

Promising Practices for Resident Engagement:

**Ways to Foster Trust and
Strengthen Collaborative
Approaches Across Toronto**



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This report was collaboratively developed by the **Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods (TSNS)** Advisory Group (2022–2023) and **Social Planning Toronto (SPT)** through community consultations with resident leaders across the city, with a focus on Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and Emerging Neighbourhoods. It synthesizes recommendations from residents and practical steps to support the City of Toronto, funders, and community-based organizations to build meaningful partnerships and foster collaborative approaches to resident engagement across Toronto.

Written by: Rima Athar
Copy edited by: Jasmyn Galley
Designed by: Janie Hao

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Social Planning Toronto
2 Carlton St., Suite 1720
Toronto, ON M5B 1J3

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To learn more about the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy (TSNS), visit: www.toronto.ca/tsns.

About the Project

From July 2022 to March 2023, members of the **Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy (TSNS)** Advisory Group engaged with **Social Planning Toronto (SPT)** to design and implement a research project that explored best practices for resident engagement.

The project aimed to centre the expertise and current realities of resident leaders across Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) and Emerging Neighbourhoods, and to identify tools and approaches that facilitate more meaningful engagement and trust-based partnerships for neighbourhood and community development across Toronto.

The partnership with the TSNS Advisory Group members as leaders in the community provided the necessary expertise and networks to ensure the research would be informed by the perspectives and experiences of equity-deserving residents from across the Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and Emerging Neighbourhoods. Emphasizing consultations across these socio-demographic and geographic lines aligns with the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy and other City of Toronto equity strategies.

This report presents key recommendations from residents, as a beginning resource that we hope will guide community-based organizations, funders, and the City of Toronto to strengthen resident engagement processes. Direct quotes are included in the report as illustrative examples of best practices shared by residents in the consultations. As these recommendations are based on feedback from 164 residents from 34 neighbourhoods, they represent only a sample of experiences in Toronto. We encourage readers to use this report as a reference, to explore how resident engagement processes that you are part of can better foster trust and collaboration going forward.

Research Process

The research was carried out in three phases. The first step was a brief literature scan conducted by SPT. Given the breadth of existing literature, we chose to hone in on insights specifically from Toronto-based resident groups' and community-based organizations' project and evaluation reports on resident engagement and community development processes between 2015 and 2020. The findings from these reports formed the basis of our analysis and were presented to representatives of community-based organizations across Toronto and the TSNS Advisory Group members for initial validation.

Key lessons from the literature scan reflected the need for the City, service providers and community-based organizations to move towards:

- Participatory program design, implementation and evaluation
- Support for autonomous resident leadership and network building at the neighbourhood level
- Integrating a focus on resident well-being in engagement processes
- Practicing open communication, mutual accountability and responsiveness
- Making accountable and transparent decisions informed by evidence
- Publicizing and sharing consultation findings and evaluation data back with communities
- Providing more sustainable funding and program support

Research Process (Continued)

The second step and heart of the research was holding a community consultation that would surface residents' voices directly. The goal was to explore what aligned with the findings from the literature review and what additional and new lessons had emerged from the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The community consultation was co-designed by an 18-person working group, including 15 TSNS Advisory Group members, two SPT Community Planners, and a Resident Liaison. Through four planning sessions from August to September 2022, the working group identified key research questions, designed the mixed-method research tools, developed an equitable consultation budget, and tailored an accessible outreach strategy that would engage a wide array of perspectives and views from across Toronto. In October and November 2022, working group members carried out 25 engagements, reaching 164 residents across more than 34 neighbourhoods in Toronto. This included seven in-person focus groups (75 residents), two virtual focus groups (14 residents), 14 virtual in-depth interviews, and 61 online survey responses.

Between January and February 2023, SPT staff synthesized the research findings and presented the data to the

working group in a validation process. The consultation findings affirmed the key needs identified in the literature review while providing insights into the residents' motivations, hopes and inspirations for civic participation and the common challenges and barriers to meaningful resident engagement. The research findings also brought forward concrete examples of what's working and specific recommendations for municipal departments, funders, and community-based organizations on how to shift practices to meet the needs of the moment.

