

The Municipal Council and Elected Officials: Guidance for Public Health

FACT SHEET 1

MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN CANADA

2026

FOREWORD

This fact sheet presents the role of the municipal council and of elected officials. It is part of [a collection of fact sheets on municipal governance in Canada](#). This collection is intended for public health organization staff who wish to better understand how municipalities operate in order to position themselves strategically, collaborate effectively with the municipal sector, and exercise influence for health-promoting municipal decisions. This collaboration is important, as municipalities have a direct influence on living environments and therefore on key determinants of population health.

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KEY MESSAGES

- This fact sheet is part of a collection on municipal governance in Canada, intended for public health organizations seeking to collaborate with municipalities. It outlines the role of the municipal council and of elected officials—an essential element for understanding how decision-making authority is exercised and how to position oneself effectively.
- The municipal council is the decision-making body: it sets priorities, adopts policies, and approves budgets.
- Municipal elected officials are generally elected for four-year terms, a cycle that should be factored into planning the development and maintenance of collaborations.
- Mayors hold limited formal powers, but may exert broader influence depending on their leadership style and the local context.
- Some municipal councils establish committees and assign them thematic files. These committees offer a strategic entry point for public health, given their focused mandate and meeting settings better suited to technical presentations.
- Council meetings and municipal documents are public and constitute valuable resources for staying informed and positioning oneself in relation to the municipality's ongoing work.



ABOUT THE COLLECTION OF FACT SHEETS ON MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE

Municipal governments play a key role in shaping the communities in which we live, directly influencing population health and wellbeing (Lévesque et al., 2024; Morestin, 2020). This capacity for action makes municipalities relevant—and even essential—partners for public health. A better understanding of how municipalities operate makes it possible to position oneself strategically, identify the right contacts among municipal representatives, spot windows of opportunity and work effectively within municipal decision-making processes, while also setting realistic expectations.

With this in mind, the NCCHPP has developed [a collection of thematic fact sheets](#) on municipal governance in Canada, intended for the staff of public health organizations.

The content of this collection was developed in three phases:

- An analysis of guides for newly-elected municipal officials in Canada's ten provinces and three territories;
- A Canada-wide consultation with public health professionals (three focus groups and a questionnaire);
- A complementary review of scientific and government literature.

For more information, see [the fact sheet outlining the project's context and methodology](#).

1 INTRODUCTION

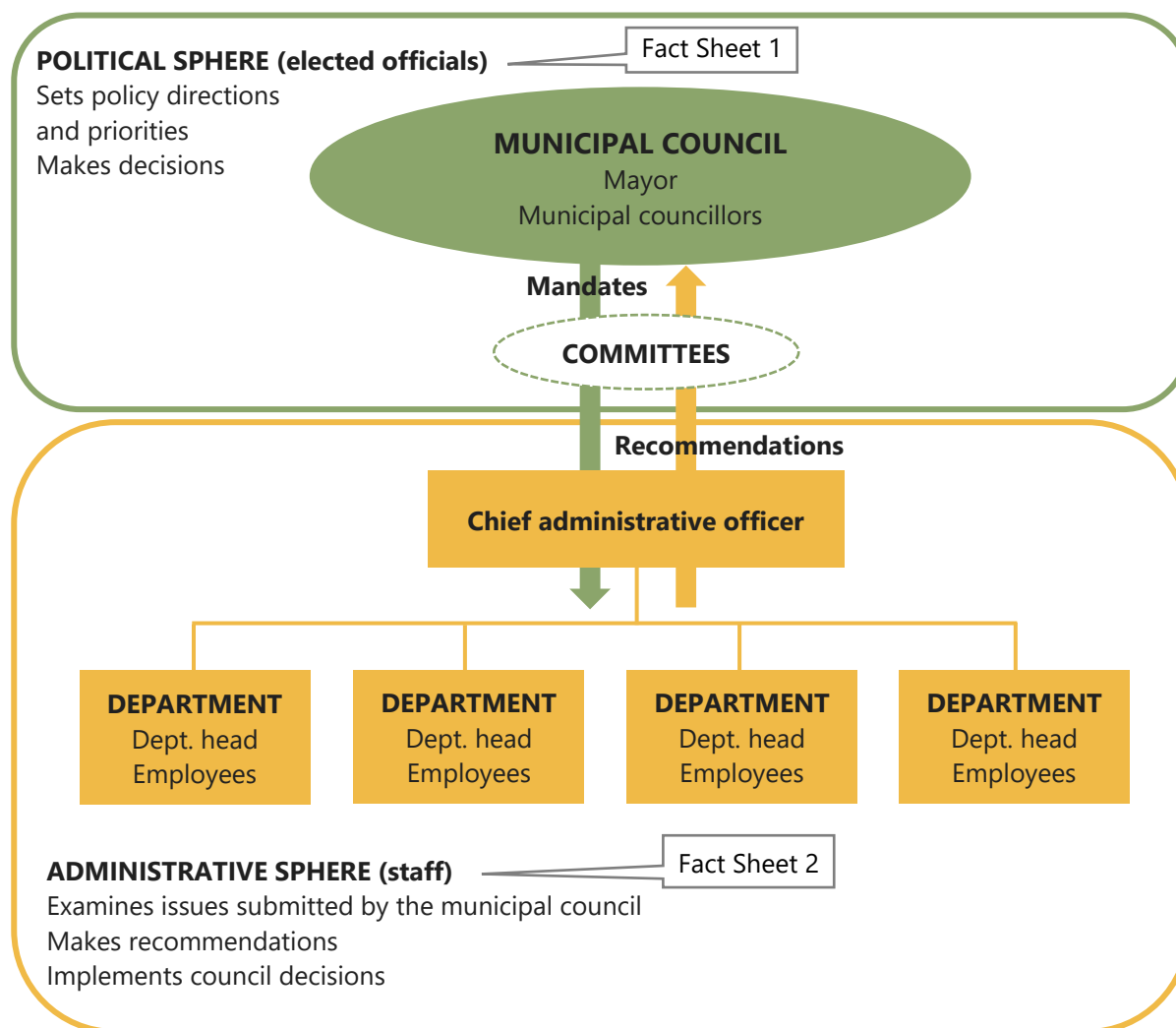
This fact sheet focuses on the municipal council and elected officials, which make up one of the two spheres that form the basis of municipal governance (Figure 1):

