

National Housing Strategy

A case study on Government of Canada Public Engagement

Overview:

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), which is a small government organization, was tasked with a significant project—to launch a national engagement and work in partnership with all levels of government on developing a National Housing Strategy. The key to the success of the engagement was creating strong, collaborative relationships. The team built relationships with housing advocacy groups, non-profit organizations and Indigenous groups. They worked together to engage with the constituents of these organizations and seek their views. Once the engagement was complete, the team took steps to maintain the relationships they had established through consultation.

1 History

1.1 Introduction

In 2016, CMHC launched the national consultation “Let’s Talk Housing!” to inform the development of a National Housing Strategy. As Canada was the only G8 country without a national housing strategy, this was considered a key federal priority.¹ The consultation took a human-rights based approach to housing, focusing on social inclusivity. It addressed the core needs of the most disadvantaged populations and communities, such as immigrants and people living in shelters. The relationship between social issues, such as homelessness and mental health, and housing was central to developing the engagement strategy. This was the largest consultation ever undertaken by CMHC.

The consultation occurred between June 1, 2016, and October 1, 2016.

1.2 Why Engage?

The goal of the consultation was to seek a broad and diverse range of perspectives to support the development of a comprehensive housing strategy. It sought out external input to identify and confirm where policy gaps and challenges exist.

2 People and Context

2.1 Who was included

¹ The Mandate Letter to the Minister of Children, Families and Social Development and Budget 2016 committed to developing a national housing strategy.

Due to the nature of the subject matter, the National Housing Strategy implicated numerous federal departments, including: Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)², Status of Women Canada (SWC), Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), Infrastructure Canada, and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). The engagement therefore became a cross-government initiative. Among CMHC's other key partners were the provinces and territories. Together, these federal departments and provincial and territorial governments co-developed the strategy. This approach was necessary as housing comes under provincial/territorial jurisdiction.

The engagement process used a variety of online and in-person options to seek public input. Additionally, CMHC sought input from the housing sector and Indigenous advocacy groups. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) were key stakeholders. CMHC formed a strong relationship with CAP. Together, they built a collaborative agreement to have the Congress engage with its constituents on the National Housing Strategy.

2.2 Funding

CMHC financed the 'Let's Talk Housing' consultation. The consultation informed the development of the National Housing Strategy, which allocated 11.2 billion dollars to housing initiatives in Budget 2017. This included a portion to be used for Indigenous housing concerns. Since Budget 2018 was announced, 40 billion dollars is allocated to the Strategy³

2.3 Context

In addition to the development of the National Housing Strategy, the federal government was concurrently negotiating standing multi-lateral agreements with the provinces and territories. These agreements are funding mechanisms that transfer federal funds to the provinces and territories to address core-housing needs.

3 Goals and Objectives (Policy)

The objective was to develop a National Housing Strategy in partnership with provinces, territories, and Indigenous governments, which would operate alongside existing regional

² On August 28, 2017, the Government of Canada dissolved the federal department known as Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), and established two new departments: Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) and Indigenous Services Canada (ISC). The 'Let's Talk Housing' consultation was undertaken under the former INAC structure; the commitments and initiatives will continue in partnership with the new departments.

³ Learn more at: <https://www.placetocallhome.ca/>

housing strategies to fill gaps and ensure that all Canadians have access to affordable housing and related services.

4 Methods and Tools

Methods:	Tools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Roundtables. 22 roundtables were held with 344 total participants.- Focus groups. Focus groups were conducted to gain further insights. A priority was placed on ensuring that the focus group events were regionally diverse.- Surveys. More than 6,300 surveys were completed.- Online questionnaires.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Idea box. This online tool was open to the public and allowed people to respond to set questions by theme.

