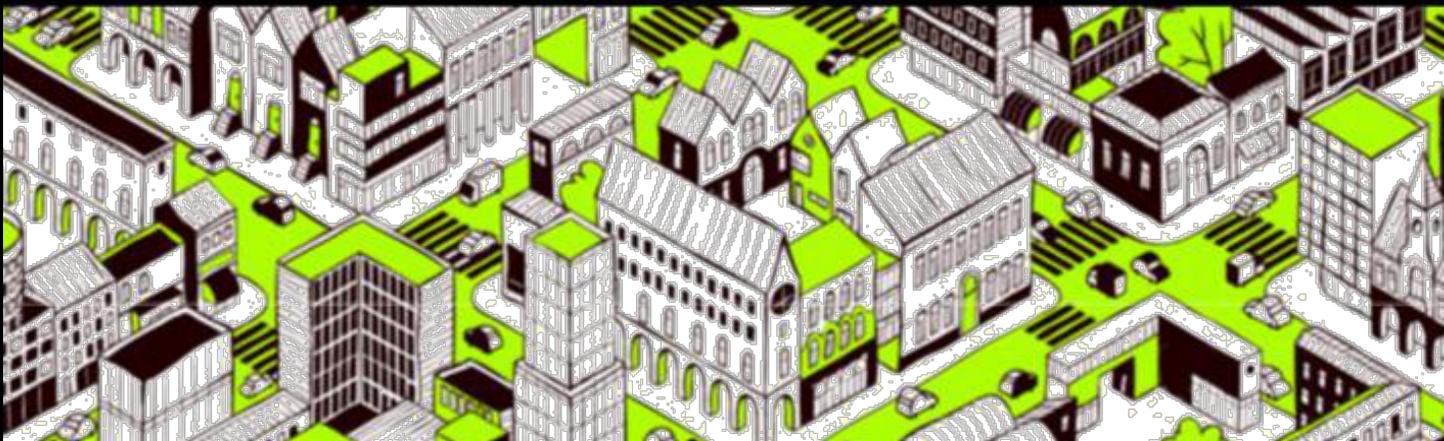




# National Housing Collaborative

Reflections & Analysis of a Process

SEPTEMBER 2019



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United Way, through its Greater Toronto office, served as the convener and backbone organization for this initiative and supported the creation of this report.

# INTRODUCTION

Policy actors and community are frequently preoccupied with ensuring members of civil society participate in the policy-making process. There is no shortage of actors who attempt to influence policy development from outside of government, and government needs the right mix of evidence and perspectives in order to create effective solutions to complex problems.

Increasingly, civil society and the public are placing higher expectations on governments to engage with stakeholders in policy formation. This presents an opportunity to bring more types of expertise to bear on challenging issues. It can also present a challenge to both governments and civil society to find new and constructive ways of working together.

When done well, engagement between government and civil society can bolster the legitimacy of government decisions, build trust in public institutions, deepen appreciation for difficult policy choices, and produce better-informed decisions with greater buy-in and support. It can also expand the impact of government decisions by bridging the divide between policymaking and implementation. A poorly designed or executed engagement, however, can have the opposite effect: dampening trust between actors and diminishing faith in shared ownership or partnership.

This paper details the experience of the National

*Collaborate, def:*

- 1. To work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavour*
- 2. To cooperate with or willingly assist an enemy*
- 3. To cooperate with an agency with which one is not immediately connected*

*- Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

Housing Collaborative (the Collaborative) – an alliance of nonprofit and private housing associations and major philanthropic organizations that came together to influence the Government of Canada’s development of a National Housing Strategy. This report is written entirely from the point of view of people who were involved in the initiative, as a reflection and critical assessment of the process. It is informed by interviews with a range of actors from both inside and outside the initiative, and is authored by the Collaborative Secretariat.

The goal of this report is to provide a history and analysis of a particular civic engagement initiative, in order to inform future practitioners from across sectors seeking to collaborate to achieve policy change. Its content is participant-generated: far from presenting an ‘objective’ opinion, this report aims to present the balance of perspectives from across a range of participants.

Section I of this paper describes how and why the Collaborative was formed; provides insight into its process, structure and governance; and outlines the approach to policy development and advocacy.

Section II, based on interviews with participants, analyzes where the Collaborative succeeded, where it failed to meet its objectives, and provides lessons learned for others who may be interested in creating collaborative initiatives of their own.

## METHODOLOGY:

This report provides a history of the National Housing Collaborative. It was produced based on one-on-one interviews with participants in the Collaborative process, including both members and non-members, and review of the materials created as part of the process itself. It presents a first-hand account of the Collaborative experience and lessons learned, as understood by the people who witnessed its impact on the policy development process, and resulting policy.

## CONTEXT

In October of 2015, the Government of Canada committed to the creation of a National Housing Strategy. The announcement signaled a reemergence of the federal government in housing policy after a diminished leadership role for many years, to be anchored in a long-term roadmap to guide governments and housing providers across the country.

The announcement came as housing issues across Canada were reaching a critical point. There was a growing sense of urgency: all orders of government, and the public, were recognizing that Canada's housing system was falling short. From demand for emergency shelters and rental housing to rising house prices in major cities, from capital backlogs in public housing to aging seniors overwhelmed by the demands of their properties, the situation across the span of housing forms and tenure types was in dire need of attention.

In spring of 2016, the federal government committed to consult with stakeholders to develop a national housing policy framework. The government wanted its National Housing Strategy (NHS) to present a renewed vision for housing in Canada, with corresponding policy solutions that reflected the perspectives and expertise of leading national actors.

The Minister for Families, Children and Social Development (responsible for housing) tasked the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), Canada's housing agency, with conducting a significant national consultation – called *Let's Talk Housing* – with stakeholders and the public, in order to inform a new vision for housing in Canada, and priorities for the new National Housing Strategy. After previous government leaving housing policy on the back burner of policy priorities, the federal government was now moving at a record pace: consultations and input into the NHS would need to be completed within a year.

Renewed federal attention in housing, paired with a broad national consultation led by CMHC at a time of emerging consensus that change in the way Canada plans and delivers housing was required, presented a unique opportunity to introduce new ideas and policy solutions. It also presented the dual challenge of developing new solutions, while finding a way to differentiate those solutions from the large amount of input from a wide and varied audience CMHC was already charged with processing – all within a highly compressed timespan.

After many decades of advocating for the creation of a national housing strategy, the sector was pleased but unprepared. Years of policy stasis had impeded the housing sector in realizing new policy ideas and atrophied the policy capacity of many small industry associations. Organizations across the sector had clearly delineated positions. While they were united in recognizing the need for a more systemic and strategic approach, they had lacked the impetus to develop joined-up policy solutions to Canada's housing challenges.

The Collaborative was a unique response to this rare opportunity. The idea for the Collaborative was inspired by the GTA Housing Action Lab ("HAL"), a network of regional organizations led by Evergreen CityWorks. HAL members had been working together for the past two years to raise attention to, and develop policies to address, housing issues in the Greater Toronto Area. After the Government of Canada announced it would commence the development of the National Housing Strategy, a number of individuals who had participated in HAL asked whether a similar initiative could be attempted at the national level.

Following an initial feasibility study (described below), the Collaborative was created to develop cross-sector policy solutions to address Canada's pressing housing challenges. By integrating voices from across the housing sector, the Collaborative could provide government with cohesive advice that carried the broad support of a wide range of stakeholders. Conceived to be a time limited, externally resourced, independent initiative, the Collaborative was positioned to take risks and explore possibilities that would be unmanageable otherwise, and present government with a better understanding of shared priorities.

The Collaborative was unique in its focus: bringing together a variety of housing perspectives for a specified period of time to rigorously explore a limited range of policy ideas. The Collaborative was to provide a neutral platform and administrative and research support that would enable partners representing the range of the housing spectrum to move beyond the status quo.

# BUILDING THE COLLABORATIVE

Critical to the success of the Collaborative was the early agreement of United Way/Centraide to serve as the “neutral platform” for the Collaborative. United Way/Centraide had a national footprint and a deep interest in housing, but no direct stake in the issue. United Way Greater Toronto served as the administrative home for the project and brought credibility, resources (both financial and in the expertise of its own policy staff), and designated senior staff to organize and champion to the effort. Early dedication from United Way/Centraide was key to bringing other funders on board to resource the effort.

## The National Housing Collaborative process unfolded in four parts:

- a) Feasibility study
- b) Determining structure, governance and process
- c) Policy development

### A) FEASIBILITY STUDY

Before proceeding with the initiative, it was important to determine whether there was sufficient interest across the sector to populate the table. Initial conversations between foundations, United Way, HAL and individuals within the federal government identified the opportunity, but also expressed concerns about the ability of the sector to respond. After a decade of “playing defence,” did the national housing players have the appetite and capacity for innovation and collaboration?

