

Mid-way developmental evaluation reflection
Affordable Housing Development Navigator (AHDN) Project
Public Good Society
March-June 2022

Introduction

This report outlines the process and findings of a mid-way developmental evaluation reflection with all the individuals involved with the AHDN Project.

Overarching questions

Where we've been: What's been working well, that potentially others could replicate if they go through the same process? What's worked/ing less well? And What improvements could be made if this process were to be replicated?

Where we're going: What opportunities do you see going forward? How could we best leverage this project/process/group in terms of serving the needs of affordable housing in Dartmouth North and beyond?.

Context: The project began in April 2021, with the Navigator Team starting workshops in December 2021. The Navigator Team's capacity building workshop series is ongoing at the time of this report (March 2022), and there is a perceived opportunity for other collective work in support of affordable housing.

Purpose: First to reflect on the journey so far, and understand the needs being met. Second, to explore what other areas of opportunity or need currently exist for the organizations participating with the AHDN project.

Intended outcome: Themes and specific ideas will be shared back with the Oversight Committee, Navigator Team and the participating organizations in order to co-create the next phase of this work.

Methods: The Developmental Evaluator conducted 9 semi-structured interviews and small group sessions with individuals involved with the initiative: 8 individuals representing all 6 participating organizations (LakeCity, YWCA Halifax, Farrell Benevolent Society, Christ Church, Welcome Housing and The Freedom Foundation who are no longer with the project); 2 members of the Backbone Team and all 3 members of the Navigator Team. Transcription software (Otter.ai) was used to capture notes. The conversations weren't intended to be confidential, however there were moments of confidentiality requested by participants.

Overview of this report

The headline of this project so far could be:

Non-profits' "minds blown" as Navigator Team wows with on point knowledge and capacity support for housing development

Overall the non-profit organizations are building an incredible amount of capacity and progressing with their development plans. The Navigator support has been invaluable. The main area arising for attention is relationships and trust between the participating organizations as well as the need for support with funding, partnerships and proposals going forward.

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FINDINGS

Strengths to-date

APPROACHES

Accessibility

Overall, people commented that accessibility was well tended to from day one of this project. Many measures were in place to ensure everyone that wanted to participate could. Some examples include:

- Checking in with everyone about best times to meet;
- Project Lead's one-on-one relationship building and creating a culture of trust;
- Openness to talk through tensions/challenges;
- Finding resources to support an individual not able to attend due to lack of organizational funding; and
- Recording workshop sessions to be available if anyone wasn't able to attend.

Responsive, adaptable & flexible

Individuals experienced multiple instances where concrete adaptations were made in a timely way when opportunities or possible challenges were identified. For example:

- Seeing the challenge of one of the non-profit organization's losing their employee, the Project Lead and backbone team found some project budget to hire the employee for the duration of this project.
- The Navigator Team shifted from 100% workshop delivery to include some one-on-one meetings with organizations after experiencing the challenge of keeping the very diverse groups and housing projects at the same pace.

Openness to emergence & experimentation

It was mentioned several times that there is an openness to emergence from all parties involved in this project. Innovation and experimentation are not linear and there is a strength in this group of being comfortable with not knowing exactly what is going on in every moment or exactly where we're going to end up.

Embedded developmental evaluation role

Some participants shared the value of the reflection provided by these mid-way interviews, which illuminated insights and allowed for different perspectives on the work at hand. As well, the sensemaking of the findings done in conversations with the Project Lead and oversight committee were named as vital to this kind emergent initiative.

FINDINGS

Strengths to-date

CONSTELLATION OF PLAYERS

Comments were shared throughout the interviews about the diverse and complementary skill sets, as well as how unique a team has been assembled.

