



# Developing a New Strategy for Southlake

## Consultation Summary Report

July 2024



**SOUTHLAKE**  
REGIONAL HEALTH CENTRE



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## Message from Southlake's President & CEO

For 100 years and counting, Southlake has delivered leading edge care to patients across northern York Region and southern Simcoe County. While our dedicated team of professionals have and continue to work miracles everyday, we couldn't have done so without support from the communities we serve. Generous support from donors and partnerships with colleagues throughout Ontario's healthcare system has led to positive patient experiences and a commitment to excellence for everyone that comes through our doors.

Over the past five months, my team and I have worked hard to connect with stakeholders to gather their input on the future of care in our communities. This input is critical as we continue our work to develop a new strategy for Southlake. More than 1,150 individuals from all walks of life have shared their feedback. Our consultation team has connected with patients, caregivers, doctors, nurses, staff, donors, elected officials, partners-in-care, Indigenous communities, and many more. Each interaction has provided valuable insight into experiences at Southlake and across Ontario's healthcare system.

We want to thank everyone for sharing your stories with us.

The following report consolidates all contributions received so far under six key themes based on the collective input of all information received. Not only does this help to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, but it also effectively addresses feedback that we heard numerous times.

It is our hope that you see your input reflected in the report, which we'll validate through an additional community survey soon. After ensuring we're on the right track, Southlake will work to continue refining our future direction by identifying enablers for success.

We look forward to sharing our new strategy with the communities we serve and everyone in the Southlake family later in 2024.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Woods", is written over a light blue circular background.

Paul Woods, MD  
President and CEO



## Executive Overview

In March 2024, Southlake kicked off a multi-month consultation to connect with people across Southlake and the communities we serve to help develop a new strategy. Following a review of the [hospital's accomplishments](#) during the previous five-year strategic plan, it became clear that Ontario's healthcare system is rapidly evolving as new medical advancements come online, government priorities shift, and unforeseen emergencies like a global pandemic come to pass. As a result, Southlake is choosing to develop its new strategy on a 10-year horizon in three-year segments to address long-term challenges while accounting for changes in short-term priorities.

The report that follows is a summary of findings sourced during a robust and multipronged consultation over the past five months. Southlake remains committed to ensuring the new strategy is on the right track by reconnecting with stakeholders through a validation phase to verify findings grouped under the following six themes that align with the most significant challenges that Southlake is facing:

- Population growth and aging
  - The communities served by Southlake are among the fastest growing and aging in the province, generating a marked increase in healthcare utilization locally.
- Minimal provincial capital investment at Southlake
  - Older infrastructure, outdated equipment and deferred maintenance is negatively impacting operations, as well as the staff and patient experience.
- Community care challenges
  - Limited access to primary care, long-term care and other services like rehabilitation, results in many patients being forced to wait in hospital for space to become available in the community.
- Health workforce challenges
  - Industry-wide labour market challenges are growing, creating short- and long-term obstacles for hospitals across the country.
- Importance of continued investment in technology
  - Southlake should adopt new technologies where possible to improve patient and staff experiences.
- Health system integration challenges
  - Healthcare services in Ontario remain largely planned and delivered in siloes, which leads to access concerns, sub-optimal patient and provider experiences, as well as inefficiency.

Faced with diversifying care needs, a catchment area that spans a large geography, and limited resources provisioned in an increasingly restrictive environment, Southlake must be creative in developing solutions that extend beyond the hospital's walls to address patients' immediate and long-term care needs. Healthcare can no longer be delivered by organizations working in isolation. Instead, a more collaborative approach that leverages the collective expertise of the entire healthcare system and distributes services more conveniently is desired. This approach presents an opportunity for Southlake to work with our partners to strengthen care delivery, closer to home.



## Consultation Approach

Since March 2024, Southlake has worked hard to engage all audiences through a diversified internal and external consultation strategy. More than 1,200 engagements have taken place through three primary methodologies:

### Direct Engagement

As part of a phased approach, Southlake began its strategy consultation with an invitation to all members of the hospital family to share their input through large posters distributed throughout the organization. Staff, medical staff, volunteers and learners had an opportunity to provide feedback unprompted at their convenience. Nearly 600 comments were provided, which helped to inform future lines of inquiry. This input was explored further through dedicated committee meetings, councils, and program touchpoints to ensure the final strategy would incorporate feedback from everyone directly involved in Southlake's success.

