

Expanding the Listening to Toronto Survey to Support Ward-Level Insights

Date: May 28, 2026
To: Executive Committee
From: City Manager
Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report responds to City Council direction [2026.MM34.7](#) to report on opportunities to expand the Listening to Toronto survey to support ward-level insights.

Staff were also directed to assess potential sampling frameworks, methodological and promotional options to improve demographic and geographic representation, and comparable municipal survey models.

In response, staff conducted a jurisdictional scan of municipal survey models, engaged divisions on survey expansion opportunities, and assessed the feasibility of expanding the current survey's scope, including approaches to enhance demographic and geographic representation, strengthen public outreach strategies, and understand associated costs.

The purpose of this report is to summarize the results of this analysis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The City Manager recommends that:

1. The Executive Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no current or known future year financial implications resulting from the adoption of the recommendation contained in this report.

The Listening to Toronto survey is currently delivered within an annual budget of approximately \$50,000, with external vendor costs at just under this amount, excluding internal staff costs.

The report identifies that expanding the survey to support ward-level analysis or enhancing methodological approaches would result in additional costs.

Should Council choose to pursue any of the expansion approaches outlined in this report, any required funding would be requested through a future budget submission for Council consideration.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact statement.

DECISION HISTORY

On November 12 and 13, 2025, City Council adopted MM34.7 - Expanding the Listening to Toronto Survey to Support Ward-Level Insights. [Agenda Item History - 2025.MM34.7](#)

On September 29, 2025, Executive Committee adopted EX26.1 – 2025 Listening to Toronto Survey. [Agenda Item History – 2025.EX16.1](#)

On December 10, 2024, Executive Committee adopted EX19.28 – Listening to Toronto Survey. [Agenda Item History - 2024.EX19.28](#)

COMMENTS

Key terms and assumptions

For the purposes of this report, “meaningful ward-level insights” refers to survey results with a sufficient sample size to support basic comparisons across wards, recognizing that margins of error will be wider than for city-wide results.

“In-language” surveys are translated and administered in respondents’ preferred languages (for example, Cantonese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Punjabi, or Tamil), rather than being offered only in English.

Probability-based sampling is a survey method in which every member of the target population has a random chance of being selected to participate. Because the selection process is random and measurable, results can be generalized to the broader population within a calculated margin of error.

“Statistically significant” means findings are based on a sufficient number of responses to allow reasonable confidence that observed differences are not due to random chance alone.

In this report, 'n' refers to sample size, meaning the number of survey responses within a given group or subgroup. Larger sample sizes generally increase the reliability and precision of results, while smaller sample sizes are associated with greater variability.

Background

The Listening to Toronto public opinion survey was launched in 2024 to gather insights on a range of topics, including satisfaction with select City services, perceptions of quality of life in Toronto, and residents' experiences interacting with the City. The survey is administered by an external vendor using an online panel sampling framework and targets a representative sample of n=1,125 Toronto residents aged 18 and over.

The total sample includes n=1,000 respondents recruited through an English-language online panel and n=125 in-language surveys conducted online, consisting of n=25 respondents each in Cantonese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Punjabi, and Tamil. The survey is typically in the field for three to four weeks. Quotas and weighting are applied to help ensure the sample reflects the surveyed population by age, gender, and region (former boroughs), based on the most recent Statistics Canada Census data (2021).

The Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC), the polling industry's professional body, notes that online surveys cannot be assigned a formal margin of error because they do not rely on random probability sampling. For comparison purposes, a probability-based random sample of a similar size would have a margin of error of approximately ± 3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Margins of error are higher and vary for subsample results, such as by region (former boroughs).

Currently, data is not collected at the ward-level because the survey is designed to measure broad public perceptions across general quality of life indicators and support high-level, citywide analysis of service satisfaction, rather than localized results.

The annual budget for the Listening to Toronto survey is \$50,000 with the cost to deliver the survey through a reputable, experienced external vendor at just under \$50,000, excluding internal staff costs. Within the current budget, it is not feasible to expand the survey to produce statistically significant results at the ward level. Details of this assessment are provided below.