The final step of the research was transforming the findings into a pilot project that could integrate and elevate the best practices for resident engagement. To that end, the working group developed a series of workshops to support local groups, organizations, funders and the City to engage with the practices outlined here in more depth. These workshops have been compiled into A Resident Engagement Toolkit: Exploring Power, Participation, Communication and Decision-making, accessible at socialplanningtoronto.org.

Below we share the key recommendations from the consultation.

Key Recommendations for Resident Engagement

Commit to Meaningful, Trust-based Partnerships and Support Resident Leadership

The consultation reaffirmed that residents' civic engagement across Toronto is a true labour of love, demonstrating residents' expertise and commitment to building a just, kind, caring, inclusive, and equitable city. Residents' primary motivations for engaging include:

- Fostering social connections and strengthening intergenerational support systems
- Gaining inspiration, mentorship and peer support
- Building safety within and across communities
- Securing better outcomes for youth and the next generation
- Changing narratives and public perception to advance equity
- Co-creating lasting solutions to social, environmental and economic disparities

What We Heard

“The biggest motivation is to see the change.”

“It's all about people, building relationships, meeting neighbours because it helps create a sense of safety, belonging when I know them by name. As we are a diverse community where apartment dwellers live beside single-dwelling housing, we meet together in our garden as equals with a common interest in food and growing. Seeing the “fruits” of our labour, seeing our food grow, harvesting and then sharing it with other residents and social agencies distributing food to the community. Seeing our advocacy extend to a newly elected city official who represents the community and who we worked side by side within the garden makes me hopeful for new beginnings and direction.”

Commit to Meaningful, Trust-based Partnerships and Support Resident Leadership (Continued)

The consultation also highlighted the need for an intentional shift in the principles underlying resident engagement. The primary finding and recommendation was for the City of Toronto and community-based organizations to commit to partnerships and collaborations that **support residents to succeed and thrive as leaders in their own right, as equal partners, co-creators and autonomous organizers of neighbourhood change.**

This requires a concerted and active shift away from top-down approaches which assume that:

- Residents are simply subjects of interventions instead of the rights-holders who programs and services are meant to serve,
- Residents should be grateful for any participation opportunities presented to them, even if they don't meet residents' needs,
- Residents should be content working without compensation on an organization's project,
- Residents are always in need of capacity-strengthening, while organizational staff possess the knowledge and skills for action, and
- Residents should be content to provide input and share experiences while organizational staff make the actual decisions.

Meaningful partnerships and genuine collaborations are possible when residents are recognized and engaged as equal peers in the design, planning, and implementation of engagement processes, programs and services. This means that **residents have active decision-making power, and their contributions at all levels of the process are valued and recognized as co-leadership.**

It is important to note that when residents are invited to participate in projects or to sit on advisory boards where they do not hold decision-making power, such models of resident engagement cannot be considered collaborations. Mutual benefits can certainly be generated through information sharing and advisories, but shared power is essential to move towards meaningful partnerships. Whatever the model for engagement, resident engagement processes need to be held by trust-based relationships. In the following section, we identify how organizations can foster trust-based relationships with residents.

“In theory, ‘Best Practice’ is easy—the challenge is in the practice.”

What Can Organizations Do to Build Trust-Based Relationships?

Build authentic relationships

Building trust-based relationships takes time and commitment. It is about creating a personal relationship in addition to a professional one, and it requires deep, honest conversations. This is often done best by showing up in the community and spending time with residents in their spaces. Bring your whole self to these interactions and take time to build rapport so people are familiar with you.

Be upfront about expectations & limitations

At times, residents will benefit from participating in information sessions, workshops, and training and serving on advisories run by organizations — while other times, residents are seeking genuine partnership and collaboration opportunities to create long-lasting change. Foster trust by being clear on your organization's role, the type of engagement process you're running, the decision-making structure, and the expectations and limits of residents' engagement opportunities with your organization. Providing clarity up front and acknowledging the existing power dynamics ensures that residents can choose to participate with full and informed consent. This, in turn, mitigates unmatched expectations, tensions and conflicts.