Roundtables were the primary means of in-person engagement. The roundtables were conference style, with plenary sessions included. Each session had a lead who provided an overview of the issues, context and policy challenges to participants. All the sessions were recorded and made available online. Nine expert roundtables were conducted with housing providers and municipal leaders, among others. Expert roundtables were chosen as a method to maximize views. CMHC had a sense of what issues were but they wanted to hear expert opinions and validate their assumptions. Three such sessions were held, one in each of Thunder Bay, Whitehorse, and Winnipeg, with the intent to capture the unique experiences of those living in rural and remote areas. Additionally, several regional roundtables focused specifically on Indigenous issues. An external company with trained facilitators led the roundtables.

A bilateral mechanism was set up so that federal departments, provinces and territories could converse regularly throughout the entire engagement process.

5 Engagement

Prior to launching the “Let’s Talking Housing!” consultation, preliminary engagement was conducted with National Indigenous Organizations (NIOs) to determine how *they* wanted to be engaged. The team wanted to determine from the outset what a respectful dialogue would look like from the perspective of the NIOs. They learned from the NIOs that engagement and

consultation are not considered to be synonymous; consultation with Indigenous peoples indicates a legal requirement (Section 35 Duty to consult). CMHC is a Crown corporation that does not frequently conduct large-scale consultation, so they lacked the extensive stakeholder networks of larger departments. When the National Housing Strategy consultation launched, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) was engaging with the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) on on-reserve housing reform. The two teams joined forces to have a larger conversation on Indigenous housing needs, and build new relationships with the AFN.

From the beginning, CMHC involved the provinces and territories, and asked them to engage with their regional Indigenous partners with whom they already had an established relationship. Provincial counterparts conducted the engagement sessions and provided input from their partners. CMHC played an encouragement role and provided the provincial teams with the necessary materials.

The open consultation had a three-stage process:

1. First, a broad consultation was conducted that invited input from all Canadians.
2. Then, a series of thematic expert roundtables were conducted in Ottawa. The objective of these thematic sessions (hosted by INAC and ESDC) was to seek views from experts on key housing challenges. A focus was placed on receiving regional and gender balanced views. A total of 340 people were flown to Ottawa to participate in the roundtables. Views were sought from provinces and territories, National Indigenous Organizations (NIOs), and federal departments, among others.
 - 15-20 people were present at each roundtable session.
 - Three focused sessions were held in locations other than Ottawa. One roundtable focussing on rural and remote housing needs was held in Thunder Bay, another addressing issues facing the North was held in Whitehorse. Finally, an Indigenous-specific roundtable was held in Winnipeg. Five roundtable sessions in Ottawa also focused on Indigenous Housing.
3. Finally, the team circled back for feedback on the draft materials, after which the final strategy was produced and published.

Logistics:

- CMHC used a contractor for facilitation of roundtables and notetaking.
- It hired two additional staff members to the team to do event planning.
- CMHC's in-house event planner helped organize events, which greatly contributed to the success of the engagement.
- Overall, 40 people on the policy team were involved with this project.

- Participants and the public had the opportunity to submit supplementary input using a survey tool.

CMHC developed a stakeholder management strategy and assigned account managers to key stakeholders to provide liaison with CMHC, and develop and maintain relationships.

Challenges emerged during the engagement, including capacity gaps with provinces and territories, and the NIOs. There was a strong desire from these groups to engage, but they often did not have the financial or human resources, or data, to respond. An intergovernmental working group was established to help address provincial and territorial housing data gaps.

The team examined the survey results at the halfway point of the engagement process. The results showed low response levels from Indigenous peoples. In response to these findings, CMHC renewed their approach to target participation from First Nations living on the East Coast.

6 Analysis

A contractor was engaged to analyze the submissions. They conducted mapping exercises with the information and created the final report.

7 Communicating back

To communicate back with those who provided their views, everyone who participated in the roundtables received a link to the final report and full summaries of the roundtable sessions.

Throughout the consultation, the CMHC communications team ran a strong social media campaign, including creating and promoting video clips, graphics, etc. They won an award for their social media campaign.