

Discussion paper (November, 2014)

The Guelph difference: Guelph Wellbeing



Guelph Wellbeing is making a difference. It has introduced a platform for community building that is having real results in making Guelph a safer, healthier and more compassionate community. It emphasizes citizen involvement and collaboration to identify community issues and solutions. It uses qualitative and quantitative data measured against a nationally used index to make decisions. And, guided by a Community Leadership Team, it is coordinating groups across the community to affect positive and measurable change.

Despite its name, [Guelph Wellbeing](#) is not a health program. It is a platform for community building and improving our common good or wellbeing:

- a new way of defining what we as citizens see as our common good,
- collaborative processes for aligning our efforts to achieve the highest level of wellbeing possible through collective impact, and
- an established method to measure it

Through extensive community engagement and surveys, Guelph Wellbeing has identified four key issues on which the community should focus: food security, social and physical connectivity, and affordable housing. The Guelph Wellbeing data tell us that these issues have the greatest impact on our overall wellbeing and fixing them will bring the greatest benefit to the community as a whole.

However, Guelph Wellbeing is more than an initiative to address issues around poverty. It is an initiative to change our approach to government and a platform for community building in general. While food, social connectivity, physical connectivity and housing have been identified as the focus in the near term, other issues may be identified as priorities in the future. In this paper we discuss the Guelph Wellbeing platform, why it is an important and transformative initiative, and how it identifies and measures our collective wellbeing and helps us to build a stronger community for the future.

Changing government

Guelph Wellbeing is not addressing a problem unique to Guelph. It is addressing a class of problems that are structural or systemic and aren't being addressed by traditional methods. And these kinds of problems are an issue for governments everywhere.

The traditional approach to providing government services involves breaking problems down into component parts and addressing those parts separately. It is the essence of modern bureaucratic organizations and is employed widely from companies to government departments.

A dramatic challenge to this way of doing things came from Japanese companies in the 1980s. Japanese car companies, for example, did not use the assembly line method for assembling cars, but employed teams of people who worked together to build each car. The Japanese team approach resulted in better quality cars, in part, because the team took ownership of the final product. Also, working together, they could see innovations and solutions to problems that the isolated assembly line workers could not. They had a holistic view that allowed them to see problems and find better ways of doing things together.

In response, many companies, especially those who competed directly with the Japanese, began to re-think the way they operated. The older hierarchical, bureaucratic model was challenged. For instance, in today's top business schools, MBAs are prepared for flattened organizations, team approaches to problem solving, agile methodologies for innovating and, above all, to be wary of slow-moving, top-down, siloed organizations.

Governments are struggling to follow suit. Policies are still decided at the top and communicated down. Issues that don't precisely match the policy have to be run up the hierarchy for decision. As a result, it is difficult for them to be more agile and innovative, to get rid of waste and provide higher quality services by allowing staff to think on their feet or act in teams. What is holding them back? If companies are learning to put their faith in the factory floor, could governments do the same?

This is part of what Guelph Wellbeing is testing today. Two related things have to happen to make this possible. The first is accepting a model of open government, which is a rethinking of the relationship between citizens and their government. The second is community engagement, which involves training government workers how to interact differently with the public they serve. These are two important foundation stones of Guelph Wellbeing.

Open and engaged

Traditionally, government bureaucracies would never have been described as “open” and weren’t designed to be so. Authority flows from the elected representatives down.

Top-down might make sense in theory, but in practice it is often a wasted opportunity. For several decades, the mantra of “customer first” has been drilled into customer-facing staff in many successful companies. They make use of surveys, user groups and social media to have rich interactions with their customers, principally as a way to improve their product or service.

Through bottom-up engagements with the public, government staff can learn a great deal about what is working and what isn’t. The public is also a potential source of solutions, which have the potential to make government more effective. Citizens can also benefit from an open information exchange. With more and better information, they are more likely to understand the reasons for policies. They may even come up with solutions of their own that don’t need government at all.

This kind of openness and ability to engage with the public does not come naturally. It has not been part of the civil service tradition. It has to be learned. It involves a whole new set of skills and behaviours, as well as information tools, such as websites, to which the public has access.