What Can Organizations Do to Build Trust-Based Relationships?

Design programs with a deliberate equity lens

When designing programs, intentionally apply an equity lens to remove or reduce participation barriers, starting with accessibility. You can collaborate with organizations that specialize in accessibility to review your program design and develop an appropriate baseline budget for your engagement projects that account for diverse physical, linguistic, visual, health, safety, and learning needs. Integrate this baseline accessibility budget into all new funding proposals.

To ensure that compensation for resident participation is fair, equitable and transparent, develop policies that salaries, honorariums, transportation, meals, and more, and that are based on the expected level of engagement and commitment. Establishing a fair, equitable and transparent compensation policy demonstrates your commitment to upholding ethical labour practices, especially for residents leading neighbourhood change who are most impacted by socio-economic marginalization, discrimination, and structural inequities.

Across all kinds of engagement activities, residents continue to request and respond most positively to accessible, participatory, creative, and interactive methodologies that meet diverse learning needs and styles. Ensure that your staff, facilitators, consultants, and outreach workers have a deep understanding of these kinds of adult education methods and can design and evaluate your programs to support and strengthen meaningful engagement.

What Can Organizations Do to Build Trust-Based Relationships?

Centre resident well-being in every engagement process

Within the nonprofit sector, there is often pressure to move at warp speed to address the urgent needs of the moment. However, it is critical to advance engagement approaches that prioritize the well-being of residents and allow for the slow pace of community work and systems change. Build in extra time to allow for flexibility in project plans to meet and respond to emerging needs and new ideas. Engagement programs must not reroute residents' energies away from their own priorities, increase stress, overburden residents, or result in burnout due to unreasonably short timelines and inadequate human resource support.

Build a consistent culture and practice of resident appreciation throughout any project cycle and across your annual plan. This can happen in many ways, from small to large. For example, you can share small thank-you notes and appreciation gifts at the end of an engagement or hold events celebrating residents' contributions with staff, partners, and funders. You can also amplify resident leaders' work, voices, and experiences through profiles in your newsletters, social media, reports to funders, and public annual reports. When doing this, always ensure that the profiles reflect residents' words and narratives and that residents have actively consented to being featured.

Fostering resident well-being also stems from clear, consistent, timely, and compassionate communication, which includes creating safer spaces for honest feedback. Resident leaders are experts in neighbourhood work and must have opportunities to express critical feedback without fear of reprisal or dismissal. When you receive feedback from residents, demonstrate how you will integrate it into your work or outline why you cannot. This report-back process is often overlooked yet plays a critical role in building trust through accountability and transparency.

Especially when working on community safety issues—such as gender-based violence, gun violence, racism, or crisis response—ensure that your program has been designed with a culturally responsive and trauma-informed lens. Equip your program staff, partners, and outreach workers with the knowledge, tools, and resources to conduct their work sensitively and without discrimination. Where possible, conduct an assessment and budget for mental health and social supports that may be needed within the engagement process, such as access to therapists, social workers, and wellness practitioners.

What Can Organizations Do to Build Trust-Based Relationships?

Support residents' solutions

Build an intentional learning culture in your organization so that your resident engagement programs and processes stem directly from community-identified needs and gaps. By learning in real time about what is and is not meeting communities' needs, your organization will be better positioned to partner and collaborate with groups to build on successful outcomes.

Too often, a lack of input from residents prior to program development results in organizations either duplicating efforts or creating projects that do not address communities' needs and advance localized solutions. This hinders a streamlined and effective approach to neighbourhood and community development. You can consider inviting residents to workshop ideas for new funding proposals and provide feedback and guidance before submitting them to a funder. Compensate them for their expert opinion and review.

When developing new ideas or programs, engage residents in co-creation and co-design processes so that solutions are jointly developed by diverse stakeholders. Remember, if residents do not share decision-making power in your process, then that process cannot be labelled as 'co-creation' or 'co-design.' It's important to also commit to flexibility in a shared

process so that you can change course and adapt to emerging needs and opportunities together.