Backbone Team & the Project Lead

- **Backbone Team** (*formerly Between the Bridges*)¹: All the backbone support they bring such as processes to build the Oversight Committee, developing the Terms of Reference, consensus decision-making, the collective impact approach, scheduling, logistics, and support for network communications. Specifically named was how helpful it was for the Navigation Team to have a single point of contact for communication with the organizations. "*[The Backbone Team] has been so vital in massaging the fuzzy edges.*"
- **Commitment to specific community**: Both the Backbone Team and the Project Lead focus on the specific geographic area of Dartmouth North. This point of strong cohesion and tenacity lends itself to the possibility of better outcomes.
- **Project Lead as a key champion**: The Project Lead is active in keeping their finger on the pulse of this initiative and all its moving parts. They are strong at stewarding the people and the process, particularly through ongoing one-on-one's with organizations to keep everything moving.
- **"Bridgers"**: The Backbone Team and the Project Lead bring the relationships of trust with the organizations involved and "bridge" between the culture of community development and the culture of architecture and development. For example it's been really useful to have them sit in the 'background' of the workshops as confidential observers and advisors (e.g., at the first meeting, the Navigation Team's complex language was noted and they were able to address this immediately).

¹ Just prior to the mid-way interviews the Between the Bridges initiative was dissolved through unforeseen circumstances. One staff member stayed on with the AHDN project in a volunteer capacity and a second was hired onto the project directly in May 2022.

FINDINGS

Strengths to-date

Navigation Team

The gratitude to have access to this professional group is deep amongst the organizations. Some strengths named include:

- **Expertise:** Quality of expertise, technical competence, professionals that know the business, as well as data and knowledge.
- **Resources:** All the resources they bring to the group such as HRM's Centre Plan, 3D modeling and design.
- **Aligned values:** Genuine desire to engage with the project and seek innovative approaches; determination and willingness to help; effort to thoroughly explore options; their patience in shepherding/navigating the organizations; and taking things slowly, step-by-step.
- **Responsiveness:** For example shifting to one-on-one's after encountering some roadblocks during the workshops series.
- **Open and fluid:** Openness to questions, and flexible agendas allowing time when needed for clarification.

Group of non-profit organizations

Some participants have drawn a lot from being with other organizations who are also working on affordable housing development.

- **Comradery:** *"It's nice to have a sense of togetherness." "It's not just me being overwhelmed by this, we're all in the same boat."*
- **Commitment and openness:** The commitment shown by most organizations to this process; it required a lot of faith as an emergent process without pre-determined concrete outcomes.

FINDINGS

Strengths to-date

HOW: PRACTICAL STEPS IN THE PROCESS

These aspects of the initiative were named as core strengths that have contributed to a strong foundation and ongoing success.

- **Housing Social Innovation Lab (SIL):** As a core condition for success, the SIL in 2019 facilitated by Between the Bridges and NouLab developed a strong understanding of the problem and launched important relationships of trust.
- **Hiring process:** Creating a Request for Proposal rather than a job posting and being open to a team or an individual, cast a wider net and meant that experts could propose possibilities.
- **Virtual format:** Strengths include that it's easier to participate virtually than to commit to in-person meetings; it enables versatility in the presentation; it enables more democracy and helps to level the power dynamics (everyone is a square); and it allows for recording.
- **Session recordings:** Helpful for individuals not able to attend and to keep important segments of information for future reference.
- **Workshop series:** The Navigator Team's workshops provide real capacity building and skills that are directly useful for the individuals and the organizations; a space for co-learning amongst the organizations; and offer efficiencies by limiting information repetition by the Navigator Team.
- **Guest speakers at the workshops:** Bringing in guest speakers/experts brings key information and allows for longer-lasting impact through making connections and resources available.
- **One-on-one's:** Having one-on-one's between the Navigator Team and the organizations between workshops has allowed for the projects to get concretely established and increased the relevance of the workshops.
- **Duration of project:** Having the project spaced out over many months makes it more impactful than, for example, a short intensive workshop as it allows for the work to grow, evolve and deepen.
- **Flexible funds:** Allocating some of the budget as flexible funds has allowed for important pivots and actions including bringing in guest experts, and hiring an employee for a non-profit with limited financial capacity.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

- **"Housing is hot right now":** Opportunities and engagement are high. There are many resources available for this issue that can be mobilized.