One of the foundation stones for Guelph Wellbeing has been the creation of the City’s community engagement team. The team has been working for a couple of years training City staff to be more open and engaged. This is part of a larger “open government” initiative, of which Guelph Wellbeing is a part.

There are nine guiding principles of the [City’s community engagement philosophy](#), which for anyone who has had to deal with a stone-faced bureaucrat will seem like a revolutionary manifesto.

Inclusive: The City encourages participation by those who will be affected by a decision. The City builds relationships with stakeholders by using a range of tools to engage varied audiences.

Early Involvement: The City involves the public as early as possible in the community engagement process so stakeholders have time to learn about the issue and actively participate.

Access to Decision Making: The City designs processes that will give participants the opportunity to influence decisions.

Coordinated Approach: The City coordinates community engagement activities to use community and City resources effectively.

Transparent and Accountable: The City designs processes that are open and clear. Stakeholders will understand their role, the level of engagement and the outcome of the process.

Open and Timely Communication: The City provides information that is timely, accurate, objective, easily understood, accessible and balanced.

Mutual Trust and Respect: The City engages the community in a fair and respectful way that fosters understanding between diverse views, values and interests.

Evaluation and Continuous Improvement: The City commits resources to evaluating engagement processes to ensure engagement activities are effective.

Equitable Engagement Process: The City designs engagement processes that allow all community members a reasonable opportunity to contribute and to develop a balanced perspective.

As reasonable as this all sounds, it is a fundamental departure from the traditional model in which top-down policy is simply implemented and delivered. The Community Engagement team works with all departments to ensure they follow this model whenever appropriate. Further, City employees are now held accountable for their level of community engagement. They must “pursue community engagement with the belief that involving the community leads to better decisions”. And, to improve the linkages between bottom-up and top-down, elected representatives on City Council review the information gathered through community engagement processes to inform their decisions.

Community Engagement is a part of [Guelph’s Open Government](#) approach. It is how the City of Guelph wants to work across the board. For Guelph Wellbeing to work, it needs to be in place. And, unsurprisingly, Guelph Wellbeing has used the community engagement approach to establish the next key ingredient: metrics and accountability.

Measuring wellbeing

How do we measure something as nebulous as the public good? We are all engaged in building our community, whether it is as government, business or through our various activities in the community or civil society. But how do we know if our collective efforts are actually improving our wellbeing?

When the Guelph Wellbeing initiative began to look at the issue of metrics, they had a happy surprise. One of the most promising approaches was being developed just next door at the University of Waterloo and getting worldwide attention.

The [Canadian Index of Wellbeing](#) or CIW, as it is known, uses 64 indicators to measure eight domains of life that contribute to our wellbeing:

Community Vitality	Healthy Populations
Democratic Engagement	Leisure and Culture
Education	Living Standards
Environment	Time Use

Initially, the CIW was developed as an index for national or provincial use, not municipal. In working with Guelph, the CIW team became excited by the possibilities it presented to develop a new tool, the Community Wellbeing Survey. Guelph’s use of the CIW Community Wellbeing Survey is now getting attention across the country and beyond. In October 2013, it won an [impact award from the US-based Community Indicators Consortium](#). Other programs in municipalities, such as Kingston and Waterloo Region, have begun to adopt it, following the leadership of the Guelph Wellbeing initiative.

As part of a lengthy community engagement process to set a benchmark for Guelph’s wellbeing, 1,402 households completed the [CIW Community Wellbeing Survey](#). Having this baseline data gives Guelph something to measure against. But it also helped identify the specific indicators the community wanted most to improve. Through extensive community engagement, with more than 3,000 inputs, the CIW Survey and other data were refined to indicate four areas where Guelph has opportunities to act that would significantly improve community wellbeing: connectivity (both [socially](#) and [physically](#) - in terms of helping people move throughout the city), affordable housing and [food security](#).