If acting as a trustee or a partner of resident groups, there are times when it can be helpful to offer your expertise or resources that could benefit a residents' project. However, this should be done through conversations with residents' about their goals and needs. Be open to residents' objections to your offers, and refrain from imposing your ideas, agendas, and priorities on residents' initiatives.

To build on existing successes of neighbourhood change, invest in solutions that strengthen place-based social infrastructure. This includes:

- Supporting residents to hold inclusive and welcoming neighbourhood events to build community,
- Connecting residents with local organizations (e.g., schools, local businesses, developers, municipal agencies) to develop shared programs, and
- Providing free training on the essential skills and certifications needed to obtain permits for community events (for example, food handlers certification, CPR, first-aid, health and safety).

What Can Organizations Do to Build Trust-Based Relationships?

Be Accountable and Transparent Leaders

The first step to fostering accountability and transparency is to bring residents into your thinking and decision-making processes. When residents are engaged as peers and partners, they should have access to the same information as you and your staff throughout a program's life cycle. This includes administration, finances, contractual obligations, and other factors impacting program/project design and implementation.

It's important to clearly outline how your program design has an equity-driven impact approach. This can be done through presenting your evaluation data and budgets, demonstrating how program/project design has shifted to meet needs and reach stated goals, and supporting residents to understand the reasoning behind the distribution of resources. These acts of transparency enhance a shared understanding of a program's design, intentions, and expected impact and can minimize competition and conflict.

A best practice to measure progress and impact is establishing indicators and baseline data for a project and committing to publicly evaluating progress toward goals. Take the opportunity to further collaborate with the community by engaging residents and partners in making sense of the data. This fosters an inclusive culture of accountability and transparency and ensures residents understand what's working, what can be improved, and how to scale place-based solutions.

What Can Organizations Do to Build Trust-Based Relationships?

Fund and support residents to succeed

When providing grants to residents, provide flexible funding that can cover essential costs, including staff, technology, transportation, venues, supplies, and meals.

Ensure that grants are large enough to cover the costs of program implementation and that administrative reporting requirements are low so residents' efforts are channelled towards successfully reaching their goals. Providing standard templates for narrative and financial reporting and reviewing these requirements directly with residents before a project starts, facilitates smoother program administration. Consider alternative report-back methods as well, including interviews and observational site-visits, that could ease the written reporting requirements on residents. Discuss the options with grant recipients, to identify what works best for them. Overall, providing larger grants with simplified, accessible application and reporting requirements demonstrates that you trust residents' capacities, expertise and commitments to carry out community-building and organizing work ethically and effectively.

Whether residents are directly leading and organizing engagement sessions and other activities on behalf of your

organization or receiving an independent project grant from your organization, they must receive funds in advance to cover the implementation costs. Make sure that the process to access these funds is simple, timely, accessible and responds to resident feedback. Advancing costs is essential so that residents who already experience income insecurity are not financially burdened by having to cover your organization's project expenses out of pocket or waiting for reimbursements.

Increasingly, residents are seeking access to meaningful funding to pursue medium- and long-term neighbourhood change goals. Yet, most often, small grants of \$500-\$2000 are made available to resident groups for one-off events. While such funds are needed and welcomed, they rarely cover the cost of resident organizers' time and energies, and they can limit creative thinking to immediate and short-term goals. When organizations and funders provide larger grants, longer project timelines, and low administrative reporting requirements, this creates a more enabling environment for residents to reach their community development goals successfully.

What Can Organizations Do to Build Trust-Based Relationships?

Partner with residents through accompaniment support

In addition to direct funding, your organization can strengthen partnerships with residents by using your resources to support resident groups based on their expressed needs. Accompaniment support refers to when a funder or granting agency acts as a partner and provides 'in-kind' or non-financial kinds of holistic supports to their recipients.

Accompaniment support will vary in each relationship. It is best determined through transparent, honest, and thoughtful conversations with residents you partner with to ask for and discuss how such support would be beneficial.

