect Handguides



Association of
Municipalities
of Ontario

AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides provides practical resources, tips, and tools that elected officials and senior staff can adapt, rebrand, and use to foster civility and respect in municipal governance across Ontario.

The handguides were developed by MASS LBP and AMO in a joint initiative of the Healthy Democracy Project and Municipal Workforce Development Project.

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How to Use These Guides

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Who These Guides are For

These guides were designed for the people who keep Ontario's municipalities running: **mayors and reeves, members of council, chief administrative officers (CAOs), clerks, and senior managers**. Whether you serve a major urban centre or a rural township, this resource recognizes that you may be operating in a climate of heightened polarization and declining public trust.

What They Are (and Why AMO Produced Them)

This is a **practical, modular, and optional** toolkit. It is not a rigid rulebook or a provincial directive.

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) produced this guide because the tone of municipal life has undeniably changed. Through the Healthy Democracy Project and the Workforce Development Project, AMO identified that harassment and toxic behaviour are no longer occasional outbursts but have become systemic barriers to effective governance and service delivery. We heard clearly that while local governments continue to

deliver essential services, the system is increasingly strained by mistrust, misinformation, fatigue, and incivility.

Public support for Canada's political system has held steady for the last 15 years, and 74% of Canadians agree that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, particularly authoritarian government.¹ This signals to us that everyday people do value the democratic fabric that shapes their lives, that people believe there is something valuable here to protect.

These guides translate extensive research and member feedback into actionable strategies to help you:

- Protect the well-being of elected officials and staff.
- Preserve the quality of democratic decision-making.
- Attract and retain the next generation of local leaders - elected and staff.

They were not developed to displace existing policies, frameworks, or strategy that a municipality might have, rather to complement and strengthen what exists and to provide guidance on what to develop when there are gaps.

¹ https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/read-the-report17b8667c-aald-4593-a6f0-8f877d609ee4.pdf?sfvrsn=6049dc67_1

How They Were Developed

The insights here are grounded in lived experience. They are drawn from:

- **Confidential interviews** with 29 municipal leaders, staff, and experts.
- **Workshops and drop-in conversations** involving about 150 participants at the AMO 2025 Annual Conference.
- **A review** of best practices from jurisdictions grappling with similar challenges globally.

Adapt and localize

There is no "one size fits all" for Ontario's 444 municipalities.

You have clear permission to adapt, rebrand, and localize these tools. Take what works for your community's size, context, and capacity, and leave the rest.

Using These Guides Under Pressure

We know you are busy. You do not need to read this cover-to-cover to find value.

For Staff

Use these resources to support your Council. This guide is intended to make your job easier by providing third-party, evidence-based frameworks for difficult conversations regarding conduct and safety.

For Elected Officials

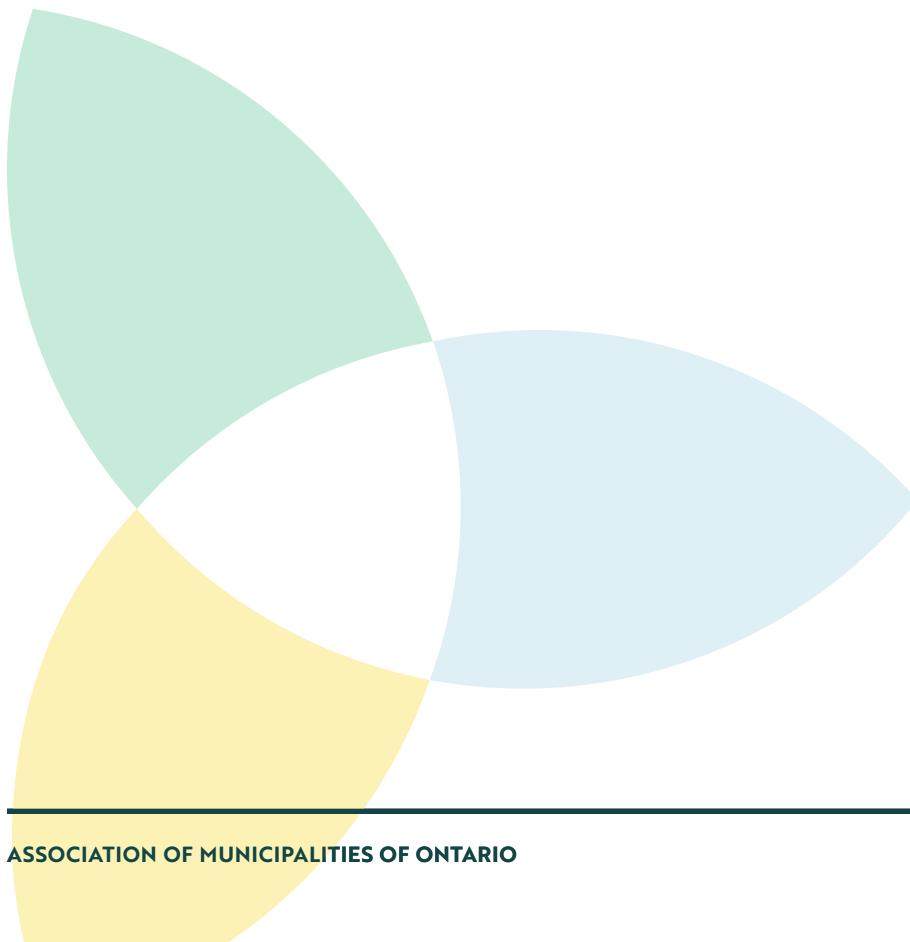
Use the checklists and decision trees to navigate complex interactions with constituents and colleagues without engaging in "retail politics" that erode your time and well-being.

A. Leading with Respect

Creating a Culture of Civility

Civility is not just about politeness; it is the "invisible infrastructure" that allows us to live together despite our differences. In a municipal context, civility is the professional discipline that allows conflict to be expressed without violence and disagreement to occur without a breakdown in governance.

Leading with respect does not mean suppressing debate. Politics is inherently competitive and adversarial, and disagreement is both inevitable and necessary. Opinions will differ, priorities may conflict, and solutions will not always align. The goal of this guide is to help create conditions where people can challenge one another and hold each other to account in ways that remain rooted in mutual regard and recognizing a shared commitment to the community and to the democratic process that makes principled disagreement possible.



What Is at Stake?

Leaving incivility unaddressed is not an option. The costs are already being paid by municipalities across Ontario:

Decision Quality

When councils are consumed by interpersonal conflict or inundated by aggressive lobbying, strategic work suffers. Councils report spending disproportionate time on minor operational details or procedural battles rather than long-term planning. The result is a shift from deliberation to defensiveness.

Staff Retention

Senior staff are facing unprecedented hostility, sometimes from council and sometimes from the public, often leaving them feeling undermined or "cross-examined" rather than consulted. As other staff witness this, succession planning and promotions become harder to fill. This environment contributes to burnout and early retirements, draining municipalities of institutional memory and professional expertise.

Candidate Recruitment

The toxicity of the current environment is narrowing the pipeline of future leaders. Many current members of council have indicated they will not run again due to the toll on their mental health and families. This is particularly true for women, racialized individuals, and young people, who disproportionately face identity-based harassment.

Public Trust

Dysfunction breeds cynicism. When residents see councils paralyzed by infighting or staff subjected to abuse, they disengage. This creates a feedback loop: as reasonable voices withdraw, extreme voices dominate the public forums, further eroding confidence in local government.

B. What We Heard From AMO Members

Municipal government plays a foundational role in Canada's democratic system. Elected officials and senior staff are responsible for decisions that shape daily life, often under intense public scrutiny and with limited resources. Across Ontario, municipal leaders continue to show professionalism, commitment, and resilience in the face of growing complexity and public pressure. At the same time, the conditions under which this work is carried out are changing. Increased polarization, blurred boundaries between public and private life, and new forms of engagement—particularly online—are creating risks that existing norms and supports were not designed to manage.

To create this handguide, we listened to the people on the front lines of local government. From small rural townships to large urban centres, the message was consistent: the status quo is unsustainable.

Here is a summary of the challenges facing Ontario's municipal leaders today.

Proximity Without Protection

Municipal government's closeness to the people fosters accountability but can also be the source of vulnerability.

"Leading Where You Live": Unlike MPs or MPPs, municipal officials cannot retreat to a capital city. In small communities, home, the grocery store, the hockey rink is the office. Members of council report being accosted in grocery stores, at places of worship, and in their driveways.

Not Employees: Members of council are not "employees," which means they often lack Occupational Health and Safety Act protections, leaving them isolated and exposed to harassment without institutional support.

Declining Expertise and Respect

There is a growing skepticism toward professional advice.

Skepticism of Staff: Senior staff report being called "liars" or accused of bias when presenting evidence-based reports.

Role Confusion: Members of council are increasingly pressured or choose to act as operational managers rather than governors. This leads to interference in day-to-day administration, undermining staff authority and bogging Council down in operational minutiae.

The Information Vacuum

The collapse of local journalism has left many communities in "news deserts," creating a void filled by unmoderated social media.

A new public square: In this vacuum, Facebook groups have become the de facto public square, where complex policies are often replaced by memes and unfiltered outrage. These spaces can become echo-chambers where misinformation spreads unchecked.

Dehumanizing interactions: This shift also dehumanizes officials, as it is far easier to abuse a digital avatar than a neighbour.

Structural Strain

Incivility flourishes in environments under stress. We heard clearly that the municipal sector is facing chronic under-resourcing that makes meeting rising public expectations nearly impossible.

The Volunteer Trap: In many municipalities, councilship is a "part-time" role despite requiring full-time hours. Small and rural municipalities often lack dedicated staff and office infrastructure including legal counsel, or communications staff to manage harassment.

Inconsistent Response to Threats: We heard that responses to threats vary wildly. While some urban centres have dedicated police liaisons, some municipal officials reported that police don't respond or are unsympathetic to "lawful but awful" behaviour, and rural officials report that police may be hours away.

At-a-Glance Menu of Handguide Topics and Tools

Each handguide covers a specific topic and includes different types of practical resources that can be adapted and used. There are seven topics:

② Responding to Constituents

- Core Principles That Reduce Escalation
- Guidance for Setting Boundaries
- Sample Response Language
- Foundational Policies: The Rules That Protect You

③ Chairing Meetings Effectively

- Principles for Civil and Orderly Meetings
- Participation Standards
- The Role of the Chair: Responsibilities & Tactics
- Proactive Conflict Management: From Preparation to Follow-Up
- De-Escalation Principles and Structured Models

④ Holding Public Meetings

- A Checklist for Designing Civility and Safety in Public Meetings
- Working with Security and Law Enforcement
- Decorum Policy for Public Meetings
- Principles for Public Engagement: Preempting a Frustrated Public

5 Fostering Civility at the Council Table

- Building Effective Working Relationships on Council
- Shared Norms and Civility Pledges
- Policy Tools for Managing Conflict
- How to Be an Active Bystander

6 Social Media and Online Platforms

- Moderation Principles for Online Forums & When to Disengage
- Personal vs. Official Account Guidance
- Policies to Consider for Online Platforms

7 Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff

- Warning Signs of Burnout
- Practical and Realistic Self-Protection Strategies
- Peer Support Options

8 Professional Development and Education

- Comparative Models: Professional Development as a Core Council Practice
- Recommended Training Topics: An Annotated Guide
- Tips for Making Professional Development Practical

Responding to Constituents

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2.0 Responding to Constituents

Responding to constituents is one of the most demanding and consequential parts of municipal work. Most interactions take place outside formal meetings, through emails, calls, social media, and informal encounters, where expectations are often unstated and pressure can accumulate quickly. How these routine exchanges are handled shapes public trust and sets the tone for civic engagement.

These interactions matter because escalation rarely begins with a single hostile moment. Conflict typically develops when residents feel uncertain, unheard, or unclear about what will happen next.