With the CIW baseline in place and the area of focus now established, Guelph Wellbeing ceases to be something praiseworthy but nebulous. It is a hard measure of whether our collective efforts are actually moving us forward. City employees were previously accountable only to the elected Council based on top-down policy. In a more open, collaborative relationship with public groups and citizens, they are can also be held accountable on how well they meet the metrics and goals for collective impact set by Guelph Wellbeing.

The CIW baseline also provides a way of aligning community efforts. Previously there was a sense that everyone was working in silos and not getting the maximum bang for their collective buck. Using the CIW framework and the Community Wellbeing Survey not only give the community a way to have meaningful discussions about what it wants, but also a way to align efforts and funding to make a measurable impact. Funders, such as the [Ontario Trillium Foundation](#), are so excited by this methodology that they are using it as the criteria for all their funding. Other funding agencies are looking at it as well.

It is in this sense that Guelph Wellbeing provides a platform for everyone to engage in collective impact or community building. It helps set the agenda for collaboration, it informs policies for government, business and civil society groups and it provides a way to measure whether we are actually improving our wellbeing. In other words, it creates the possibility for all these various groups to act as a team to address systemic problems they couldn't solve individually.

Addressing systemic problems

As was learned from the Japanese approach three decades ago, teams are better at spotting problems and finding solutions that cross multiple domains, what we might call systemic or holistic problems. Teams often innovated in ways specialists were unable. Breaking problems down into their component parts and tackling them singly can be extremely powerful. Individuals and organizations can hone their skills and knowledge as specialists to the point that they can do things unimagined by generalists. But they can also be blind to systemic problems — or to solving them.

This blindness to systemic issues can easily be seen with respect to the deployment of social safety net services in Guelph (and most other communities too). As an example, an elderly woman, Helen, calls 911 three

times in one month because she keeps losing her balance and falling. The paramedics sent to her home patch her up and make sure she is OK. On the fourth instance, however, she breaks her hip. This time, she is hospitalized, undergoes a hip replacement and months of rehabilitation.

If after the second or third call to her home, the paramedics had contacted her doctor, he or she would have instantly recognized that Helen's medication was causing her dizziness and she needed to have it adjusted. Unfortunately, that isn't the way the system works today. The paramedics, for privacy reasons, as well as the narrow definition of their job, are not authorized to let her doctor know what is happening.

This is a small example that repeats itself endlessly because social safety net agencies don't normally work together as a team. As Guelph began to tackle some of these systemic problems, here are some of the things they found that speak to the incredible waste to which silos can lead:

- the police were called to one home 500 times in one year
- another person used ambulance services 66 times in six months
- a third person visited the emergency department 200 times in one year

Why didn't these services do something to get to the root of the problem and prevent all these calls and visits? The answer, sadly, is that they usually aren't authorized, they lack the information needed, and there are often no processes in place to facilitate cross-agency communications and actions.

Guelph is in no way unique in having these kinds of silo problems. At the provincial level, studies have measured the impact of these kinds of issues. It turns out that roughly 5% of the population uses 75% of our social safety net resources. That means that in Guelph, roughly 3,000 people are consuming 75% of the resources. How expensive is that? In the Waterloo-Wellington-Grey region we spend roughly a billion dollars on these kinds of services. That means that in Guelph, a mere three thousand people are consuming some hundreds of millions of dollars in public spending per year. Over a decade, it may amount to several billion dollars.

We now live in a time of tight budgets. Lack of funding is a powerful incentive for silos to begin working together. But unless we fundamentally change the model for delivering these services, shrinking funding alone will only entrench the bureaucracy. Transformation has to start with a different way of delivering social services that improves the wellbeing of the community, as well as gaining cost efficiencies.

Teaming up

The Guelph Wellbeing initiative has brought together community leaders from across the city. It has been the first time many of them have come together as a team to address common issues. They are not only learning about what other organizations do, but also actively working together to find solutions. As a group, the Leadership Team is connecting the dots between the many organizations working to improve quality of life in Guelph. They are able to see beyond silos and can offer leadership, facilitation and resources depending on what is required in each individual opportunity.

