Leading With Respect Handguides

AMO's Handguide 4
Holding Public Meetings

AMO
Association of
Municipalities
of Ontario

4

AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides provide 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.

There are eight guides in the series.

1. An Introduction to AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides
2. Responding to Constituents
3. Chairing Meetings Effectively
4. **Holding Public Meetings**
5. Fostering Civility at the Council Table
6. Using Social Media and Online Platforms
7. Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff
8. Professional Development and Education

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

Contents

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.

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.

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.

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
1. "The decision is already made." 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".	**Early Engagement & The Feedback Loop** **Engage Before, During, and After:** Start dialogue during the visioning stage, not just the approval stage. **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. **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.

What Frustrates the Public	Engagement Principles & Solutions
2. "It's us versus them." 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.	**Dismantle Physical Hierarchies** **Active Listening:** Officials must use body language (eye contact, sitting still) to show they are listening, rather than crossing arms or checking phones. **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.
3. "The loudest voices dominate." 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.	**Structure for Equity** **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 **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.
4. "It's too complicated / I don't understand." 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.	**Education First, Input Second** **Embed Learning:** Move residents from "reacting" to "learning" by providing balanced, plain-language background presentations before the discussion begins. **Visualizations:** A picture can often communicate impacts more effectively than detailed text or technical documentation. Design materials that favour visual clarity and simplicity.

What Frustrates the Public	Engagement Principles & Solutions
5. "It's inconvenient." 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.	**Go to the People** **Pop-up Engagement:** Instead of expecting residents to come to you, set up booths at grocery stores, libraries, or community events. **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.
6. "I'm getting conflicting information."	**Defer to Expertise** **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. **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.

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

Learn More

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

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