Without consistent approaches to communication and boundaries, frustration can harden into incivility or harassment, placing strain on staff, elected officials, and the institution as a whole.

This section focuses on practical ways to reduce escalation while maintaining accessibility and fairness. It outlines core principles for constituent engagement, guidance for setting boundaries when behaviour becomes problematic, sample response language to support consistency, and foundational policies that provide administrative protection. Used together, these tools can help your municipal offices manage constituent interactions tactfully and foster a culture of civility.

2.1 Core Principles That Reduce Escalation

Escalation rarely begins with a single moment. It usually develops through routine interactions where expectations are unclear or boundaries are tested. Below are core principles for constituent engagement that can prevent, diffuse, and de-escalate conflict.

Acknowledgement Matters More Than Speed

In most cases, fast acknowledgement reduces repeat contact more effectively than fast resolution. The constituent's first concern is often not the outcome, but whether anyone is listening.

A predictable acknowledgement reassures residents and prevents inbox-clogging follow-ups that increase frustration on both sides.

Predictable Timelines Are Safer Than Optimistic Ones

Escalation often begins when expectations float. Offices are safest when timelines are boring, standard, and consistently applied.

If you cannot meet your stated timeframe, set a new one before the old one expires. This keeps the relationship anchored in rules rather than emotions.

Helping Is Not the Same as Owning

Your office adds value by navigating systems, clarifying processes, and advocating where appropriate. It becomes vulnerable when it quietly becomes the default operator for every service request.

Routing operational matters to the correct department—while closing the loop—protects staff time and prevents dependency that can later turn into resentment.

Jurisdictional Clarity Is a Form of Service

Residents do not always know which order of government is responsible, especially in moments of stress. Explaining jurisdiction clearly, and directing them to the correct office, is not a brush-off—it is an act of respect. What matters is not just transfer, but explanation.

A Clear “No” Preserves Trust Better Than Ambiguity

People can live with “no.” They struggle with shifting rationales, vague answers, or the feeling they were managed rather than answered.

A defensible “no”

- Explains constraints (legal, budgetary, policy, jurisdictional).
- Avoids lectures or moralizing.
- Is paired with the best available next step, even if limited.

2.2 Guidance For Setting Boundaries

Boundary-setting is not about refusing service. It is about creating the conditions that make service possible.

Name the Condition for Continuing

When communication becomes abusive or hostile, address the behaviour directly:

1. Identify the behaviour.
2. State the condition for continuing (professional language).
3. State the consequence if it continues.

This should be brief, factual, and calm.

Time-Box Where Necessary

For demanding or repetitive interactions, time-boxing (allotting a fixed maximum amount of time for something) protects staff without appearing punitive:

1. Set meeting durations in advance.
2. Limit interactions to specific questions.
3. Offer one clear next step rather than many options.

Do Not Negotiate Boundaries

Explaining or debating boundaries invites further conflict. A useful internal rule is, "We will engage on the issue; we will not engage on abuse."

Know When to Stop

Your office is not required to provide unlimited access when contact becomes harassment. Disengagement should be clean: state the decision, the condition for re-engagement, and the appropriate channel for legitimate requests.

2.3 Sample Response Language

Once correspondence has been handled within policy and principle, language matters. Clear, professional responses often prevent future escalation.

The ABC Rule (+ Empathy)

A – Accuracy → Do not guess.

B – Brevity → Avoid unnecessary jargon.

C – Clarity → Separate issues if needed.

E – Empathy → Acknowledge inconvenience or stress without conceding fault.

Pulse Check: If your message appeared on the front page of the local paper tomorrow, would its tone reflect professionalism and restraint? If not, remove adjectives and stick to the facts.

Below are examples of a few different types of professional but clear emails you can tailor to suit the situation.

Holding Reply



"Thank you for contacting me regarding [Issue]. I want to ensure I provide you with accurate information. This matter requires review with [Department]. I will provide an update by [Date]. Thank you for your patience."

The “Soft No”



“I appreciate you raising this concern. After reviewing the matter, we’re unable to proceed with [Request] due to [Reason]. I understand this is disappointing. While we can’t [Action], you may wish to consider [Alternative or Referral].”

Jurisdictional Transfer



“Thank you for writing regarding [Issue]. This matter falls under provincial responsibility. To ensure your concern reaches the appropriate authority, I recommend contacting your MPP at [Contact].”

Campaign Response



“Thank you for contacting me regarding [Issue]. I have received a high volume of correspondence on this issue and have noted your views for consideration when this matter comes before Council.”

Boundary Warning



“I want to assist where I can. However, I cannot engage with correspondence that contains abusive language. If we can keep communication professional, I am happy to continue reviewing the substance of your request.”

2.4 Foundational Policies: The Rules that Protect You

To respond effectively to constituents without exposing yourself to burnout or liability, your practices and those of your staff should be backed by clear policies. These do not need to be complex legal documents; they are simply "rules of engagement" that ensure consistency, fairness, and administrative protection.

Below are four key policy areas to consider adopting. We have drawn these from established government frameworks in Ontario, the United Kingdom, and the United States to show that these are tested, defensible standards.

Service Level Standards (The "20-Day" Rule)

The Concept: Ambiguity creates anxiety, and anxiety drives repeat emails. A published service standard manages expectations by defining exactly when a resident will receive a reply, and from whom in cases when a staff response is more appropriate.

The UK Cabinet Office establishes a clear benchmark for government departments: a maximum of 20 working days for substantive replies. While you may aim to be faster, adopting a formal policy like this protects you during busy periods.

The "Holding Reply": Your policy should authorize the use of "holding replies." As practiced in the UK, if a substantive answer cannot be provided within the standard timeframe, staff must send an interim message explaining the delay and setting a new date. This stops the clock and reassures the constituent.

Calculation: The "clock" starts the day after correspondence is received.

Vexatious and Unreasonable Behaviour Policy

The Concept: You need a formal mechanism to disengage from interactions that consume disproportionate resources without a constructive goal.

It is vital to know that “disengaging” is not a dereliction of duty; it is a standard administrative practice. Tribunals Ontario maintains a policy allowing for the “Summary Dismissal” of complaints under specific conditions. Your office can mirror this language to define when you will stop engaging. According to Ontario practice, a matter may be dismissed if it is:

Frivolous or Vexatious: The complaint has no serious purpose or is intended purely to cause annoyance.

Made in Bad Faith: The correspondence is dishonest or has an ulterior motive.

Abuse of Process: The resident is using the complaints process to harass staff rather than resolve an issue.

Privacy and Confidentiality Policy

The Concept: Handling casework involves collecting sensitive personal information. A robust policy protects you from privacy breaches and builds trust.

Following the example of Tribunals Ontario, your policy should state that you cannot process complaints anonymously; a complainant must be willing to disclose their name and connection to the matter.

Personally Identifying Information: Your policy should clearly detail that members of council are not considered employees of the municipality and correspondence between a member of council and a constituent is not subject to the stipulations of the Municipal Freedom and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA). However, when this correspondence is forwarded to municipal staff, or included as part of a formal agenda, it does become part of the public record. Your policy should indicate that identifying information will be redacted from the correspondence before it is made publicly available.

The "Need to Know": If a constituent implicitly or explicitly expects confidentiality, you should not share their details without their consent unless there is a risk of harm.

Campaign and Anonymous Correspondence

The Concept: An established policy prevents your office from wasting time chasing "ghosts" or responding manually to bots.

National Center for Principled Leadership & Research Ethics (NCPRE, USA) guidance suggests that while anonymous complaints should not be ignored if they reveal a serious risk, they generally do not trigger a direct response or serious decision-making process without independent verification.

Batched Responses: For mass email campaigns (form letters), the UK Cabinet Office advises against individual replies. Your policy should allow for a "batched response". You may issue a single standard reply to all identical messages or post a position statement on your website to address the campaign collectively.

Governance Tip: These policies act as a shield. When you block an abusive emailer, you are not being "undemocratic"—you are applying the Tribunals Ontario standard for Summary Dismissal. When you send a holding reply rather than an immediate answer, you are following the UK Cabinet Office protocol for accuracy. These are not personal choices; they are professional standards.

Learn More

Organization	Links
Ontario Ombudsman <u>What the public can expect when filing a complaint about an Ontario government or public service</u>	ombudsman.on.ca
Tribunals Ontario <u>Complaints policy and Process</u>	tribunalsontario.ca
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign National Centre for Principle Leadership & Research Ethics <u>Approach to managing complaints from External Constituents</u>	lcpathways.web.illinois.edu
UK Parliamentary Health Service Ombudsman <u>Helping constituents use the Ombudsman's service</u>	ombudsman.org.uk
UK Parliamentary Health Service Ombudsman <u>Online Complaint Form</u>	ombudsman.org.uk
UK Cabinet Office <u>Guide to Handling Correspondence (PDF)</u>	gov.uk
Healthcare Insurance Reciprocal of Canada (HIROC) <u>Responding to Complaints and Concerns: A Letter Writing Guide for Healthcare Providers and Administrators</u>	hiroc.com
Minnesota Psychological Association <u>A guide for Legislators: communicating with troubled constituents (PDF)</u>	apadivisions.org
Ombudsman New South Wales (Australia) <u>Managing unreasonable conduct by a complainant (PDF)</u>	ombo.nsw.gov.au

Chairing Meetings Effectively

3

3.0 Chairing Meetings Effectively

Public meetings ultimately succeed or fail in the moment-by-moment management of discussion. The presiding official carries unique responsibility for translating established rules, procedures, and expectations into fair and consistent practice under real-time pressure.

Effective chairing requires judgement, neutrality, and emotional regulation, particularly when participants are frustrated, fearful, or angry. How rules are applied and how interventions are delivered strongly shape whether participants experience the process as legitimate, even when outcomes are disappointing or contested. When meetings feel disorganized, permissive, or inconsistently managed, frustration can escalate quickly.

Disorder rarely begins with a single outburst; it develops when expectations are unclear, rules appear optional, or the chair's authority is uncertain. Once that dynamic takes hold, it can be difficult to restore calm without escalating further.

Meetings that are clearly structured and predictably chaired tend to feel safer, even when the subject matter is controversial. When roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, particularly between elected officials and staff, participants have a better understanding of how decisions are made and where accountability lies. This clarity helps reduce confusion and tension, and makes people more likely to accept outcomes, including decisions they oppose, when the process is visibly fair and consistently applied.

3.1 Principles for Civil and Orderly Meetings

These principles support chairs in creating meetings that are orderly, fair, and accessible. When applied consistently, they reduce confusion and frustration and help establish shared expectations for behaviour. The goal is not to limit public input, but to ensure it can be heard and considered without conflict overtaking the process.

Predictability

Clear, easy-to-understand ground rules established both before the meeting, in posted and circulated documents, and at the start of the meeting reduce uncertainty that fuels frustration.

Consistency and Evenhandedness

Procedural rules, such as speaking time limits and sign-up requirements, must be applied identically to all participants. Favoring one viewpoint by granting extra time while strictly cutting off another violates viewpoint neutrality. Addressing minor disruptions immediately and proportionally prevents the perception that rules are optional.

Impartiality

The presiding official acts as the protector of the process, directing discussion without using their position to sway outcomes. Chairs must remain open to persuasion during deliberation.

Separation of People from Problems

Discussion should focus on the factual merits of proposals rather than personalities or motives. Chairs should redirect or stop debate if it devolves into personal attacks.

Acknowledgment Without Endorsement

Neutral acknowledgment of emotion or concern helps reduce escalation without validating positions or conclusions.

Firm but Neutral Limit-Setting

Disruptions should be addressed using clear, proportional warnings and “when–then” statements. Removal is a last resort following warnings and opportunities to comply.

Transparency

Trust increases when the public understands the rules in advance and sees how input relates to outcomes, including explanations when feedback cannot be used.



3.2 Participation Standards

These standards may be printed on agendas or read at the start of meetings to establish clear expectations. Some elements will be more appropriate for open/public, rather than closed, meetings.