There are a number of pilot projects on the go or in design that give a sense of how a team approach to community building and wellbeing might begin to contribute to higher quality services while addressing waste and inefficiency. All of these programs embody the basic characteristics of the Guelph Wellbeing model and indicate how the general principles of the approach are being applied successfully.

A surge of social enterprises and projects in from 2010 to 2012 demonstrated the longstanding commitment to finding complete solutions and putting patients and at-risk citizens at the heart of our decision making and service delivery. Guelph Wellbeing can tie those efforts together for ever increasing efficiency and effectiveness.

The Guelph Enterprise

Police are often at the front line in responding to crises and, more often than not, bear the brunt of failures in the system. When cross-silo issues fail individuals, the police pick up the pieces. Guelph Enterprise is a team approach for linking the silos and catching at risk individuals before they fall through the cracks. The key to the new system is called "the Hub", a weekly working meeting between the police and representatives from all the critical social service agencies in the city.

At Hub meetings, team organizations bring forward cases, initially with no names attached for privacy reasons, and assess the case for risk, scoring risk higher the younger the individual involved. Only when the Hub identifies a high risk potential, do they act. Individuals or families are then approached and asked if they would like help. Very few turn down the offer.

Once in the door, the various agencies work with the families to address issues and provide support and resources before the issues escalate to something more serious. Guelph Enterprise addresses issues of social connectivity, creating supportive networks around families in need.

Based on a similar program that has been running for three years in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, the approach is risk-driven, as opposed to incident-driven. In medical parlance, it would be called "preventative." As the ultimate front-line workers, the police are still often the ones to identify risk. In Prince Albert, the police bring half of the cases forward, but through the collaborative, sharing approach of the Hub, four out of five of those cases are being handed off to agencies that are more appropriate. The crime rate in Prince Albert, after years of going constantly up, has in the last year dropped an eye-popping 39%. The Government of Saskatchewan is now implementing the program in nine more communities, and governments across Canada are watching closely — or, as in Guelph, already jumping on board.

Up and running since May, 2014, Guelph Enterprise is one of the leading projects being launched from the Guelph Wellbeing platform. It has adopted the disciplines and protocols developed by Prince Albert, as well as many of the same analytic tools. The University of Guelph has stepped up by providing a researcher to do analysis and reporting. By mid-July 2014, they had already successfully closed eight situations.

Health Links and the [Guelph Family Health Team](#)

Late in 2012, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care launched a new pilot program, Health Links, to reduce health care costs while improving health outcomes. From their website:

“Five per cent of patients account for two-thirds of health care costs. These are most often patients with multiple, complex conditions. When the hospital, the family doctor, the long-term care home, community organizations and others work as a team, the patient receives better, more coordinated care. Providers will design a care plan for each patient and work together with patients and their families to ensure they receive the care they need.”

This reflects the general holistic approach to service delivery we’ve discussed with relation to Guelph Wellbeing. The focus has shifted from the specific ailment, which normally would have been referred to a specialist, to the

patient and his or her overall health, thus allowing a team approach that can address multiple issues that might be interacting to create the problem.

Health Links was piloted in 22 communities, and Guelph was fortunate enough to get one of them. The Guelph Family Health Team was selected. They have adopted the team approach to medicine. They describe their mission as “the development and delivery of high quality collaborative health care that informs and assists our patients to make decisions that maximize their wellness potential.” Here we see the hallmarks of the new model that is emerging:

- a team approach
- focus on the patient first
- overall wellness potential, and
- involve patients in the decision-making process through better information and measurable results

Health Links, although specifically about medical care, shows how improved connectivity, one of the four key themes of Guelph Wellbeing, can lead to better wellbeing in general. The Guelph Family Health Team not only reacts to issues, but also identifies high-risk individuals and connects them with other support services. Many times, a visit by a team nurse starts a series of interventions that can prevent further emergency issues. For instance, in the case of Helen, a visit by a nurse might have identified not only that her medication was causing dizziness, but that her housing was inappropriate or that she needed support for better meal planning and shopping. The key is to create a more integrated network of support and connectivity around the individual or family so that problems can be identified and dealt with before they escalate.