- The political sphere: elected municipal officials who make up the municipal council.
- The administrative sphere (discussed in [Fact Sheet 2](#)): municipal staff, headed by the chief administrative officer.

This fact sheet covers the following topics, in order:

- The municipal council
- Municipal elections and their procedures
- The responsibilities of municipal councillors
- The role, powers, and influence of the mayor
- Committees of council: their creation, role, and operation
- Transparency of processes in municipal policy making (public meetings and access to information)

Figure 1 Simplified structure of a municipality

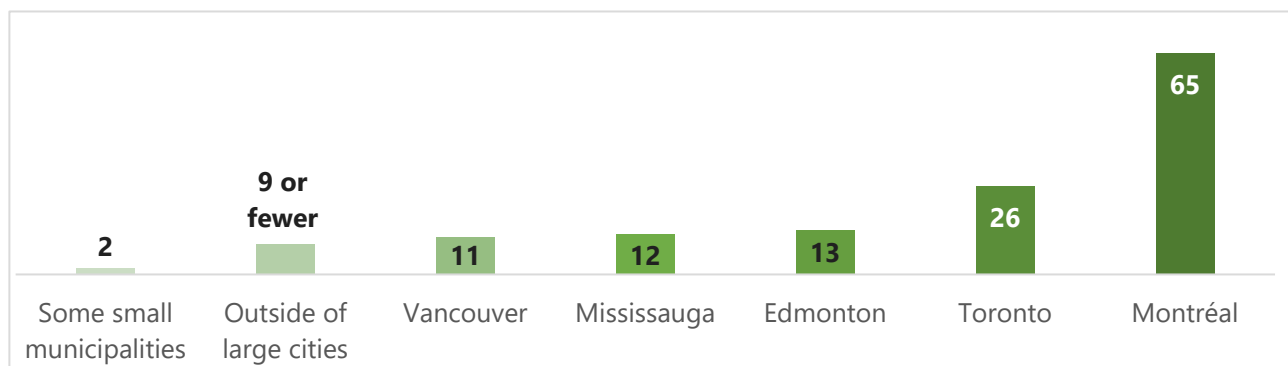


2 MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

The municipal council is the decision-making body of the municipality. It is composed of the mayor, who presides over the council, and municipal councillors. The council establishes local priorities, makes strategic decisions, adopts municipal policies, and approves the budget. In addition, it oversees the operations of the municipal administration (Patsias, 2024).

Except in large cities,¹ almost all municipal councils have nine members or fewer – as few as two in some small municipalities (Dillabough & Lucas, 2025). In large cities, the size of councils varies independently of population size (Figure 2). A smaller size can increase a municipal council's efficiency but can limit the diversity of representation (Tindal et al., 2016).

Figure 2 Variation in the number of municipal council members – Selected examples



3 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: SCHEDULE AND PROCEDURES

In Canada, mayors and municipal councillors are generally elected for a four-year term.



Exception - Northwest Territories: terms of office vary from two to four years, depending on the municipality.



To find the date of the next municipal elections in each province and territory, consult: [*Municipal election schedule in Canada*](#) (MUNISCOPE - A service by the Secretariat of the Table of Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for Local Government).

The turnover of elected officials every four years can lead to a reconsideration of existing collaborations between public health and municipalities. This is a particular challenge for collaborations that pursue medium- or long-term objectives. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for the same people to be re-elected over long periods. This lack of renewal can slow down collaboration with the public health sector if the elected officials in office fail to see its benefits (input gathered during the NCCHPP consultation with public health staff).

¹ "Municipality" is a generic term that refers to municipalities of all sizes, from the smallest to the largest. The term "city" refers to a category of municipalities—those of relatively larger size. It is a commonly-used term, but one that does not have a uniform, objective definition across Canada; for example, the population threshold required to qualify as a city varies from one jurisdiction to another (Graham, 2018). In this collection of fact sheets, we sometimes use the term "city" with qualifiers (large cities, mid-sized cities) to give a sense of the type of context being discussed.

Election of municipal councillors

As outlined in Figure 3, there are three systems for electing municipal councillors (Dillabough & Lucas, 2025).

- **At-large elections:** all voters residing in the municipality vote for all seats on the municipal council.
- **District (or ward) elections:** each voter votes for one or more councillors representing a specific geographical area.
- **Hybrid systems:** within the same municipality, some councillors are elected at-large, and others by district.