Examples of meaningful and underprovided financial and in-kind supports identified by resident groups in the consultations include:

- Contributing staff time to resident-led projects to take on tasks that local groups request support for
- Access to leadership development for residents based on the specific skills they want to build
- Scholarships for resident leaders to acquire essential skills certifications, such as Food Handling, First Aid, CPR, and others
- Funding participatory learning and evaluation processes for resident-led projects so residents can build on their successes
- Facilitating free office and event space for resident groups' use, e.g., supporting residents to book spaces where organizational registration is required or where agencies receive discounted rates
- Offering your office and event spaces free of charge
- Providing resident groups with access to technical resources (laptops, computers, printers, phones) for their organizing
- Connecting residents to new funding opportunities and supporting them in developing their own independent proposals
- Facilitating organizational development processes when groups want to grow.

Ultimately, the consultation highlights that organizations that show up as peers and learning partners with residents lay the foundation for meaningful collaborations and better engagement processes. The following narratives from residents who participated in the consultations demonstrate some of the above steps and their positive impacts in practice.

Narratives of Success: Examples of How to Strengthen Resident Engagement

These quotes are illustrative examples of best practices shared by residents in the consultations. Self-identifiers have not been included in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The quotes were selected from the responses from the 164 residents from 34 neighbourhoods who participated in the consultation. They represent only a sample of experiences in Toronto.

Building trust-based partnerships

“I feel appreciated by the agency. In return for my volunteer assistance and coordination, though I was unpaid, they offered me space in their program for my children. This allowed me the time to be involved and reassurance that my children will be occupied in a positive program. They involved me in their program planning, and I learned this skill and felt they listened to my suggestions. When parents indicated they did not receive certain items in their package from me, I learned to do documentation to ensure that I can prove it was distributed. The agency staff was supportive and trusted me.”

Providing strong social infrastructure supports

“As a resident of this community for most of my life, I have been fortunate to be supported throughout my years by classmates, teachers, neighbours, community workers, and centres. I have been able to lean on individuals and spaces to play, heal and learn... Community members and spaces have provided me and allowed me to access the support I needed to further myself. Getting involved in the community is my way of paying forward the critical support I received from others growing up in similar circumstances or those who need it more. Further, as a visible minority, it was important for me to share my voice and be a face for others to feel seen and welcomed in spaces. These factors

motivate me to stay engaged. Getting involved is not only about giving to others but also about collectively learning from one another.”

“I live in the community and see the struggles and gaps in services. I feel that I need to contribute to the needs of the community. It makes me feel helpful to do what I do to improve the living conditions of residents and, in doing so, also help my family. E.g., Advocate and help implement programs for youth and seniors. Getting involved also allows me to get connected with others. When I hear the issues of residents, it motivates me to invite others to come together as a group to build a voice for our neighbourhood and to make things happen. Forming authentic and supportive friendships keeps me and others [to] stay engaged.”

Narratives of Success: Examples of How to Strengthen Resident Engagement

Building trust-based partnerships

Supporting residents to hold safe and inclusive community events

“Underserved and underrepresented folks must be prioritized in outreach, and we must be willing to ask them what makes them feel comfortable in order to plan safe and inclusive community events. It is helpful to have space for unstructured dialogue and time to just ‘be’—intentional time and space without an agenda or plan (think family cook-out). Hosting an event around a common interest (sports, arts and crafts, cultural events) can be a really good way to bring people together. For example, hosting a basketball program for youth that centers mental health and well-being/life skills is a way to bridge the knowledge gap in mental health and create opportunities for young people to engage with mental health professionals in a way that is inclusive and welcoming.”

“A key practice to our group is that there [are] no barriers to being involved or engaging in the garden or food program at the start of their volunteering. That is, people are invited to events and gardens without asking them to join a membership or sign a waiver prior to [ensure they are] feeling like they belong or are welcomed. Later, as a commitment, some people will choose to be members, but all are welcomed regardless.”