A feasibility study was essential. Knowing that time was limited, that significant resources would be needed, and that heavy reliance would be placed on the participation and expertise of key stakeholders, the feasibility study set out to answer five questions:

1. Are partners from across the housing sector willing to work together in a new collaboration?
2. Are participants willing to engage in policy innovation, or are they absorbed with protecting current interests?
3. Can we mobilize the resources required?
4. Would government – both at the political and bureaucratic level, be receptive to the advice of the group?

5. Would United Ways, as a federated movement, be willing to make commitments across the country to support the work?

Consultants were hired for a six-week period to reach out to potential participants and funders to determine the answers to these questions. The initial two-person feasibility study consultant team was selected for their combined strengths in project design, stakeholder management, government relations and housing leadership.

Having a consultant who was recognized and respected across the housing sector after holding a number of senior leadership positions – without being affiliated with any single part of the sector – was critical in opening the doors for conversations with housing sector leaders. Further, United Way Toronto & York region – a leading organization with established relationships of trust with both government and other philanthropic organizations – made it possible to convey the opportunity to potential funders, and the national network of United Way/Centraide.

The United Way movement, with its long-standing commitment to elevate its own collaboration on systemic issues, quickly endorsed the initiative at national and local levels. The feasibility study resulted in support from funders, government, and housing associations.

“ *Why come to the table? The opportunity presented by the government was a game changer for what we thought was possible... Government leadership was significant.*  
– NFP Sector Member

Interviews with participants attributed the positive response to a unique combination of three factors: timing, personalities, and resources. First, there was an unprecedented opportunity to have a significant influence on federal policy. Early and continued engagement with staff in the Minister’s and Prime Minister’s Office played a critical role in showing the Collaborative that government was listening and ensuring the Collaborative’s work was relevant to the government direction. In this respect, honesty and openness from government ensured that while the Collaborative would try to influence policy

development, it could do so from a reasonably informed perspective of government priorities. Ongoing engagement of political staff signaled that government was listening, and willing to engage.

Second, foundations committed to the project with remarkable speed and confidence. The J.W. McConnell Foundation, The George Cedric Metcalf Charitable Foundation, Mayree, and Vancity all demonstrated the ability to fast-track decision-making and a willingness to take a risk because each recognized a limited window of opportunity and a sizeable potential for impact and innovation. By quickly mobilizing the resources required to power a significant national endeavor, and by bringing senior leadership to the table to engage directly in the process, the supporting foundations enabled the rapid launch of a high-performing initiative.

Foundations came to the table because they trusted each other, trusted United Way as the anchor, and trusted the key personalities known through their leadership in the housing sector and United Way. As one funder noted, having a host organization who undertook both the internal and external partnership development, while ensuring that there was receptivity by government on an ongoing basis was critical. Some funders were already involved in housing issues and saw the Collaborative as a way to amplify and inform their own conversations. Others recognized that there was an opportunity to contribute to something that could provide outsized return for their investment, and saw this as “the right opportunity, at the right time, with the right people.” The speed with which foundations came to the table sent a strong message of confidence to both government and sector actors. Significant commitment to resourcing the work early on was a definitive factor enabling the breadth, depth, and rapid development of the work that followed.

Many of the stakeholders from the housing sector were initially cautious: some questioned why United Way was stepping into the housing space, when there were already organizations in the sector, such as the Canadian Housing Renewal Association (CHRA), who saw themselves as fulfilling the role of convener. They were suspicious of a United Way agenda, or worried that participation would conflict with their own organizational mandates. But most were drawn by the opportunity to be involved in a national discussion, and were, to varying degrees, attracted to taking part in an effort that would bring the private and nonprofit parts of the sector together to develop shared policy solutions. The personal credibility particular members of the Collaborative held across the housing sector,

combined with the prospect of resources for research, facilitation and administration, were ultimately persuasive to those who signed on.

The federated structure of many of the organizations around the Partnership Table influenced their ability to engage. For some, such as United Way, the federated structure enabled leadership and participation: without full participation and support from United Way/Centraide, United Way of Greater Toronto would have lacked the credibility to lead a national conversation. Further, the strong local connections and convening power within the United Way movement was reflected as local United Ways across the country stepped up quickly and nimbly to host local consultations. Other organizations, such as the Cooperative Housing Federation or the Canadian Federation of Apartment Associations, could be quick in decision-making and confident in their ability to compromise due to their strong central leadership. More diffuse federations, such as CHRA, had a more difficult time both joining and staying at the table. Federations with a high degree of cohesion, or strong central authority, had a much easier time engaging in deliberation and compromise.

The Collaborative’s core partners spanned a broad spectrum of national housing interests, from homelessness, co-operatives, social housing and assisted home ownership to private market renters and homeowners. The foundations and United Way brought a cross-cutting policy perspective on poverty, income security, equity, and how these factors interact with housing challenges faced by Canadians.

Ultimately, not all who were invited came to the table as full partners. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) participated, but in keeping with their position as representative of another order of government, was never a member of the Collaborative and did not endorse the final submission. Similarly, participants from the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA) and Le Réseau québécois des OSBL d'habitation (RQOH) were involved in early meetings but later withdrew, for reasons explored later in this paper.

However, with the buy-in of government, funders, and the majority of the national level housing sector associations, the project could proceed to the next step: determining the structure, process, guiding principles and goals of the Collaborative.

## **B) STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND PROCESS**

After deciding to proceed from the feasibility study, the original consultants were retained as the Project Director and Senior Policy Advisor for the duration of the Collaborative. The team also grew at this juncture, adding a Senior Process Specialist to round out the Secretariat of the Collaborative (discussed in detail later in this report). Great care went into both identifying the skillset needed, and selecting the smallest possible team that could bring the full complement of requisite skills. Sufficient resourcing allowed the Collaborative to retain in a three-person team significant policy, project management, stakeholder relations, government relations, fundraising and process design experience. With the advice first of the foundations, many of whom had experience establishing multi-stakeholder initiatives, then affirmed and further developed with the advice of the full table, the first task was to determine the structure, governance and process for Collaborative decision-making.

The Collaborative took a bespoke approach to the structure of the collaboration. This enabled the structure and process to evolve over the course of the initiative, under the direction of a small Secretariat. Given the compressed timeline, the Collaborative was often required to react rapidly to unfolding events among stakeholders or with government. While trying at times, this had the benefit of driving the Collaborative to be adaptable, flexible, and able to respond to the various working cultures of the organizations around the table. It is easy for pre-defined processes to drift too far to become prescriptive or rigid, or for loosely structured processes to become dithering. Having in-house process design expertise enabled the Collaborative to break through impasse, structure non-traditional meetings, and structure each discussion and phase of the project to meet the needs of the group at that time.

Certain elements of the structure were established at the outset and remained constant throughout the initiative. These were largely designed to attain trust and transparency among the group, and for the most part retained their usefulness. They included a statement of shared purpose,<sup>1</sup> the principles that would set the norms for the collaboration, and general structure of governance and decision-making. Each was articulated by the Secretariat based on its understanding of the mandate from the members. Members then discussed together the

draft, which was revised and validated at each phase of the project. This explicit setting of terms and process, followed by repetition and revisiting, both allowed the group confidence that the Secretariat was acting within the agreed upon mandate, and enabled the group to periodically evolve its terms over the course of the policy development process.

### **Membership**

Membership in the Collaborative was limited to national-level housing sector associations and foundations providing significant backing for the project. The interests of end users for the Collaborative's work were represented through associations representing the whole of the spectrum of housing. The most vulnerable were further represented by the foundations, each of which had a mandate to serve Canadians disproportionately affected by core housing need. The decision to limit membership in this way stemmed from the compressed timeline and desire to transparently and fairly communicate the conditions of participation. An exception was made to ensure Quebec (which for the most part has provincial associations unaffiliated with national counterparts) and the Réseau québécois des OSBL d'habitation (RQOH) were invited to join the table.

It was not the most inclusive method to define membership: under-represented groups lacking the organizational structure to match the parameters were under-represented in this process as well.

This was a particular challenge for the Collaborative in trying to meet its own expectation of involving Indigenous perspectives at the table. When the initial participation of the National Association of Friendship Centres was curtailed by lack of capacity, the Collaborative was at a loss as to how to reconcile its criteria for national-level associational membership with the reality of numerous nations and national representation among First Peoples. Reflections about this shortcoming are included in later sections of this report.

Within the qualifying criteria, the Collaborative took a flexible approach to membership. Given the rapid pace of development, participating groups were invited to participate and determine their formal association with the Collaborative as the work developed. At various points throughout the process, the RQOH, Canadian Housing Renewal Association, the National Association of Friendship Centres and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities contributed to the policy

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendices

development process, though, for various reasons discussed in detail later in this report, were not formal members of the Collaborative.

