

Stronger Together!

Creating thriving communities to enhance quality of life in Chatham-Kent through the Community Leaders' Cabinet

Policy Brief

Stronger Together! Creating Thriving Communities to Enhance Quality of Life in Chatham-Kent through the Community Leaders' Cabinet

Key Points

- The Chatham-Kent Community Leaders' Cabinet (CLC) is a network comprised of leaders from local organizations, government sectors, businesses, and non-profits, such as the Municipality of Chatham-Kent, United Way, Junctura Group, and the school board, among others. By having various community organizations work together, the CLC aims to make Chatham-Kent a “thriving community that enhances quality of life.”
- Based on research investigating the reasons behind organizations' initial and sustained participation in collaborative work in the CLC, recommendations for reinforcing ongoing engagement were developed and include the following:
 - Give CLC members time to learn about each other and how to work together in the early stages of collaborative work.
 - Focus on achieving early successes and try to stay action-focused as the CLC evolves.
 - Ensure there are dedicated staff embedded with leadership who are knowledgeable about intersectoral action and skilled in facilitating meetings.
 - Ensure meetings are well-organized and focused on productivity.
 - Encourage open communication during meetings to foster understanding of roles and benefits of participation, and trust across members.
 - Have CLC leadership ensure that members feel heard and have ownership over CLC processes.
 - Have leaders provide members with information and support both within and outside of meetings.

Why collaboration across organizations is needed to create communities that enhance quality of life

The communities in which people live play a large role in their wellbeing and quality of life. The policies and decisions by different government and non-governmental sectors and organizations (hereafter referred to as organizations) greatly influence the environments for daily living, and have the potential to promote or hinder the creation of thriving communities and the quality of life of residents. Because of that, policies also influence people's wellbeing and health. As poignantly stated in the Epp report: “The potential of public policy to influence people's everyday choices is considerable. It is not an overstatement to say that public policy has the power to provide people with opportunities for health, as well as to deny them such opportunities. All policies, and hence all sectors, have a bearing on health”.¹

What Chatham-Kent is doing to improve quality of life

In 2012, executive leaders in Chatham-Kent signed a formal resolution aiming to improve the quality of life of residents, which led to the formation of the Chatham-Kent Community Leaders' Cabinet (hereafter, CLC).² The CLC, comprised of leaders from local organizations, government sectors, businesses, and non-profits, such as the United Way, Municipality of Chatham-Kent, Junctura Group, and the school board, respectively, envisioned Chatham-Kent as a “thriving community that enhances quality of life.”³ Their mission is “to work together, across sectors, to build a community where quality of life is planned, developed, and championed.”³ The CLC has recognized that a community's quality of life is closely tied to “strong leadership in the government, business,

Abbreviations:

CLC : Community Leaders' Cabinet

and social/voluntary sectors of that community.”³ In order for everyone in the community to have opportunity for good quality of life, cross sectoral collaboration and community engagement are needed to strengthen the social determinants of health such as housing, employment, social inclusion, etc.

Since its formation, the CLC has met approximately every quarter to discuss important issues and plan activities. Over this time the CLC evolved and had many accomplishments. In 2013, they released a report outlining measurement tools to assess indicators that reflect quality of life (measured in relation to themes such as community belonging, healthy population, environment and safety, etc.).⁴ In 2014, the CLC released an initial Strategy Document, outlining their mission and plans, including attention to addressing pressing community issues such as high obesity rates and child poverty.² The most recent version of the strategic framework covers 2019-2022. Along the way, the CLC has supported many other community projects and initiatives such as World Read Aloud Day, and has championed causes including work to advance a Living Wage.^{5,6}

Lessons learned to build upon for future growth of the CLC

The **HARMONICS** research team conducted interviews with 13 members of the CLC from November 2020 to January 2021. Their objective was to comprehend the reasons behind organizations' initiation and sustained participation in cross-organizational collaboration through the CLC. The team's research led to a set of findings and recommendations aimed at reinforcing ongoing collaboration within the CLC. These insights are categorized into three primary themes: 1) promoting a strong start to collaborative work, 2) planning successful meetings, and 3) the role of CLC leadership.

Quotations:

All passages in quotation marks are direct quotes from interviewed committee members.

1. Promoting a strong start to collaborative work

Recommendation: Give members time to learn about each other and how to work together in the early stages of collaborative work to facilitate the identification of a common mission.

Early in the work of the CLC, members spent time learning about the interests of the various organizations on the Cabinet and learning how to work together, with a focus on finding a common mission. Initially, the CLC settled on a mission closely aligned with that of one of the member organizations, the United Way: “Working together, across sectors, to build a community where quality of life is planned, developed, and championed, focused on collaboration across the community to strengthen and promote quality of life for everyone.”

Members found it useful to have clarity around the purpose of the CLC because they could clearly see the alignment between their organizations’ interests and the CLC, and this motivated them to start planning and implementing specific CLC activities. This approach also allowed members to seize opportunities to advance their own interests and establish connections that they could use outside their work on the CLC.

Recommendation: Focus on achieving early successes to motivate members to continue collaborating, and try to stay action-focused as the CLC evolves.

Creating opportunities for the CLC to have success early on was valuable for fostering cross-sectoral collaboration with focus on a shared interest. For example, CLC members worked together to champion a new smoke-free regulation for Chatham-Kent in 2014. The process involved first changing the way CLC members thought about health to help them understand how living and working conditions shape health behaviours. This illuminated the role various sectors can play in addressing smoking cessation, which helped CLC members refine messaging for a new regulation. The success of changing smoking regulations across the region was motivating to members, which gave traction for collaboration on future initiatives.