Figure 3 Ways municipal councillors are elected in Canada

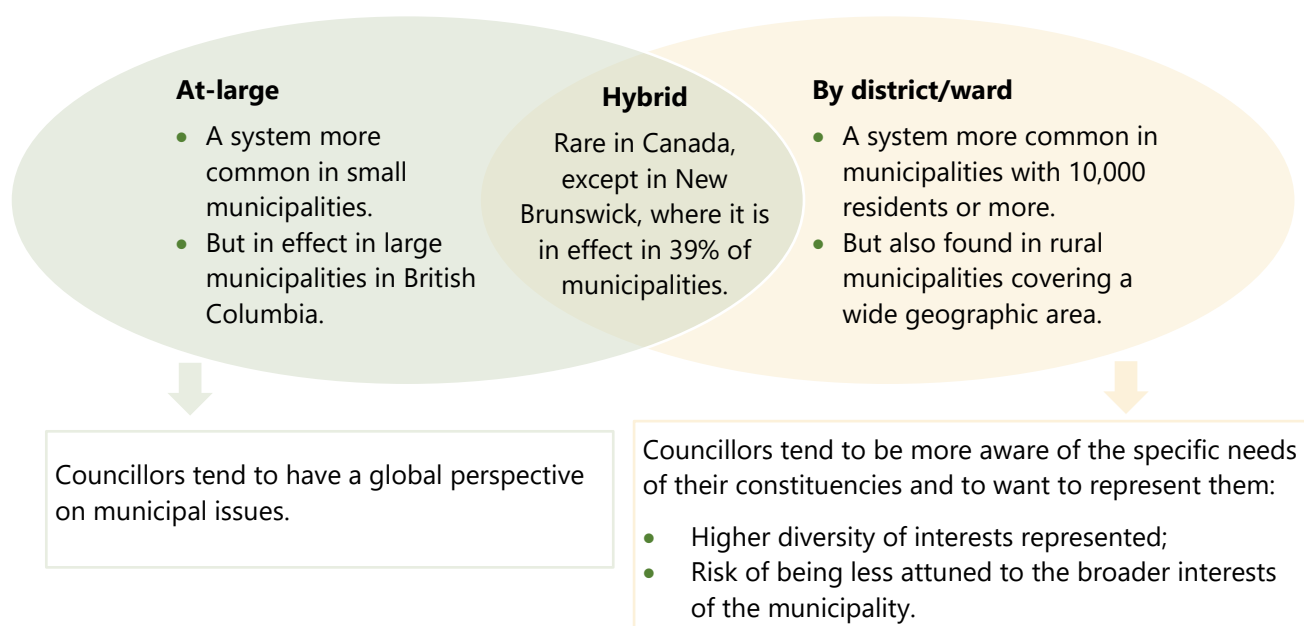


Figure based on: Blidook et al., 2022; Dillabough & Lucas, 2025; Horak et al., 2024; Sancton, 2015; Taylor et al., 2026; Tindal et al., 2016.

Mayoral elections

The elected official who chairs the municipal council generally bears the title of mayor.² Other titles are used in certain municipalities in some provinces and territories (Table 1). These titles are most often used in rural municipalities.

² To keep the text concise, the term "mayor" is used in this collection of fact sheets to refer to the municipal council chair—even though other terms exist.

Table 1 Other titles of the municipal council chair

AB	Chief Elected Official, Reeve
SK	Reeve
MB	Reeve, Head of Council
ON	Warden, Reeve, Chair Francophone municipalities: <i>Préfet</i> or <i>Préfète</i> , <i>Président du conseil</i> or <i>Présidente du conseil</i>
NS	Warden
NT	Chief
YT	Chairperson

Mayors are elected at large, even when municipal councillors are elected by district (Taylor et al., 2026).

**Variations:**

Newfoundland and Labrador: with a few exceptions, voters only elect municipal councillors. Once elected, the councillors choose which of them will be mayor.

Alberta, rural municipalities in Nova Scotia and Yukon: exceptionally, municipalities may adopt the same system as in Newfoundland and Labrador.

IN PRACTICE – ADAPTING COLLABORATION TO THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE ELECTORAL CALENDAR³

In some regions, public health staff are not permitted to interact with elected officials. Only the Medical Officer of Health engages in such exchanges. The following suggestions are intended for those who are authorized to do so.

Adapt your approach to the electoral system:

- **By district:** during one-on-one discussions with a municipal councillor, focus messages on how the issues affect their district.
- **At-large:** emphasize impacts on the entire population.
- **How can I find out about the current electoral system?** If councillors represent a particular district, this will be indicated on the website of the municipality you're interested in, in the "Municipal Council" section. Example: Ms. Z, District 2 Councillor.

Take into account the electoral calendar:

- Take advantage of pre-election periods, a strategic moment when community-driven initiatives can be integrated into candidates' programs.
- Raise awareness among candidates and the public about the links between municipal responsibilities and population wellbeing.
- Ask questions during candidates' debates. For example: how would they take into account the effects of municipal decisions on population health?
- Prepare transition briefs summarizing current collaborations to facilitate continuity after the elections. These briefs should refer to the municipality's multi-year strategic documents that relate to the themes of the collaborations and remain in effect beyond election day.
- Establish relationships with several key people among elected officials and, most importantly, municipal staff, to limit the impact of turnover.