Registration	All speakers must register as delegations by the prescribed deadline.
Time Limits	Each speaker is limited to the allotted time set by the chair.
Respectful Conduct and a Neutral Environment	Applause, booing, or catcalls are not permitted as they disrupt the neutrality of the space.
Prohibited Items	Picket signs, placards, or banners are not permitted in the meeting room.
Focus on Issues	Comments must be directed to the chair and focused on the item under debate. Back-and-forths between delegates and council or staff are not appropriate in this setting. Questions and comments from delegates are captured and on record but a direct, immediate response is rarely possible. A formal response will be provided in a future staff report.
Digital Standards	Online participants must comply with established terms of use; abusive behaviour results in removal.

3.3 The Role of the Chair: Responsibilities & Tactics

The head of council or presiding officer owns the process, while members own the outcome. Effective chairing balances efficiency and fairness to ensure all voices are heard without allowing disorder.

Core Responsibilities

- Preparation:** Review agenda materials in advance to anticipate contentious items.
- Impartiality:** Facilitate debate fairly, separating the role of facilitator from that of voter.
- Enforcement:** Preserve order, enforce procedural rules, and rule on motions.

Chairing Tactics

Set expectations at the outset, acknowledging emotional issues while restating conduct rules.

Enforce one speaker at a time, recognized by the chair.

Keep **debate focused** on policy rather than personality.

Manage time to ensure efficient progress.

Attend to the energy in the room. Consider calling for recess after heavy agenda items to help with fatigue and meeting flow.

Demonstrate **active listening** through attention and summarizing.

Use the gavel sparingly; **rely on procedure and call recesses** when necessary.

3.4 Proactive Conflict Management: From Preparation to Follow-Up

Conflict escalates when individuals feel unheard, unsafe, or confused about what is happening. De-escalation combines preparation, early intervention, and structured in-the-moment responses..

Before the Meeting

1. Identify likely flashpoints in consultation with senior staff.
2. Prepare opening scripts that emphasize civility, community values, or shared purpose.
3. Ensure agendas are finalized and distributed in advance to avoid surprises.

During the Meeting

1. Watch for signs of emotional overwhelm, such as raised voices or interruptions.
2. Remind participants of the meeting process and shared goals.
3. Clarify procedure when confusion arises.

After the Meeting

1. Close the “feedback loop” by reporting how public input influenced decisions.
2. Debrief with appropriate staff and members of council to assess what worked and where protocols could improve.



3.5 De-Escalation Principles and Structured Models

De-Escalation Principles

1

Active Listening

Maintain neutral, attentive body language and focus on understanding concerns.

2

Acknowledgment

Validate emotion without endorsing facts or positions.

3

Separation of People from Problems

Redirect heated exchanges back to the merits of the issue.

4

Managing Repetitive Speakers

Acknowledge contributions respectfully while preventing domination of the agenda.

Strategic Recess:

Short breaks can reduce emotional intensity and restore order.

Structured De-Escalation Models

Widely used de-escalation models are helpful because they give chairs and participants a simple, reliable structure to fall back on in tense moments, reducing the likelihood of reactive responses and helping restore calm, clarity, and procedural fairness under pressure.

CLARA (Centre, Listen, Acknowledge, Respond, Add) is drawn from trauma-informed communication and conflict-resolution practice, with particular emphasis on the internal regulation of the responder before engaging externally.



LEAPS (Listen, Empathize, Ask, Paraphrase, Summarize) originated from conflict resolution training programs, particularly those used in security and law enforcement. It provides a structured communication approach to de-escalate tense situations by addressing emotional triggers like feeling unheard.



Learn More

Organization	Links
Ombudsman Ontario <u>Open Meetings: Guide for Municipalities</u>	<u>ombudsman.on.ca</u>
Office of the Ombudsperson, British Columbia <u>Open Meetings: Best Practices Guide for Local Governments</u>	<u>bcombudsperson.ca</u>
Institute for Local Government <u>Tips for Promoting Civility in Public Meetings (PDF)</u>	<u>ca-ilg.org</u>
Princeton University Bridging Divides Initiative <u>Guidelines for De-Escalation and Communication Around Contentious Meetings for Local Elected Officials (PDF)</u>	<u>bridgingdivides.princeton.edu</u>
National Civic League <u>How to De-Escalate Public Meetings: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Cities</u>	<u>nationalcivicleague.org</u>
California School Boards Association <u>Managing Board Meetings in Turbulent Times (PDF)</u>	<u>csba.org</u>
Municipal Research and Services Centre <u>Strategies for Managing Difficult Public Meetings</u>	<u>mrsc.org</u>

Holding Public Meetings

4

4.0 Holding Public Meetings

Municipalities hold different kinds of meetings that involve the public. Council meetings are formally open to anyone, allowing residents to observe municipal decision-making. Public engagement activities, by contrast, are designed specifically to involve residents in dialogue, consultation, or co-creation around particular issues. Both require careful attention to the conditions under which they occur, but the purpose and expectations of each can shape how they are planned and experienced.

The quality of public participation depends heavily on the physical, procedural, and social environment. Layout, access, communication, and clearly signaled expectations all influence how people behave, how safe they feel, and whether meetings can proceed without disruption.

Public meetings often bring together residents experiencing high emotions, limited trust, or a sense of urgency. Barriers such as poor acoustics, unclear procedures, overcrowding, or inconsistent signals about acceptable conduct can quickly escalate frustration into conflict, often unrelated to the topic under discussion. Thoughtful design anticipates these stressors, making it easier for participants to engage constructively.

Intentional planning for space, movement, accessibility, security, and communication—including selective, transparent coordination with local law enforcement where appropriate—protects everyone involved: members of the public, elected officials, and staff. By creating predictable, transparent, and physically safe meeting conditions, municipalities ensure that both council meetings and public engagement activities can foster meaningful participation, informed discussion, and decisions made without intimidation, exclusion, or unnecessary escalation.

4.1 A Checklist for Designing Civility and Safety in Public Meetings

The physical and logistical design of public meetings has a direct impact on both participant behaviour and overall safety. When people struggle to see, hear, move through the meeting room, or understand what is expected of them, frustration can build quickly and spill over into conflict—often unrelated to the issue under discussion. At the same time, poorly planned spaces can expose elected officials, staff, and members of the public to unnecessary safety risks.

Entry, Screening, and Expectations Checklist



- Post community agreements, sign-in and search policies at entrances, on the municipality's website, and in all materials sent in advance of the meeting.
- Use pre-registration or check-in tables as needed.
- Conduct bag or coat checks where appropriate.

Layout and Accessibility Checklist



- Use clear audio-visual systems so participants can see and hear proceedings.
- Turn off unused equipment to minimize background noise.
- Reduce glare with drapes or blinds and use adjustable lighting.
- Provide reserved seating for those who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or have low vision.
- Keep aisles clear and designate seating for service animals and mobility devices.
- Maintain a physical buffer of 6–8 feet between officials and the public.

Safety and Movement Checklist



- Plan separate entry and exit routes for staff and officials.
- Ensure all exits are clearly marked and unobstructed.
- Identify non-public exits and ensure officials and staff know them.

Proactive Design Checklist



- Where possible, designate a quiet break-out room for overwhelmed participants or staff.
- Where possible, install reliable live-streaming systems to allow the remote participation of members of the public, including overflow of an at-capacity in-person meeting. Ensure that the virtual meeting space – including Q&A in public engagement meetings – is attended to, and that the meeting is paused if any technical disruptions inhibit the live stream.

4.2 Working with Security and Law Enforcement

Local law enforcement can play a constructive role in supporting safe, orderly public meetings when their involvement is carefully planned, clearly defined, and transparently communicated. Effective coordination helps ensure that meetings remain accessible to the public while protecting elected officials, staff, and attendees from intimidation, harassment, or physical risk.

Law enforcement presence should never compensate for poor chairing, unclear procedures, or inconsistent enforcement of meeting rules. Instead, it should function as a backstop—available to support the chair if conduct escalates to the point of actual disruption or safety concern.

When expectations, roles, and thresholds for intervention are established in advance, the likelihood of unnecessary escalation is reduced, and public confidence in the fairness of the process is strengthened.

Transparency is critical. Members of the public should be informed in advance, and at the outset of the meeting, when security or law enforcement will be present and why. Clear communication helps prevent misinterpretation of security measures as punitive or viewpoint-based and reinforces that their purpose is to protect everyone's right to participate safely.

Coordinating With Law Enforcement

Establish Clear Points of Contact

Develop direct, ongoing relationships between designated municipal representatives and the local law enforcement agency to ensure continuity, trust, and shared understanding of expectations.

Prebrief: Share Relevant Meeting Information in Advance

When security or law enforcement are in attendance, provide them with the meeting agenda and contextual information, including anticipated attendance, known hot-button issues, and any prior incidents or individuals likely to test meeting rules. Ensure there is a clear, shared understanding and preferred approach to managing the meeting.

Clarify Roles and Authority

Confirm in advance that the Chair remains the primary authority for managing the meeting and that law enforcement intervention occurs only at the Chair's direction or in response to clear safety threats.

Determine Appropriate Visibility

Decide how visible security personnel should be, including whether uniforms are worn and where officers are positioned. Options may include monitoring from outside the chamber via CCTV, with a clear plan for when and how officers would enter if needed.

Define Escalation Thresholds and Response Protocols

Establish clear criteria for intervention, including what constitutes actual disruption or a safety concern. Ensure all parties understand the graduated response approach, from observation to verbal intervention to removal as a last resort.

Communicate Expectations Publicly

Inform the public in advance, and at the beginning of the meeting, about the presence of security or law enforcement and the protocols governing their involvement.

Coordinating with Law Enforcement

Emphasize Rights-Protection and Neutrality

Ensure officers understand that their role is to protect the integrity of the public meeting and the rights of all participants—members of the public, elected officials, and staff—regardless of viewpoint or personal opinion.

Coordinate with Meeting Space Design and Logistics

Align security planning with room layout, entry and exit routes, and designated non-public areas to minimize unnecessary contact and reduce the potential for confrontation.

Debrief and Learn

After the meeting, debrief with elected officials, staff, and law enforcement to assess what worked, what did not, and whether protocols or design features should be adjusted for meetings of this nature in the future.

Communicate Changes in Advance

Proactively inform the public of any changes to security presence or procedures for upcoming meetings to avoid surprises and maintain trust.

4.3 Decorum Policy for Public Meetings

A clear decorum policy provides elected officials - particularly the chair - with a shared framework for managing challenging situations consistently, transparently, and in a viewpoint-neutral manner. When possible, this should be circulated in advance to anybody attending the meeting, including members of the public.

Template



The [Municipality Name] is committed to a meeting environment that welcomes robust debate on public policy issues in an atmosphere of inclusiveness, integrity, and respect for differing points of view. This policy ensures that meetings remain a safe forum for the public to observe their government and for the council/Board to conduct the people's business without actual disruption.

Scope of Application

- This policy applies to all attendees—including members of council, staff, and the public—at the following:
- Regular and Special Council/Board Meetings.
- Committee of the Whole and Advisory Committee Meetings.
- Statutory Public Hearings (e.g., land use and planning).

Standards of Conduct for Public Participation



To ensure the orderly and efficient conduct of meetings, all participants must adhere to the following rules:

- All individuals are expected to be kind, polite, and respectful in all interactions.
- All individuals are expected to focus remarks on factual merits and solutions rather than individuals or perceived motives, or engaging in personal attacks, name-calling, or questioning the motives of others.
- All individuals are expected to respect the rights of others to use municipal spaces and participate in proceedings without intimidation.
- No person shall speak until first recognized by the chair. All remarks must be directed to the chair (e.g., "Mr. Mayor" or "Madam Chair") rather than to staff, other audience members, or individual officials.
- All attendees must refrain from disrupting the neutrality of the council chamber, including by clapping, booing, hissing, or shouting, as these actions can intimidate other speakers and disrupt deliberations.
- Picket signs, placards, or banners are prohibited inside the meeting room to prevent visual disruption and maintain safety.

