

Community Funding Framework

Midterm Review – What We Learned Report

A summary of community voices and sector insights from the midterm review of Ottawa's Community Funding Framework.

October 2025



Acknowledgement

The City of Ottawa would like to sincerely thank all the organizations, staff, volunteers, and community members who contributed to the midterm review of the Community Funding Framework (CFF).

This work would not have been possible without the honesty and generosity of the agencies who shared their time, perspectives, and lived experiences. Whether through completing the survey, joining focus groups, or engaging in conversations, your voices are at the heart of this report.

We recognize that many of you participated while balancing the daily pressures of serving your communities — pressures that have only grown in recent years. Your commitment shows the strength of Ottawa’s non-profit sector and the shared belief that together, we can build a more equitable and inclusive city.

We also extend our thanks to the City staff who supported the process, from facilitating discussions to taking notes at focus groups, ensuring that the findings were captured with care and respect.

This review is about more than programs and funding; it is about people. It is about the residents who rely on services, the staff who deliver them, and the communities that make Ottawa stronger. To everyone who contributed, we say thank you.

The challenges are real, but so too are the opportunities. With continued collaboration, Ottawa’s social services sector can remain resilient, equitable, and ready to meet the communities’ needs today and into the future.

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Introduction

The City of Ottawa invests over \$30 million of 100% municipal funding every year in local non-profits through the Community Funding Framework (CFF).

In September 2019, Ottawa City Council approved a new vision for how the City supports the non-profit social services sector. This new Community Funding Framework (CFF) was built on the belief that a strong and sustainable sector is essential for an equitable and socially inclusive city. The vision painted a picture of community organizations working collaboratively, supported by the City, to make sure all residents could access the services they need.

At the heart of the CFF is the mission to improve community well-being by investing financial and capacity-building resources in the non-profit sector. The goal is to address the root causes of poverty and to expand equitable access to services for Ottawa's most vulnerable residents.

The CFF is structured around three key priorities: poverty reduction, community development, and social infrastructure. The CFF also identifies priority groups that must be at the centre of this work: Francophones, immigrants, Indigenous Peoples, 2SLGBTQQIA+ community members, older adults, people living in poverty, people with disabilities, racialized people, rural residents, women, and youth.

In February 2020, Council built on this foundation by approving the Community Funding Framework Policy Statements, outlining how each funding envelope would operate.

The CFF officially came into effect on January 1, 2022, with the launch of the Sustainability Fund. And as part of the City's commitment to accountability and learning, Council required that a midterm review of community needs, funding pressures, and criteria be carried out every five years. A broader review of the overall CFF would take place every ten years, with the next full review planned for 2030.

About the Midterm Review

This report is a summary of what we learned through the engagement of the midterm review of the [Community Funding Framework \(CFF\)](#).

The purpose of the midterm review is to evaluate the operations of the current framework to ensure that the CFF continues to align with community needs, while promoting equitable and socially inclusive services for Ottawa residents with the greatest needs

This review is a learning process, built on listening and collaboration. Through surveys, focus groups, and conversations, agencies shared their successes and struggles. The insights gathered through this review will guide immediate improvements and inform the longer-term vision for the CFF. They also set the stage for the next full review in 2030.

Since the new CFF became operational in January 2022, Ottawa's social service sector has navigated enormous change. Agencies are still feeling the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inflation has driven up the cost of everything from rent to food, while at the same time demand for community services has increased significantly. Housing and affordability crises are putting unprecedented pressure on families and organizations alike.

In short, the environment in which agencies operate looks very different from when the CFF was first designed. The midterm review allows us to ask if the CFF is delivering on its mission to improve community well-being, to support the non-profit sector, and to expand equitable access to services for Ottawa's most vulnerable residents.

The review matters for four reasons:

- **Accountability:** Community agencies, City Council, and residents must be able to understand and assess how the CFF is performing. Transparent reporting ensures trust and informed decision-making.
- **Equity:** Systemic barriers continue to affect many groups. The review process helps identify these inequities and ensures they are actively addressed through policy and funding decisions.
- **Collaboration:** Engaging community agencies in the review process reinforces that Community Funding is a partnership, not a one-way relationship. Shared responsibility strengthens outcomes.
- **Impact:** The review helps determine whether the CFF is achieving its intended goals and delivering meaningful results for communities.

Methodology: Engagement Approach

The midterm review used a two-step engagement process to ensure the findings were grounded in both data and lived experiences. First, a broad survey was conducted with community agencies to capture diverse perspectives and identify overarching themes. Second, focus groups were held to test, validate, and expand on what we learned.

This layered approach allowed us to start testing ideas across the sector and then dive deeper into the issues through direct dialogue with agencies.

Step 1 – Survey

Purpose

The purpose of the survey was to capture a broad snapshot of how agencies are experiencing the Community Funding Framework (CFF) in its early years. It was designed to reach as many organizations as possible — both those funded by the City and those not currently receiving funding — to understand how well the CFF is working, where pressures are being felt most, and what improvements could be made.