³ The content of all "In practice" boxes draws upon, among other things, the experience shared by public health staff during the focus groups organized by the NCCHPP and during the external review of this fact sheet.

4 THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS

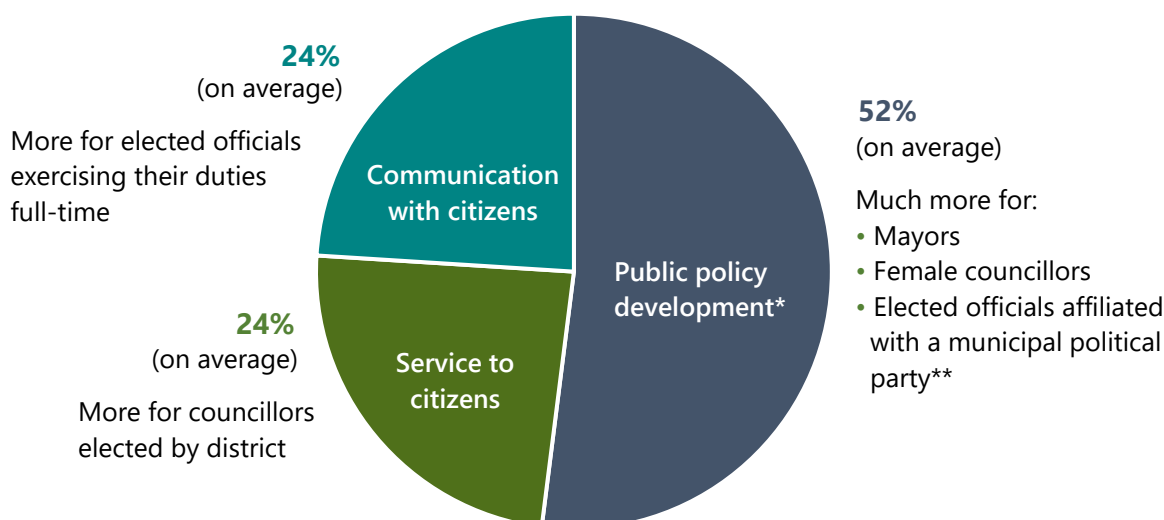
Each councillor is expected to fulfill the following responsibilities:

- Represent citizens and defend collective interests: be attentive to local concerns, maintain an ongoing dialogue with the community, and help citizens address their needs, for example, by helping to direct their requests within the municipal administration (Vallette & Mévellec, 2024);
- Participate in decision making: help establish municipal priorities, attend meetings of the municipal council and its committees, and contribute to the adoption, adaptation and evaluation of municipal policies.

Figure 4 shows how municipal councillors typically allocate their work time, according to a Canada-wide survey by Blidook et al. (2022) in municipalities above 9,000 population.

It is worth noting that in many small municipalities — and even in some larger ones — the position of municipal councillor is modestly paid and carried out on a part-time basis, alongside another job (Sancton, 2015). In practice, however, it is not always truly part-time, since in the public sphere municipal elected officials are perceived as being ‘on duty’ at all times.

Figure 4 How do Canadian municipal elected officials allocate their time?



* For elected officials, this includes taking part in meetings where public policies are debated and adopted, as well as the time spent preparing for them: reviewing documents prepared by municipal staff (see [Fact Sheet 3](#)), conducting additional research, and engaging in discussions with stakeholders.

** Municipal political parties exist in some large cities in Québec and British Columbia, and have been newly permitted in Alberta since 2025.

AN ADDITIONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOME MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS IN ONTARIO: SITTING ON A BOARD OF HEALTH

In Ontario, Boards of Health (BOHs) are the decision-making bodies of public health units (PHUs). They approve policy directions, programs and budgets, and oversee all operations (Association of Local Public Health Agencies, 2024). The composition and governance structure of BOHs thus influence decision making and the relationship between public health and municipal structures.

There are three BOH structures:

- **Autonomous BOH:** membership includes elected municipal officials from several municipalities, and sometimes citizens and provincial appointees. The board of health and its associated municipalities are separate entities. Example: Windsor-Essex BOH includes 4 municipal councillors from the City of Windsor, 4 from Essex County, and 6 provincial appointees. A variant type of BOH, known as “autonomous/integrated,” includes representatives from a single municipality; under that model, PHU staff are integrated into that municipality’s administrative structure.
- **Regional BOH:** membership is composed of all elected officials of the regional municipality, and includes no citizen representatives or provincial appointees. The PHU staff is part of the regional municipality’s administration. Example: Waterloo.
- **Semi-autonomous BOH:** the municipal council appoints the members of a separate BOH (composed partly of councillors, partly of citizens), but approves the budget and staffing. The PHU staff operate under the municipal administrative structure. This is the case in Toronto, Ottawa, and Hamilton.



For further details, please consult: [*Orientation Manual for Boards of Health*](#) (Association of Local Public Health Agencies, 2024).

5 THE ROLE, POWERS, AND INFLUENCE OF THE MAYOR

5.1 The mayor's role and powers

Mayors in Canadian municipalities have the same responsibilities as municipal councillors. In addition, they fulfill the following basic functions:

- Chairing (with rare exceptions) municipal council meetings and ensuring that they run smoothly;
- Officially representing the municipality by acting as its principal spokesperson;
- Signing by-laws, official municipal documents, and contracts (Graham, 2018; Taylor et al., 2026).