Identifying "Actual Disruption" to Public Meetings

"Actual disruption" is conduct that physically or procedurally impedes the meeting's ability to proceed. This includes:

- **Time Limit Violations:** Refusing to conclude remarks after the allotted time (typically 3–5 minutes) has expired.
- **Interruption:** Speaking out of turn from the gallery or shouting over a recognised speaker.

- **Resource Abuse:** Making excessive demands through high-volume correspondence or repeatedly arguing points after a final decision has been rendered.
- **Unauthorized Proximity:** Entering the "horseshoe" or formal staff/Council area without prior consent from the Chair.
- **Privacy Breaches:** Covertly recording meetings or taking photos/videos of staff without consent.
- **Aggressive Language:** Threats, harassment, profanity, or discriminatory slurs.
- **Safety Threats:** Implied or expressed threats of intimidation or violence directed at anyone in attendance.



Procedures for Addressing Disruptions

The Chair serves as the protector of the process and shall use a tiered approach to restore order:

1. **Verbal Warning:** The Chair shall advise the individual that their behaviour is disrupting the meeting and that failure to cease may result in removal.
2. **Muting/Technical Intervention:** In electronic or hybrid meetings, the Chair may direct staff to mute the individual's microphone if they exceed time limits or engage in offensive language.
3. **Recess:** If the room becomes overheated, the Chair may call a short recess (e.g., 5-15 minutes) to allow tempers to cool and to consult with senior staff on next steps, including perhaps the further need for expert legal or security advice or intervention.
4. **Expulsion/Removal:** If a warning is not heeded, the Chair may order the individual to leave. Removal is a last resort and must be based on the individual's disruptive actions, not the viewpoint they are expressing.

Proportional Restrictions and Follow-Up



To protect the future integrity of public meetings while respecting the Charter right to participate, the municipality may apply proportional restrictions to repeat disruptors:

- **Written Submission Only:** Requiring the individual to provide input via letter or email rather than oral delegations for a set period.
- **Single Point of Contact:** Designating a specific staff member as the only recipient for the individual's correspondence.
- **Limited Attendance:** Prospective exclusion from future meetings should only occur if there is definitive evidence of a threat to public safety; otherwise, the individual may be escorted out only when a new disruption occurs.

“Closing the Loop” (Post-Meeting)

- **Public Reporting:** The municipality should summarize how public input gathered through a public engagement activity influenced the actions or decisions. This helps to build trust and reduces future conflict.

4.4 Principles for Public Engagement: Preempting a Frustrated Public

These principles are more relevant to public engagement meetings than they are to public participation at a council meeting.

Effective public engagement requires attention to structure, accessibility, and clear communication so residents can contribute meaningfully. Clarifying roles, connecting participants to subject matter experts, and providing multiple ways to learn and share input are essential for fostering trust, equity, and influence.

What Frustrates the Public	Engagement Principles & Solutions
<p>1. "The decision is already made."</p> <p>Residents often feel that public hearings happen too late in the process, serving only as a procedural checklist after staff and developers have finalized plans. This leads to a perception of "sham participation" or "box-checking".</p>	<p>Early Engagement & The Feedback Loop</p> <p>Engage Before, During, and After: Start dialogue during the visioning stage, not just the approval stage.</p> <p>Share Decisions to Date: Be transparent about what decisions have already been made and when. Be clear about where public input is still relevant and valuable.</p> <p>Close the Loop: Explicitly report back to the public on how their input influenced the final decision. If feedback wasn't used, explain why (e.g., legislative constraints or budget limits) to build trust and reduce suspicion.</p>

What Frustrates the Public	Engagement Principles & Solutions
<p>2. "It's us versus them."</p> <p>Traditional meeting layouts (for example, theater style with an elevated dais) create a physical hierarchy that cues opposition. This "performance model" often makes residents feel they are speaking to a passive, unresponsive wall of officials.</p>	<p>Dismantle Physical Hierarchies</p> <p>Active Listening: Officials must use body language (eye contact, sitting still) to show they are listening, rather than crossing arms or checking phones.</p> <p>Accessible Events: Public engagement activities work well with formats like round tables, workshops, facilitated conversations, or Public Information Centres (PICs) to encourage dialogue with staff and experts in informal, inclusive, and equitable settings, where a wider group of people may feel able to participate.</p>
<p>3. "The loudest voices dominate."</p> <p>Open mic sessions often become contests of volume or numbers, and organized interest groups can dominate. As a result, quieter, marginalized, or moderate voices can be intimidated, or lost in the crowd.</p>	<p>Structure for Equity</p> <p>Small Group Discussion: Break large audiences into facilitated small groups. People behave more respectfully in face-to-face clusters, and this format prevents a single viewpoint from hijacking the room</p> <p>Randomized Speaking Order: If a speaker list is long, select speakers randomly rather than in order of sign-up to prevent organized groups from "stacking" the deck.</p>
<p>4. "It's too complicated / I don't understand."</p> <p>The use of technical jargon, complex legal constraints, and insider acronyms creates barriers to entry. Residents may rely on misinformation because the municipality has not provided accessible facts.</p>	<p>Education First, Input Second</p> <p>Embed Learning: Move residents from "reacting" to "learning" by providing balanced, plain-language background presentations before the discussion begins.</p> <p>Visualizations: A picture can often communicate impacts more effectively than detailed text or technical documentation. Design materials that favour visual clarity and simplicity.</p>

What Frustrates the Public	Engagement Principles & Solutions
<p>5. "It's inconvenient."</p> <p>Fixed meeting times, formal venues, and single participation formats can unintentionally exclude people. Engagement should offer convenient timing, accessible locations, and multiple ways to participate to reflect how different groups live and engage.</p>	<p>Go to the People</p> <p>Pop-up Engagement: Instead of expecting residents to come to you, set up booths at grocery stores, libraries, or community events.</p> <p>Asynchronous Input: Allow residents to submit audio, video, or written comments online beforehand so they don't have to attend in person to be heard.</p>
<p>6. "I'm getting conflicting information."</p>	<p>Defer to Expertise</p> <p>Clarify Roles: Make it clear who holds expertise and decision-making authority. While council members may wish to participate in public engagement sessions organized by the municipality, they should avoid giving technical or procedural answers outside their role to avoid sowing confusion with residents.</p> <p>Connect to Experts: Direct residents to staff or subject matter experts through public meetings, workshops, online Q&A sessions, open houses, or advisory committees to provide accurate, structured responses.</p>

What Frustrates the Public	Engagement Principles & Solutions
<p>7. "This is too fast / I don't have time to catch up."</p> <p>Compressed timelines, short notice, or last-minute materials can make people feel rushed into reacting rather than meaningfully contributing.</p>	<p>Respect People's Time</p> <p>Adequate Notice: Share materials early and clearly communicate decision timelines.</p> <p>Paced Engagement: Match the complexity of the issue with sufficient time for learning, reflection, and dialogue.</p> <p>Staged Input: Allow multiple points of entry rather than a single high-stakes moment.</p>
<p>8. "Nothing ever changes."</p> <p>When people invest time and energy but see the same outcomes repeatedly, engagement begins to feel futile—even when processes are technically sound.</p>	<p>Demonstrate Impact Over Time</p> <p>Track Commitments: Publicly document themes heard, commitments made, and progress on implementation.</p> <p>Show Evolution: Explicitly reference how past engagement influenced current policies or projects.</p> <p>Name Constraints: Be transparent about what engagement can and cannot change to avoid false expectations.</p>

Learn More

Organization	Links
Scott Lazenby, Community Heart and Soul <u>Seating Matters! How Room Arrangement Encourages or Discourages Civility</u>	<u>communityheartandsoul.org</u>
City of Niagara Falls <u>Decorum Policy for Public Meetings</u>	<u>niagarafalls.ca</u>
Town of Innisfil <u>Respectful Interactions Policy (PDF)</u>	<u>innisfil.ca</u>
Municipality of West Grey <u>RZone (Respect-Zone) Brochure (PDF)</u>	<u>westgrey.com</u>
The Crime and Justice Institute <u>Guidelines for Law Enforcement Role at Public Meetings (PDF)</u>	<u>bridgingdivides.princeton.edu</u>
Ottawa Police Service & Service de police de la Ville de Gatineau <u>Running for Office, Ready for Anything: Safety Tips for You and Your Team (PDF)</u>	<u>ottawapolice.ca</u>

Organization	Links
University of Calgary School of Public Policy <u>Community Engagement in Local Communities: Hearing the Voices of the Public (PDF)</u>	policyschool.ca
Newfoundland and Labrador Office of Public Engagement <u>Public Engagement Guide (PDF)</u>	gov.nl.ca
SFU Morris J Wosk Centre for Dialogue <u>Public Engagement Toolkit (PDF)</u>	sfu.ca
Ombudsman Ontario <u>Open Meetings: Guide for Municipalities</u>	ombudsman.on.ca

Fostering Civility at the Council Table

5

5.0 Fostering Civility at the Council Table

Civility at the council table is not about the absence of conflict; rather, it is about the presence of respect while navigating inevitable disagreements. In the context of democratic governance, civility requires focusing debate on the strengths and weaknesses of policy solutions rather than engaging in personal attacks against colleagues or staff.

Maintaining this standard is critical for both institutional stability and public trust. The rise in incivility and harassment is currently driving resignations among elected officials and deterring dedicated community representatives from seeking office.

Beyond retention, a lack of decorum undermines decision-making; robust debate is necessary to avoid "group think," but it must remain constructive to ensure that collective decisions reflect the best interests of the community.

This section provides practical principles, tips, and tools designed to help you build productive working relationships with your fellow council members and manage meetings effectively, even when tensions run high. It outlines strategies for guiding disagreement toward productive outcomes, such as separating the people from the problem and utilizing parliamentary procedure to maintain order.

5.1 Building Effective Working Relationships on Council

Effective governance relies on the ability of elected officials to work together despite differing ideologies. While you do not need to be friends with every colleague, you must be able to function as a cohesive decision-making body. The following strategies can help build a foundation of trust and respect at the table.

Practice the "No Surprises" Rule

Adopt a practice of giving colleagues or the chair a "heads-up" if you plan to ask a particularly tough question or introduce a complex motion. Avoiding "gotcha" moments demonstrates professional courtesy and ensures that debate is focused on the merit of the issue rather than the shock of the process.

A fundamental rule of civility is to separate the people from the problem. Debate must remain focused on the item and policy in question, never on the motives or character of other members. When tension rises, re-center the discussion on shared goals, such as the economic or social well-being of the community, rather than personal differences.

Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

Conflict is a necessary part of democracy, but it must be managed to avoid toxicity. Strive for collegiality even when voting on opposite sides of an issue. Recognize that debate and disagreement are fundamental to avoiding "group think" and ensuring robust decision-making. Once a decision is made, accept the will of the majority and move on without harboring lingering hostilities.

Invest in Connection Outside the Chamber

It is easier to demonize a colleague you only see during contentious votes. Create spaces or opportunities for connection that are not about conflict or policy. Ad hoc conversations around the 'water cooler' are great for building social connection and empathy. Talking about real life—families, hobbies, or shared community interests—humanizes your colleagues and builds a reservoir of goodwill that can be drawn upon during difficult debates. If you find a colleague particularly difficult, actively try to identify their "biggest redeeming quality" and keep it in mind during interactions.

Listen to Understand, Not Just to Reply

Active listening is a powerful tool for reducing polarization. When a colleague is speaking, focus entirely on their argument rather than formulating your rebuttal. Demonstrating that you are willing to hear differing perspectives—and potentially be persuaded by facts—builds credibility and encourages others to accord you the same respect.