Over time, the focus of the CLC shifted from being action-oriented to strategic planning. While members acknowledged the need for some strategy-based work, there was some concern that the shift led the committee to “losing its way”. This suggests that some members valued the outcomes being achieved by the CLC, and would have preferred keeping more of a focus on outcomes alongside strategic planning.

2. Planning successful meetings

Recommendation: Ensure there are dedicated staff embedded with leadership who are knowledgeable about intersectoral action and skilled in facilitating meetings to keep members engaged.

The mayor's office provided a dedicated staff member to coordinate the CLC. Having a dedicated staff member helped keep members engaged in the CLC in several ways:

- The dedicated staff member's knowledge of relevant topics, like how policies in various sectors can impact quality of life and wellbeing, helped them work with the mayor to set meeting agendas and run meetings so that current priorities were addressed. This contributed to efficient and productive meetings, which was appreciated by members.
- Having the dedicated staff member helped take some of the heavy lifting of the CLC work from members. For example, this staff member would take on much of the work needed between meetings, which allowed members to focus on participating in meetings in a way that was most beneficial for their respective organizations.
- Being embedded with the mayor enabled the dedicated staff member to communicate with partners about the CLC in a timely manner and with legitimacy, which demonstrated to members that the CLC was a political priority and strengthened their commitment.

"...I owe a lot of thanks to my staff. ...(It) was the staff who actually made this become (a reality). We took an idea, we dusted it off, put a framework around it and they made it happen."

Recommendation: Ensure meetings are well-organized and focused on productivity to establish momentum early on and bolster buy-in.

Given the large size of the CLC (26 member organizations) and lengthy time interval between meetings (quarterly), it was integral to members that CLC meetings were well-organized and focused on productivity. Some noted how this resulted in efficient meetings, which demonstrated that leadership respected CLC members. This was particularly important early on when members were still assessing whether the CLC was worth their limited time.

"So we would sit down prior to the meeting with the ... two Co-Chairs and ... the key staff person. We would go over the agenda (and) lay out very specifically what we were trying to achieve with the meeting. We wanted to know outcomes.... why are we talking about this and what are we trying to get to?"

By facilitating efficient meetings, CLC members were able to establish momentum early on, including identifying collective interests and engaging in strategic planning to align funding requests from the provincial government with CLC initiatives. On the other hand, some believed that when CLC membership expanded, meetings became less productive as there was not enough time to adequately address issues and plan actions.

"... [It] diluted some of the, some of the conversation because there's too many people around the table... the number of opinions is never a problem. It's just, it's more about having to get all of the different opinions is a lot more, it takes more time and everybody feels like they need to offer their opinion."

Recommendation: Encourage open communication during meetings to foster an understanding of roles and benefits of participation, and trust across members.

Encouraging open communication during meetings in various ways was valued by members. Early on, members were encouraged to share their organization's strategic plans, which cultivated an understanding of respective roles and benefits of participation. In cases where members were not comfortable speaking to the whole committee, CLC leaders organized small breakout groups during meetings to promote information sharing. Over time, as members felt they could speak freely, they were able to develop a shared language about local issues and hold each other accountable more easily, which ultimately allowed them to maintain focus on overall goals and a vision of the CLC as they worked on the minutia of specific strategies.

There were some cases where the roles and responsibilities of members in the community overlapped; however, the trust that had developed between members over time through open communication helped members avoid conflict and focus instead on making progress on CLC work.

“(Our organization's alignment with the vision of the CLC was) helpful, but ... my participation was more about developing the relationships with others in the community. Don't think we had to be perfectly aligned in order for me to participate.”

3. The role of CLC leadership

Recommendation: Have CLC leaders ensure that members feel heard and have ownership over CLC processes to foster more engagement from membership.

Many CLC members strongly emphasized the value of feeling heard and having ownership over CLC processes, including agenda setting, working on issues, and information sharing and decision making in meetings. This was implemented by leadership in several ways:

- After a shift in leadership in 2018, the new CLC leader met individually with each member to get input on the overall direction of the CLC, which gave organizations an opportunity to share their specific interests.
- Leadership ensured members were the ones identifying issues that were important for action, which motivated members to address these issues in a timely manner.
- Involvement in the CLC was voluntary for organizations, which kept members engaged because they were able to focus on initiatives that were most aligned with the mandate of their own organizations. Leadership supported members in this way by seeking opportunities to promote the specific interests of member organizations.
- Leadership created a culture of inclusion and showed their passion for change, which motivated members to contribute in CLC meetings. For example, one member felt that leadership was genuine in their viewpoint that “we are in this together and can do great things together.”

“[The leader is a] community builder. He's very warm and personable, he takes a very keen personal interest... quite lovely in person and, a lot of enthusiasm. So I think he values the people that are on the Committee. Values the work that they're doing. He makes the daily effort to build community here.”

Recommendation: Have CLC leaders provide members with information and support both within and outside of meetings to inspire ongoing participation.

When leaders provided appropriate information and support to CLC members, this demonstrated their interest in the work and made members feel valued and respected, which increased productivity. Importantly, leadership offered support inside and outside meetings to maximize engagement with members. For example, leadership kept in contact with members to share information about community events. Also, when new members joined, the leaders fostered a sense of inclusion and belonging by inquiring about the needs of individual members. Once members had been involved for some time, leadership remained in constant contact with them between meetings, to ensure they remained knowledgeable of the current status and work of the CLC.



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