



What We Heard



Provincial Consultations:
A Review of NLHC Programs and Services



March 2017

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Introduction

In November 2016, the Provincial Government released “The Way Forward” — a vision for sustainability and growth in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Vision will guide Government’s actions to achieve greater efficiency, strengthen the province’s economic foundation, enhance services, and improve outcomes to promote a healthy and prosperous province.

One of the over 50 initiatives in “The Way Forward” was a commitment to conduct a review of the programs and services of the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation (NLHC) in consultation with clients, community stakeholders and employees with an aim to:

- ensure the mandate of the organization reflects current priorities;
- optimize the use of federal and provincial funding in the delivery of programs and services;
- identify the means to reduce complexity and duplication within the system; and
- realize efficiencies, improve services and streamline the organization with no negative impact on clients.

NLHC was mandated to provide recommendations to Government by March 31, 2017 and to develop an action plan to address priority areas by June 30, 2017. A review of programs and services, as well as these consultations, will also inform the development of our Provincial Housing Plan which will be a focus in 2017.

Engagement Process

NLHC conducted a series of consultations to review its programs and services between November 2016 and March 2017. Clients, community stakeholders and employees were consulted through a variety of means including roundtable sessions, teleconferences, on-line surveys, email, written submission and suggestion boxes.

Specific opportunities for stakeholders to contribute directly to the consultation included the following:

- **Tenant Survey:** Newfoundland Labrador Housing Corporation (NLHC) launched a survey of social housing tenants in February 2017. The survey included questions on current NLHC programs and services and how they are meeting the needs of tenants. By February 28, 2017, 481 responses had been received. For a complete list of questions, please see Annex A.

- **Stakeholder Roundtables:** During January – February 2017, NLHC held five in-person external community partner engagement sessions in St. John’s, Gander, Corner Brook, Happy Valley-Goose Bay and Labrador City. In addition three teleconferences were held in Clarenville, Harbour Breton and Marystown and a number of one-on-one conversations with stakeholders, as requested. These sessions provided community partners including non-profit organizations, municipalities, volunteer groups, the private housing sector and the faith community, the opportunity to have their ideas heard and to help shape NLHC programs and services to better serve our clients.

Approximately 115 people from various community partner groups attended the engagement sessions. For the list of Community Partner Engagement questions, please see Annex B.

- **Employee Engagement:** NLHC employees were consulted with in late 2016 in an effort to review NLHC programs and services. These engagement sessions were attended by approximately 175 employees and were moderated in all seven regions, either in person or via teleconference. Questions used in this consultation can be found in Annex C.

Sessions were organized and facilitated by departmental staff, with assistance from the Communications and Public Engagement Office of the Executive Council. The following “What We Heard” document is meant to provide a summary of the themes which emerged from these sessions. For the purposes of this document, the themes will be reviewed generally rather than broken down by question.

What We Heard

Though the stakeholders consulted in this process were varied and selected from many different organizations, several key themes emerged across all sessions. While each individual contributor brought their own perspective to the table, their views can be broadly categorized under the following themes:

Helping Those with the Greatest Challenges. A clear priority for all participants was placing a focus on the most challenging forms of housing need. This includes responding to the needs of the homeless; providing housing to households in poverty, seniors and persons with disabilities; and supporting victims of family violence and other emergency shelter needs.

Providing Supports to Clients Who Require Them. Stakeholders feel that a fundamental component of Government's approach to housing and homelessness must be the inclusion of supports for those who require them. Support for those facing mental health challenges was a particular concern.

Sustaining and Enhancing the Social and Affordable Housing Stock. Interest in the "bricks and mortar" elements of housing was also strongly expressed. Areas of concern for participants include the long-term sustainability of social housing; the need for more affordable housing construction; enhanced support for low-income homeowners to complete energy retrofits and other renovations to their homes; and accessibility.