Narratives of Success: Examples of How to Strengthen Resident Engagement

Ensuring clear, consistent, timely and compassionate communication

“When I applied to the climate action program and the pollinator program grants, City staff responded in a timely manner and were very friendly and supportive throughout the process. The programs also encouraged mentors and collaborations with schools and other agencies. My mentors and partnerships made it easier to submit and implement the project.”

Funding essential costs, including paid positions

“We were able to receive funding to pay two project coordinators to do 350 hours [over] the course of the project for nine months. This funding allowed two of our long-time volunteers to dedicate more time to the project and implement four times more events than we originally applied to do. It also built the capacity of both volunteers as leaders and assisted them financially to make it sustainable for them to be very active. They used this opportunity to also reach out specifically to residents that are not currently engaged in their circles, such as newcomers and families with children with disabilities.”

“While I was a full-time student with a part-time job, receiving honorariums and bus tokens for leading and participating in community projects helped reduce the barriers to getting involved. Further, having individuals with a shared mindset support you along the way as peers and mentors supports my well-being.”

“What happens is that organizations rely very, very happily on residents’ volunteer labour, with no pathway to any kind of empowerment. The most obvious pathway to empowerment would be giving residents a job, right? And that’s when you start to see excuses from organizational staff, saying for example, that you can’t have a paid job as an outreach worker or resident advocate because you don’t have a degree in social work. But you know what? I don’t have a social work degree! And if it wasn’t for this Executive Director taking a chance on me, I would probably still be homeless, right? What we are finally seeing is successful models like the COVID-19 ambassadors’ program, where residents were paid to be outreach workers, and that model might expand beyond the pandemic response. It’s a great opportunity. We need to think about long-term models of engagement, that also consider community income generation and support for residents.”

Narratives of Success: Examples of How to Strengthen Resident Engagement

Supporting residents in developing their leadership

“Critical to the food program and community garden was access to food resource library, manpower, and training from social agencies. [The organizations] also provided volunteers ongoing training for free on composting, food handling, First Aid, CPR, technology, social media training, [and] workshops to understand the issues faced by people experiencing homelessness and drug addiction.”

“What helps is when staff champion existing groups and connect them to opportunities where they can grow their knowledge and experience, not just email opportunities but call them up, talk about the programs and how this would help them. There are so many things flying around that groups cannot see the opportunities through the noise.”

Conclusion

Residents' civic and community participation across Toronto is a marked demonstration of their commitment to building a just, caring, and equitable city. Residents tirelessly take on work in the community without the promise of personal benefit or reward. Instead, they are motivated by the hope that it will contribute to the improvement of the social, community, neighbourhood, and environmental landscape.

The findings of this research point to how the City of Toronto and community organizations can acknowledge, value, and amplify these contributions. Through meaningful collaboration and trust-based relationships that recognize that residents are equal partners, co-creators and autonomous organizers of change, the City and organizations can embark on a path to fostering long-lasting partnerships with residents.

Included in this report are eight practical recommendations that provide a starting point for this work:

1. Build authentic relationships through time and authenticity
2. Be upfront about expectations and limitations
3. Design programs with a deliberate equity lens to remove or reduce participation barriers
4. Centre resident well-being through resident appreciation, communication processes, and culturally responsive and trauma-informed lens
5. Support residents' solutions
6. Be accountable and transparent leaders
7. Fund and support residents to succeed
8. Partner with residents through accompaniment support

An important component to this work is the shift away from top-down structures and towards approaches which afford residents decision-making power and leadership roles. The many narratives of success included in this report highlight the potential of what can be achieved when this is done.

Learn More

Thank you for engaging with these findings! We hope these key recommendations, examples, and narratives support the City of Toronto and community-based organizations to tangibly and practically shift approaches to resident engagement moving forward.

If you want to engage further with the recommendations in this report, consider inviting resident leaders to hold one of the workshops from A Resident Engagement Workshop Toolkit: Exploring Power, Participation, Communication and Decision-Making with your team. You can access it at socialplanningtoronto.org and/or find it at a Toronto Public Library branch.

If you want to learn more about the research project, or to get in touch with any of the TSNS Advisory Group members who participated in the project, contact Social Planning Toronto at: info@socialplanningtoronto.org.