FINDINGS

Challenges to-date

SO MANY MOVING PARTS

Though some found the diversity of groups a strength, many have experienced challenges related to the multiple levels of diversity in the group of organizations:

- **Diversity of non-profit organizations:** Finding a sense of the project with so many different organizations/structures etc. has been a main challenge.
- **Groups at very different stages of housing goals:** This has meant that the journey of other projects is often less relevant as the context is so different.
- **Pace:** Given the diversity of organizations and stages of housing projects, pacing is a challenge – to keep all the groups moving and able to go through the material together.
- **Low clarity:** Due to the innovative and experimental nature of the project there have been points of low clarity about the end result and how to get there.

PIVOT: The Navigator Team shifting to one-on-one sessions with each organization between workshops alleviated each of these challenges to some degree.

IDEAS FOR REPLICATION: Cohort models with organizations of similar non-profit structure/vision/goals and/or group together projects at a similar stage in the development process.

FINDINGS

Challenges to-date

GROUP DYNAMICS

Overall a key tension for the group of organizations is that some hold goals of this being a coalition or a place that can bring a united voice to affordable housing in Dartmouth North; while some others are comfortable to explore collaboration possibilities and then move on.

- **Different core values:** Differing beliefs about what is needed in the affordable housing sector (e.g., harm-reduction vs. recovery homes/zero tolerance).
- **Commitment from participating organizations:** There are sentiments that the project would be stronger to have the same level of commitment from each organization and the same level of the organizational representative (e.g., someone within the organization that is directly involved in this work and level of decision-making/strategic thinking).
- **Equal representation:** having different numbers of individuals take part in the meeting can skew the conversation (e.g., multiple people from one organization asking questions vs. one person from another organization who is quieter).

IDEAS FOR MOVING FORWARD & REPLICATION

Creating a strong culture of trust and process amongst the group: including developing group agreements and capacity building (e.g., trauma-informed approaches).

FINDINGS

Challenges to-date

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

- **Language:** The Navigation Team's language has been experienced as abstract, complex and sometimes difficult to follow.

RESPONSIVENESS: The Navigation Team has been working on their plain language and is creating a glossary of terms.

- **Funding:** For example, a staffing shortage at a partner organization and a contract ending has occurred during the project so far. The contract was renewed and funds were found within the project budget to support the local organization to participate.

RESPONSIVENESS: The Backbone Team and Project Lead explored options and were able to set aside funds from the project budget to support an individual to continue working at a participating organization on the housing project. The Oversight Committee ratified this action.

- **Technology:** The regular blips with virtual collaboration. For example, the recordings don't always work when trying to stream on a phone (*in this case the phone was the only device available for this individual*).

FINDINGS

Challenges to-date

BACKBONE TEAM AND PROJECT LEAD

- **The Project Lead as a key to the process:** Early in this initiative the Co-Lead had to step back for health reasons which left one volunteer carrying leadership for the project. This was identified by one individual as a risk and vulnerability to the success of the project.
- **Loss of Backbone Team support:** Since Between the Bridges became suddenly unavailable in February 2022 there has been a gap in backbone services such as scheduling, coordinating, thinking partner, support work in-between workshops and meetings and supporting the building of trusting relationships.
- **Onboarding and support for new entrants:** Some individuals mentioned the benefit of more support if a group enters part-way in the process or has staff change-over.

RESPONSIVENESS: A former staffer from Between the Bridges has carried on some basic backbone support in a volunteer capacity and in May 2022 the Oversight Committee ratified using remaining project funds to bring back another former Backbone Team member on a short-term contract.

FINDINGS

Impacts to-date

Understanding the scope & scale of housing development

Everyone noted in some way how lost and overwhelmed they have been trying to understand the full scope of housing development, where they are in the process and what the next steps are. This project has given a sense of scope for housing development and orientation as to where each group is on that journey. This includes: what timelines are realistic and what's within the realm of possibility and the helpful perspective of *"Well, this is going to take a LONG time."*

Learning & capacity building

Overall participants agree that this process is a rich environment of learning from the Navigator Team and from each other. In this way, having a group of organizations with the same goals coming together creates efficiencies for the sector (i.e., less recreating the wheel and opportunities for partnership).