## MEMBERS OF THE COLLABORATIVE

- Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness
- Canadian Federation of Apartment Associations
- Canadian Home Builders' Association
- Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada
- Housing Partnership Canada
- Habitat for Humanity Canada
- Evergreen
- J.W. McConnell Family Foundation
- Maytree
- Metcalf Foundation
- Vancity
- United Way Centraide and United Way Toronto & York Region

## Principles

Guiding principles set the basis for how the group would work together. The Secretariat took pains to select as few principles as possible, while ensuring they were sufficient to speak to the range of activities the group would undertake. The principles sent critical signals to each member of the Collaborative about their rights and responsibilities to the group. They also set important signposts for the kind of solutions the group agreed to drive towards, without in any way predetermining the content of the Collaborative's work.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF THE NATIONAL HOUSING COLLABORATIVE

1. **Equity** – Each partner brings essential value and specific expertise to the table. The Collaborative will be a collegial exercise between organizations representing the spectrum of housing affordability. Each represents an equally important constituency of Canadians.
2. **Transparency** – All Collaborative findings and developments will be shared openly with all partners.

Open communication and clearly understood decisions are integral to success.

3. **Maximum benefit for Canadians** – In developing the Collaborative's recommendations, we will keep the focus on areas of broad concern and opportunities to maximize the benefit for Canadians.
4. **Sustainable Innovation** – The Collaborative will focus on developing new ideas of shared relevance, leveraging the strengths of the group to formulate holistic insights and forward-looking actions for government to incorporate into a national housing strategy.
5. **Openness** – The Collaborative will be open to bringing more partners on board, as mutually determined, and will foster opportunities for input and discussion about the key policies and actions to be proposed across the country and the sector.

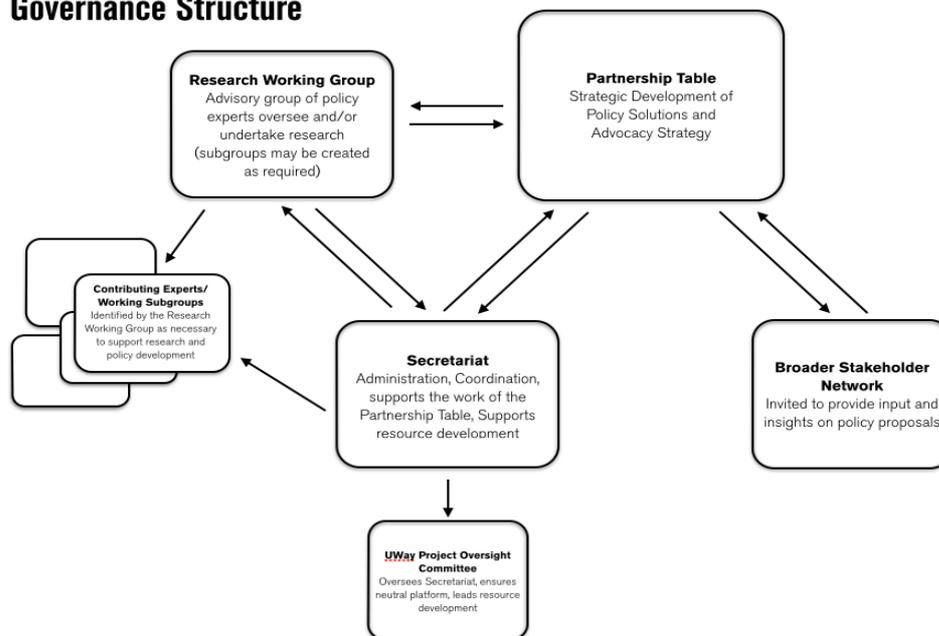
An additional principle was explicit from the start, and verbally communicated to partners, though not formally written into the foundational documents. It was critical to establishing the Collaborative as a force complementary to, and not in competition with, the established housing sector associations:

- **Additive to the sector** – The Collaborative will be funded through new sources, and will not draw from existing housing sector funding. The Collaborative will bring additional resources into the housing sector and will not divert funds dedicated to any existing organization or initiative.

## Governance

In keeping with its principle of Equity, the Collaborative adopted a flat governance structure, which sought to balance inclusion and accountability, while providing sufficient separation of roles to allow participants to focus their energies on activities that were important to them.

### Governance Structure



The core of the Collaborative was the Partnership Table, comprised of all participating organizations. The Partnership Table was where decisions were ultimately made. At an early meeting of the Collaborative, some of the housing sector representatives suggested the Partnership Table have a Chair, or Co-Chairs, to serve as external representatives for the group as necessary, and to serve as internal sentinels for the balance of perspectives and systemic interest amongst the Collaborative members. Initially, some members envisioned Co-Chairs spanning traditional divides among the housing sector, such as between private and not-for-profit actors, or different parts of the housing continuum. The presence of the funder group around the table helped introduce alternatives to this traditional pattern of thinking. Ultimately, there was consensus in selecting Co-Chairs from United Way and the Secretariat, reinforcing the value of Co-Chairs to represent and promote balance of perspectives.

As national associations, each partner would be responsible for communicating the work of the Collaborative and leading the involvement of their regional/local networks. Identifying local stakeholders, and subsequent regional soundings

that gathered insight from communities across Canada, were carried out by local affiliates of the national partners.

The group was supported by a dedicated Secretariat, which served all partners and was responsible for fulfilling all staff functions that would be required by the initiative. The Secretariat played key roles in administration, process design, facilitation, stakeholder relations, communications, coordinating and contributing to research and policy development, and government relations. This freed the partners to build relationships with each other and focus on the policy conversation.

The Secretariat was overseen by a Project Oversight Committee, housed in United Way and comprised of 4-6 funder representatives. This committee was very active in the early months of the Collaborative, and became less so as the governance and process became more firmly established.

A Research Working Group, a subset of the Partnership Table, was struck at the outset to advise and lead the development process. It was intended to allow interested partners a high degree of involvement in the research process, without

demanding the same from all partners. Ultimately, this group was dropped after the focus areas were selected. There was sufficient flexibility in the partnership table to allow for greater or lesser time commitment, and the majority of partners chose to participate on the Research Working Group, making it redundant to the Partnership Table.

Instead, subgroups for each focus area allowed partners to delve deeply into policy areas in which they were most interested. Focusing on a particular topic allowed each subgroup to identify and invite external subject area experts or stakeholders to contribute in their area of expertise. Partners self-selected into the subgroups, which each reported to the Partnership Table. In keeping with its principle of Openness, external experts were identified and invited to contribute based on the agreement of the Partnership Table.

In retrospect, some participants criticized that so much early time and effort was devoted to solidifying a structure that proved to be most useful for its malleability. Contributors came and went from the various tables. The Research Working Group and Project Oversight Committee fell dormant as their usefulness waned, without discussion or formal agreement from the Partnership Table. In short, the structure was allowed to evolve and became more informal over time.

At the onset, however, establishing transparency and accountability to both funders and partners in a new venture was key to building trust and buy-in. As this trust developed and participants grew accustomed to working with one another, the need for formalized decision-making structures declined. Some participants noted that taking the time to co-create how the Collaborative would work together was a valuable norm-building activity that produced an environment in which collaboration and shared decision-making came more naturally.

## Process

At an early stage, the Collaborative set itself three key tasks

- 1. Identify a limited number of shared priority areas for policy development**
- 2. Produce a set of action-oriented policy proposals, within priority areas**
- 3. Advocate for their adoption in a national housing strategy by the federal government, starting with Budget 2017**

The most challenging aspect of the project was the compressed timeline. The Collaborative had seven months to fulfill these goals – in contrast to its predecessor, HAL, which had been working for two years. Moreover, everyone recognized that it was not enough to conduct the conversation solely among national-level associations – the Collaborative would need to engage housing providers and stakeholders in communities across the country, to ensure that its policy development reflected the input of those who would be most directly affected by it.

Given the extraordinary time constraints, the parameters for policy development had to be carefully delineated. The Collaborative focused only on areas within federal jurisdiction; sought issues of broad concern and interest; concentrated on ideas the group felt were feasible to scope within time available; and pursued policies that could have the greatest impact on the greatest number of Canadians. Weekly Partnership Table calls maintained the momentum, with frequent additional communication between various partners and members of the Secretariat, ensuring those who missed a call or wanted to discuss further had every opportunity.

The Collaborative developed an iterative process that enabled the group to work sequentially through a series of decision-points. This process began with a statement of shared purpose, and continued through defining the systemic outcomes their recommendations should seek to achieve. This was followed by an exploration of the range of policy ideas that might achieve those ends, before selecting a limited set of policy options and conducting concerted research and deliberation to ultimately arrive at specific, costed recommendations.

