

# Expert Steering Team Engagement with People with Lived and Living Experience - 10 Year Housing and Homelessness Plan Refresh

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## Context

The Expert Steering Team (EST) of the Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa played a key role in ensuring that people with lived and living experience (PWLE) of homelessness directly shaped the refresh of the City of Ottawa's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan. The EST worked closely with the City's Housing and Homelessness Leadership Table (HHLT) to design and implement an engagement process that meaningfully reflects the priorities and realities of those most affected by homelessness.

The EST is a paid group within the Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa, made up of people who have been personally impacted by homelessness and poverty. The EST brings members' skills, strengths, and lived experience into efforts to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness in Ottawa. They share their knowledge by advising on policy, providing consultations, joining community committees, and offering public training.

The City's Housing and Homelessness Leadership Table is a multi-sector body that oversees the strategic direction, coordination, and accountability of the 10-Year Plan. It brings together leaders from across sectors to guide collective action on housing stability and homelessness reduction. As a part of this work, the HHLT has identified lived expertise as a distinct sector within its collaborative governance structure, alongside community health, newcomer services, youth, justice, and Indigenous partners.

The mid-point review of the City's 10-Year Plan provided an opportunity to refresh the strategy for the next five years. The EST's role was to design a structured, ethical, and sustainable engagement approach to integrating the perspectives of PWLE. This work was grounded in the understanding that meaningful systems change depends on centring the voices of those most affected.

This report outlines how the EST, in collaboration with the HHLT, engaged people with lived and living experience of homelessness as part of the Plan refresh. This work fulfills the legislative requirement to demonstrate meaningful engagement with lived expertise in developing and updating the 10 Year Plan. Beyond meeting the requirement, this work highlights the ongoing commitment of the EST, the Alliance, and the HHLT in centring co-design and shared leadership in systems design.

## Methodology

The Expert Steering Team developed and implemented an engagement process that combined surveys and direct outreach. The goal was to engage individuals and groups possessing lived or living experience of homelessness or housing precarity, and to do so in ways that respected time, dignity, and accessibility. Recognizing that lived experience spans every sector involved in housing and homelessness, the EST engaged a diverse range of interested parties, including

youth programs, peer support networks, Indigenous and newcomer communities, and tenant associations.

The EST defined success as creating an engagement process that is ethical, inclusive, and grounded in lived expertise. They agreed that effective engagement should:

- Support ethical and sustainable participation without overburdening contributors.
- Focus on system-level issues and decision-making values rather than individual narratives.
- Include both peer workers and community members active in informal networks.
- Reflect the diversity of experiences shaped by trauma, health, poverty, migration, and systemic racism.

The EST considered focus groups, interviews, and community dialogues, but selected a survey-based approach as the most accessible. This method supported participation across partner agencies and lived experience networks while allowing for direct, relationship-based outreach by EST members.

The survey, developed by the EST, included both open-ended and structured questions on:

- Preferred modes of engagement (email, in-person, virtual, group discussions)
- Key issues and priorities respondents wanted the HHLT to consider (e.g., affordable housing supply, rent control, support services, prevention, employment and training opportunities)
- Suggestions for ensuring accountability and visibility of lived expertise in City decision-making

The survey was distributed both digitally (via Google Form) and in person, allowing respondents to participate through community events, drop-ins, or with EST members using printed copies.

While the original plan anticipated collecting and synthesizing engagement data by early October 2025 for presentation at an October 6 HHLT session, the timeline was ultimately extended. Despite strong preparation and outreach, responses had not yet begun to come in by the target date. Many partner organizations and lived-experience networks expressed interest but required more time to coordinate internally, identify appropriate participants, and complete the surveys.