Respect Role Clarity ("Noses In, Fingers Out")

Conflict often spills over between members when the lines between governance and administration blur. Adhere to the "Noses In, Fingers Out" (NIFO) principle: Council's role is to set policy (noses in), while the CAO and staff are responsible for execution (fingers out). Respecting these lanes reduces friction not only with staff but among members of council who may feel compelled to defend staff from micromanagement.

Model the Standard You Expect

As a leader, your behaviour sets the tone for the community. If you engage in eye-rolling, interruptions, or personal attacks, you grant permission for the public to treat the council with similar disrespect. Commit to a standard of civility where you treat colleagues with the courtesy you wish to receive, regardless of the heat of the moment.

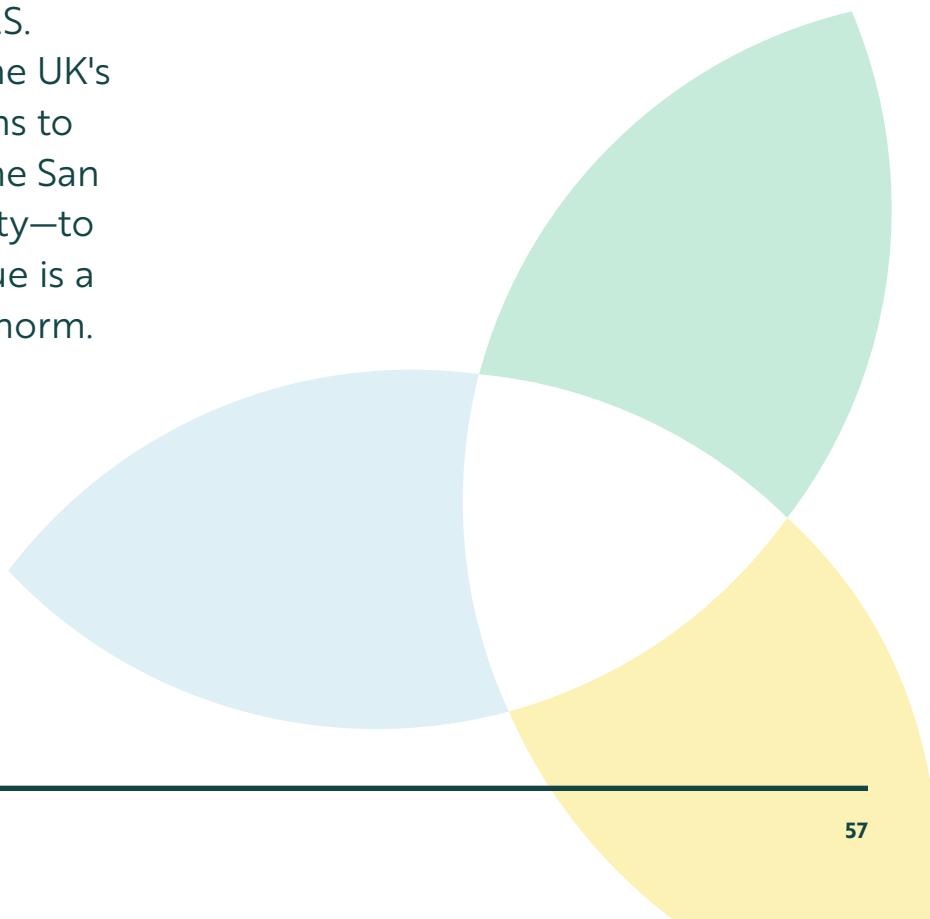
5.2 Shared Norms and Civility Pledges

Civility pledges and shared norms templates are formal commitments that establish clear behavioural expectations for elected officials and the public, providing a "neutral reference point" to de-escalate conflict and define acceptable conduct.

These tools are increasingly being utilized by governance bodies globally—ranging from the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the UK's local government associations to specific local agencies like the San Diego County Water Authority—to signal that respectful dialogue is a non-negotiable community norm.

In Ontario, Elect Respect is a civility pledge that municipalities and citizens can become signatories to.

For councils that want their own bespoke approach to norm setting, there are different kinds of shared norms or pledges to adopt.



Option 1: The "Commitment to Civil Behaviour"

(Procedural Focus)

This template focuses on the mechanics of the meeting and specific behavioural constraints. It is best suited for councils seeking clear, enforceable boundaries.

Council Commitment to Civil Governance



To maintain a productive working environment and retain public trust, the council commits to the following standards:

- 1. Unity of Purpose:** We will support the municipality's mission and bring authority-related concerns to the council table for open discussion rather than letting them fester.
- 2. Constructive Debate:** We will focus on the problem, not the person. When addressing a problem, we commit to offering alternative solutions rather than just opposition.
- 3. Respect for Roles:** We will show respect to each other as elected representatives and to staff as professional public servants. We will adhere to the "Noses In, Fingers Out" principle, respecting the distinction between policy (Council) and administration (Staff).
- 4. Meeting Decorum:**
 - We will listen to understand, not just to reply.
 - One person speaks at a time; we will not interrupt colleagues or staff.
 - We will limit side conversations and turn off mobile devices to demonstrate active listening.
- 5. Confidentiality:** We will strictly maintain the confidentiality of materials and discussions held in closed meetings (in-camera), honoring our legal obligations under the Municipal Act.
- 6. Self-Correction:** We pledge to correct ourselves and accept correction from the chair constructively should our conduct fall below this standard.

Option 2: The "Pledge of Civility"

(Values Focus)

This template is broader and focuses on the culture of the organization. It is useful for setting a tone of inclusion and respect, particularly regarding public interaction.

Statement of Values and Civility



- 1. Governance Matters:** We acknowledge that the manner in which we govern ourselves is often as important as the positions we take.
- 2. Valuing Divergence:** We believe our collective decisions will be better—and truer to our mission—when differing views have had the opportunity to be fully vetted and considered. Disagreement is necessary for democracy, but we will disagree without being disagreeable.
- 3. Right to Respect:** All those who appear before the council—including residents, staff, and fellow members—have the right to be treated with respect, courtesy, and openness.
- 4. Zero Tolerance for Hate:** We unequivocally condemn hate speech, discrimination, and harassment. We commit to a standard where such behaviour is never acceptable in our chambers or on our digital platforms.
- 5. Accountability:** We commit to conducting ourselves with civility at all times. If we fail to meet these standards, we will take responsibility for our actions and seek to repair the harm.

Option 3: Short-Form Meeting Opener

(The "Community Character" Statement)

Some councils find it effective to read a brief statement at the beginning of meetings to set the stage for the public and the members. This can be read by the Chair or rotated among members.

Template



"Welcome to this meeting of the [Name] Council. This forum is a place for democracy, respectful discussion and debate. We are committed to the values of integrity, honesty, responsibility, and respect. We ask that everyone present—council members, staff, and the public—exercise self-discipline. Please focus your comments on the issues at hand, respect the time limits, and accord others the same courtesy you wish to receive. Let us work together to build a community where diverse views are heard and valued."

Implementation Tips for CAOs and Clerks

Formalization: Do not just agree verbally. Adopt the pledge via resolution or have all members sign a ceremonial copy to hang in the council chambers.

Refresh: Revisit the pledge annually or at the start of every new term to ensure buy-in from new members.

Orientation: Include the pledge in the orientation package for candidates and newly elected officials so expectations are set before the first meeting.

Public Visibility: Post the pledge on the municipal website and at the entrance to the council chambers. This signals to the public that abuse and intimidation are not welcome.

5.3 Policy Tools for Managing Conflict

Beyond pledges, councils should enact specific policies to provide structure, manage conflict, and stipulate consequences for misconduct. This section outlines four specific policy instruments that define boundaries, clarify roles, and provide mechanisms for resolution.

A Robust Procedure By-law

The **Procedure By-law** is the primary tool for maintaining order. It should be viewed not just as a scheduling tool, but as a mechanism to enforce decorum.

Purpose: To govern the proceedings of meetings and provide the chair with enforceable rules to manage debate and behaviour.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Role of the chair: Explicitly empower the chair to preserve order, enforce rules, and rule on whether motions or speakers are out of order.

One Speaker at a Time: Enforce the rule that only one person speaks at a time and must be recognized by the chair.

Focus on the Issue: Include a provision that requires debate to focus on the item and policy in question, strictly prohibiting personal attacks or comments regarding the motives of other members.

Electronic Participation: Clearly define rules for electronic participation to ensure remote members are held to the same standards of decorum and attention as those physically present. Ensure that video participation is monitored in the same manner as the live session, and that participant conduct online aligns with what is expected of participants in-person.

Enhanced Code of Conduct

Every municipality should have a Code of Conduct that goes beyond financial impropriety to address behavioural standards and interpersonal conduct.

Purpose: To set ethical standards for members of council and local boards and provide a mechanism for accountability.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Respectful Conduct: mandated provisions regarding respectful conduct toward officers, employees, and fellow members.

Social Media Usage: A specific section governing members' conduct online, clarifying that the Code applies to communication on social media platforms.

Non-Interference: Provisions prohibiting members from using their office to attempt to influence staff or interfere in administrative duties (operationalizing the "Noses In, Fingers Out" principle).

Reprisal Protection: A clause prohibiting members from engaging in reprisal or threats against anyone who files a complaint or cooperates with an inquiry.

Council-Staff Relations Policy

Conflict often arises from role confusion between elected officials (policy) and staff (administration). A formal policy clarifies these lanes.

Purpose: To clearly define the distinct roles of staff (neutral advice, implementation) and council (policy, decision-making) and manage the relationship between them.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Role Clarity: Explicit definitions of the CAO's role as the only employee reporting directly to council, and the restriction of individual members of council giving direction to staff.

Respectful Communication: Standards for how inquiries are made to staff, ensuring they are not subjected to abuse or undue pressure.

NIFO Principle: Formal adoption of the "Noses In, Fingers Out" principle to prevent members of council from interfering in day-to-day operations, a frequent source of friction.

Complaint and Inquiry Protocol

Policies are ineffective without a clear process for enforcement. This protocol defines how complaints are handled.

Purpose: To set out how to file complaints against members regarding code of conduct contraventions and how the integrity commissioner will investigate.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Informal Resolution: Include an option for mediation or informal resolution. This allows the integrity commissioner to resolve interpersonal disputes without a costly, formal investigation, saving time and money.

Frivolous Complaints: Give the integrity commissioner discretion to dismiss complaints that are frivolous, vexatious, or made in bad faith to prevent the weaponization of the complaint process.

Timelines: Establish reasonable time limits for filing and reviewing complaints to prevent issues from dragging on and poisoning the council environment.

Social Media Policy

Given that online interactions are a major driver of modern political conflict, a specific policy or detailed section within the Code of Conduct is critical.

Purpose: To govern how members of council and senior staff represent themselves and the municipality online.

Key Provisions to Adopt:

Personal vs. Political: Clear distinction between personal accounts, campaign profiles, and official municipal channels.

Zero Tolerance for Hate: A statement that hate speech, harassment, and discrimination are never acceptable, even on personal political platforms.

Engagement Rules: Guidelines on how to disengage from toxicity and avoiding "feeding the trolls" to prevent online conflicts from spilling into the council chamber.

5.4 How to Be an Active Bystander

Bystander inaction when witnessing harassment, bullying, or other targeted uncivil behaviour is rarely due to apathy; rather, it stems from psychological barriers such as a diffusion of responsibility (assuming someone else will act) and a crowd mentality (assuming the situation is not an emergency because others are not reacting). To move from a passive witness to an active bystander, sometimes called an "upstander," an individual must navigate a specific decision-making process: noticing the event, interpreting it as a problem, assuming personal responsibility, knowing how to intervene and, finally, taking action.

The 5Ds of Bystander Intervention

The "5Ds" are a set of versatile strategies designed to help bystanders safely intervene in situations of harassment or incivility.

① Direct

Intervene by directly addressing the situation or the individuals involved. This can involve setting boundaries by telling the aggressor, "That is not okay.", or checking in with the person being targeted by asking, "Are you okay?". When using this method, be firm, clear, and concise, focusing on the behaviour rather than attacking the person to avoid escalating the conflict.