Strengthening Programs and Services. Participants provided feedback on a myriad of NLHC programs and services and offered many constructive comments that could lead to improvements.

Improving Communication and Awareness. Ensuring that residents of the province are aware of the programs and services that are available to them to improve their housing situation is key. More direct communication with tenants and applicants is viewed as an important means by which to avoid evictions or social problems and to ensure that waitlists are managed in a manner that is easily understandable and manageable for staff and applicants alike.

Fostering a Collaborative Approach to Housing. The theme of partnerships emerged strongly in discussions about how to better serve clients. Cross-government and cross-departmental collaboration, enhanced support for and engagement with non-profit organizations, a better relationship with municipalities, and more work with the private sector to foster affordable housing construction were among key viewpoints.

Key Themes

Helping Those with the Greatest Challenges

Participants in all sessions frequently advocated for those who are facing the most extreme housing needs. Some of the segments of the population whose housing needs were specifically and frequently mentioned include:

- Those facing chronic or episodic homelessness continue to face the most extreme levels of housing need. Participants reflected on the need for more transitional shelter and emergency housing options. There appears to be widespread support among external stakeholders for the concept of Housing First, though within the employee engagement there were some concerns about how “Housing First” impacts lease management, particularly surrounding the issue of evictions. While many suggestions were made for the expansion of emergency housing options, still others were made for a more proactive approach to housing with a goal of decreasing the need for emergency housing.
- Youth moving out on their own face unique challenges, often without resources or the life skills needed to succeed,
- Clients with complex needs, clients with mental health concerns or illness, and people being released from correctional facilities.
- A more focused support for seniors was noted including specialized eviction prevention, help for them to stay in their homes, be it financial or otherwise, more housing options and shelters which are senior focused or friendly. Given Newfoundland and Labrador’s aging population, this was noted as particularly important.
- Persons with disabilities have specific and unique requirements for their housing. They are less likely to find suitable accommodations within the private market and rely on supports from government to make dwellings accessible.
- Education for landlords in the private rental market, particularly around mental health and addictions, was suggested.

Quotes from Participants

- “We need to be careful we do not push out people who need our help.”
- “Seniors need to be our primary focus”
- “Youth homelessness is a growing issue. Our Housing First approach should really focus on getting youth off the streets and into a secure home—they cannot succeed without it”
- “More shelters and emergency housing options are needed in Rural Newfoundland and Labrador”
- “I am finding it harder every day to live in my apartment because I need a wheelchair. You need to give more help to people like me”

Providing Supports to Clients

Concerns were voiced around the need for support for specific client groups. Within the tenant survey in particular, tenants offered up a number of possible supports that could make improvements in their lives, including social supports (financial, health, lifestyle); better mental health supports by frontline staff, and other supports for household tasks including cleaning, minor maintenance, snow clearing and other exterior maintenance.

The need for more transitional/shelter/emergency housing options was expressed by stakeholders. Particularly for specific groups and in rural areas where there are currently no such options. Warming shelters, mobile shelter units, overnight supports, and safe houses for people leaving the sex work industry were all suggestions brought forward.

Wraparound services were noted as being important in providing the right amount of support to clients. It was suggested that an eviction prevention policy would be a positive step in helping vulnerable clients remain housed with NLHC and within the private market. Possible ways to keep people in their own homes was also noted, and it was suggested expanding some current NLHC program criteria may help to do this.

Quotes from Participants

- “You should have more programs to help people with mental health challenges”
- “There are many residents who could benefit from different forms of shelter, like warming centres, mobile units, or safe houses for those leaving the sex trade”
- “NLHC should avoid making people homeless. An eviction prevention policy is important if we are adopting a Housing First approach”

Strengthening Programs and Services

Tenants were asked questions to determine their overall satisfaction with the programs and services offered by Newfoundland Labrador Housing Corporation. 69% of respondents gave NLHC a satisfaction rating of 7 or higher (27% gave NLHC a 10). 8.5% of respondents gave NLHC a rating of 3 or lower.