Methodology

The survey was available online from April 9 to 30, 2025. It was promoted through direct outreach to agencies, City newsletters, and community networks. Agencies could complete the survey in English or French. Questions were a mix of multiple-choice and open-ended formats, allowing both quantitative and qualitative insights. The survey was structured around five key themes: access to funding, ability to meet community needs, planning and collaboration, transparency and equity, and reporting and demonstrating impact.

Participants

The survey received 116 responses from both funded and non-funded agencies across the city (88% in English, 12% in French).

Key findings from the survey

- Agencies stressed that funding has not been keeping pace with rising costs and increasing demand.
- Equity-deserving and grassroots organizations found current processes intimidating and resource-heavy, leading to lower participation.
- Agencies asked for multi-year agreements, right-sized reporting, streamlined applications, and equity-focused funding streams.

- Inflation, housing pressures, and mental health needs were identified as the most urgent challenges.
- Many agencies expressed interest in more collaboration opportunities but flagged capacity as a barrier.

Step 2 – Focus Groups

Methodology

Seven focus groups were held in May and June 2025. Sessions were organized by agency type and focus, including those receiving Sustainability Funding, those with short-term funding, and those not currently funded at all. The process ensured to include agencies serving priority groups such as Francophone communities, Black-led/serving/focused (B3) organizations, and Indigenous-serving agencies through targeted outreach. For rural serving agencies, a virtual session was offered to ensure distance was not a barrier to participation.

These sessions brought together a cross-section of Ottawa’s non-profit sector — from small grassroots groups and mid-sized organizations to long-standing community partners. Written submissions were welcomed from agencies who could not attend, to make sure their perspectives were included.

Each session was 90 minutes, held virtually or in person, and facilitated by City staff with volunteer support for notetaking. A semi-structured guide was used to ensure consistency across groups, while allowing participants to raise issues most relevant to them.

Participants

- Seven focus group sessions were held with 165 participants:
 - four from rural-serving organizations
 - 12 from Indigenous serving organizations
 - 18 from Francophone-serving organizations
 - 30 from Black-led Black-focused and Black-serving (B3) organizations
 - 36 from organizations not in receipt of funding or short-term funding
 - 65 individuals from organizations in receipt of Sustainability Fund
- Mix of large, long-standing organizations and smaller, grassroots groups
- Sessions included equity-deserving groups to ensure diverse perspectives were represented
- Participants engaged in open dialogue and shared concrete examples of their challenges and successes

Key findings from the focus groups

- Survey themes were confirmed: agencies need both stability and flexibility, as well as simpler processes.
- Reporting was discussed in more detail, with many stressing the burden it places on smaller groups.
- Equity gaps were emphasized: Black-led agencies shared experiences of exclusion and called for tailored approaches.
- Collaboration and capacity-building emerged as urgent needs, with agencies wanting more opportunities to connect and more resources to sustain partnerships.
- Agencies appreciated the City’s willingness to listen and said that opportunities for direct dialogue were just as valuable as the funding itself.

As one participant put it: **“Being in the room together — even just talking through these challenges — is part of what strengthens the sector. We don’t always have space for that.”**

Challenges, As We Heard Them

The voices of agencies painted a picture of both struggle and resilience. They face significant challenges in delivering services.

As one director explained: **“We’re serving more people than ever, but every dollar buys less. It feels like we’re running faster just to stay in place.”**

Challenge 1: Rising Costs and Inflation

Agencies across Ottawa described how inflation has reshaped their budgets. Rent, utilities, insurance, food, and salaries have all climbed rapidly. While community demand has increased, funding levels have remained relatively stable, leaving organizations squeezed.

Implications if not addressed

- Agencies risk cutting services, reducing hours, or turning people away.
- Staff burnout and turnover will accelerate if wages cannot compete.
- The most vulnerable residents will bear the brunt through reduced access to support.

Challenge 2: Staffing Pressures and Workforce Sustainability

Staffing emerged as one of the sector’s biggest challenges. Agencies struggle to recruit and retain qualified staff, particularly bilingual and culturally competent workers. Salaries are often lower than in other sectors, and staff burnout is high.

Implications if not addressed

- High turnover leads to loss of knowledge and continuity of services.
- Agencies risk being unable to meet demand or maintain quality.
- Equity-denied communities may lack culturally responsive services if staff leave.

Challenge 3: Systemic Barriers

Despite progress, equity gaps remain pronounced. Black-led and grassroots organizations consistently reported greater difficulty accessing and sustaining funding. Many feel they must work harder to prove their legitimacy, despite their deep roots in community.

Implications if not addressed

- Systemic inequities will persist, with some communities consistently underserved.
- Trust between equity-denied communities and the City may weaken.
- The CFF risks failing its mission of increasing equitable access.

Challenge 4: Heavy Reporting and Administrative Burdens

Agencies repeatedly described reporting as disproportionate, especially for smaller grants. The administrative workload pulls energy away from frontline service.