2 Distract

De-escalate the situation by creating a diversion that interrupts the harassment or shifts attention away from the conflict. This is a subtle approach that ignores the aggressor and engages the target, such as asking for the time, pretending to know the person, or accidentally dropping an item to create a commotion.

3 Delegate

Seek assistance from a third party who may be better positioned or have more authority to intervene. In a municipal or public meeting context, this could involve alerting a supervisor, security personnel, or a presiding official to help you intervene.

4 Delay

Check in with the person who experienced the harm after the incident is over. This action validates their experience and shows them they are valued; support can include listening without judgement, offering resources, or simply asking if they need anything.

5 Document

If it is safe and someone else is already assisting the victim, create a record of the incident by taking notes, photos, or video. Always ask the person who was harmed what they want to do with the documentation, such as share it with meeting officials or law enforcement. Never post or share it without their explicit consent, as doing so can cause further trauma or harassment.

Learn More

Organization	Links
Ombudsman Ontario <u>Codes of Conduct and Integrity Commissioners - Guide for Municipalities</u>	<u>ombudsman.on.ca</u>
University of Western Ontario Ivey Executive Education <u>Understanding and Counteracting Incivility in Canadian Municipal Politics</u>	<u>ivey.uwo.ca</u>
iBABS (Euronext) <u>The 7 Chairing Meetings Skills That Every Chair Should Develop</u>	<u>ibabs.com</u>
City Clerk's Office (City of Toronto) <u>Meeting Processes and Simplified Rules of Procedure</u>	<u>toronto.ca</u>
Government of Ontario <u>The Ontario Municipal Councillor's Guide on Council Meetings</u>	<u>ontario.ca</u>
Institute for Local Government (USA) <u>Tips for Promoting Civility in Public Meetings (PDF)</u>	<u>ca-ilg.org</u>
Local Government Association (UK) <u>Councillor Workbook – Chairing Skills (PDF)</u>	<u>local.gov.uk</u>
GagnonStrategix (for the New Brunswick Government) <u>Governance Best Practices (PDF)</u>	<u>gnb.ca</u>
Western City Magazine (League of California Cities, USA) <u>Essential Tips for Effective City Council Meetings</u>	<u>westerncity.com</u>

Organization	Links
<p>National Association of Counties (USA) The Right Way to Run A Meeting – A Guide for Council Officials (PDF)</p>	naco.org
<p>Strong Cities Network Policy Brief – City Leadership in the Face of Rising Incivility and Polarisation: Ten Considerations for Mayors and Local Governments</p>	strongcitiesnetwork.org
<p>Elect Respect (Ontario) Civility Pledge</p>	electrespect.ca
<p>National Association of Local Councils (UK) Civility and Respect Pledge</p>	nalc.gov.uk
<p>City of Whitehorse (Yukon) Civility Policy</p>	whitehorse.ca
<p>Institute for Local Government Everyday Ethics for Local Officials – Promoting Civility at Public Meetings: Concepts and Practices (PDF)</p>	ca-ilg.org
<p>Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (USA) De-Escalation Tip Sheet (PDF)</p>	cisa.gov
<p>States United Democracy Center (USA) De-Escalation: A Toolkit for Election Officials (PDF)</p>	statesunited.org

Organization	Links
<p>Princeton University Bridging Divides Initiative (USA)</p> <p><u>Resource on De-Escalation and Communication Around Contentious Meetings for Local Elected Officials (PDF)</u></p>	<p><u>statesunited.org</u></p>
<p>American Psychological Association</p> <p><u>Bystander Intervention Tip Sheet</u></p>	<p><u>apa.org</u></p>
<p>Wilfrid Laurier University</p> <p><u>5Ds Direct, Delegate, Delay, Distract and Document</u></p>	<p><u>students.wlu.ca</u></p>
<p>University of Waterloo Office of Equity, Diversity, and Anti-Racism</p> <p><u>Bystander Intervention Resource Sheet (PDF)</u></p>	<p><u>uwaterloo.ca</u></p>

Using Social Media and Online Platforms

6

6.0 Using Social Media and Online Platforms

Social media is now a common venue for civic communication, but it is not a neutral or cost-free tool for municipalities. While these platforms can help reach residents quickly, they also introduce legal, operational, and democratic risks that require careful judgement about when and how they are used.

When used appropriately, social media can support municipal work by sharing information about council decisions and local priorities. It can be used to set the record straight when misinformation and disinformation is swirling. The vacuum left by the retreat of news media and journalism at the local level means that social media is the only way for council and staff to disseminate information to residents in a timely manner.

Different platforms serve different purposes, and municipalities can choose channels based on their communication objectives and the audiences they aim to reach:

Facebook is a common starting point for community engagement and institutional updates;

X (formerly Twitter) is better suited for real-time information, event coverage, and responding to public inquiries;

TikTok & Instagram can be effective for reaching younger residents through visual content;

AI tools such as Grok on X have been the subject of recent controversy and underscore the importance of ongoing risk assessment, content moderation, clear account controls, and careful oversight of automated or algorithmic features.

At the same time, online behaviour shapes offline civic life. Harassment and abuse affect who feels able to participate, who is willing to engage publicly, and who considers running for office or working in municipal roles. Poorly managed platforms can narrow participation and weaken public trust. The informal nature of social media also creates legal and ethical exposure: accounts and posts are often perceived as extensions of official authority, creating risks related to conduct, privacy, and the use of public resources.

6.1 Moderation Principles for Online Forums and When to Disengage

Without clear moderation standards, online engagement can quickly expose municipalities to legal risk, privacy and data breaches, and staff harm. The principles below provide a defensible baseline for managing these risks while preserving open civic discussion.

① Publish Your "House Rules"

You cannot enforce rules you have not posted. Before moderating content, publish a Social Media Community Policy or Terms of Use and link to it prominently. This policy provides the authority to hide or remove content. At minimum, prohibited content should include:

- Discrimination or harassment
- Threats, illegal activity, or copyright violations
- Spam or commercial solicitation
- Demonstrably false information related to elections, public health, or safety

② Enforce Behaviour, Not Opinion

(Viewpoint Neutrality)

Moderation must be viewpoint-neutral. Distinguish between **what** is being said and **how** it is expressed. Criticism of council or staff is protected political speech. Abusive, threatening, or discriminatory conduct is not. Removing content based on disagreement rather than behaviour may violate Charter protections.

3 Protect Privacy

(No Casework in Public)

Social media is not a secure channel. Public threads are inappropriate for handling service requests or sharing personal information.

- Remove posts containing personal or identifying details
- Redirect residents to a secure channel, explaining the privacy rationale

4 Use a Graduated Response

Apply the least intrusive intervention needed:

- Hide spam or irrelevant content
- Preemptively disable comments on certain hot-button topics
- Delete material that clearly violates posted rules (retain records)
- Block only after repeated violations or credible threats

5 Documenting Evidence for Potential Legal Action

If legal action may be pursued, it is important to preserve thorough and accurate records of all relevant interactions:

Screenshots: Capture clear images of all messages, comments, posts, or images.

Ensure each screenshot shows timestamps and the sender's username or profile URL.

Detailed Log: Maintain a chronological record of incidents, noting the date, time, platform, and a concise description of what occurred.

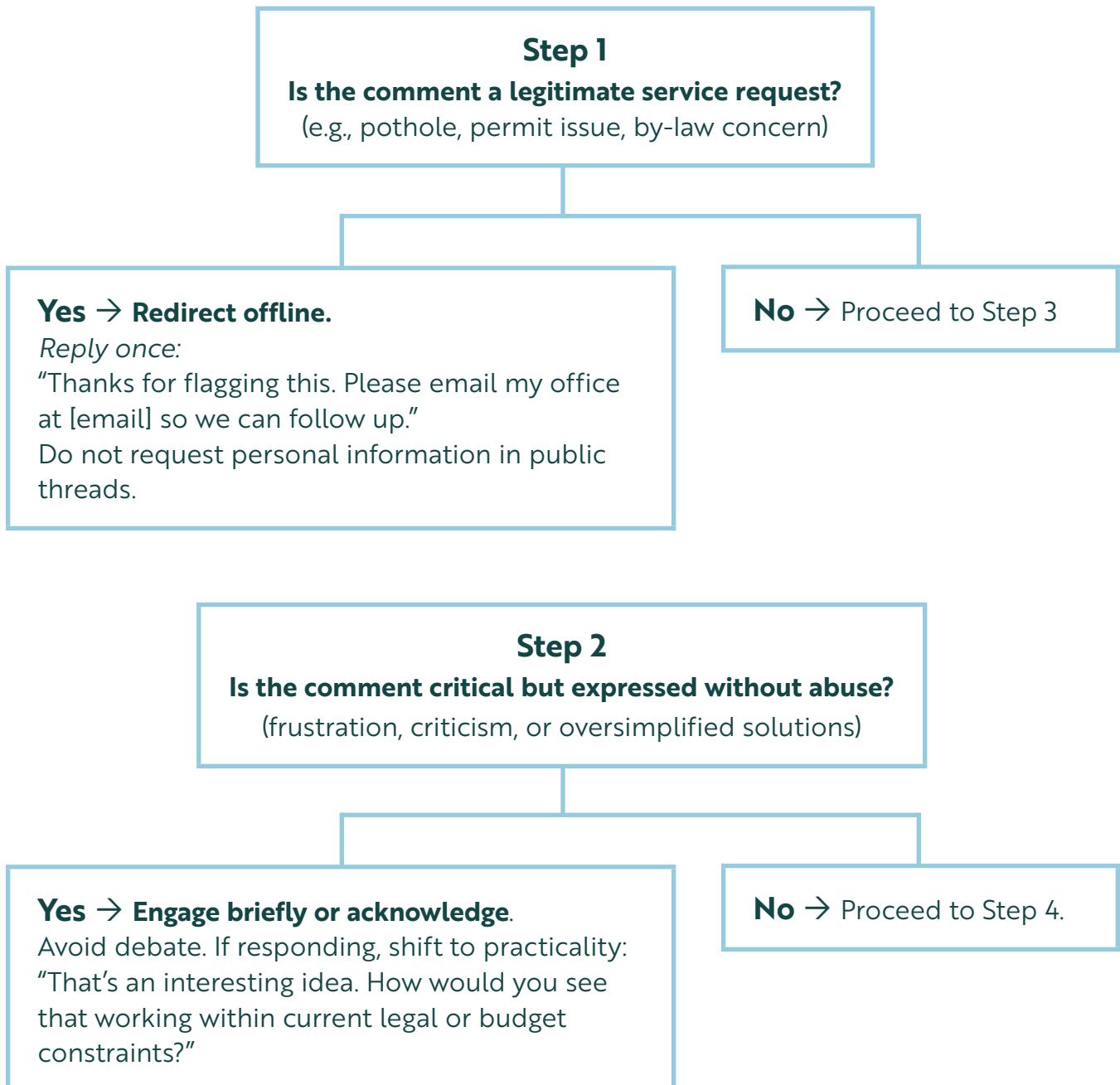
→ Note that some may view any of these actions as preventing dissent or infringing on free speech, and escalation is possible; seek legal advice on an appropriate policy when uncertain.

Moderation Analogy:

A municipal page is like a community notice board. Residents may criticize municipal decisions, but they may not deface the "board", post threats, or use it for commercial advertising. Moderation removes harmful conduct—not unpopular opinions.

Disengagement Decision Tree

Engaging online does not mean you are required to suffer abuse. **"Don't feed the trolls"** is a core tenet of digital survival. Use this decision tree to determine when to engage, when to ignore, and when to block.



Step 3
Is the comment designed to provoke or disrupt?
(off-topic, repetitive, insincere, inflammatory)

Yes → Do not engage.

Hide spam or repetitive posts if needed to keep the thread usable.