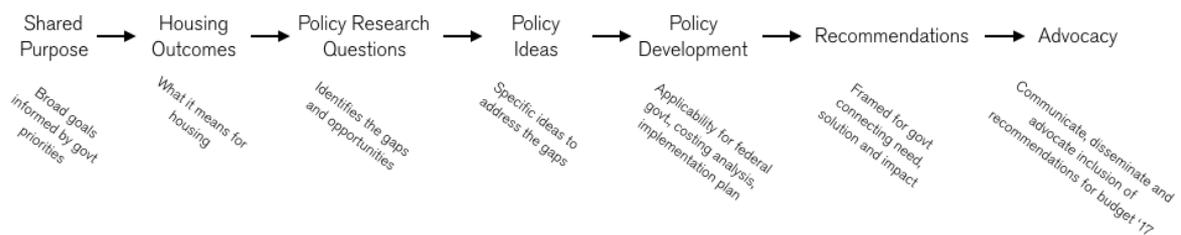
**“ It was a very pragmatic process. Those who were driving and writing this felt that there was no choice but to be utilitarian and take on the biggest pieces where there was consensus. [I am] deeply respectful of the outcome. It was not an easy task. We delivered. – Foundation Member**

Approaching the work in this way served two functions: first, it enabled the group to build social capital through agreement on less contentious issues, as well as systematically assemble the evidence required before negotiating details of policy

options – some of which had long been controversial in the sector. Second, it provided opportunity to engage stakeholders and experts beyond the Collaborative in a purposeful way. Broad-based regional soundings provided insight into the context of different housing markets across the country at the same time as the Collaborative was considering what to prioritize from a long list of potential policies for development. Leading subject-area experts were invited to contribute to the process of detailed policy development specifically within their area of expertise.

There was a repeating cycle of Partnership Table deliberation to arrive at clear direction for next steps, followed by consultant-led research and secretariat-driven consultation to produce evidence and input, which would then feed into a final deliberation of the Partnership Table. This ensured that each decision-point was informed by impartial evidence as well as advice from key experts and stakeholders.

## From purpose to policy



### C) POLICY DEVELOPMENT

A two-day retreat in June 2016 brought the partners together in a robust – and at times intense – conversation about housing policy challenges, opportunities, and ideas (a summary of the June retreat can be found in the appendices). An initial list of 24 policy ideas was shortlisted to ten for further exploration, under the broad categories of supply, affordability, and homelessness. Participants discussed, among other things, jurisdictional considerations, exploring new ways for the sector to work together, and the need to think systemically.

Bringing the private sector associations together with nonprofit housing associations – initially a fraught proposition – bore fruit. The retreat featured a combination of informal, small group, and plenary sessions. Meals and casual conversation were shared in advance of policy positions. New relationships were built as participants began to recognize areas

of common interest and purpose. People were able to move past their particular organizational interest to think about broader questions affecting the whole system, and participants gradually learned to trust one another. This social capital became one of the defining features of the project, providing what one participant called “a baseline of trust and collaboration.”

Through further discussion and iteration, the Collaborative determined to focus its efforts and commission research in four areas: homelessness; financial mechanisms to spur new supply of housing that was affordable (both market and nonmarket); social housing, given the imminent ending of operating agreements; and a portable housing benefit.

It was important to all of the members that policy positions be based on evidence, rather than advocacy. Accordingly, research briefs were written

and, as with all materials produced through the process, circulated for input and editing by members of the Collaborative. Consultants were then hired to undertake the research. As it was completed, expert working groups were convened – including representatives of the Partnership table along with identified external experts – to review drafts and provide feedback. Four substantive policy options papers were produced, which informed the final submission.

“ *I think we did remarkably well at bringing together the groups and getting to a result. The separation historically between the not-for-profit and private parts of the sector has been significant – there has been a history of conflict and hostility. I was skeptical about the degree to which we could bring the parties together.... [but] both sides of the sector took the other as legitimate*  
– Foundation Member

Throughout the process, the Secretariat was holding regional soundings, a series of local stakeholder workshops and provincial and municipal meetings held in different markets across the country. Local United Ways, sometimes in partnership with the local association of another Collaborative member association, mobilized quickly and offered their connections and venues, leveraging the benefits of federated associations.

Eight Soundings produced input from across Canada, with one Sounding exclusively of Indigenous housing providers on Indigenous housing issues. Further, a session was held with the provincial-territorial table of senior bureaucrats who were working on the housing file to familiarize them with the work and identify any particular sensitivities. Along with the research, input from all sides was being absorbed to inform the final submission.

At critical junctures, such as defining the desired outcomes that would guide the group’s recommendations, and before finalizing the recommendations that would comprise the Collaborative’s submission to the *Let’s Talk Housing* consultation, Partnership Table member Evergreen hosted the Collaborative at Evergreen Brickworks – a scenic Toronto location with meeting facilities. At each in-person meeting, Collaborative members participated in a combination of social activities and group work. These allowed time for informal

conversation and socializing, as well as extended time to deliberate as a group.

Consensus was more easily reached on the general items than on the particular. As the research was completed and policies were fleshed out, significant areas of difference and entrenched positions emerged, in particular with respect to the transformation of the social housing sector. In other areas, however – such as the proposed portable housing benefit – consensus was reached that, as one member noted, “was almost unimaginable twenty years ago.” Considerable work and compromise was required to keep all of the partners at the table.

The four research papers informed the Collaborative’s final submission to the National Housing Strategy in October 2016. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (now Blueprint ADE) penned the final submission. Government welcomed it as both substantive and readable.

However, the policy development process did not stop there. Aware of the need to advocate for our policies and support the government’s own policy development exercise, the Collaborative met and spoke with CMHC and the Minister’s Office regularly over the course of the next year. Further roundtables with not only our partners but other participants from within the sector took place in summer of 2017, which led to the commissioning of more detailed policy papers with proposals that followed from the original options papers. These papers – Proposal for a National Portable Housing Benefit, Proposal for Strengthening Social Housing, and Proposal for Maximizing Investments in Supply – were sent to CMHC and the Minister’s office and, as with all of the Collaborative’s work (in keeping with the principle of Transparency), posted on our website.<sup>2</sup>

## D) ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS

The Collaborative was aware that submitting our proposals in October was only the first step. The *Let’s Talk Housing* consultations held by the federal government had engaged more than 7,000 Canadians, and virtually every national housing organization – including the individual partners in the Collaborative – had made submissions to the government. If the Collaborative’s proposals were to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nhc-cpl.ca/>

land, we would have to engage intensely with government and be proactive about outreach to the media and our stakeholders across the country.

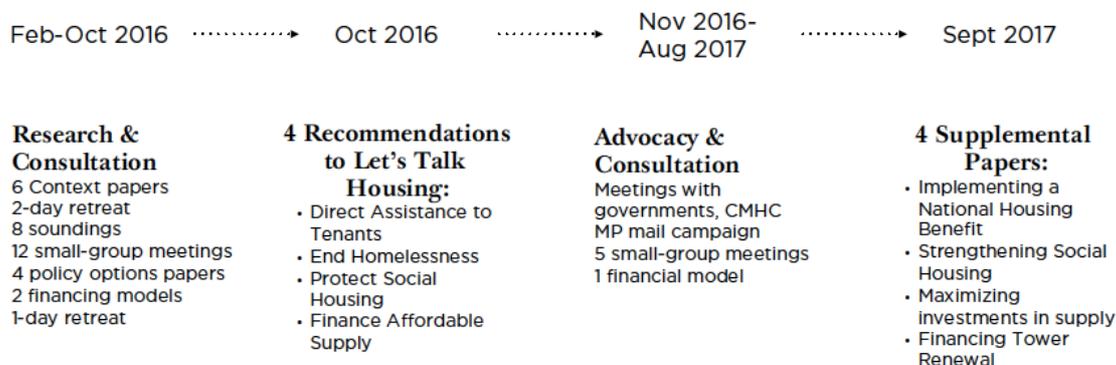
This shift from policy development to advocacy marked an especially critical occasion for the Secretariat to return to the mandate and first principles. After discussion that reinforced the importance of the Collaborative’s contribution being additive and not in competition with its members, the mandate was renewed and outreach strategies of the Collaborative were clear.

“*The Collaborative [process] allowed for ongoing dialogue and development. Another stream of work [at CMHC] was happening in a very different way so when the two streams came together and recommendations lined up, it was very powerful.*  
-Foundation Member

A variety of tactics was used in the run-up to the 2017 budget in particular. While few expected major decisions in that budget – the 2016 budget had essentially provided two years of “placeholder” funding – it was nonetheless critical to ensure that housing was kept top of mind. A “write your MP” campaign, communiqués to stakeholders, op-eds, and one-on-one engagements with MPs by all of the partners were among the tactics that were used. One of the co-chairs from the host organization acted spokesperson on Budget Day, while other Collaborative members were primed with information and messaging.

As time went on and it became clear that the National Housing Strategy was taking shape, the Collaborative also published open letters to MPs in the Hill Times and iPolitics and relied on its partners to push information out to their members.

The timeline of the National Housing Collaborative process:



### Changing relationship with government

To achieve its goals, the Collaborative relied on a combination of approaches, some of which were traditional – individual meetings with political staff, MPs, bureaucrats, the Minister and the PMO – and others which were more innovative, bringing different partners from government and the sector together for policy conversations.