In some municipalities, mayors also have one or more additional powers that strengthen their position with respect to municipal councillors or the municipal administration. Some mayors have the power to:

- Control the microphones, thus deciding which councillors are given the opportunity to speak during council meetings;
- Force council to reconsider a decision (i.e., veto or postpone a vote to a future meeting);
- Call a special council meeting;
- Create committees of council;
- Appoint committee chairs – and thus control councillors' access to additional power and any financial bonuses associated with these positions;
- Appoint the members of the executive committee, where there is one; this committee, usually composed of the mayor and some of the municipal councillors, gives direction to the municipal council;
- Hire and fire certain municipal employees (Graham, 2018; Horak et al., 2024).

Where in Canada do mayors tend to have more powers?

- In provinces where the law so provides: British Columbia, Ontario (see [the section on “strong mayors”](#)), Québec, and Prince Edward Island (Horak et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2026).
- Outside these provinces, in certain municipalities where the mayor is granted additional powers through a charter⁴ or through procedural by-laws that further specify a provincial statute — for example, in Winnipeg and Saint John's (Graham, 2018).

Nevertheless, mayors in Canada have limited powers (Tindal et al., 2016). They have no authority of their own, beyond that conferred by decisions of the municipal council (Graham, 2018).

Yet mayors are perceived as having a great deal of power and are seen to intervene in many areas beyond those formally assigned to them by law. In reality, they mainly occupy a key position from which to exert influence on other actors (Graham, 2018).

⁴ A charter is a special statute adopted by a province for a given municipality. For more information, see [Fact Sheet 2](#).

5.2 Potential for greater influence

Mayoral influence varies from one municipality to another. It depends to a large extent on the local institutional context in which the mayor operates and on their personal leadership style.

Local institutional context

- The presence of municipal political parties (which exist only in certain municipalities in Québec and British Columbia, and more recently in Alberta) means that mayors can count on the votes of their party's municipal councillors, helping them to achieve their goals (Graham, 2018; Horak et al., 2024). In the absence of political parties, the mayor has to put increased effort into consensus building (Tindal et al., 2016).
- Executive committees, when they exist, concentrate part of the decision-making power, which can strengthen or limit the mayor's ability to influence policy directions (Horak et al., 2024).
- The resources granted to the mayor (staff, operating budget) exceed those of the municipal councillors, except in the smallest municipalities, where these resources are non-existent. In some cases, the mayor has a full-time position, whereas the councillors are part-time (Graham, 2018; Vallette & Breux, 2024).

Personal leadership style

The mayor's personal leadership style is crucial, particularly their communication skills and ability to mobilize the support of the municipal council, the municipal administration, and the community (Graham, 2018; Tindal et al., 2016).

- In the absence of political parties, a mayor who wishes to advance certain initiatives must be able to rally municipal councillors. Some use diplomacy, while others rely on strong personal leadership.
- Since the mayor has no executive power, they must maintain good relations with the municipal administration to obtain its full cooperation. A harmonious relationship confers advantages, including advance access to information possessed by the administration, which the mayor can then use as a resource to share with councillors, and being the person to whom the administration turns for clarification of ambiguous council instructions. Some mayors even manage to broaden their executive role, which is poorly defined in formal terms, in asking the administration to take action that has not been discussed by the municipal council.
- In large municipalities, the mayor is often the person who meets the most representatives of all groups in the community, and is in the best position to ask them to take part in municipal initiatives (Graham, 2018). In smaller municipalities, this role may be shared more extensively with municipal councillors (personal communication with one of the reviewers of this document, May 15, 2026).

A mayor who cultivates strong relationships with the municipal council, the administration, and community groups is better positioned to exercise collaborative leadership and achieve desired outcomes. Conversely, a mayor who neglects these relationships risks leading a municipality that is more divided and less effective (Graham, 2018).

In addition to managing relations with the many actors described above, mayors:

- Are the main liaison with the provincial/territorial and federal governments;
- Participate in numerous community events;
- Must be available at all times to fulfill their role as spokesperson for their municipality, particularly during crisis situations (Eidelman & Lucas, 2023; Graham, 2018).

The position is very demanding. In a Canada-wide survey, full-time mayors reported devoting an average of 50 hours a week to their duties, while part-time mayors reported devoting an average of 30 hours a week (Vallette & Breux, 2024).

5.3 The case of “strong mayors” in Ontario

Since 2022,⁵ Ontario has granted certain mayors expanded powers to accelerate the delivery of provincial priorities. This regulatory model was introduced for Toronto and Ottawa in 2022, then extended to 47 municipalities in 2023 and a further 169 in 2025. These new powers include:

- Appointment of the head of the municipal administration (Chief Administrative Officer/City Manager/*Directeur général*, see [Fact Sheet 2](#)) and of senior municipal staff⁶ further down to an unspecified level in the administrative hierarchy;
- The ability to modify the structure of the municipal administration;
- The power to create committees of council and to appoint their chairs;
- A right of veto over by-laws adopted by the municipal council that could interfere with provincial priorities;
- Proposal of the municipal budget (in lieu of the head of the municipal administration) and a right of veto over elements of the budget adopted by the municipal council;
- The ability to pass a by-law that could advance a provincial priority, with the support of only one-third of the municipal council. In a 6-member council like Brampton’s, the mayor would only need the support of one councillor (Eidelman, 2023; Taylor, 2023a, 2023b).