No → Proceed to Step 4

Step 4
Does the comment contain abuse or threats?
(hate speech, threats of violence, sexual content, defamatory attacks)

Yes →

1. **Record:** Screenshot for your files.
2. **Remove or Block:** Apply your posted rules.
3. **Report:** Flag to the platform; escalate threats to police or the integrity commissioner as required.

No → Reassess or seek staff advice before responding.

Pulse check:

When in doubt, ask: Will this response advance service—or escalate the conflict? If engagement adds heat rather than clarity, disengagement is the appropriate professional choice.

6.2 Personal vs. Official Account Guidance

One of the most common pitfalls for elected officials and senior staff is the blurring of lines between a "personal" opinion and an "official" statement. In the municipal context, how you set up and use your account determines your liability, your ability to moderate comments, and your obligations under your Code of Conduct and privacy legislation (such as the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act).

The "Official" Test

According to the Toronto Integrity Commissioner, an account is likely considered official (and therefore subject to Council Codes of Conduct and records retention rules) if it meets any of the following criteria:

Identity: You use your official title (e.g., "Councillor," "Mayor," "CAO") in the handle, username, or profile description.

Resources: The account is managed using municipal devices (computers, smartphones) or maintained by municipal staff or volunteers.

Contact Info: You list your city hall or municipal email address/phone number for registration or contact.

Branding: You use the municipal logo or other corporate imagery.

Promotion: The account is linked from the municipality's official website or your official constituency site.

The "Personal" Test

To maintain a truly personal account where you retain greater control over content and blocking, you must strictly separate it from your office.

No Official Business: You cannot use the account to make official announcements, solicit public input on municipal decisions, or issue orders.

Clear Disclaimers: Clearly state that views are your own.

No Municipal Resources: You cannot engage in this account during working hours or using municipal hardware.

The "Hybrid" Trap:

Many officials attempt to run "hybrid" accounts. Be warned: if you mix personal family photos with official policy announcements, the account will likely be treated as official by integrity commissioners and the courts. If you use your title, you are trading on the influence of your office, and the Code of Conduct applies.

Election Year Scrubbing

During an election period, the distinction becomes critical to avoid using municipal resources for campaigning. You generally have two options:

- 1. Separate Accounts:** Maintain a distinct "Re-Elect" account funded entirely by your campaign. This is the safest approach.
- 2. Conversion:** If you use your official account for campaigning, you must "scrub" it during the election period. This involves removing references to your official title, removing municipal logos, and ensuring no staff or city devices are used to update it.

6.3 Policies to Consider for Online Platforms

To professionalize your digital governance and protect against liability, your municipality should consider adopting or updating three specific types of policy documents. These examples are drawn from established Canadian municipal frameworks.

External "House Rules" (Community Guidelines)

You need a public-facing document linked in your bio or "About" section that explicitly grants you the licence to moderate. Without this, blocking users may be seen as arbitrary or discriminatory.

Prohibited Content: Clearly list what is not allowed. This can include: insulting, threatening, or harassing language; promotion of illegal activity; spam; and content that violates another person's privacy.

Right to Remove: State clearly: "We reserve the right to hide and/or remove content that does not abide by these Guidelines".

Disclaimer on Endorsements: State that "following," "liking," or "sharing" content does not constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed.

Internal Elected Official Guidance

(Code of Conduct application)

This internal policy clarifies how the Code of Conduct applies to digital actions, specifically distinguishing between "Official" and "Personal/Election" accounts to prevent the misuse of municipal resources.

The "Official" Definition: Define an account as official if it uses a corporate email for registration, uses the municipal logo, or is maintained by municipal staff/devices.

Election Year Protocol: Mandate that during an election period, official accounts must either be "scrubbed" of municipal branding and titles or kept distinct from new campaign accounts. No municipal resources (computers, staff time) can be used for campaign content.

In-Camera Confidentiality: Explicitly prohibit the use of social media during in-camera meetings to prevent inadvertent disclosure of confidential information or real-time broadcasting of privileged proceedings.

Service Level Expectations

(Terms of Use)

Manage public expectations regarding response times and service requests to protect staff workflow and resident privacy.

Not for Formal Complaints: State clearly that social media is not the venue for official complaints or complex service requests because platforms are not confidential. Direct these to a secure web form, email, or phone number.

Availability: Define monitoring hours (e.g, "Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm"). Explicitly state that accounts are not monitored 24/7 to avoid liability during emergencies.

Privacy Warning: Remind users that social media is a public record. Warn them never to post personal details (addresses, file numbers) on the public feed.

Learn More

Organization	Links
Office of the Integrity Commissioner Toronto: <u>Use of Social Media by Council Members (PDF)</u>	toronto.ca
Ombudsman Toronto <u>Social Media Policy (PDF)</u>	uwaterloo.ca
Ombudsman Ontario <u>Approach to Social Media Engagement</u>	ombudsman.on.ca
City of Victoria <u>Forum Etiquette & Moderation</u>	engage.victoria.ca
City of Markham <u>Social Media Community Guidelines</u>	markham.ca
City of Peterborough <u>Social Media Policy (PDF)</u>	peterborough.ca
Samara Centre for Democracy <u>The 2023 Toronto Mayoral By-election Report</u>	samaracentre.ca
UK Parliament <u>Corporate Use of Social Networking Sites (PDF)</u>	parliament.uk
UK Department for Work & Pensions <u>Guidance on Social Media Policy</u>	gov.uk

Organization	Links
UK Society of Local Council Clerks <u>Civility and Respect Guide to Social Media</u>	<u>slcc.co.uk</u>
UK City of London <u>Employee Handbook: Social Media Policy (PDF)</u>	<u>democracy.cityoflondon.gov.uk</u>
UK City of London <u>Social Media FAQs (PDF)</u>	<u>democracy.cityoflondon.gov.uk</u>
USA Office of the Chief Technology Officer <u>Social Media Access and Use Policy</u>	<u>octo.dc.gov</u>
USA Office of Personnel Management <u>Social Media Policy (PDF)</u>	<u>opm.gov</u>
USA Association of Washington Cities <u>Guidelines for Elected and Appointed Officials Using Social Media</u>	<u>wacities.org</u>
USA New York State <u>Social Media Policy</u>	<u>ny.gov</u>
USA Election Assistance Commission <u>Social Media Comment Policy</u>	<u>eac.gov</u>
Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University <u>Social Media for Public Officials 2.0 Factsheet</u>	<u>knightcolumbia.org</u>

Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff

7

7.0 Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff

Municipal work increasingly takes place in high-pressure environments shaped by public scrutiny, complex decision-making, and frequent conflict. These conditions place sustained demands on the mental and emotional capacity of elected officials and staff, making well-being an operational concern as well as a personal one.

Self-care matters because burnout and chronic stress do not only affect individuals; they shape how institutions function. In municipal roles, fatigue, hypervigilance, and emotional exhaustion can impair judgement, narrow attention to immediate crises, and increase the likelihood of escalation in already tense situations.

Over time, unmanaged stress contributes to staff turnover, withdrawal from public engagement, and weakened democratic participation. Protecting mental well-being is therefore central to risk management, workplace safety, and public trust.

The section outlines practical strategies for recognizing and responding to stress before it becomes debilitating. It identifies early warning signs of burnout and offers self-protection and recovery practices. This section also highlights the role of peer and professional support networks in sustaining perspective and judgement.

7.1 Warning Signs of Burnout

In municipal roles marked by high scrutiny and frequent conflict, mental well-being is a professional requirement. Sustained exposure to pressure and hostility increases the risk of burnout, which rarely appears suddenly. It develops when ongoing stress outpaces recovery. Recognizing early warning signs allows for intervention before health, judgement, or performance are affected.



Physical signs often appear first:

Persistent fatigue

Exhaustion despite rest, insomnia, or frequent waking.

Stress-related symptoms

Headaches, muscle tension, chest discomfort, or digestive issues.

Physical anxiety

Elevated heart rate or blood pressure outside of acute situations.



Cognitive and decision making signs are especially consequential in leadership roles:

Decision fatigue

Difficulty making routine or low-stakes decisions.

Narrowed focus

Trouble balancing immediate demands with long-term goals.

Reduced concentration

Difficulty focusing in meetings or reviewing material.



Emotional and behavioural signs often become visible to others:

Hypervigilance

Constantly anticipating conflict or hostility.

Emotional masking

Feeling compelled to act calm or show interest you do not feel.

Compassion fatigue

Reduced empathy, growing cynicism toward constituents.

Withdrawal

Avoiding public engagement, colleagues, or meetings.

Irritability

Shortened temper or difficulty managing frustration.

It is important to note, however, that burnout is rarely isolated to one individual. Organizational warning signs include increased absenteeism and turnover, declining morale, and a defensive or distrustful posture toward the public.

7.2 Practical and Realistic Self-Protection Strategies

Safety protocols must be standard operating procedure, not an afterthought to combat increasing incivility. Effective self-protection requires a holistic approach that secures your physical environment and your mental bandwidth.

Psychological Self-defence

Protecting your decision-making capacity is as important as physical safety.

Validate the Experience: Acknowledge that harassment is a systemic issue, not a "part of the job" you must silently endure. If you feel hypervigilance or dread, step back and engage your support network immediately.

Monitor Your "Battery": Be alert to signs of anxiety (hypervigilance) or depression (difficulty concentrating, irritability). These are not weaknesses; they are physiological responses to chronic stress that impair your ability to serve.

Normalize Professional Support: Just as CEOs use executive coaching, municipal leaders should utilize therapy and counseling to maintain performance. Access organizational resources or private therapy to address trauma and protect your family from the stress of your role.

Mandatory Debriefing: After a hostile interaction, engage in immediate "peer debriefing." This quick conversation off-loads stress and helps "close the stress cycle" so you do not carry the incident home.

Tactical & Operational Breaks

Recovery is an operational requirement, not a luxury.

The "Time Out": During a heated interaction, if you feel your control slipping, call a "time out." Tell the individual, "These are important questions/comments. I need a five-minute break to review the file," and step away. This allows emotions to cool and helps you regain control of the interaction.

Protect Your Recovery Time: Resilience requires regular time away from high-pressure environments. Enforce basic boundaries like taking lunch breaks and annual leave to prevent decision fatigue and irritability.

Digital Hygiene and Situational Awareness

Filter, Don't Absorb: If possible, have a staff member monitor social media feeds to flag threats. This keeps everyone informed of potential risks.

Document Everything: Do not delete abusive messages immediately. Screenshot and log them to establish a pattern of conduct, which is essential if legal intervention becomes necessary.

Strict Boundaries: Do not conduct municipal business on personal social media or private phone lines.

De-Escalation and Disengagement

Name the Behaviour: If a person shouts or becomes aggressive, explicitly name it: *"I cannot continue this meeting if you are yelling".*

The "Broken Record": If a person escalates, do not argue or justify. Repeat your boundary calmly and consistently (e.g., *"As I said, I am ending this call now."*).

Disengage: You have no obligation to endure abuse. If you feel an imminent risk of harm, remove yourself immediately. Go to a secure area and lock the door.

Administrative Tools

When informal strategies fail, use formal mechanisms to protect the institution.

Incident Reporting: Log every security incident. A pattern of minor aggressions often precedes a major event; documentation allows the municipality to spot the escalation and intervene.

Restrict Access: Use trespass notices to ban threatening individuals from municipal property. This is a valid administrative response to ensure workplace safety.



7.3 Peer Support Options

Municipal leadership can be isolating. Elected officials and senior staff often operate without true peers inside their own organizations and may feel constrained in what they can share publicly or internally. Over time, this isolation limits perspective and increases the risk of misjudgement during high-pressure situations.

Seeking peer support beyond one's immediate personal or professional circle—through networks of colleagues in other municipalities, professional associations, or mentorship groups—can counteract this isolation. External peers provide perspective, continuity, and comparison, helping leaders distinguish between personal strain and systemic pressure, and offering a safe space to reflect on challenging decisions.