The Navigator Team is providing real capacity building and skills that are directly useful for the individuals and the organizations. Aspects mentioned include: the big picture of the steps for the process, the development process, construction process, city process, different organizational processes, understanding zoning, 'set-back', the City Plan and transferable skills of generic project management. Participants find workshop materials to be informative, pertinent and helpful (e.g., requirements for a new development).

"We've learned way more than we thought we ever would, it's been extremely helpful, it's been very eye-opening."

"It's amazing to have access to professionals and check stuff that I'm learning."

"Whether it's pertaining to my project or not, I'm always learning."

"I wouldn't even know who to connect with, much less make the connections for this type of work."

FINDINGS

Impacts to-date

Access to information & resources

A major impact for participants is the curated information and resources being offered by the Navigator Team for immediate use and also for future reference. Some examples given include: HRM's Centre Plan; zoning envelopes; knowledge of related laws; insights into what the City may or may not be open to negotiating; parking space or not; and presenters such as the individual from CMHC.

Relationships & trust building

Participants are finding relationships within the group and with resource people to be impactful. Some organizations are getting a lot from new and strengthened relationships within the group and appreciate the time to build relationships. Most are getting a lot from building relationships with resource people such as the Navigator Team, staff at HRM Planning and CMHC.

One organization values being involved with the people who are building affordable housing in the community and the opportunity to bring in perspectives that will help clients in need of housing.

MOVING FORWARD

Ideas for this project

The following are ideas shared by one or more than one person on how to improve the process going forward.

The Navigation Team's capacity building workshops

There were a number of ideas from the group about ways to improve the experience of the workshops:

Check-ins & check-outs at every workshop with everyone on the call, including the backbone team, to support ongoing understanding of roles, and to continue to build trust and relationships.

Having a consistent check-out ensures that people are going away feeling they've accomplished something and capturing questions at the end that people have not had a chance to raise. It can be the same one every time, such as: What is a key learning and a question that you're holding going forward? And similarly starting with something like: do you have questions that came up for you since last time?

Encouraging different levels of participation. One participant shared a desire to feel welcomed to watch and participate when ready, coming from a place of feeling a bit lost and sometimes overwhelmed by the information. This individual wanted to be explicitly offered invitations such as: "You can always pass if we come to you and you're not ready or don't have something to share."

Supporting different types of adult learners. Some examples given were to provide some materials beforehand if folks want to review or flip through the presentation and share some of the key terms before each session so folks can follow along more easily and google items before beginning.

Support materials & resources

Some ideas for materials included: a non-profit affordable housing how-to; FAQs; sharing the visual spectrum of the project process breaking down what's happening at each stage, who's involved, and here's how long this might take (e.g., planning takes 2 years, so find funding to support that; these are the different professions who need to be hired; this is when you need to hire an architect).

MOVING FORWARD

Ideas for this project

Support to explore opportunities for collaboration

Multiple people mentioned their interest in support for focused conversations between workshops to explore opportunities for collaboration on housing development projects. For example there are a few opportunities within the group participating in this project for collaboration where one group might have land and another needs land, or two organizations have potential to create a strong partnership to apply for funding together.

Timely moment for a housing coalition & funding availability

Given this particular moment in time where housing is a hot topic and funding from all levels of government is forthcoming one individual posed the questions: How can this group or some constellation of folks in this group come together and act as one voice to seize the funding opportunities coming this way? There is an opportunity to make giving money to Dartmouth North the easy political decision through a collective project or even multiple separate projects that are working together with a collective governing body.

Need of capacity & support with funding, proposals & partnerships

Funding landscape & private sector partnerships: A theme amongst the non-profits is needing support to network, broker and build relationships with the private sector and government. Questions came up such as: How do non-profits find matching private funding for CMHC grants? How can non-profits make housing development a feasible financial possibility? How do we navigate the private sector world in terms of partnership? What are our strengths as a non-profit partner? What are the real numbers that make all this work? Is it even possible?

Support to put together proposals & packages for government/funders: Needing support with proposal development and pulling together all materials into a polished package including brokering relationships to create a strong proposal/plan as mentioned above.

Partnering with developers: Are there best practices for building a successful relationship with the developer and still maintaining control of the project?

