

CASE STUDIES

Proof in Practice



How a Municipality Revamped Its Reporting for Better Decisions

Turning performance data into meaningful insight.

CONTEXT

Across Canadian municipalities, local governments are expected to deliver more with less, clearer results, transparent reporting, and efficient use of public funds. The City of Calgary, one of Canada's largest urban centers, recognized that its traditional performance reports were no longer enough. Reports tracked hundreds of activities, number of inspections, kilometers of road paved, hours of training delivered, but offered little insight into whether these activities were actually improving quality of life for residents. In 2019, Calgary began re-evaluating how performance information was collected, interpreted, and shared. The goal was to shift from counting effort to measuring impact, helping both council and citizens understand how decisions translated into real outcomes.

THE CHALLENGE

The city's existing system had grown complex over time:

- Fragmented metrics: Each department tracked its own measures with inconsistent definitions.
- Reporting overload: Staff spent significant time preparing static reports few people used.
- Low clarity: Data told what happened, not why or what should happen next.

Leadership realized that information abundance was not the same as insight.

Departments were “reporting to report,” and council lacked clear visibility on results across service areas.

“We had a lot of data, but not a lot of decisions driven by it.”

— Manager, Corporate Performance, City of Calgary

APPROACH

1. Streamlining and Prioritizing Metrics

A city-wide working group reviewed over 600 performance indicators and reduced them to about 120 “metrics that matter.” Each indicator was tested for clarity, relevance, and connection to strategic priorities such as Safe and Inspiring Neighbourhoods and A Well-Run City. Departments were coached to ask: “What decision will this measure inform?”

2. Building a Results-Focused Dashboard

The city created a modern Performance Dashboard integrating open-data platforms and Power BI visualization. Instead of dense reports, leaders could now see live data on service levels, complaints, budget variance, and citizen satisfaction. Public users could explore the dashboard through the Open Calgary portal, increasing transparency and engagement.

3. Connecting Data to Strategy

Calgary introduced a “Service Plan and Budget” process that explicitly linked outcomes, measures, and resources.

Departments used logic models to connect activities to citizen outcomes – helping managers understand the ripple effect of operational decisions.

4. Training and Engagement

Staff were trained in basic data storytelling – how to translate metrics into meaningful messages for council reports.

Workshops emphasized that performance reporting is a conversation tool, not an audit checklist.

RESULTS

After two years of implementation, the shift delivered measurable benefits:

Metric	2019 (Before)	2022 (After)
Number of KPIs in corporate report	600+	~120
Departmental reporting time per quarter	6–8 weeks	2–3 weeks
Citizen satisfaction with information clarity	54 %	72 %
Use of performance data in council discussions	Minimal	Regular agenda item

Decision-making also became faster and more targeted – staff could trace how budget reallocations affected key outcomes, allowing for real-time course corrections during emergencies like the 2020 flood response.

“The focus moved from reporting to learning – that’s when performance became meaningful.”

— Director, City Strategy, City of Calgary



LESSONS LEARNED

1. Less is more.

Fewer, sharper indicators create more clarity and conversation than pages of data.

2. Link measures to purpose.

When people understand how their metric contributes to a larger goal, data becomes motivational.

3. Visual storytelling builds trust.

Dashboards made results visible – to leadership, staff, and the public – reinforcing accountability.

4. Performance culture needs coaching, not compliance.

Managers who used data to guide dialogue saw the greatest engagement gains.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Audit your current metrics – ask what each one changes or explains.
- Reduce duplication by aligning measures across departments.
- Visualize outcomes using open or shared dashboards.
- Train leaders to interpret data as stories, not spreadsheets.
- Publicly share results to build credibility and continuous learning.

REFERENCES

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Share your thoughts, your examples

We are always looking forward to learn as a community.

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