Most of the organizations in the Collaborative conducted government relations, and the weekly Partnership Table calls allowed them to pool their intelligence. As one participant noted, “Government

responses are never that clear cut, so we had more vantage points to give a more holistic picture of the political and policy environment.”

Members recognized that working collaboratively was more likely to produce results than everyone advocating on their own. One participant observed that the sector grew in sophistication as a result of the *Let’s Talk Housing* process, understanding that bringing together a diversity of voices gave them more power to convince government and that this diversity also provided support to government. More than one member of the Collaborative noted that connection with government was one of the group’s

greatest strengths, one found to have mutual benefit. For political staffers, being able to get on the phone to brief all the Collaborative members at once provided a direct line into the sector, while allowing the Collaborative to ensure the work being undertaken was relevant to government. Knowledge that the government was anticipative of its final recommendations was also a driving force for the Collaborative. As one member put it, “People stayed at the table because they saw it as a pathway to influence. [The Collaborative] gave people a larger platform than they would have had on their own and it was better to be in than out.”



*The Collaborative was integral in the creation of the Canada Housing Benefit. It is a big new idea for the federal government in housing. Because of that it's not something that we would have done without strong external support and the evidence base. The Collaborative did both those things: it allowed us to develop a robust evidence base much faster than we could have ourselves, and it gave us the confidence that based on the evidence we could sell a novel policy because we had a choir of stakeholders who were willing to defend it (and already had) publicly.*  
– CMHC Official

For some members, it allowed them to demonstrate that even where their organizations disagreed with government on certain issues, they were willing to put aside those disagreements and work in a constructive way through the Collaborative to help forward the government's agenda.

For government, the Collaborative was helpful in many respects. Political staff observed that, instead of calling a range of different organizations, they could test ideas with a few calls, quickly and efficiently. And, because the Collaborative was set up as a time-limited initiative to advance the National Housing Strategy, government staff trusted that the Collaborative was putting forward recommendations in the public interest – not trying to please a particular membership base.

CMHC, tasked with leading the *Let's Talk Housing* consultation and reconciling the enormous amount of input provided, also benefited from the existence of the Collaborative. That said, representatives from CMHC admitted to some apprehension early on.

They found out about the Collaborative from the Minister's office and were asked to participate in an early meeting. Though intrigued, officials were concerned as to whether two parallel processes – with both the Collaborative and CMHC itself convening conversations and engaging on some of the same topics – might entail some confusion for stakeholders.

However, as the Collaborative furthered its work and became more engaged with CMHC, the agency ultimately recognized that the Collaborative needed to have its own process and voice, and began to trust the individuals involved. On some issues, like the national housing benefit, the processes were complementary, which was helpful for the agency in seeing how thinking on the topic evolved.

In an interview for this report, one official noted: “An area that was vague for us for a while but really impressed us in the end was actually your process. The process was innovative and original, bringing everyone together and building the agreement on the priorities. Getting everyone to sign on to the report brought weight and credibility.”

Members of the Collaborative noted that CMHC had headed into the Let's Talk Housing consultations “without a lot of practice with policy innovation.” The agency was also unaccustomed to receiving unity and coherence from across the housing sector. The Collaborative was able to engage CMHC in a different kind of conversation and validate their work – improving both the agency's relationship with the sector and policy innovation. A question that some members have asked is whether CMHC, as a result of this experience, will be prepared to adopt a different, more participatory model of consultation throughout the course of the ten-year National Housing Strategy.

Looking back, some noted that engagement with CMHC at an earlier stage would have accelerated building trust and aligning efforts. Moreover, while the Collaborative had a very good relationship with the Minister's office and ultimately with CMHC, further work could have been done on reaching out to other federal government officials, particularly within the Department of Finance.

## SECTION II

Where did the Collaborative succeed, where did it fall short, and what lessons can we draw from this experience for future efforts of this sort? This section draws from interviews with the members of the Collaborative, including funders, representatives from government and CMHC. It concludes with an analysis of what elements of the Collaborative could be recreated and what might be improved upon, to inform researchers and practitioners interested in deliberative policy development.

## SUCCESSSES

The earliest visible success of the Collaborative was the relationships that were created between the participants. All members had the opportunity to build the policy platform to the degree that they wanted to participate, and individual members were more or less involved at different points in time. New relationships were formed, including between members of the nonprofit and private sector who had previously been suspicious of one another. Information sharing, a neutral third space, equitable representation and resources all built trust, social capital and the space to compromise.

Because the interests of the Collaborative transcended individual mandates, members were asked to think more broadly and systemically than they might be called upon to do otherwise; to consider interests that were larger than their own and in some cases even oppositional to their own. Most rose to the occasion. In some cases members deferred to each other's expertise; in others, they had difficulty setting aside their own positions. But generally, they were, as one member put it "amazingly collaborative... [we] found a way to find common ground."

**“ It was the right size of group; it allowed personal connections to be strong. ”**  
– Foundation Member

When it set out, the Collaborative was seeking innovation in the policy space. Ultimately, some participants felt that the most innovative part of the Collaborative was the process itself: the way that participants were brought together to find common cause and work together. People felt that the process offered everyone a win and an important common platform to amplify the recommendations. The Collaborative also provided multiple avenues to participate – even groups who either had decided or were deciding they could not support the submission's recommendations were invited to remain at the table. To government, this was seen as the most innovative and useful aspect of the Collaborative: by continuing to work and invite input from critics, the Collaborative was able to provide government with added insight of both supporters and detractors of various policy proposals.

The structure and support provided by United Way, the funders and the Secretariat were also critical

elements. Having a neutral convener without a particular position on the issues ensured that all members could participate, come up with big ideas, and have their voice heard. An administrative backbone, provided by United Way, meant that members could focus on the substance.

**“ One wasn't afraid that the notetakers were biased... [The Secretariat] was smart, good with people. Even though they weren't from the housing world, they soaked it up like sponges. ”**  
– NFP Member

Resources were crucial. In the first year, almost \$500,000 was raised from funders to support the work. This funding supported a three-person Secretariat (who undertook the stakeholder relations, communications, ongoing coordination, facilitation and engagement work) as well as consultant teams with subject-area expertise to conduct policy research in each of the four pillar areas. One member pointed out "Resourcing of this project was extraordinary, beyond what we can normally achieve. That investment was a real driver." Funders were also active participants at the table, bringing not just resources but also policy expertise, government relations, and savvy advice.

**“ We are usually a sponsor, funder, framer and then sit back. In this case we participated as well. I knew some [participants], new to others. We learned enormously from the process. It wasn't always easy given the different perspectives. Sometimes it felt like giving two cents as opposed to digging deep, but that's a function of very accelerated timeframes. ”**  
– Foundation Representative

Members of the Collaborative pointed to the strength of the Secretariat in helping ensure the project was accomplished on time and within the resources available. They noted that the Secretariat brought stakeholder management and process design skills that led to thoughtful processes: "That's what enabled the really good, funny, intense conversations between the stakeholders to

succeed,” one member commented. It was a highly pressurized timeline, and everyone worked intensely to achieve the desired outcomes.

Research and policy development was another key success. The Collaborative chose to commission external research from subject-matter experts in four policy areas. These researchers developed an initial round of options papers to inform the submission in October 2016. Additional research was commissioned in 2017. Combined with small group input from external reviewers and on-the-ground engagement across the country, this research allowed the policy proposals to be “sound and balanced” and proved to be crucial to the credibility of the recommendations.

“*Hiring external researchers with the NHC owning [the research product] was a great approach. I learned you could take the same people and ask them for a lot and if there’s real opportunity they will come... The importance of building the base, going around the country and meeting with people to get exposure reinforced the value of that work.*  
– Foundation Representative

The Collaborative succeeded in completing a vast amount of work in an extremely short period of time. The effort and dedication of all of the members of the Partnership Table – all of whom were unpaid – cannot be understated. Weekly conference calls, additional calls and emails as part of working groups, reviewing materials, group editing, and collaborative public and government relations took significant energy and commitment from all members. The pace and volume of work was exhausting for some and would not be sustainable over a longer period of time.

“*The group was by far the most influential because it brought so many players together and also had long term effect in terms of housing policy development in Canada. Connecting to other areas of government, it is a model that will be talked about outside of housing as well for how we do policy development.*  
– CMHC Official

The Collaborative was successful in producing, as one member put it, “good solid recommendations to government, that have been clearly heard by government.” The interest of Minister Duclos himself – who met twice with the Collaborative as a whole – as well as the participation of CMHC in some of the Collaborative’s process and the overall provision of a coherent sectoral voice were helpful to government.

What the Collaborative was able to do was bring cohesion and clarity to the volume of input government was receiving through the *Let’s Talk Housing* consultations. All of the participants were well known and experienced at policy advocacy. The ideas that ultimately became the recommendations to government were also not novel. But by assembling the right mix of housing actors, evidence, and constructive advocacy, the Collaborative was able to help build the social license for government to adopt them.