MOVING FORWARD

Ideas for this project

Based on feedback from those interviewed, these are some items to consider going forward (as of March 2022):

Re-visit the structures to ensure they are still serving and/or are needed

Currently the structures include:

- Project Lead conducts ongoing one-on-one check-ins with organizations involved in the project,
- the Oversight Committee meets bi-weekly, and
- the Navigation Team runs workshops bi-weekly with breaks for organizational one-on-one's to advance individual projects.

There is some redundancy perceived by participants currently between the Project Lead's check-ins, the Oversight Committee and the Workshops. Some questions arising: Now that there is established trust and ways of working together/cohesion, is there a way to lessen the work here? Is there a place where we could pull back at the moment? Is there room to tighten up at the Oversight Committee if it's an info-sharing meeting or one where we need to make a decision?

Re-visit timing for the meetings & workshops

There are some different experiences and needs including: the end of day is tiring, needing a hard stop of 5pm and it being a tough time to participate based on other work priorities. Can we have a discussion to see if the meeting time is still serving as best it can and if adjustments need to be made?

REPLICATION

Ideas for replicating this project

The following are ideas and recommendations shared by individuals interviewed about replicating this process and/or the next iteration of this work going forward.

PRE-CONDITONS

1. **Start with a social lab** to deeply explore the problem and start building relationships.
2. **Invest in the constellation of players:** A backbone to support the project (*How does the investment in a backbone get funded?*), one or more champion(s) who believes in and will fight for the project, an embedded evaluator to support a culture of learning and shifting practices to improve outcomes, and a Navigation Team who is values-aligned (not just about getting professionals with the skills/expertise).
3. **Longer term funding commitment.** This work needs more than a few months to be meaningful.
4. **Larger pot of funding.** One reality is that the Navigation Team is going well above and beyond their stated contract (~10x). This goes back to the values-based alignment and belief in the project, however this is a key consideration to keep in mind when thinking about replication.

HOW TO

1. **Ideas for cohort model or streams:**
 - **Non-profit/organizational types:** bring together similar non-profits to go through Phase 1. For example: Churches who want to transition land or infrastructure; organizations working on tiny homes; organizations working on large-scale projects; rural contexts etc.
 - **Readiness, early stage <-> advanced stages:** bring together organizations at similar places along the project journey.
2. **Work through one in depth example together:** Bring a prototype from an existing project participant or hypothetical project for everyone to learn from and understand the nuts and bolts and real numbers of a project from start to finish.

OUTCOMES

Reflection leading to change

In developmental evaluation, the goal is to have timely feedback loops between collecting information, sensemaking with invested groups, and shifting ways of working to improve practices and outcomes. At the time this report is being written (May-June 2022), there have already been a number of feedback loops, reflection discussions and shifts in practice. Some examples of this observed by the developmental evaluator include:

- Discussions within the backbone team (evaluator, project lead, backbone support) about the themes and findings from this mid-way reflection focusing on wanting to further support relationships and trust amongst the group.
- Multiple discussions resulted in hiring a backbone support staff person that was lost when Between the Bridges dissolved unexpectedly. The Oversight Committee agreed to this and is working with the consultant to pick up the thread of what is needed for the organizations to be successful going forward beyond what the Navigator Team is able to offer.
- Revisiting the project structures (Oversight Committee, Project Lead's one-on-ones, workshops etc.) and checking in together about: are they still serving a need? Do they need to shift? Resulting in an ongoing conversation, while deciding to keep the existing structures as is.
- Multiple check-ins with one group who was not showing up to workshops regularly and not responding to communications. This resulted in re-orienting their role in the group to leverage the strengths they have to offer, as they are not interested in building housing they are now going to review all project plans with the perspective of working directly with people who are unhoused.
- The Navigator Team shifted practices, such as working towards more plain language; creating a task tracking document to better liaise with the organizations and the Oversight Committee; and added a pulse check at the end of the workshops to allow groups to reflect on the materials presented.
- Clarifying/illuminating the different goals individuals have for this project including: to advance a specific housing project; to build relationships and learn from others; to build a coalition that can attract large funding resources; to bring community organizations together to strengthen the sector; and to test the feasibility of a project idea.