Peer Connections

A small external “reality-check” network—such as a mentor, coach, or trusted colleague outside your reporting line—can play a critical role. These individuals are positioned to notice shifts in judgement, tone, or risk tolerance that may not be visible internally, particularly during prolonged controversy or crisis.

Cross-Jurisdictional, Role-Based Networks

For elected officials, peer support within one's own council may be complicated by political dynamics. Cross-jurisdictional and role-based networks—such as mayor-to-mayor or CAO-to-CAO groups—often provide safer forums for candid discussion. These connections help normalize challenges and reduce the tendency to interpret persistent conflict or abuse as individual failure.

Professional Association Resources

Beyond informal relationships, municipal staff should make use of professional association resources designed specifically for leadership support.

- AMO offers a range of opportunities through its conferences, forums, and education workshops. Workshop topics have included The Mayor-CAO Relationship; and an array of topics from managing conflict, human rights, land use planning, as only some examples. AMO is currently developing a peer-to-peer (mentoring) support program, new council education and more.
- The Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) offers Leadership Hubs that provide access to executive coaching, consultations with practice experts, and training related to leadership resilience and workplace civility.

These services connect leaders with peers who understand the legal, political, and administrative pressures unique to municipal roles.

Affinity-Based Networks

Leaders from underrepresented groups, including women and racialized officials, often face more frequent and targeted harassment. Affinity-based networks, such as women in local government associations and candidate attraction and support organizations, can provide tailored strategies and shared understanding that general peer networks may not fully offer.

Peer support should be understood as a professional infrastructure, not a personal coping mechanism. Maintaining these connections helps sustain judgement, perspective, and decision-making capacity over the long term.

Learn More

Organization	Links
American Psychological Association <u>Impact of election stress</u>	<u>apa.org</u>
American Psychological Association <u>Managing stress related to political change</u>	<u>apa.org</u>
Canadian Association of Municipal Administrations <u>Standing Strong Toolkit (PDF)</u>	<u>camacam.ca</u>
New Zealand Parliament Ombudsman <u>Managing unreasonable complainant conduct (PDF)</u>	<u>ombudsman.parliament.nz</u>
Better Politics Foundation <u>Mere Mortals – The State of Politicians' Mental Wellbeing and Why It Matters</u>	<u>betterpolitics.foundation</u>
AMCTO <u>Your Voice Matters: Results from Our Harassment & Incivility Survey</u>	<u>amcto.com</u>
Canadian Centre for Addictions <u>7 Warning Signs of Burnout at Work</u>	<u>canadiancentreforaddictions.org</u>
Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety <u>Mental Health - Job Burnout</u>	<u>ccohs.ca</u>
Queen's University <u>Burnout: Signs, Causes, and Preventative Strategies</u>	<u>pros.educ.queensu.ca</u>

Candidate Support Organization	Links
electHER NOW	electhernow.ca
Equal Voice	equalvoice.ca
Guelph Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/ Guelph
Leadership féminin Prescott-Russell	leadershipfemininpr.ca
Nominee	gonominee.com
Operation Black Vote Canada	obvc.ca
Oxford Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/ oxford
PoliticsNOW	polinow.org
ProudPolitics	proudpolitics.org
The Canadian-Muslim Vote	canadianmuslimvote.ca
The Jean Collective	thejeancollective.ca
Waterloo Region Women's Campaign School	wrwomenrun.wordpress.com
Wellington Campaign School	municipalcampaignschool.ca/ wellington

Professional Development and Education

8

8.0 Professional Development and Education

The role of a municipal member of council has become a complex, 24/7 position requiring high-level decision-making and personal resilience. While elected officials bring valuable diverse life experiences to the table, they are not expected to be immediate experts in land use planning, municipal finance, or conflict mediation upon taking the oath of office. This section argues that continuous professional development is not a "perk" or a luxury item to be cut when budgets are tight, but a critical risk management strategy necessary for good governance and organizational stability.

Investing in professional development protects the municipality by:

Supporting Council and Staff to Work to Their Highest Scope:

Clarifying the critical distinction between council's strategic role and staff's role in operational implementation.

Enhancing Decision-Making: Moving from reactive decision-making to strategic oversight requires specific skills in analyzing data and understanding governance roles.

Preventing Toxicity: Training in conflict management and code of conduct compliance can prevent the breakdown of council relations, which is often costly to repair.

8.1 Comparative Models: Professional Development as a Core Council Practice

In Ontario, professional development is largely discretionary. It is typically funded through municipal operating budgets, often with a specific allocation per member of council for the term or year. Support is provided through associations like the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), which offers user-pay workshops and conferences.

When budgets are tight, professional development is often among the first items reduced or deferred. This approach contrasts with practices in other jurisdictions that treat councillor education as a structural requirement for democratic health.

Comparative models for consideration:

Mandatory Model

(Victoria – Australia)

The state government mandates that all mayors, deputy mayors, and members of council complete specific training within set timeframes (e.g., one month for mayors, four months for members of council). This includes mandatory annual professional development. Failure to complete training results in the withholding of allowances. Councils must report training completion in their annual reports, ensuring total transparency.

Academy Model

(Georgia, Colorado, Iowa – USA)

These jurisdictions utilize a "Municipal Leadership Academy" model. This is a structured, multi-part curriculum (e.g., Parts 1, 2, and 3) that guides officials from basics to advanced strategic thinking, treating the role as a profession requiring certification.

Capped Policy Model

(Cardston, Alberta – Canada)

To manage costs while ensuring access, some municipalities implement strict policies where members of council are entitled to a specific cap (e.g., \$2,000 per term). This creates a "use it or lose it" incentive without open-ended liability for the municipal budget.

The Case for Improvement:

Ontario municipalities should consider formalizing professional policies that protect training budgets from ad-hoc cuts, and empower members of council to take ownership of their own learning, ensuring that training is viewed as essential work rather than a luxury.

8.2 Recommended Training Topics: An Annotated Guide

Effective councils approach professional development deliberately. The goal is not to “train for everything,” but to ensure that high-risk areas—where conflict, incivility, or public mistrust often arise—are addressed early and revisited over time. Strong councils balance technical competence, relational capacity, and leadership judgement.

The categories below are intended as a practical menu. Councils should consider training and workshops on core topics and procedures within the first year of a term and to reinforce them through refreshers. Additional topics may be suitable for specific roles or council situations, as the context dictates.

Core Orientation

(Early in the first year of the term)

Roles, authorities, and boundaries (council vs. staff): Prevents operational interference, reduces internal conflict, and protects staff from becoming targets when boundaries blur.

Meeting procedure and decision-making basics: Procedural missteps are a frequent source of public flashpoints. Strong procedural literacy supports orderly debate and reduces escalation.

Integrity, ethics, and accountability systems: Codes of conduct, conflict of interest rules, and the role of the Integrity Commissioner set expectations for respectful behaviour.

Strategic planning: Dos and don’ts of setting strategy that help shore up role clarity between council and staff.

B

Governance, Finance, and Legal Risk

Municipal finance and asset management: Financial literacy reduces suspicion, misinformation, and conflict over spending decisions.

Procurement and value-for-money basics: Transparent decision-making reduces allegations of favouritism or misconduct.

Land use planning and quasi-judicial decision-making: Planning files are among the most contentious and emotionally charged; training supports defensible decisions and calmer public engagement.

Human and health services: Ontario has a distinct model in the delivery of human and health services with a centralized funding model and local delivery of services.

Human resource management: Collective bargaining and other staffing decisions that councils need to navigate.

C

Civility, Conflict, and Public-Facing Conduct

De-escalation and difficult interactions: Practical boundary-setting skills help prevent harassment from becoming normalized.

Social media and communications risk: Charter-aware moderation and message discipline reduce online escalation and staff exposure to abuse.

Media relations and crisis communications: Scenario-based training prepares officials to communicate under pressure without inflaming conflict.

Community engagement: Good practice on how to effectively engage residents in your community.

D

Safety, Security, and Information Protection

Personal and workplace security basics: Training helps identify early warning signs of escalation and supports appropriate responses.

Cybersecurity and account hygiene: Reduces impersonation, doxxing, and digital harassment risks.

E

Equity, Human Rights, and Accessibility

Human rights and respectful service: Understanding systemic barriers reduces harm and conflict rooted in exclusion or misunderstanding.

Accessible meetings and communications: Improves participation and lowers frustration that can fuel incivility.

Indigenous–municipal relations: Protocol awareness helps avoid missteps that escalate tensions or damage relationships.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: How to bring consideration for those historically excluded from decision making to the council decisions and deliberations.

F

Leadership Development

Chairing and meeting management: Strong chairs set the tone for respectful debate and protect staff and delegations.

Council–CAO relationship training: Role clarity reduces internal dysfunction that often spills into public conflict.

Coaching and peer learning: Coaching and cohort-style programs reduce isolation and improve judgement under sustained pressure.

8.3 Tips for Making Professional Development Practical

Training only reduces risk if it is planned, visible, and taken up by council. The following practices help translate professional development from an aspirational goal into a routine part of municipal governance.

AMO is currently exploring these approaches and you can reach out to them for more information.

Create a dedicated council learning line item



Establish a clearly named budget line for council education and training, rather than burying costs within general conference or travel accounts. This increases transparency, protects learning funds from ad hoc cuts, and reinforces that training is essential governance work.

Use shared and regional training models



Partner with neighbouring municipalities to deliver joint sessions, particularly for specialized or high-risk topics such as land use planning, integrity systems, and media or social media risk. Shared training reduces costs, builds peer networks, and supports consistency across regions.

Adopt a term-based learning plan



Structure professional development across the council term. For example:

Year 1: Core orientation and high-risk topics (roles and boundaries, integrity, planning, finance).

Years 2–4: Targeted refreshers, leadership development, and deeper dives into emerging risks (communications, conflict, security).

A shared plan helps normalize learning and reduces the perception that training is remedial or optional.

Leverage sector and association resources



Make routine use of offerings from municipal associations and trusted providers to avoid reinventing content and to ensure training reflects current legal and governance standards. These are great resources that can support smaller, less-resourced municipalities

Document participation and revisit annually



Track training uptake and review learning priorities annually to ensure coverage of core risks and responsiveness to new challenges.

Councils that treat professional development as infrastructure—planned, budgeted, and revisited—are better equipped to manage complexity, prevent dysfunction, and sustain effective leadership over a full term.

Learn More

Organization	Links
Association of Municipalities of Ontario <u>Education Workshops</u>	amo.on.ca
Cardston Ontario (Canada) <u>Professional Development Fund for Councillors Policy</u> (PDF)	cardston.ca
Action! Chinese Canadians Together Foundation (Canada): <u>Aspire to Act Leadership Training Program</u>	acctfoundation.ca
Victoria State Government (Australia) <u>Guidance on the Mandatory Training for Mayors,</u> <u>Deputy Mayors and Councillors</u> (PDF)	localgovernment.vic.gov.au
Municipal Association of Victoria (Australia) <u>Citizen to Councillor Guide</u> (PDF)	mav.asn.au
Georgia Municipal Association (USA) <u>Certificate Programs</u>	gacities.com
Civic Results - Colorado (USA) <u>Municipal Leadership Academy</u>	civicresults.org
Iowa League of Cities (USA) <u>Municipal Leadership Academy</u>	iowaleague.org

Organization	Links
International City/County Management Association (USA) <u>Practices for Effective Local Government Management and Leadership</u>	iowaleague.org
Local Government Association (UK) <u>Councillor Development Courses</u>	local.gov.uk
South West Councils (UK) <u>Councillor Development Courses</u>	swcouncils.gov.uk
City of York Council (UK) <u>Member Training & Development Policy (PDF)</u>	york.gov.uk
Improvement Service (Scotland) <u>Elected Members Development</u>	improvementservice.org
University of Birmingham Public Service Academy <u>The 21st Century Councillor (PDF)</u>	21stcenturypublicservant.wordpress.com



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