“*The Collaborative brought balance and cohesion and tightness to a volume of recommendations that if they weren’t being steered externally would have been really hard to steer from inside government. As a general policy observation, when government becomes overwhelmed by the volume and diversity and contradictions in the external policy noise, it’s more likely to default to the status quo. By making the outside advice more digestible the NHC made it more possible for the government to be innovative.*  
- Political staffer

The ultimate success was the incorporation of much of the Collaborative’s work into the National Housing Strategy itself. Consummate quality and depth of policy research paired with broad-based support from a diverse set of stakeholders proved a winning combination. All four pillars were reflected in the National Housing Strategy. In particular, parties agreed that the Canada Housing Benefit (CHB) was the most innovative proposal to come from the Strategy and one that would not likely have been adopted if not for the strong work and advocacy of the Collaborative.

## THE SHORTCOMINGS

Despite its successes, falling short of some ambitions of the National Housing Collaborative was inevitable. The most significant factor contributing to the Collaborative's shortcomings was the compressed timeframe. Other failings illustrate the challenges faced by many organizations seeking policy collaboration in a complex, multi-stakeholder, and federated environment.

At the outset, the Collaborative was conceived as an opportunity to produce innovative –that is, entirely new – policy recommendations that addressed the housing system in a new and systemic way. Ultimately there was not sufficient time for the kind of conceptual development that would have required. The group did evaluate the full continuum of housing to arrive at interventions that were most required to strengthen the system as a whole, but did not arrive at agreement on a more interconnected way to understand the system as a whole.

“*I'm not sure how innovative the proposals were, but they are certainly durable. The four pillars were the logical ones. They were the right areas for us to be able to say “These form the basis of solid policy.” It was iteration more than innovation.*”  
– Foundation Representative

Likewise, the policy proposals forwarded by the Collaborative were sophisticated, costed, and significant in demonstrating support from across the housing system, but were not themselves original ideas. Some, such as the financial mechanisms to incentivize new rental supply, represented an evolution of previous proposals. Others, such as the recommendations towards ending homelessness, incorporated existing best knowledge and practice and brought them greater support and recognition. While most participants agreed the ideas the Collaborative proposed were not as novel as many had initially hoped, they also agreed the major step forward was government's moving to enact the ideas proposed.

The Collaborative also struggled throughout the process with achieving full diversity of participation and was less successful than many in the group had hoped. Initially, the Collaborative sought participation of all national-level associations, collectively representing the full spectrum of housing; representation from across Canada's

regions; and Indigenous perspectives. Because the Collaborative limited itself to national-level associations, most were based in either Ottawa or Toronto. While the regional soundings ensured the Collaborative's proposals were informed by regional market contexts, consistent participation representing Canada's Atlantic and northern regions was lacking. The Collaborative also did not achieve balanced representation across the housing continuum: the private sector was underrepresented at the table.

Initial participation bringing an Indigenous perspective through the National Association of Friendship Centres could not be maintained. That Association did not have the capacity to participate in the Collaborative over time, while also conducting regular business and responding to increasing demand from civil society groups and governments to include Indigenous voices in planning. The Collaborative attempted additional outreach, but was stymied by two challenges: first, Canada's Indigenous peoples are comprised of many nations, languages, and cultures. Given the Collaborative's focus on broad, national-level representation, it struggled to identify and connect Indigenous groups in the process.

Second, the Collaborative members had few established relationships from which to draw. This fact highlights the next phase of development required to achieve reconciliation in Canada's civil society landscape. Despite Indigenous participation in all the regional soundings, in addition to an additional national sounding devoted exclusively to Indigenous housing issues, the Collaborative was unable to achieve consistent participation from Indigenous representatives and was at a disadvantage because members lacked personal relationships with the Indigenous-led and -serving housing actors.

The Collaborative faced a different kind of challenge with organizations such as CHRA and RQOH. Both are well-recognized sector leaders who participated with reservations for the majority of the development process and ultimately withdrew from the Collaborative for either political or philosophical reasons.

There was a natural tension with the emergence of a new table filling a leadership role in the sector. For most of the organizations in the Collaborative, the potential of what could be achieved through cooperation was worth sharing leadership and

credit. Others saw more risk in working across sector lines and in inviting new players (in the case of the foundations and the Collaborative as a distinct initiative) into the political space.

Understandably, the necessity of reconciling participation in a new table exercising leadership with one's existing role within the housing sector was a challenge all organizations faced. For those that remained involved in the Collaborative, there was a growing recognition that participation in a collaborative could in fact enhance their role within the sector and allow them to explore lines of thinking from a systems-perspective.

“ *By our members, [the Collaborative] was seen as an external hand coming in to do things we should have been doing ourselves.*  
– Housing Sector Representative

Broad-based membership associations faced greater challenges with participation in the Collaborative than those with more cohesive membership and centralized decision-making. CHRA, whose membership spans affordable, social and nonprofit housing providers, municipalities and provincial/territorial housing departments, Indigenous housing providers, and others, struggled to reconcile representing its own position and its members' with the demands for compromise of the Collaborative. It was not unique in facing this challenge: each of the Collaborative members needed to convince their individual membership of the recommendations, which did not necessarily correspond the positions of any individual organization. As time-limited exercise, the Collaborative recognized that the ramifications of its recommendations would remain for its members, long after the work of the Collaborative was completed.

For RQOH, there was also significant philosophical tension about the very notion of working across sector lines, in particular being open to the possibility of government providing support or incentives to the private sector. The Collaborative took a deliberate position of basing its exploration from the point of view of the end user: people who need a place to live. It deliberately kept the options open, so that participants over time could identify the solutions – private and public – that they could agree would have the biggest impact on improving the safety, adequacy and affordability of housing for people.

This philosophical difference was further emphasized in the regional sounding that took place in Montreal. Organizations present expressed clear support for not-for-profit supply-based solutions, emphasized the collective over the individual, and were protective of provincial powers and Quebec's ability to design and implement Quebec-based policy solutions.

Ultimately, the Collaborative was unable to convince all participants to support its findings. After considering the full draft of the submission, the CHRA and RQOH decided that they could not support the recommendations as members of the Collaborative and withdrew from the initiative. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness did not endorse the supply recommendations, but did support the other three pillars and remained a full member of the Collaborative. This illustrates both failure and strength of the Collaborative: consensus was not required, but alignment was sought while avoiding situations that would force any participant into an 'all or nothing' position.

“ *For government, it's important to have a simulation to understand what the argument is going to look like if we go with decision a, b, or c. The Collaborative did us a great service in anticipating and simulating the reactions to various policy decisions. That's more helpful to us than a space where everyone can come together and agree.*  
– Political Staffer

As a national effort, the Collaborative encountered many challenges familiar to the Canadian story: regional differences and multiple regional actors expressing at various times feeling overlooked or misunderstood; the complications of arising from a federated system with multiple orders of government; the complications of mirroring federated associational structures, with varying degrees of centralization or decentralization; the challenge of meaningful reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The Collaborative neither invented nor solved these challenges, but made a concerted effort to address them.

The Collaborative represented a remarkable effort from funders, researchers and housing associations in response to an exceptional opportunity presented by government. Trust, policy development sophistication and practice of collaboration require

cultivation over time. The Collaborative presented a temporary solution to a perennial challenge of lack of resourcing to build and maintain capacity for sophisticated policy making. The Collaborative experience demonstrated what is possible: dedication and constant renewal are necessary to maintain the benefits of collaboration over time.

## ANALYSIS

The experience of the National Housing Collaborative offers insight to other initiatives aimed at bringing civil society groups together to work in constructive policy development with government. This analysis is based on the advice of government, funders and sector representatives who participated and the reflections of the Secretariat responsible for the design of the process. This section is organized into advice directed to each of the major players – funders, government, sector leaders, Secretariat – about their respective role and how each contributed to making the initiative work. Finally, we will offer general lessons on how a similar process could be improved and advice to others looking to engage in a similar exercise.

### FUNDERS

Foundations and charities initiated the National Housing Collaborative, and according to those involved in the initiative, fulfilled four critical functions enabling its success:

**Creating a neutral table** – The participation of the funders at the Partnership Table provided a balance to the housing stakeholders and created a shift in their typical dynamics. Without United Way serving as the administrative backbone for organizing and fundraising, the Collaborative would have collapsed. As trusted actors with an interest in population-level outcomes, the funders created the space where all participants were challenged to think beyond the interests of their constituents to addressing housing need across the entire system.

**Resourcing** – Substantial investment, provided by a variety of funders who mobilized quickly, allowed extensive travel, consultation, research, dedicated staffing and social opportunities. The Collaborative required significant time and energy from housing participants. By resourcing the initiative to the extent that participants had all the support required to produce high quality work, funders encouraged sector actors to put in the time and effort required of the initiative, which was considerable.

**Lending credibility** – Critically, most (though not all) funders actively participated in the Collaborative, and were signatories to its submissions. In this way, funders lent their name and credibility to sector actors who otherwise could be viewed as self-interested. By serving on the Collaborative,

foundations pushed for solutions with greatest public benefit; by signing on to the resulting recommendations, they sent important signals to government and the public that their high standards were met.