How divisions currently use Listening to Toronto survey results to inform service planning

As a corporate-level tool, divisions use data from the Listening to Toronto survey to assess overall satisfaction with programs and services and to identify areas where further public engagement or deeper analysis may be required to better understand specific issues and opportunities for improvement within divisions.

City-wide data from the Listening to Toronto survey also complements more granular divisional data obtained through operational sources, such as 311 data, as well as targeted program user surveys.

Feedback from divisions on how survey results are used indicates that the Listening to Toronto survey is primarily valued as a high-level, city-wide supplementary dataset for planning, communications, and benchmarking, rather than as a primary operational dataset.

Potential survey enhancements within the existing budget

Within the existing budget, the Listening to Toronto survey could be enhanced to capture respondents' Community Council Areas: Etobicoke York, North York, Scarborough, and Toronto and East York. The survey mode and total sample size would remain unchanged. Adding this geographic identifier would allow staff to report on statistically meaningful results at the Community Council Area level, with an acceptable margin of error, while maintaining the current cost and survey design. However, implementing this enhancement would require modifications to the survey to collect full postal codes from respondents, rather than the first three digits (FSA) currently captured. Minimal additional effort would be required to map postal codes to Community Council Areas to support reporting at this level.

Assessment of approaches to expand the survey for ward-level data

Three key factors influence the feasibility and cost of producing ward-level survey data: the number of respondents required per ward to support statistically meaningful results, the sampling framework used, and the ability to maintain demographic representation, including through surveys conducted in languages other than English.

Number of respondents to be statistically significant at the ward level

Producing statistically meaningful results at the ward level requires a substantially larger number of respondents to adequately reflect the population within each ward. Higher statistical precision requires larger sample sizes.

- a) To achieve high precision at the ward level, a margin of error of approximately ± 3 percent at a 95 percent confidence level would require an estimated $n=1,067$ respondents per ward, or approximately 26,675 respondents across Toronto's 25 wards.
- b) A moderate precision approach, with a margin of error of approximately ± 5 percent at a 95 percent confidence level, would require an estimated $n=384$ respondents per ward, or approximately 9,600 respondents city-wide.
- c) An indicative precision approach, intended to support high-level or directional ward-level insights, would require approximately $n=151$ respondents per ward. This corresponds to an approximate ± 8 percent margin of error at a 95 percent confidence level and would result in a total sample of approximately 3,775 respondents across all wards. This level of sampling is broadly comparable to current practices in other large municipalities, such as Calgary (typically between 120 and 180 respondents per ward) and Hamilton (approximately 100 respondents per ward).

Summary or precision scenarios

Ward-level precision target	Margin of error (95% confidence)	Approx. respondents per ward	Approx. total respondents (25 wards)
High precision	±3%	1,067	26,675
Moderate precision	±5%	384	9,600
Indicative insights (min. threshold)	±8%	151	3,775

An acceptable margin of error used by most survey researchers typically falls between 4% and 8% at the 95% confidence level. Thus, a sample of 151 per ward would generally be considered the minimum threshold for meaningful "ward-level insights" for Toronto.

The high overall sample requirement reflects Toronto's relatively large number of wards (25), compared to other major municipalities such as Calgary (14 wards) and Hamilton (15 wards).

The sample sizes noted above are illustrative estimates derived from publicly available sample size calculators. Final requirements would need to be confirmed with the polling vendor based on the sampling framework.

Potential sampling frameworks

This section outlines potential sampling frameworks that could be used to expand the Listening to Toronto Survey and compares their relative cost and methodological trade-offs. Each approach varies in terms of cost, effort, representativeness, and feasibility.

Online panel

Online panel surveys offer a fast and cost-effective method for collecting targeted insights, particularly for longitudinal research that tracks changes over time. Respondents are pre-recruited and profiled by third-party research vendors, enabling rapid data collection at a significantly lower cost than telephone or in-person survey methods.