Throughout the consultations, the Rent Supplement Program was the most frequently referenced program needing adjustments. Suggestions were made that the administration and billing process for this program is too complicated. Comments were made about a desire for the rent supplements to be flexible and for them to be portable— attached to the client— rather than to a rental unit.

The Educational Incentive Program was also raised during several sessions. Participants suggested a review of the program to assess how children should qualify and whether it is ultimately effective in the goal of increasing the number of children within social housing who remain in school.

In regards to the Rental Housing Program, stakeholders also voiced the need for a review of the current income threshold for rental housing as well as other programs. The income cap for NLHC programs is currently \$32,500 for most of the Province, and many stakeholders expressed that this amount does not reflect the ability of a household to meet their housing needs independently.

Waitlist management is another concern of many stakeholders. Tenants in particular have a lack of understanding about the waitlist and selection process of clients. Stakeholders commented on the current policy that applicants must reapply after 12 months and suggested that this should be changed. There are concerns that the most vulnerable applicants are being lost in this process.

Quotes from Participants

- “NLHC should consider alternative living arrangements, such as shared accommodations, which would open up options for housing providers and clients”
- “The Rent Supplement Program needs to be more flexible and let us pick our own units”
- “Home repair programs should be open to more residents. Maybe one program instead of multiple, with higher income thresholds”
- “Down Payment Assistance should be expanded. Use it to move higher-income people off social housing and into their own home”
- “Education Incentive should reward achievement not attendance”

Sustaining and Enhancing the Housing Stock

Beyond the discussion of how the needs of tenants and applicants are best served, there was also significant discussion through the engagement process on the condition of the current housing stock and the need to sustain and enhance the province's available social and affordable housing. Emerging discussion points within this theme include:

- The need for better/faster maintenance of social housing units. Participants are particularly concerned that the condition of units leads to health and safety within the unit and in the surrounding neighbourhoods.
- Major repair requirements (roofs, windows, plumbing, etc.). Participants highlighted the need for major repairs in many housing units.
- Unit configuration. Past efforts by NLHC to reconfigure vacant units to better reflect the needs of those on the waitlist was identified as something that should be expended;
- Accessibility challenges. While there is recognition that the universal design employed in affordable housing construction is a positive step by NLHC, there remains concern about the accessibility of existing social housing and private-sector units used for Rent Supplement.

Stakeholders expressed that the private housing stock needs to be give more attention. Ways suggested to do this include:

- Supporting landlords who rent affordable units with funding for maintenance and to expand the Provincial Home Repair Program eligibility to include the private affordable rental market.
- Regulation regarding the quality of rental housing was put forward as an important advancement for tenant safety and well-being. The importance of accessibility and safety in affordable housing was noted as an important consideration.

Quotes from Participants

- "Find ways to encourage tenants to properly care for their units"
- "Need to deal with the size of units" comments either indicated that there is either too little space for large families or too much space for singles/ couples in larger homes.
- "Persons with disabilities have limited options in not only social housing but in the private housing market—need to find incentives to drive Universal Design as a standard practice."

Improving Communications and Awareness

Communication was discussed in several contexts including:

- Public awareness of NLHC programs and services. NLHC should be focused on ensuring that every resident who could benefit from their programs and services is aware of them. Such communication should be clear and unthreatening, taking the client into consideration.
- Employee-tenant engagement. a positive move would be for NLHC employees to become more engaged with clients, enabling information regarding programs and services from NLHC and concerns and issues from the clients to be exchanged more naturally.
- Stakeholders noted that it would be helpful for applications to be made available online as well as in multiple languages.
- It was suggested that applications should not expire after 12 months and that there should be other options for proof of income besides the Option C document currently required as part of the application process.
- Professional development for staff around mental health, addictions, sensitivity, and cultural differences was suggested as being essential. While staff is seen as being aware of the changes happening in the communities as they relate to tenants, it is also important that they have the proper training to deal with concerns in the most effective manner.
- Tenants were asked a series of questions on current programs and services offered by NLHC, which included noting which NLHC programs or services they availed of, were aware of or felt was working well. Responses to this question were open-ended. The most common response by tenants was that they were not familiar with any of the programs and services offered by NLHC.