### Discussion Forums

From April to June, Southlake hosted 10 open forums for stakeholders and members of the public to attend. A community engagement session was hosted in each municipality primarily served by Southlake. Participants had an opportunity to speak with members of the Executive Leadership Team about their views, learn more about the challenges facing Ontario's healthcare system, and offer feedback on how Southlake should best respond to the challenges that lie ahead. These sessions featured mayors and members of local councils, to whom Southlake wishes to extend thanks and gratitude for their support.

### Assessment Surveys

In addition to open discussion, Southlake also undertook a combined qualitative and quantitative approach that included multiple hospital-wide surveys. More than 200 responses were received, each of which was considered by the consultation team and incorporated into work that helped craft the broader themes of the upcoming strategy. A future survey will be issued publicly to validate the direction of our strategy as it is finalized.

## Consultation Findings

### Population growth and aging

The communities served by Southlake are among the fastest growing and aging in Ontario. In 2022, Statistics Canada named East Gwillimbury the fastest growing municipality in Canada after experiencing a 44 per cent increase in population growth in the previous five years. Bradford West Gwillimbury was also included among the top 25 municipalities with a 21 per cent increase in population growth. Collectively, the communities served by Southlake are growing at twice the average provincial growth rate. Ballooning populations are putting strain on local public services, including those provided at Southlake.

The impact of this growth was explicitly noted throughout the internal and external consultations. Respondents remarked regularly that increasing patient volumes without an expansion in space contributes to longer wait times and hallway healthcare. Care is centralized in the most populated areas, but significant growth is occurring on the periphery of our catchment area. We heard that a more distributed approach to care delivery should be explored to better serve Southlake's large geographic catchment area and, in doing so, help preserve acute capacity for those who need hospital services most. Moreover, as models for care delivery are reviewed, an opportunity exists to pivot toward population health management by focusing on care integration and coordination, patient engagement, analytics and value-based care approaches. We also heard about the importance of including wellness and other social determinants of health in partnership with other stakeholders.

As the local population continues to grow and age, it's becoming more diverse reflecting various multicultural backgrounds. This requires Southlake to take a more inclusive approach to care. Focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion is important. More must also be done to create the most welcoming environment, including staff education, training, consideration of holistic medicines, and ensuring the workforce reflects the community it serves.

Existing residents must not be forgotten as the population grows, particularly as many of these people are increasingly choose to age in place. Respondents noted that Southlake should continue to invest in its geriatric program to support increasing demand as generations retire from the workforce and require greater support from Ontario's public healthcare system. The hospital's homecare program - Southlake@Home - also received strong support through the consultation, with recommendations to scale the program further to help prevent readmissions to the hospital and, eventually, admission in the first place.



## Minimal provincial capital investment at Southlake

Without a significant acute care capacity expansion in more than 20 years, Southlake is rapidly becoming one of the oldest and most overcrowded hospitals in the province. This was raised regularly during consultations. Aging physical infrastructure, deferred maintenance, and a limited ability to invest in technology undermine confidence in patients and staff. Moreover, it's impeding clinical operations and efficiency as resources regularly need to be redeployed to remedy telephony failures, digital infrastructure downtimes, internal flooding and more. Despite industry-leading emergency planning, these compounding factors impact the organization's reputation, which threatens talent recruitment and retention, community investment, and more.

New facilities and expanded capacity is needed now. Consultations noted that Southlake has maximized the use of its existing space for patient care. Space used as waiting rooms 10 years ago has been converted into patient rooms and other unconventional beds are used regularly throughout the building. While a new hospital is at least a decade away, it was recommended that other smaller sites be developed, to help bring care closer to home and preserve acute care space for the sickest patients. People also spoke about the need for improved wayfinding to support patients and visitors.

Respondents were also asked through consultations to provide input on our plan to build a new Southlake. It was made clear that new facilities closer to home are preferred and also that Southlake's current Davis Drive site should continue to play an important role in care delivery into the future. It was noted that available land for development is scarce and considering further growth areas made most sense.

Participants were pleased to hear work was underway to expand the Emergency Department at the Davis Drive site as it was consistently described as significantly too small and cramped for the volume of patients and visitors served on a daily basis. It was noted that a new hospital should be purpose-built to serve existing and future populations based on growth and healthcare needs modeling for the catchment area. As such, facilities should be built in central locations where populations are located, be accessible by transit with multiple access points for those travelling by car, and close to greenspace or walking trails to provide activities for patients and staff to enjoy.