Decisions that rely on “strong mayor” powers must be made transparent. In practice, they are indicated on the websites of the municipalities concerned (The Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario [AMCTO], 2024).

Some observers fear that the powers of “strong mayors” will undermine the political neutrality of municipal administrations (AMCTO, 2024; Eidelman, 2023). The risk of abuse of power impacting appointments may be heightened in small municipalities where the administrative apparatus is already quite small (Taylor, 2023a).

⁵ *Strong Mayors, Building Homes Act; Better Municipal Governance Act.*

⁶ Except for the Medical Officer of Health and a few other positions with special authority.

However, according to an assessment carried out in the summer of 2024, the new veto rights had been rarely used (AMCTO, 2024). It remains to be seen how this use will evolve as the number of municipalities involved grows.

IN PRACTICE – COLLABORATING WITH THE MAYOR

- Do not over-solicit this busy elected official.
- Take the municipality's size into account: in rural settings, direct access to the mayor is more often possible; in urban settings, it is typically the Medical Officer of Health who has this level of access.
- Follow local news and observe a few municipal council meetings to gain an understanding of the power dynamics and type of collaboration between the mayor, councillors and municipal staff.

6 COMMITTEES OF COUNCIL: THEIR CREATION, ROLE, AND OPERATION

In all provinces and territories, the municipal council (or, in some places, the mayor) can establish committees (Taylor et al., 2026). The presence and influence of these committees vary greatly depending on the size of the municipality and its political culture. Many municipal councils operate without committees (Horak & Taylor, 2025).

There are three types of committees:

- Standing committees.
- Ad hoc committees.
- The executive committee.

The following sections provide a more detailed presentation of standing and ad hoc committees, followed by the executive committee, which plays a distinct role.

6.1 Standing and ad hoc committees

These committees⁷ serve to streamline and structure the decision-making process of the municipal council. They enable the:

- More thorough treatment of the issue assigned to them (e.g., finance, urban planning, environment and climate change, housing, seniors);
- Distribution of the workload among elected officials;
- Formulation of recommendations that are then submitted to the municipal council for adoption.

Ad hoc committees are created to examine a specific issue, then dissolved once their mandate has been fulfilled (Sancton, 2015). Other than that, they function like standing committees.

Composition

Standing and ad hoc committees always include elected municipal officials as members. Indeed, many committees are made up exclusively of elected officials. Municipal staff with expertise in the matter assigned to the committee may also sit on it, sometimes as full members and sometimes without voting rights.

Less frequently, citizens, external experts, or organizations operating within the community also serve as members of these committees (Tindal et al., 2016).

⁷ The term “commissions” is sometimes used, particularly in Québec.

A significant but circumscribed role

Committees generally play an advisory role: they are given mandates by the municipal council, and make recommendations after studying the assigned issue, but the final decision rests with the council. Some provinces allow municipal councils to delegate some of their authority to a standing or ad hoc committee – excluding essential decisions such as approving the budget or appointing the head of the municipal administration.

Thus, the main purpose of standing and ad hoc committees is to prepare for decision making. They enable elected officials to specialize and to examine issues in detail in a more informal setting than that of municipal council meetings (Tindal et al., 2016). Committees are also an interesting forum for public participation: citizens and organizations operating within the community can attend as a delegation and make a presentation (Sancton, 2015). This may be a setting better suited to technical presentations than a municipal council meeting, since committee members are more familiar with their subject and can devote more time to it. In this regard, committees play an important role, because if they determine that an issue or project is not relevant, it may not be brought before the municipal council. This observation was made by one participant in the focus groups organized by the NCCHPP, who sits on a council committee to represent her public health organization.

Potential disadvantages of committees

Committees remain under the authority of the municipal council. The back-and-forth between committees and council can slow down the decision-making process, fragment debates (with each committee defending “its” sector) and overburden the schedules of elected officials (Tindal et al., 2016).

Standing committees are highly relevant in large municipalities where the municipal council cannot examine all issues in detail (Sancton, 2015). On the other hand, in smaller municipalities, the scope of administrative work may be too limited to justify the creation of committees (Tindal et al., 2016).

IN PRACTICE – STANDING AND AD HOC COMMITTEES: A GATEWAY FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

- **Gather information about committees:**
 - Check the municipality’s website, specifically the section describing the municipal government (often labelled “City Hall,” “Council,” or “Government”). If standing or ad hoc committees exist, a webpage is usually devoted to them; in some cases, they are mentioned on the same page as the list of municipal council members.
 - Examine the list of committees to find the one that most closely matches your work focus. The information presented varies greatly from one municipality to another. Some provide all manner of information: the committee’s mandate; its schedule, agendas, and minutes of its meetings (if public); how to apply to make a presentation as a delegation; a call for applications from community members; the committee’s annual plan and activity report. Other municipalities present only the names of committee members (or only the names of members who are elected municipal officials).
- **Understand whether the committee has decision-making or advisory powers.** Information about delegated authority can be found in municipal by-laws and local governance codes. You can also inquire with the municipal clerk.⁸
- **Regularly consult the agendas and minutes** of the committee you’re interested in, if its work is public (this varies from case to case).
- **Ask to make a presentation to the committee** whenever this is possible and strategically relevant.⁹ The more targeted mandates of committees make it easier to introduce technical issues there, rather than in front of the municipal council. If the municipality’s website does not explain how to request to make a presentation, the municipal clerk is the appropriate point of contact.
- **Ask to sit on the committee**, where committee membership rules allow. For a public health organization, this position makes it possible to bring health issues forward from the earliest stages of the discussions.