Quotes from Participants

- “Tenants should always know the status of their applications. Not fair to remove them from waitlist without warning”
- “Most of my interactions with staff have been positive, but sometimes they could be more sensitive to my situation”
- “I’m not aware of the programs and services offered by NLHC”

Fostering Partnerships and Collaboration

There is widespread agreement about the importance of partnerships in dealing with housing issues. Collaboration with municipalities, non-profit organizations, the private sector and the faith community were all highlighted as important elements to Government's approach on housing.

Stakeholders expressed the need for more collaboration between government entities on similar work rather than duplicating programs and services being offered by different agencies. The need for more information sharing between departments was also voiced. Privacy legislation, to stakeholders, appears to slow down processes, with the applicant being the one to often suffer the negative consequences.

Quotes from Participants

- "Wraparound services are important in providing supports. Information sharing between entities is critical to achieve this"
- "Too many of the external partners have too little accountability"
- "There are no community centres or supports where I live. Housing should work with our local community to improve the lives of our residents"

Summary and Next Steps

NLHC's corporate vision is that Newfoundlanders and Labradorians with the greatest need have access to secure and affordable housing. The input and ideas received from these provincial consultations will inform the review of programs and services and ultimately help ensure we are efficiently and effectively serving our clients and are focused on the right priorities. This review will also help shape the development of a new Provincial Housing Plan which will be a key focus in 2017.

An action plan to address priority areas will be developed by the end of June 2017. Continuing to improve our programs and services is important to us all and will strengthen the future success of our organization.

Annex A

Tenant Engagement Discussion Questions:

- Q. Are you a tenant of Newfoundland Labrador Housing?
- Q. What is your age?
- Q. How many people live in your home?
- Q. How long have you been a NL Housing tenant?
- Q. Which Regional Office of NL Housing serves you as a tenant?
- Q. What type of home do you live in?
- Q. How many bedrooms are in your home?
- Q. Is the home that you are living in meeting your current needs? If you answered no, why do you feel your home is not meeting your current needs?
- Q. Is there a community centre or tenant association in your neighbourhood?
- Q. If you have a community centre, do you participate in any of the following activities?
Please check all that apply:
- Q. Are there other programs or services that you would like to see offered through your community centre?
- Q. Overall, how satisfied are you generally with the service provided by NL Housing (1 being very dissatisfied, and 10 being very satisfied)?
- Q. Of the programs or services offered by NL Housing that you avail of or are aware of; what is working well?
- Q. What changes would you recommend to improve NL Housing's programs and services?
- Q. Are there any gaps in supports, services or programs that you would like to avail of that would help you live independently?
- Q. If you answered yes, please tell us what supports, services or programs you would like to avail of that would help you live independently?
- Q. We would welcome any further comments that you may have.

Annex B

Community Partner Engagement Discussion Questions:

- Q. What is working well with the existing program[s] in meeting the need[s] of clients?
- Q. Are there opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing program[s] to better serve our clients and/or community partners? [Consider various factors that could include but are not limited to: access to the program, how the program is delivered, policies within the program, duplication with other providers, use of technology, opportunities to streamline the program, opportunities for partnering in program delivery, etc].
- Q. Are there any needs of clients and/or community partners that are not currently being met by the programs delivered by NLHC?
- Q. What strategic priorities do you think NLHC should focus on for the next three years?
- Q. Do you have any additional ideas or comments regarding NLHC programs that have not been addressed by the above questions?