When designing new facilities, respondents resoundingly agreed that buildings should be constructed for functional purposes and less for their visual appeal. It was preferred that investments prioritize current and future patient care, including shell spaces that could be built out for future collaborations, academic partnership and innovation hubs, or other community benefits such as a civic centre. Where possible, respondents would also like the hospital to consider sourcing local materials and working with local vendors to maximize investments within the catchment area.



## Community care challenges

Delivering the right care, in the right place, at the right time is critical for Ontario's healthcare system to function properly. Each component offers specialized services tailored to optimize patient care and their experience. An acute care hospital like Southlake can provide specialized treatment for disease or severe episodes of illness to most patients for a short period of time, whereas other residential care facilities are better equipped to treat patients for an extended period. Ensuring patients are cared for in the right setting is vital to maintaining capacity so new patients can flow in and out of the hospital smoothly.

Compared to provincial averages, Southlake's catchment area is grossly under-resourced with community care capacity. There is limited access to long-term care beds, roughly 50 beds per 1,000 seniors compared to an 85 bed provincial average. Regionally, the total 2,500 bed deficit across all sectors is expected to grow to 15,000 beds by 2041 based on population growth models, with a disproportionate deficit concentrated in northern York Region. Without capacity in the community, Southlake is unable to transition patients to more appropriate care settings based on their needs, exacerbating hallway healthcare at the Davis Drive site.

Respondents acknowledged throughout the consultation period that a strong healthcare system supports a strong Southlake. A preference to receive care close to home was present during all consultation forums, including through other community healthcare facilities. Patients and family members acknowledged the need to increase capacity through mental health, addiction, long-term care, retirement, and physical therapy and rehabilitation services. However, appropriate supports are also required, including patient transportation services, and stronger relations among care providers to ensure smooth transition and appropriate patient hand-offs.

Increasing available out-patient services in the community was also deemed necessary. Respondents wish to see more alternatives to Southlake's Emergency Department, including urgent care centres, and virtual and mobile care options. It was felt that healthcare was too centralized in urban settings, notably in Newmarket and Aurora. Other communities served by Southlake wished to see capacity distributed throughout the catchment area to bring about more equitable access to care, particularly in Georgina where community members, including those living on Georgina Island, noted great challenges due to their geographic limitations.

Finally, respondents acknowledged that decreasing healthcare needs through preventative care and early interventions would always be preferred. Attracting more family physicians to serve patients throughout the catchment area should continue through Southlake's Family Medicine Teaching Unit. It was felt that early interventions and community education in partnership with primary care providers in the community would help divert or prevent unnecessary visits to Southlake's Emergency Department entirely.



## Health workforce challenges

Healthcare is fundamentally about people helping people. For Southlake to grow its success to better serve the community, feedback focused on improving staff satisfaction to better the patient experience.

Inside and outside of the organization, respondents recognized that Southlake's staff and medical staff are very busy. Every day, they do their absolute best to serve as many patients as possible with limited resources, which often leads to staff burnout and exhaustion. It was felt that over-worked and stretched staff resources can erode the patient experience, notably during patient handoffs between providers and during discharge planning process.

Building Southlake to be an employer of choice was felt to be critically important to attract and retain talent, helping to overcome some of the health human resource challenges faced across Ontario's healthcare system. Doing so would help fill vacant positions and support a long-term pipeline of talent as longer serving employees approach retirement. Moreover, a high-calibre and top performing organization would attract specialized talent and innovations in the medical field to better serve patients.

Southlake should continue to invest in its workforce to avoid getting trapped in a downward spiral of dissatisfaction among staff and patients. Additional investments in formal and informal staff supports could improve experiences for everyone involved. Advanced research and continued education for staff and physicians could also lead to improvements. Moreover, interpersonal training programs could further cultivate an environment where the best experiences happen by increasing cultural awareness for staff and patients, including through enhanced diversity, equity, and inclusion programming. Evidence informed decision-making should continue to guide investments in staff supports, including compensation and benefits.

Finally, Southlake shouldn't shy away from bold thinking to overcome its human resource challenges. Patient and caregiver respondents were open to receiving training on how best to help their loved ones through their healthcare journey in order to alleviate burden on hospital staff. It was acknowledged that their roles already involve patient advocacy, which would make supporting healthcare delivery a natural progression. Staff also expressed an openness to review how they work, including diversified lengths in shifts, hybrid work options, expanded scope of practice and increasing technologies to improve efficiency.

## Importance of continued investment in technology

Respondents were surprised to hear that Southlake has limited revenue streams. While government funding is intended to cover operating costs, hospitals are required to fundraise or integrate alternate revenue streams such as parking fees to cover other costs like equipment and capital expansions. These limitations restrict local healthcare systems ability to integrate new services and make other ancillary investments to improve the patient and staff experience.