6.2 The executive committee

As mentioned in the section on mayors, it can be difficult to unite the municipal council around shared objectives. The creation of an executive committee is intended to rectify this situation. The role of this committee is generally to propose budgetary and public policy orientations to the municipal council, and to coordinate the work of other council committees (Figure 5) (Horak et al., 2024; Patsias, 2024; Tindal et al., 2016). The executive committee is composed of the mayor and a number of municipal councillors: generally, those chairing standing committees, and sometimes a few others (Horak et al., 2024; Horak & Taylor, 2025).

⁸ For more information on the clerk’s role, see [Fact Sheet 2](#).

⁹ [Fact Sheet 5](#) explores the practice of making representations to committees in more depth.

Outside of Québec, executive committees exist only in Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat, Winnipeg, Toronto and Halifax. In Québec, they are much more widespread, even in smaller municipalities (Horak et al., 2024).

Figure 5 The executive committee's role in the municipal political sphere



Generally, the mayor chairs the executive committee. However, the extent of a mayor's control over the policy directions chosen by the committee varies. This control appears stronger when the mayor personally appoints the committee members. It seems less pronounced when members are selected by the municipal council—except, possibly, when the mayor's political party holds a majority on the committee, in large cities where such parties exist (Sancton, 2015; Tindal et al., 2016). Winnipeg and Montréal are often cited as having the executive committees that most strongly structure municipal council decisions, and on which the mayor can rely to consolidate their influence (Graham, 2018; Sancton, 2015; Tindal et al., 2016).

IN PRACTICE – THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE: A KEY FORUM FOR STRUCTURING MUNICIPAL POLICY DIRECTIONS

- In some municipalities, the executive committee goes by a different name. It is therefore advisable not to rely solely on its designation, but also to examine the composition and mandate of the body to determine whether it fulfills the functions of an executive committee.
- Committee members are usually chairs of standing committees. It can still be useful to check which of them sit on the executive committee, as this gives an indication of which issues and sectors have priority.
- In municipalities where the executive committee exerts significant influence over the municipal council, it is useful to analyze the power dynamics within it. To do so: attend its meetings when they are public (this is not the case for all executive committees) or follow local media coverage of its activities.

7 TRANSPARENCY OF PROCESSES IN MUNICIPAL POLICY MAKING

7.1 Municipal council meetings

Municipal council meetings are at the heart of the decision-making process. It is in these meetings that elected officials:

- Agree to ask the administration or committees to explore various subjects and formulate proposals;
- Debate and vote on courses of action developed by the municipal administration or by committees;
- Answer questions from citizens and organizations operating within the community or listen as they present their points of view.

The frequency of meetings varies according to provincial/territorial legislation and the culture of each municipality: from several times a month to a few times a year.

Municipal councils also make use of another, less formal deliberative forum: the committee of the whole.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE: A DISCUSSION FORUM OUTSIDE FORMAL MEETINGS

The committee of the whole is an assembly where all elected municipal officials meet to debate and discuss issues in a less formal setting than that of a municipal council meeting. Decisions cannot be made in a committee of the whole; however, discussions held there often inform decisions that are put to a vote at subsequent council meetings.

A committee of the whole provides an opportunity for in-depth discussions between elected officials and municipal staff working on an issue. These sessions are often used by municipal councils (especially if they have not established standing committees) to hear delegation presentations from citizens or organizations operating within the community (Sancton, 2015).

Committees of the whole are held at the discretion of the municipal council. In some municipalities, a committee of the whole is held before each council meeting; in others, they are organized only when necessary, to examine a specific issue (Paquet, 2024).

Municipal council meetings are open to the public, except when confidential information is being discussed—e.g., commercial negotiations, labour relations, legal opinions—in which case the council meets in an in-camera session (Sancton, 2015). Municipalities must announce the date, time, location and agenda of meetings (on the municipal website and through social networks, local newspapers, community radio, or public postings). To encourage citizen participation, many municipalities hold council meetings in the evening and broadcast them live on the web or on local television channels (Tindal et al., 2016).

The rules governing public participation vary from one municipality to another. Some require prior registration; the number of questions a citizen may ask may be limited in order to allow others to participate; the length of an intervention is often restricted to a few minutes; the number of questions asked about a subject may also be limited, so that a variety of topics can be addressed (Patsias, 2024).

7.2 Access to information and municipal documents

Access to municipal documents is governed by provincial and territorial legislation. Except in the case of small municipalities with very limited resources, a municipality's website usually contains its strategic plans, policies, by-laws, official and other land-use plans, agendas and minutes of council meetings (and sometimes their video recording) and financial statements (Tindal et al., 2016). If information is not available online, it can be requested from the municipal clerk.

Usefulness

Access to municipal documents makes it possible to discern a municipality's priorities and objectives. Indirectly, this review also reveals the areas in which the municipality does not take action (personal communication with one of the reviewers of this document, May 16, 2026). The agendas and minutes of municipal council meetings are particularly interesting, as they can reveal when there are emerging issues or issues under review that the municipal council is asking the municipal administration to examine. This upstream identification enables one to seize opportunities to influence decisions – whereas, by the time a policy or by-law has been adopted, it is too late.