*I didn't feel from the beginning that this would contribute to our agenda, but we didn't want to impose that agenda because I felt what was more important was for the conversation to develop. Would we support every single recommendation? No. This was work that we funded, not work we are commissioning. There's less control, but also less risk in what will be produced.*

– Foundation Representative

Being open to all outcomes – Funders demonstrated flexibility and commitment by making no prescriptions for the content of the Collaborative's submissions. Funders invested in the potential for sector groups to reach greater alignment than previously attained and jointly develop new solutions to pressing systemic issues. Funders modeled for sector actors that it is possible to participate and support group efforts that are not perfectly aligned with the goals of any individual contributing organization.

### STAKEHOLDERS

Housing actors seized the opportunity presented by the National Housing Collaborative initiative. They came to the table in sufficient numbers to lend it legitimacy, contributed their time and expertise, and invested their social capital to furthering collective aims. Participants in the Collaborative drew the following lessons for future stakeholder groups considering collaborative efforts:

#### **Additional avenues for government relations** –

Over the course of a multi-year NHS development process, the degree to which various housing associations saw their needs being met by government shifted numerous times. Many housing sector participants noted that the Collaborative provided them an additional avenue to demonstrate constructive partnership with government, even as their advocacy positions required them to take a more adversarial stance elsewhere. The

Collaborative created the possibility for associations to take a strong stance on behalf of their members' interests, while simultaneously advancing work in other areas. This contributed to associations' good relations with government, as well as to ongoing policy development.

**Strengthening alliances** – Most participants cite stronger connections and trust across the housing sector as the greatest accomplishment of the Collaborative process. Many joint meetings and forums preceded the creation of the Collaborative. The clear task and iterative process, with equal attention spent on the social connections between participants, enabled building connections and understanding across sector silos.

“ *I thought we might have more in common than they [the not-for-profit sector representatives] realized, which I guess opened the possibility for more than I realized as well.*  
– Private Sector Member

**Sharing information gets everyone further** – The Collaborative developed a regular practice of sharing information among partners based on the perspective of their sector and based on its own ongoing government relations. It was able to create a culture where power in the dynamic was earned by sharing rather than hoarding information. The regular trading of information across the housing associations and foundations, as well as hearing directly at intervals from government, allowed participants a greater total level of intelligence with less effort and duplication. In the view of one participant, this enabled housing actors a better understanding of “what government was thinking without having to spend my political capital to find out.”

**Co-design, then trust in the process** – Working with others to find common ground and create something new is inherently difficult. Moments will be fraught with tension, and conflict will arise that nothing but dedication and hard work will eventually resolve. Having a facilitated process, as opposed to a self-directed one, prevented any group(s) from stalling or blocking the process. All participants fed into the process design at the outset. While this evolved organically, initial buy-in from all participants made it difficult to derail.

## GOVERNMENT

All participants agree that interest and encouragement from government brought actors to the table and kept them there. In addition to contributing funding to the Collaborative through CMHC, government was involved throughout the process. This not only strengthened the work of the Collaborative, but also revealed benefits to government in working with civil society in this way. The following highlight both benefits to government, as well as how government can reward collaborative behaviours from stakeholders:

**Deeper, broader stakeholder relations** – While most of the members of the Collaborative were known to one another, they did not all personally know each other prior to the Collaborative process. In the same way, while government knew all of the actors, the Collaborative allowed new and deeper relationships to develop. According to some participants, these relationships have since led to new opportunities and dialogue between government and stakeholders – dialogue building from the culture of constructive exchange established through the Collaborative. The government's willingness to resource and open the door to this dialogue set a foundation for future relationships and collaboration.

“ *Was it unique? Absolutely. We [government] were doing broad based consultations, and from our perspective that was one of the successes. But this presented the sector coming together and taking ownership for a portion of that dialogue. Breaking down competing interests and barriers to work towards something bigger.*  
– CMHC Official

**Better policy with ready supporters** – By sharing some of its thinking with the Collaborative, thereby allowing the Collaborative to ensure its recommendations were relevant to government, some in government learned “that we can engage better, and we can get to better outcomes if we do.” By developing policy through a partnership lens, government was able to leverage the research and policy development conducted through the Collaborative. More work was accomplished collectively, in very little time.

**Reward with access** – Sector partners contributed hundreds of hours over many months with no compensation and without expectation of direct benefit to their organizations. They were rewarded with the attention of government (both the Minister’s office and CMHC). The reputational benefit perceived by stakeholders, along with the perception that their collective advice is appreciated by government, provided sufficient motivation for them to persevere in the hard work of collaboration.

“ *I was surprised and quite impressed with how many meetings with the Minister or the Minister’s staff we got – it’s not easy to get an audience with the Minister.*  
– NFP Member

Government recognition of the culture of the Collaborative, described as “collaborative, sober, thoughtful, pragmatic,” encouraged participants to continue those behaviours. Government sent important signals throughout the process that it valued the Collaborative effort.

“ *I think Collaboratives should exist for every major policy initiative. I was lucky to have the Collaborative, I encourage colleagues across government to support the creation of Collaboratives. This is what governments need when they are doing big policy development.*  
– Political Staffer

## SECRETARIAT

The Secretariat was highlighted in interviews as one of the factors that differentiated the Collaborative from past cross-sector deliberation attempts. The Secretariat brought a range of services and skills to the group. Those highlighted in interviews as of greatest value to the Collaborative effort include:

**Administration** – Momentum was integral to keeping the partners motivated and participating. The Secretariat maintained regular communication, organized meetings and retreats, and took care of myriad details required to keep the process moving logistically and ensure all partners had what they needed. This ‘taking care of details’ is what allowed the partners to focus on the content.

**Process** – The Secretariat designed and facilitated the Collaborative’s deliberations. Many housing actors noted that while frustrating at times, having meetings facilitated by non-housing experts was ultimately helpful: it assured participants of the neutrality of the Secretariat and forced them to justify positions and assumptions that among experts had become accepted shorthand.

**Relationship support** – The Secretariat had or developed strong relationships with every member of the Collaborative and played an active role when necessary to motivate participants to continue working together. Established relationships across the housing sector were essential in persuading participants to come to the table at the outset. As the process developed, members of the Secretariat also developed strong individual relationships with partners. Listening and appreciating the positions of all participants while challenging them to compromise and find new solutions was ultimately appreciated by all partners.

“ *The other thing we brought is lack of ego. We were there to serve the partners, the work, the project. Over time they saw the truth of that and came to trust us.*  
– Secretariat Member

**Guardianship over the project** – All the participants were committed to the principles and objectives they defined for the Collaborative, and all had day jobs with different priorities and missions. At times, these competing identities caused tension for participants, both with each other and within themselves. The Secretariat had a clear and undivided mandate to serve the best interest of the project. This meant the only recommendations that served the Secretariat were those that found common ground among participants.

Structurally, the Secretariat was a three-person team. Keeping the Secretariat at this scale allowed for the centralized administration that was needed to maintain momentum and focus. At the same time, members of the Secretariat were intentionally selected for the multifaceted skillset they collectively brought to the Collaborative – allowing other members to focus on content. Participants were also well served by the Secretariat’s commitment to being flexible and impartial, which helped guide the Collaborative’s work according to the strongest emerging ideas rather than pre-existing standpoints.

## TEN LESSONS FOR FUTURE INITIATIVES

Based on the Collaborative experience, those involved in the process highlighted the following advice to improve and ensure success for any similar initiatives in future:

- 1. Lean on a trusted intermediary** – The creation of a neutral table requires a neutral convener with the capacity to anchor project administration, fundraise, and handle funds.
- 2. Come in with willingness to compromise** – Participants must be open to the possibility for new solutions to develop. A generative process seeking common ground among diverse organizations cannot have prescribed solutions at the outset. Participants may be reluctant, skeptical, or even suspicious. They must also approach the process open to exploring what may be possible.
- 3. Engage a Secretariat with the right skills** – A formulaic approach or static skillset will not work in all situations. Collaboration requires adapting to the content, the personalities in the group, and the requirements of the political moment: there is no set template. Take care to assemble a dedicated Secretariat with a flexible approach and the right skills for the job. Over the course of time, a project will call for various tactics. Assemble a core team that has the variety of skills to see through the policy development process.
- 4. Resource well** – Participants may have great ideas, but it takes resourcing to do the work to develop them. Resource sufficiently to enable a combination of one-on-one, small group and whole group engagement and to develop the necessary evidence through impartial research to inform a enable conversation to emerge.
- 5. Define clear purpose and timelines** – The external pressure of the National Housing Strategy put a hard stop to what in other instances became an endless conversation of differing priorities. While similar opportunities are rare, the Collaborative model could be helpful to assemble a ‘swat-team’ around a defined purpose for a limited period of time.
- 6. Make room for natural leaders to emerge** – Recognize and allow for natural leadership to emerge from participants. As participants get used to working with one another, the influence of individuals can shift and change with the circumstance. Refrain from setting too-rigid roles among participants to enable natural leadership to emerge.
- 7. Be prepared for conflict and the possibility of failure** – Collaboration is inherently messy and the opportunity for things to go sideways is significant. Personal affinity, trust, and ultimately, determination to continue working will help a group find agreement. To face conflict honestly, participants and funders must be open both to working through disagreement and to engage even if agreement cannot be reached at the time.
- 8. Take a flexible – but determined – approach to representation** – The perfectly representative group will be difficult to achieve and maintain. Be tireless in the attempt, and continually develop relationships that can be called upon when the opportunity arises. Recognize that marginalized or underrepresented groups are likely to require added resources and support to participate.
- 9. Don’t get bogged down in governance** – Aim for enough structure that participants feel secure, but otherwise as little as possible in this model. Accept that it will evolve and change with the project. Return to it as needed throughout, as opposed to insisting on cementing all details up front.
- 10. Invest in building social capital** – In person sessions and time to socialize and chat informally help build social capital to draw on in deliberation. To get something different, you have to do something different. The process cannot be simply a boardroom exercise with short meetings and high-level discussion. It must be based on deliberative processes and engagement.