An online panel survey is conducted over the internet using an existing pool of respondents maintained by a third-party research vendor. Participants complete surveys using a computer, tablet, or smartphone. Unlike random-digit dialing or intercept surveys, respondents are not recruited at random at the time of the survey; instead, they are drawn from an established panel.

Once sample parameters are defined, the polling firm administers the survey by issuing email or platform-based invitations to eligible panel members who meet the target criteria. Survey completion is self-administered online and does not involve an interviewer.

However, online panels have limitations related to representativeness and potential bias, which can affect the validity of results. While larger sample sizes typically reduce margins of error or credibility intervals, online panel surveys are subject to diminishing returns. For general population polling, sample sizes above approximately 2,000 respondents are generally less efficient. The current Listening to Toronto Survey is below this threshold; however, expanding the sample to support ward-level analysis would exceed it. Municipal governments increasingly rely on online panel surveys because they provide the best balance of cost, speed, analytical flexibility, and operational feasibility relative to other survey methods, particularly for recurring, citywide research.

Random Digit Dialing (RDD)

Random Digit Dialing (RDD) is a probability-based survey method that randomly generates landline and mobile phone numbers, including unlisted numbers, giving each household a known chance of selection. This approach is particularly well suited for surveys that require probability-based sampling, time sensitive data collection, or interviewer support for more complex questions.

However, RDD is subject to declining response rates, as many individuals screen or ignore unknown calls. It also tends to over-represent older adults and individuals with greater availability, while under-representing younger residents, busy professionals, and some newcomer populations, including non-English speakers.

Mail-out survey

Mail-out surveys invite respondents to return a paper survey or access an online version, which can reduce completion rates due to the additional effort required. However, postal delivery reaches nearly all households, including residents who may be less digitally connected, which can improve inclusivity and geographic coverage.

Industry response rates for unsolicited mailout surveys typically range from 5 to 20 percent. For example, with a 10% response rate to achieve 3,775 responses, mail invitations would need to be mailed out to 37,750 residents.

Mail-out surveys are more resource-intensive than online approaches due to printing, postage, and administrative costs. In a highly mobile city such as Toronto, outdated address data can also reduce efficiency. Longer field periods, often several weeks, further delay data collection and analysis.

Multi-mode Hybrid

A multimode (hybrid) approach combines multiple survey methods to balance cost, representativeness, and data quality. Common configurations include supplementing an online panel with mailout invitations to improve household coverage and reach residents who are less digitally connected.

Mixed-mode designs are widely used by polling firms to address the limitations of any single method and tend to produce more inclusive results in diverse urban populations

such as Toronto. A hybrid approach may include online surveys, mail-out invitations, and targeted in-person outreach for hard-to-reach groups.

While this approach improves coverage and representativeness relative to an online-only panel, it also increases operational complexity and cost. However, it remains more cost-effective and operationally feasible than fully probability-based survey methods, particularly for recurring, citywide research.

Based on the review of the potential sampling frameworks, staff are confident that the current online approach strikes an appropriate balance between data quality and cost, and aligns with the overall objective of gathering broad, city-wide public perceptions across general quality-of-life indicators, while supporting high-level, city-wide analysis of service satisfaction.

Enhancing demographic representation through non-English surveys

To support inclusivity and reduce language barriers, the Listening to Toronto Survey currently includes 125 in-language surveys delivered in five commonly spoken non-English languages in Toronto: Mandarin (Simplified Chinese), Cantonese (Traditional Chinese), Tamil, Punjabi, and Portuguese. The number of in-language surveys reflects available budget rather than a statistically derived target.

Non-English surveys generally require longer field periods and increase costs due to translation, in-language programming, and coding of open-ended responses. In 2025, the Listening to Toronto Survey collected 134 non-English responses (approximately 12 percent of total responses).

According to the 2021 Census, approximately 4.5 percent of Toronto residents reported having no knowledge of either official language. If the Listening to Toronto Survey were expanded to support ward-level analysis with a total sample of 3,775 responses, this would suggest a target of approximately 175 non-English responses city-wide. Compared with the current target of 125 in-language surveys, this could be achieved by modestly increasing responses within the existing languages or by adding a limited number of additional languages.

