



## MEMORANDUM

TO: Whatcom County Council  
FROM: Council Staff  
RE: Advisory Group Survey Analysis  
DATE: September 27, 2024

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### Background

On June 11, 2024, a survey was sent to all Whatcom County advisory group members (those appointed by both the Council and the Executive's Office) to better understand their groups' processes, challenges, and needed supports. This survey was open for 20 days and consisted of 23 multiple choice and short answer questions. When the survey closed on July 1, 114 individuals, representing 37 of the approximately 55 active county advisory groups, had answered at least one question.

This survey gathered information on advisory group members' experiences with application and meeting processes, Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) requirements, and group outcomes, challenges, and opportunities. Please reference the Advisory Group Survey Response Analysis document below for a more comprehensive overview of survey results. Raw survey data is available upon request.

### Summary of Responses

Most respondents heard about the opportunity to join their advisory group through someone they knew (friend, professional connection, employer, etc.), and 81.6% of respondents said their application process was good, with only three people reporting a poor experience. When asked if respondents had suggestions to improve the application process, prominent responses included increasing transparency, setting clear expectations around process and potential role, and advertising openings better. Throughout the survey, many respondents referenced a lack of clarity in their roles and responsibilities, OPMA procedures, how to work within a government setting, and how to acquire background information necessary to inform their work. To address this, several respondents suggested an onboarding program designed to teach skills necessary for a smooth transition into an advisory group member role.

When asked if their advisory group was achieving its purpose, 68.5% of respondents said "Yes," 22.5% said "Unsure," and 9% said "No." Those who said their advisory group was working to achieve its purpose cited thoughtful discussion, clear purpose, and tangible or measurable outcomes. Those who answered "Unsure" or "No" referenced unclear purpose, lack of tangible or measurable outcomes, their input not being requested or executed, and lack of funding and staff support.

In the OPMA part of the survey, 86.6% of respondents reported completing the Open Government Training, and 92% felt fully informed regarding OPMA requirements. Additionally, some commenters offered suggestions for ways the County could better provide support navigating OPMA requirements, including orientation training, question and answer sessions, printed rule cards, FAQs, and someone to call for consultation. Survey respondents were also asked to explain how OPMA affects their work as an advisory group member. This open-ended question received 45 responses that described OPMA's effect in a neutral way, 18 responses that described OPMA positively, and 18 responses that detailed some negative aspects of OPMA. Overall, while many respondents recognize the benefits of transparency and public involvement, several noted that OPMA requirements make it harder for groups to effectively communicate and get work done in a timely manner.

When survey respondents were asked to describe challenges their group faces, many respondents mentioned lack of funding and staff time, minimal County involvement and communication, unclear mission, and difficulty understanding and transitioning into their role. Respondents then identified ways that the County could provide support in addressing these challenges. Common themes included increased funding and staff support, better communication and guidance on the advisory group's mission, proactive recruiting, onboarding programming, and a change to quorum rules.