Difficulties observed

- Each municipality structures its website in its own way, and you need to take the time to understand how their information is organized.
- While municipal documents are, in principle, public, their actual accessibility varies (Divay, 2024). It is sometimes difficult to find information; e.g., documents may be “hidden” in an unexpected section of the website (input gathered during the focus groups conducted by the NCCHPP).
- Information on a subject may be scattered across several sections of a website (see the example in the text box below on alcohol policies).
- The minutes of council meetings may be written in a formal language that is difficult for the uninitiated to understand. Some municipalities publish summaries for the public (Tindal et al., 2016) – but these remain a minority, due to the communications resources required.

EXAMPLE: WHERE CAN ONE FIND INFORMATION ON A MUNICIPALITY'S ALCOHOL POLICIES?

Lorelee Marin is a Health Promotion Facilitator at Recovery Alberta and a former municipal councillor in a municipality of 31,000 inhabitants. During a webinar (Wettlaufer & Marin, 2025), she outlined the following avenues for locating information on a municipality's alcohol policies:

- Search the municipality's website for:
 - The municipal alcohol policy, if one exists;
 - The by-law library to find by-laws applicable to several areas: public safety, noise and nuisances, parks and recreational facilities (rules governing the consumption or sale of alcohol in these areas), land use by-laws (for example, a by-law prohibiting the retail sale of alcohol within a certain distance of schools);
 - Webpages devoted to parks and recreation infrastructure;
 - Event and facility booking rules;
 - Agendas and minutes of municipal council meetings.
- Ask the municipal clerk or the legislative services department.¹⁰
- Ask the municipal councillor of the relevant district.
- Approach a committee of council whose mandate includes health and wellbeing issues or urban planning; its members will be able to explain how the land use by-law is interpreted and applied in practice.

¹⁰ In a larger municipality with a more extensive and specialized administration, it may be more appropriate to contact the staff responsible for the issue rather than the municipal clerk.

IN PRACTICE – MAKING THE MOST OF PUBLIC MEETINGS AND AVAILABLE INFORMATION

Meetings

- **Scan items included on the agendas** of municipal meetings to identify relevant issues to monitor. In some municipalities, online agendas include attachments such as reports prepared by the municipal administration and correspondence received from residents or external organizations (letters, information reports, etc.). These documents provide additional insight into ongoing municipal work (Huron Perth Public Health, 2025).
- **Attend in person** when a subject of interest is on the agenda, especially if the municipality does not keep recordings of council meetings.
- **Find out about the procedure for actively participating** in municipal meetings. Some municipalities clearly explain on their website how to register to participate in the question period, how to send a written comment to be read there, or even how to appear as a delegation before the municipal council or one of its standing committees. See, for example, the websites of [Moncton](#), [Winnipeg](#), [Banff](#) or [Whitehorse](#). If the website doesn't provide a clear procedure, ask the municipal clerk, who is the staff member that supports the organization of council meetings.
 - Note that council meetings are a non-specialized forum where a wide variety of topics are discussed, and that speaking time for external delegations is limited to a few minutes.
 - On the other hand, committees of council are more specialized deliberative bodies, and their mandate often includes hearing the views of the public and of external organizations.
- **Tailor presentations to the municipal council** based on the profile of its members. This also applies to presentations to committees, since ultimately it is the full council that makes decisions. Keep in mind that any presentation, letter, or document submitted to the municipal council or a committee becomes part of the public record and may be consulted by anyone.

Review of the available information

- Funnel information so as not to spend too much time examining the minutes of council meetings:
 - Was the subject I'm interested in on the agenda?
 - If so: locate the relevant section of the minutes using the keyword search function.
 - If a recording of the session is available, find the point in time where the topic of interest is discussed. The recording may reveal details not recorded in the minutes, such as which councillors took a position on the subject, and what their position was. Did municipal staff make any comments? Was there consensus or contention, and concerning which issues?
- When searching municipal documents, take into account the terms used locally and try several related terms (e.g., "alcohol" vs "liquor").



IN SUMMARY – KEY POINTS ABOUT THE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

- The municipal council, made up of elected officials, is the political and decision-making body of a municipality.
- In some public health organizations, interactions with the municipal political sphere are reserved for senior leadership. Public health staff generally have more latitude to interact with the municipal administrative sphere (discussed in [Fact Sheet 2](#)).
- Approach and collaboration strategies with municipalities should take into account the electoral system for municipal elected officials, as well as the electoral calendar. → See [textbox on p. 7](#)
- The relevance of approaching the mayor depends on the political context and the size of the municipality. → See [textbox on p. 13](#)
- Committees of council are relevant settings for monitoring specialized issue areas and for intervening early in the municipal decision-making process, which helps to bring health considerations forward at the earliest stages of discussion. → See [textbox on p. 16](#)
- Where it exists, the executive committee is often a key venue where the municipality's policy orientations are shaped. → See [textbox on p. 17](#)
- Public access to municipal meetings and documents makes it possible to track current municipal issues, better understand the municipality's priorities, and identify opportunities to engage. → See [textbox on p. 21](#)

Understanding the role of municipal elected officials, their relationships with the municipal administration, and the places where decisions are prepared helps public health better grasp how municipal power is exercised and adapt its collaboration strategies more effectively to the local context.

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The Municipal Council and Elected Officials: Guidance for Public Health

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