Any expansion of non-English surveys would result in incremental and material cost increases related to translation, programming, fielding, and coding, and would require confirmation through the survey vendor.

Additional consideration: Public outreach

The Listening to Toronto survey is currently a representative survey administered by a third-party vendor using an online panel. As a result, there is no public promotion or outreach through City or Councillor channels, as only panel members are aware of the survey and eligible to participate.

The current approach also includes 125 in-language surveys conducted online, consisting of 25 respondents each in Cantonese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Punjabi, and Tamil. This reflects a targeted effort to include non-English speakers to the extent possible within the existing budget.

If the survey methodology were to shift in the future to a true random probability-based approach, such as mailout or telephone sampling, the City could notify residents and encourage participation through targeted public outreach. This could help increase response rates and improve data quality. Any public outreach efforts would represent an additional cost, depending on the communication, promotion methods and strategies employed. Public outreach could also be undertaken at no additional material cost by leveraging Councillors' offices and through the City's "Have Your Say" webpage.

A review of comparable municipal survey models

A jurisdictional scan was undertaken to identify comparable municipal survey models used to collect resident feedback. A high-level summary of selected municipalities is provided below. Additional survey details and associated costs where available are included in Appendix 1.

Municipality	Survey Name	Methodology / Mode	Sample Size	Ward-Level Reporting
Calgary	Spring / Fall Survey of Calgarians	Probability-based Random Digit Dialing (landline and mobile), with quotas by ward, age, and gender; weighted to census	~2,500 per wave	Yes (14 wards)
Hamilton	Our City Survey	Telephone; earlier waves probability-based	1,052 in 2022	• 2018 – No • 2019 – Yes • 2022 – Targeted but not achieved (low ward-level sample size)
Halifax Regional Municipality	Resident Survey	Invitation-based mail to randomly selected households; online, phone, or paper response options	~25,000 invitations; ~1,250 undelivered	District-level (16 districts)
Mississauga	Resident Experience Survey	Online panel only; weighted by age, gender, and ward	1,002	Limited (online, non-probability)

- **Calgary** – Reports ward-level results using larger samples, resulting in higher costs and longer field periods compared to the City of Toronto's Listening to Toronto survey.
- **Hamilton** – Achieved ward-level reporting in 2019 at approximately ± 5 percent precision; subsequent reductions in sample size diminished the reliability of ward-level results.
- **Halifax Regional Municipality** – Uses a probability-based approach; however, representation challenges persist for equity-deserving populations due to methodological limitations, despite oversampling efforts.
- **Mississauga** – Shifted away from telephone surveying to online panels, significantly reducing costs; applies weights so results better reflect each ward.

Taken together, these examples indicate that while ward-level survey reporting is feasible, it consistently requires substantially larger samples, longer field periods, and higher costs, and can be difficult to sustain over time, even in jurisdictions that initially pursued it.

Additionally, ward-level data is subject to wider margins of error and greater year-to-year volatility compared with city-wide results.

Conclusion

The Listening to Toronto survey remains a core corporate tool for understanding residents' perceptions of quality of life, satisfaction with City services, and experiences interacting with the City. Staff will continue to administer the Listening to Toronto survey in 2026 within the existing approved budget, maintaining the current survey design to ensure year-over-year comparability and continuity of results. As part of this work, staff will seek to enhance analysis and reporting at the Community Council Area level, to enable more geographically nuanced insights while remaining within the current budget.

In parallel, staff will continue to strengthen collaboration and coordination across City divisions to ensure the survey remains responsive to emerging policy priorities, continuous improvement opportunities, and operational information needs. Enhanced coordination will also support improved use of survey insights alongside other corporate data sources, such as administrative and service delivery data, to provide a more comprehensive picture of resident experience.

Through these next steps, the Listening to Toronto survey will continue to evolve as a flexible, reliable, and cost-effective tool that supports Council and staff in tracking trends, identifying areas for improvement, and making informed decisions that reflect the priorities and experiences of Toronto residents.

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Research on Comparable Municipal Survey Models