Despite these challenges, consultation respondents want Southlake to strive for more by setting aspirational goals to meet the communities' needs. Limited local diagnostic services were identified as a gap in care by patients, as well as dialysis services for those living with kidney disease. Southlake should invest in greater analytics to strengthen digital capabilities and support greater data informed decision making, which will become more important as artificial intelligence, wearable technology and remote monitoring continues to develop.

Access to new and expanded technologies, as well as top-of-the-line equipment, were identified as a priority for staff and patient respondents. These assets were viewed as a strong contributor to the patient experience and level of care Southlake can provide. They also would make a significant impact in staff's efficiency and capacity to serve more patients, particularly if the assets would improve patient flow throughout the building to prevent extended waits for patients in the Emergency Department.

While modern medical equipment was seen as important, supplementary services and technologies would also be appreciated. Greater translation services, retail and patient food services, as well as choice in accommodation such as private rooms would improve the Southlake experience. Additional patient room improvements such as more dedicated lock boxes could also be deployed.





## Health system integration challenges

In the past six years, the provincial government has collapsed Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) into a single entity (Ontario Health) and created new Ontario Health Teams (OHTs) to help coordinate and integrate care locally. The Northern York South Simcoe OHT (NYSS OHT) is a group of healthcare providers who work together to deliver connected care to the communities they serve. Southlake is proud to have contributed to the NYSS OHT's most recent achievements. We recognize, and have heard from the communities we serve, that more is required to fully realize the benefits of integrated care. Southlake looks forward to continued collaboration and partnership with the OHT.

Consultation respondents were clear that they wanted to see greater integration across Ontario's healthcare system. Current and former patients noted that they are regularly asked to repeat themselves when interacting with care providers throughout the system. While they acknowledge that regular questioning is used by medical professionals to verify treatment plans, it is seen as contributing to delays when patients' medical history should be available at the providers' fingertips. Moreover, when gaps do arise, patients are finding that they're often forced to undergo repetitive testing and diagnostics contributing to waste and inefficiency. Integrating digital health systems could address these issues, while empowering patients with their own health information to better advocate for their needs.

Beyond digital integration, respondents also felt leveraging the expertise of others across Ontario's healthcare system could also benefit Southlake's patients by improving community awareness of services, including how to access care. Joint education forums among partners to larger patient populations were seen as an excellent opportunity to educate patients and families on resources available within their communities, which could support greater population health through earlier intervention.

While patients should continue to be the primary audience, respondents were also open to expanding awareness and promotion activities for collective benefit. Many noted how existing audiences would be happy to learn more about a variety of healthcare topics and that Southlake should elevate its level of communications, particularly as local media presence continues to deteriorate. Community organizations, including religious congregations, sports clubs, educational institutions and more, should be approached to help increase awareness. These groups could also help identify local champions and social media influencers to spread the word about Southlake's contributions to the community and support others navigating the healthcare system. It was felt that increasing awareness was supportive of patients, but could also strengthen accountability structures among patients, providers, and throughout the system.



## Conclusion and Next Steps

Clear opportunities exist for Southlake to grow as an organization and continue to deliver on its commitment to leading edge care. As Ontario's healthcare environment evolves, the consultation highlighted an openness and willingness internally and externally for Southlake to evolve with it. Patients and families are looking to be empowered and instilled with confidence that the hospital is working in a coordinated manner, optimizing resources to best meet their needs. This is also important to external audiences, including donors and other partners-in-care, to ensure their investments and efforts supporting the community's health and wellness make an impact.

Internally speaking, staff, medical staff, learners, patient & family advisors, and volunteers are feeling the weight of increasing patient volumes with limited investment to expand the hospital's capacity. Recognizing that we cannot wait for others to solve these problems, the hospital family is ready to embrace a new vision that puts Southlake on a sustainable path forward.

Based on all input received, four areas of focus are emerging to help guide Southlake's future:

- Clinical Excellence
- Quality and Safety
- Experience
- New Models of Care






In August, Southlake will host a virtual community town hall to share an update on our strategy development work to help validate these initial findings. This will also be an opportunity for people that were unable to participate in earlier consultations to provide input. The areas of focus will be further refined and we will also identify key enablers that will help us make progress in these areas. Southlake will continue developing the strategy into the fall and looks forward to release it once it is finalized later in 2024.

Together, we will chart a course for the next 100 years of care in the community.

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