Annex C

Employee Discussion Questions:

- Q. How might NLHC improve its programs and services, including how they are delivered?
- Q. How might we serve the people that our current programs should help but for one reason or another do not (i.e. those falling through the cracks)?
- Q. Are there any duplicate or competing services offered by NLHC that are also offered by other government departments or external groups? If so, how should this be addressed?
- Q. How can we encourage tenants to move out of NLHC units when their circumstances change and they no longer need social housing?
- Q. Are there any organizational or operational improvements we could make to help us deliver our programs/services more effectively?
- Q. What do you believe are the key priorities for NLHC for the next 3 years?
- Q. Do you have any additional ideas or comments that you would like to add to today's discussion?
- Q. We would welcome any further comments that you may have.

Annex D

Below is a list of external stakeholders that participated in the various consultation sessions offered by NLHC. These participants represent the community partners and organizations that attended the five in-person external engagement sessions held throughout the Province.

Academy Canada
Addictions & Mental Health- Labrador Grenfell Health
Advanced Education, Skills and Labour
AIDS Committee of NL (Tommy Sexton Centre)
Assertive Community Treatment Team (ACTT)
Association for New Canadians
Canadian Mental Health Association
Cara House
Central Housing and Homelessness Network
Children, Seniors and Social Development
Children, Seniors and Social Development – Disability Policy Office
City of Corner Brook
City of Mount Pearl
City of St. John's
Choices for Youth
CMHI – TRW
Coalition for Persons with Disabilities
Community Education Network
Community Mental Health Initiative
Community Mental Health Association (Grand Falls-Windsor)
Community Youth Network
Consumers Health Awareness Network Newfoundland and Labrador
Co-op Housing Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (CHANAL)
Corner Brook Community Coalition for Housing (Community Advisory Board)
Corner Brook Transition House
Corrections Services Canada
Department of Health and Community Services – Government of NL
Eastern Health
Empower
End Homelessness St. John's (Community Advisory Board)
Evangel Church, Gander
Excite Corporation (Grand Falls-Windsor)

Exploits Community Centre - GFW (NLHC)
Exploits Valley Community Coalition
Family Resource Centre (Exploits)
Gander- New Wes-Valley (Community Advisory Board)
Gathering Place
Government Renewal Secretariat Executive Council
Hope Haven
Iris Kirby House
Innu First Nation
Iron Ore Company of Canada
Justice and Public Safety
Labrador Friendship Centre
Labrador Grenfell Health
Labrador West Chamber of Commerce
Labrador West Housing and Homelessness Coalition (Community Advisory Board)
Labrador West Status of Women
Labrador West Women's Centre
Melville Native Housing
Mokami Women's Centre
Mushuau Innu First Nation
Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network
Newfoundland Native Women's Association
NL Association of Community Living
Nunatsiavut Government
Nunatsiavut-Supportive Living
Nunatukavut
Pleasant Manor
Private sector Affordable Hsg proponent
Provincial Advisory Council of Status of Women
Salvation Army - Wiseman Centre
Salvation Army - New Hope Centre
Salvation Army (Gander and Grand Falls-Windsor)
Southwestern Housing Stability Initiative (Community Advisory Board)
Status of Women Council (Bay St. George)

Status of Women Council (Central)
Status of Women Council (Corner Brook)
Status of Women Council (Gateway)
Status of Women's Council (Gander)
St. John's Housing and Homelessness Network
St. John's Status of Women's Council – The Women's Centre Marguerites Place
Stella's Circle
Thrive
Town of Gander
Town of Grand Falls-Windsor
Town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay
Town of Labrador City
Town of Wabush
Transition House Association NL
Violence Prevention South and Central
West Coast Correctional Center
Western Health, Mental Health and Addictions
Western Health, Primary Health Care, Stephenville
Western Health, Wellness Facilitator Stephenville Crossing
Western Regional Coalition to End Violence
YMCA, Corner Brook and Stephenville