As a result, the EST chose to prioritize relationship-building and trust over rapid turnaround. Engagement efforts continued throughout the fall of 2025, with surveys and follow-up conversations still ongoing as of the writing of this report. Several organizations and peer-led groups have only recently begun sharing input. The EST continues to track all contacts, survey completions, and informal feedback in a shared engagement log. Responses are analyzed thematically by the EST and Alliance staff, with key themes reviewed and validated by EST members.

# Results

## Demographics

A total of 16 individuals completed the survey. Respondents included people with lived or living experience of homelessness or unstable housing, and peer workers employed at several organizations, including Options Housing, The Salvation Army, Refugee 613, Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa, Overdose Prevention Ottawa and Sandy Hill Community Health Centre [OBJ].

Peer workers made up a significant portion of responses.

The cross-sector nature of lived expertise within Ottawa's housing and homelessness ecosystem was on display as respondents noted connections with diverse communities and networks, including LGBTQ2S+, Black and African Caribbean, Indigenous, newcomer, and youth groups. Several noted involvement in mental health, addiction, justice system, and foster care contexts.

## Engagement Preferences

The survey included four questions about engagement preferences for future work on the City's 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan.

- **Contact Preference:** Most respondents preferred email communication (88%), followed by in-person events (50%) and through a group or organization they are part of (30%).
- **Engagement Frequency:** When asked how often they would like to be engaged, 44% said whenever something important is being discussed, 38% said as much as possible, and 19% preferred every few months with updates.
- **Preferred Methods:** Participants said they prefer short surveys (81%), small group discussions (69%), and larger community events (63%).
- **Additional Considerations:** In open-ended comments, participants reinforced the importance of consistent, compensated, and relationship-based engagement. They suggested paid focus groups, regular contact through peer networks, and outreach via settlement and newcomer agencies (e.g., Matthew House, Carty House, YMCA, CCI) to include underrepresented voices. Others stressed the need to meet people "where they are", including at drop-ins or on the street.

## What Should Be Considered by the HHLT

Respondents shared a range of priorities and insights that they believe should guide the Housing and Homelessness Leadership Table as it refreshes the 10-Year Plan.

- **Affordable and Permanent Housing:** Respondents emphasized the ongoing need for more affordable and permanent housing options, including rent supplements, subsidies, and reduced waiting times on housing lists. Many emphasized that supportive housing

should include supports to help people adjust to stability, understand their rights, and rebuild daily routines.

- **Mental Health and Addiction Supports:** Many respondents described the need for improved mental health and substance use health services integrated directly with housing. Participants described the need for low-barrier, trauma-informed, and culturally appropriate care, especially for marginalized communities.
- **Prevention and Housing Retention:** Prevention was seen as essential to reducing homelessness. Respondents supported more rental assistance, eviction prevention, and wraparound supports that keep people housed. They noted that earlier intervention can prevent the cycle of homelessness, addiction, and instability.
- **Holistic and Inclusive Supports:** Participants connected housing stability to broader needs such as food security, free transit, and access to counselling or life-skills programs. Many stressed that system change should include people with lived experience in policy and program design, so that supports are grounded in real-world experiences.

## Building Trust & Connection

Respondents described trust as something built through inclusion, transparency, empathy, and communication.

- **Transparency and accountability:** Respondents want clear, honest communication and consistent follow-through from decision-makers. Trust is built when agencies and government provide regular updates, explain decisions openly, and demonstrate action on community input.
- **Shared leadership and inclusion:** Participants described trust as having people with lived experience directly involved in shaping policies and decisions. Being treated as equals at the table—heard, respected, and included early in the process—was seen as essential to genuine collaboration.
- **Empathy and understanding:** Many respondents highlighted that trust grows when engagement is grounded in empathy, respect, and a lack of judgment. They want decision-makers and service providers who recognize the realities of trauma, recovery, and poverty, and who meet people where they are.
- **Competent and reliable support:** Trust depends on the quality and consistency of frontline support. Respondents valued housing and social service workers who are knowledgeable about systems like rentals and benefits, and who provide practical help, encouragement, and reliable follow-up.