[The Seed](#)

The idea for the Seed comes from a two decade-long project called The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto ([The Stop](#)). It developed a different approach to charitable food provisioning by, again, taking a more holistic approach. It strives to meet the food needs of low-income people by tackling the issue of food insecurity on a number of fronts, including addressing diet-related illness, reducing social isolation and supporting local agriculture. The Stop’s programs include community kitchens and gardens, cooking classes, healthy drop-in meals, peri-natal support, a food bank, outdoor bake ovens, food markets and community action programs.

This is another example of addressing a complex issue with teams of people. Food insecurity is a large and complex problem that can't be addressed with a box of canned goods once a week. The program explicitly deals with food insecurity, but also creates greater social connectivity as part of the solution. The Seed, which got off the ground in early 2014, will be following a similar model to The Stop.

Lakeside Hope House

Hope House is another example of the new kind of well-rounded approach to addressing the myriad issues that accompany poverty. Focusing on 500 families, Hope House provides a food market, community garden program, clothing access, portrait photography, dental services, hair stylist, high school support program, cooking classes, counseling and advocacy, as well as a drop-in cafe.

As in these other emerging attempts to address wellbeing issues, the goal is to address a complex of issues rather than a single problem. By focusing on the recipient of the service, in this case, individual families, it allows a team of people to address a common set of issues that a family in poverty might face. And in the spirit of community engagement, the program also allows the family to choose which Hope House resources they need and design their own program of support.

Circles and Bridges Out of Poverty

Hope House also hosts Circles, which is one of three components of Bridges Out of Poverty, a program run by Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health. Families in poverty are teamed with several middle and upper income families (allies) who act as mentors, friends and a supportive network. The Circles team approach enables them to have an interactive relationship, exchanging ideas, learning new skills or getting support and access to other networks — as well as financing through a micro-credit program. As team members, the ally families in the circle help the family in poverty design their own personal program and define their own journey as they transform their situations and become more stable and self-sufficient.

The Elevator Project

One of the five mechanisms in the City's Community Investment Strategy, the Elevator Project addresses a different aspect of the emerging new model:

the generation of innovative ideas and how to match it to funding and support networks.

In the old top-down model, problems were addressed by policy decisions that created programs and then funding was allocated. Following Silicon Valley's startup model, the Elevator Project uses a funding model that not only raises money to support innovative ideas from many partners, but creates a team-based mentoring approach. Much like Bridges Out of Poverty, there is a skills transfer from more experienced team members to help those with the initial idea to get it off the ground successfully.

The Elevator Project is a collaboration between 10 Carden, the City of Guelph, the Community Health Centre and Innovation Guelph. Citizens at large were invited to submit project ideas, the community at large was invited to vote on them, and then the partner organizations arranged for funding, mentoring and other forms of support to help them realize their vision.

[Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition](#)

The Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition addresses the connectivity piece of the new model. It is a network of neighbourhood groups, sponsoring agencies and program partners that offers a larger team to individual neighbourhood groups. Individual citizens or groups that want to initiate an activity or solution to a neighbourhood issue can work through the Coalition to get their idea rolling and find support for making it happen. The Coalition provides collective resources to share information, provide support, distribute available funding resources and advocate for community issues. The Coalition works closely with the City's Community Engagement team, and the initiative represents one of the best examples of how solutions can be generated from citizen engagement with the City playing a supportive role.

Housing Homelessness Plan

So far, all of the example programs have focused on the themes of food and connectivity. But plans are also in place to address housing. The 10-year [Housing and Homelessness Plan for Guelph Wellington](#) has been created through a lengthy engagement with hundreds of individuals and organizations. Their vision is that "everyone in Guelph Wellington can find and maintain an appropriate, safe and affordable place to call home." Through the community engagement process, they identified eight goals:

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1. To help low-income households close the gap between their incomes and housing expenses
 2. To provide a range of supports to assist people at risk of homelessness to remain housed
 3. To offer a comprehensive range of supportive housing options for residents with complex needs due to aging, disabilities, mental health issues and addictions
 4. To increase the supply and mix of affordable housing options for low- to moderate-income households
 5. To reduce the length of time and number of people who experience homelessness
 6. To promote practices that make the housing and homelessness support system more accessible and welcoming
 7. To preserve the existing social and affordable rental housing stock
 8. To seize opportunities to turn research knowledge into action

As with the other programs we have looked at, the Homelessness Plan will tackle a complex issue using a team approach, bringing in partners from all levels of government, including the housing sector, community benefit sector (social services, health care, foundations, faith groups, education and research and criminal justice), as well as tenants, homeowners, donors and volunteers.

Turning the ship

The above are examples of projects and organizations that have been brought together as part of the discussion around Guelph Wellbeing because they all share some fundamental principles that define this new model for creating social wealth or wellbeing. All of them are autonomous projects in their own right, but all of them share common goals or approaches and profit from being better connected with each other. Because of this, they are strongly supportive of Guelph Wellbeing. The leaders of these programs would say that Guelph Wellbeing has already been invaluable for bringing them together and creating a larger community network.

But Guelph Wellbeing is meant to be more than a network of like-minded groups and community leaders providing support and a means to collaborate. It is an emerging model for community building, both providing better support for those people with the lowest levels of wellbeing and also encouraging civic action and better local government for all citizens.

In summary, Guelph Wellbeing is:

1. A community engagement model for local government that works collaboratively with the public to identify the most important problems and surface new ideas for tackling them.
2. A structured methodology for measuring our collective wellbeing based on the Canadian Index of Wellbeing, which allows community groups to hold each other accountable to shared goals for collective impact.
3. Some standard processes for collective impact, including funding and resources, as well as collaborating, mentoring and making collective decisions as a team.

Guelph Wellbeing is bringing about transformational change right across the City. This includes changes in focus, changes in skills, and changes in the way staff work collaboratively with businesses, stakeholders and community groups. In putting a priority on food, connectivity and shelter, the community will also address related issues around health, education and crime rates. It will not only raise its overall wellbeing, it will free up huge resources for addressing other needs, from recreation and the arts to infrastructure and economic development.

Summary

Guelph Wellbeing is not about doing more yoga and eating fewer carbs. It is about increasing our common wealth and improving our public good or wellbeing as a community.

Guelph Wellbeing is not another bureaucratic department at the City of Guelph. It is a methodology for encouraging a team approach to solving system-wide issues that aren't being solved by the old way of doing things. Leaders across the city are working together, sometimes for the first time. As a member of the team, the City of Guelph is just one of the partners at the table.

Guelph Wellbeing is not a specific program or even set of programs to address food, housing or connectivity issues. It is a platform for community building. Any community group can leverage Guelph Wellbeing to align its efforts with other groups, in a measurable way, around the shared objectives and goals the community has identified as a top priority. The objectives and goals have currently been identified around food security, affordable housing and connectivity. But they might change in the future.

Guelph Wellbeing is about making local government work better. It is about transformative change that will require deep changes in attitudes, skills, incentives and behaviour for both City staff and citizens. It is about breaking down silos and getting all levels of government, NGOs and charitable groups working as a team. Guelph Wellbeing is about collective impact, and it is already making a difference.

Points for Discussion:

1. From crowdsourced funding to worldwide community activism, we are seeing collaboration and the team approach being applied to a wide variety of activities. Are there areas of your life where a team approach might lead to better results? Hint: look especially for areas where the narrow vision of the specialist is missing the larger picture.
2. As the falling rate of participation in elections attests, more and more people are either completely disinterested in local government or are dissatisfied with the electoral process and politics. Do you feel that the community engagement model can help revive our democracy? What are some of the challenges and opportunities you see to broadening the scope of community engagement?
3. To paraphrase John F. Kennedy, too many people ask what their city can do for them and not what they can do for their city. What can we do to change this attitude? How can we create a greater commitment to civic action, and what roadblocks are in the way? Do you think that a framework such as Guelph Wellbeing will help more people get involved in building a stronger community?