## APPENDICES

### A) STATEMENT OF SHARED PURPOSE (APRIL 2016)

In Budget 2016, the Government of Canada stated that “All Canadians need and deserve housing that is safe, adequate and affordable.” It has committed to addressing the challenge of housing affordability in Canada through the development of a national housing strategy, informed by three high-level government priorities: economic growth, GHG reductions, and social inclusion.

The National Housing Collaborative (NHC) believes that housing is a major contributor to Canada’s economic growth and the wellbeing of Canadians. All Canadians benefit from a stable housing system that provides quality housing, suitable for a range of needs and income levels. Housing is integral to improving social and economic equity and has a significant impact on the health and prosperity of our society.

The NHC recognizes that 1.5 million Canadians live in core housing need and 750,000 live in extreme core housing need. Accordingly, the NHC will work to develop and propose a limited number of transformative, durable and innovative policy solutions that support a strong, vibrant housing system and can be incorporated into the national housing strategy.

These solutions will seek to improve outcomes in some or all the following areas:

- Supply of housing across the spectrum of affordability needs
- Repair and preservation of private and social rental housing
- Access to housing and diversity of form and tenure that reduce homelessness, increase choice, and meet the changing demographics of Canadians

Tools to be explored include:

- Tax strategies and financing mechanisms that provide stable, long-term capital for additional affordable market and non-market housing
- New forms of partnerships to strengthen the resilience and economic viability of the housing system, aligned with the needs of Canadians
- Access to and assembly of dedicated lands
- New forms of direct or indirect financial assistance to tenants

## **B) NHC FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (AUGUST 2016)**

### **What is the NHC?**

The National Housing Collaborative is a time-limited, cross-sector group developing a defined number of targeted, transformative policy solutions that can be incorporated in a national housing strategy.

We have done so because we recognize housing is integral to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of our society.

### **Why was the NHC formed?**

The Collaborative comes at a critical point in time. In Budget 2016, the Government of Canada stated that “All Canadians need and deserve housing that is safe, adequate and affordable.” It has committed to addressing the challenge of housing affordability in Canada through the development of a national housing strategy.

The government is looking for policy solutions that carry the support of leading national actors. This is a unique opportunity to introduce new ideas and policies across the spectrum of housing affordability.

### **Who is involved in the NHC?**

- Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness
- Canadian Federation of Apartment Associations
- Canadian Home Builders Association
- Canadian Housing Renewal Association
- Co-Operative Housing Federation of Canada
- Housing Partnership Canada
- Habitat for Humanity Canada
- National Association of Friendship Centres

Policy development support and funding provided by:

- United Way Centraide Canada
- United Way Toronto & York Region
- Maytree Foundation
- Metcal Foundation
- McConnell Foundation
- Vancity
- Evergreen

While each individual member will continue to do its own research and advocacy to meet its own mandate, the power of this Collaborative lies in bringing diverse interests together as one voice to develop and advocate for a limited number policy proposals that can shape and sustain housing affordability over the long term.

### **What is the NHC task?**

The Collaborative’s task is three-fold:

1. Identify a limited number of shared priority areas for policy development
2. Produce a set of action-oriented policy proposals, within priority areas
3. Advocate for their adoption in a national housing strategy by the federal government, starting with Budget 2017

### **What are the NHC’s goals for housing?**

The Collaborative has established a number of problem statements and high-level outcomes that provide direction for its work. They are:

#### **1. Affordability**

*Problem:* There are Canadians who cannot access housing that is affordable to them, and that is suitable and adequate.

*Ultimate goal:* Canadians have access to housing that is affordable, suitable and adequate (“suitable” and “adequate” includes options that are culturally-sensitive, labour market-accessible, and in healthy communities).

#### **2. Homelessness**

*Problem:* Homelessness persists in Canada, despite having the know-how and resources to end and prevent homelessness.

*Ultimate goal:* Homelessness is rare, brief and one-time (while striving to understand the root causes of homelessness).

#### **3. Supply**

*Problem:* There are a number of diverse supply shortages/pressure points in local markets related to: composition, distribution, form of tenure, and size or built form.

*Ultimate goal:* There is a healthy housing market that provides Canadians with choice to meet a diversity of needs.

### **What are the areas of policy development?**

Through an intensive policy development process rooted in the above goals, the Collaborative has determined that it will focus its policy efforts on the following four areas:

1. Improve affordability by expanding direct assistance to tenants
2. Increase supply by incenting investment in both new and existing affordable rental housing
3. Protect social housing by building a framework to address the expiry of operating agreements
4. Address homelessness by increasing the effectiveness of the Homelessness Partnering Strategy

The NHC will be producing policy options papers on these issues over the coming weeks, which will inform our final submission, in October 2016, to the National Housing Strategy.

### **C) PEOPLE INTERVIEWED FOR THIS REPORT**

Interviews were conducted between April 2017 and January 2018. Many thanks to the following individuals for contributing to the content of this report:

- Derek Ballantyne, DKGi
- Pedro Barata, United Way Greater Toronto
- David Crenna, Canadian Home Builders' Association
- Peter DeBarros, Habitat for Humanity Canada
- John Dickie, Canadian Federation of Apartment Associations
- Michelle German, Evergreen
- Kira Gerwing, VanCity
- Dina Graser, Graser Enterprises
- Karen Hemmingson, Housing Partnership Canada
- Sandy Houston, Metcalf Foundation
- James Hughes, McConnell Foundation
- Michelynn Lafleche, United Way Greater Toronto
- Dylan Marando, Office of Minister of Families, Children and Social Development
- Elizabeth McIsaac, Maytree
- Bill Morris, United Way/Centraide
- Jeff Morrison, Canadian Housing Renewal Association
- Hadley Nelles, Maytree
- Debbie Stewart, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- Noah Zon, Maytree

## D) SELECTED SUMMARY OF NHC JUNE 2016 RETREAT



### Attendees

*Moderator: **Dana Granofsky** (National Housing Collaborative).*

*Secretariat: **Pedro Barata** (United Way Toronto & York Region); **Derek Ballantyne** (National Housing Collaborative); **Dina Graser** (National Housing Collaborative); **Michelynn Lafèche** (United Way Toronto & York Region); **Hadley Nelles** (Maytree Foundation); **Elizabeth McIsaac** (Maytree Foundation); **Noah Zon** (Maytree Foundation); **Robert Plitt** (Evergreen CityWorks); **Michelle German** (Evergreen CityWorks).*

*Participants: **Dallas Alderson** (Federation of Canadian Municipalities); **Louise Atkins** (Canadian Housing and Renewal Association); **Jill Black** (J.E. Black & Company); **Andy Broderick** (Newmarket Funds); **Robert Cohen** (Le Réseau québécois des OSBL d'habitation); **David Crenna** (Canadian Home Builders' Association); **Peter De Barros** (Habitat for Humanity Canada); **John Dickie** (Canadian Federation of Apartment Associations); **Will Dunning** (Will Dunning Inc. Economic Research); **Sean Gadon** (City of Toronto); **Nicholas Gazzard** (Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada); **Derek Gent** (Vancity Community Foundation); **Karen Hemmingson** (BC Housing); **Kristen Holinsky** (Canadian Housing & Renewal Association); **Jim Hughes** (McConnell Foundation); **Sharad Kerur** (Ontario Nonprofit Housing Association); **Diana Petramala** (TD Economics); **Tim Ross** (Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada); **Michael Shapcott** (National Housing and Homelessness Network); **Marion Steele** (University of Guelph).*

*Assistants: **Ryan Maisonneuve** (United Way Toronto & York Region); **Sarah McNeil** (National Housing Collaborative); **Adam Yuzik** (National Housing Collaborative).*