Implications if not addressed

- Small and grassroots agencies may stop applying for funding.
- Reporting will continue to be seen as a compliance exercise rather than a learning tool.
- Agencies and the City risk losing focus on real community outcomes.

Challenge 5: Capacity for Collaboration

Agencies want to collaborate, but collaboration is resource intensive. Without staff time, backbone supports and trust-building, partnerships often remain surface-level.

Implications if not addressed

- Agencies may continue working in silos, duplicating efforts.
- Opportunities for joint advocacy, shared learning, and system-level change are lost.
- Smaller organizations risk exclusion from key networks.

Challenge 6: Growing Community Demand

Agencies highlighted the sharp increase in demand for services. Housing, food, mental health, and wraparound supports are all under strain.

Implications if not addressed

- Waitlists will grow, and unmet needs will increase.
- Community frustration and mistrust of institutions may deepen.
- Agencies may face crises of sustainability, unable to keep pace.

Challenge 7: Balancing Stability and Innovation

The CFF aims to provide stability for long-term agencies while leaving room for new agencies. Striking this balance is proving difficult. Established agencies value predictability; newer groups seek entry points and innovation.

Implications if not addressed

- The sector risks becoming stagnant, with limited renewal or innovation.
- Emerging voices, especially from equity-denied communities, may remain underfunded.
- Long-term sustainability could be compromised by lack of adaptation.

What We Learned – Key Themes and Opportunities

Through the survey and focus groups, agencies shared a great deal about their experiences with the Community Funding Framework (CFF). What came through clearly is that the CFF is highly valued by partnering agencies. The following five themes capture the strongest messages from the sector, as we heard it through the engagement.

Theme 1: Access to Funding

Many agencies described the funding application process as both an open door and a barrier. On one hand, City applications are seen as more straightforward than those from other funders, which often require long and technical proposals. On the other hand, agencies — especially smaller and grassroots ones — still find the process intimidating. They spoke about challenges in understanding eligibility criteria, finding the time to complete applications, and presenting their work in the formal way applications require.

Grassroots and equity-denied organizations shared that they often feel left out because they may not have the administrative staff or history that larger organizations do. Some said the very rules that define eligibility can unintentionally exclude the groups most connected to underserved communities.

- Agencies asked for simpler applications written in plain language, and opportunities to demonstrate impact without needing professional grant writers.
- They suggested a two-stage process, where organizations can first submit a short expression of interest before being asked for a full application.
- They emphasized the importance of support tools such as workshops, sample templates, and drop-in sessions with City staff.
- Many also asked for flexibility in eligibility so that grassroots organizations could apply, even if they are newer or smaller.
- Agencies suggested creating equity-focused funding streams and provide capacity-building specifically tailored to grassroots and equity-denied organizations.
- Agencies discussed embedding equity benchmarks into decision-making.

One agency put it this way: **“We know our communities, but we don’t always have the capacity to ‘speak funder.’ We need a process that lets us tell our story without drowning in paperwork.”**

Theme 2: Meeting Community Needs

The social services sector is under pressure. Agencies described how demand for their services has been increasing dramatically. Rising costs of living, housing shortages, and inflation have pushed more residents to seek help. Mental health needs were raised repeatedly as an area where demand is rising and complex.

Agencies said that the needs they see today are more complex and layered than in the past. It is no longer just about food, housing, or employment — though those remain critical. Many people need wraparound support services that connect across housing, mental health, settlement, and employment, all at once.

Indigenous rights-seeking communities and equity-deserving communities — such as Black Francophone, 2SLGBTQQIA+, and rural residents — continue to face barriers in accessing mainstream services. Agencies serving these groups often operate with fewer resources, making it harder to meet demand.

- Agencies want funding that is more flexible, so they can adapt programs quickly when new issues arise.
- They stressed the need for culturally relevant resources to support outreach and partnerships, so services can reach those most in need.
- They called for longer-term funding agreements so they can plan and not live year-to-year.

As one participant explained, **“Needs change faster than funding. We need flexibility to pivot when our communities face new challenges.”**

Theme 3: Sustainability and Emerging Needs

The Sustainability Fund, launched in 2022 as a 5-year fund, was widely praised for giving many agencies the stability they had long sought. For organizations with multi-year funding, it meant they could plan, retain staff, and deliver programs with confidence. But agencies also pointed out that stability is not enough on its own.

Non-funded and short-term funded agencies often said they felt left behind. They could see the benefits of stability for others but continued to face year-to-year uncertainty themselves. Even among sustainability-funded agencies, many noted that inflation, staffing shortages, and rising demand were stretching them thin. Stability does not always mean security.

- Agencies urged the City to expand multi-year agreements so more organizations can benefit from stable funding.

- They called for the Community Funding streams to be faster and more accessible, noting that current processes can be slow and burdensome.
- Many asked for a balance between stability and flexibility: core funding to keep the lights on, paired with flexible funds to address new issues.
- Some recommended creating equity-focused funding envelopes, so communities facing systemic barriers have dedicated access.

As one agency shared: **“Sustainability funding gives us a foundation, but without flexibility, it risks becoming rigid. We need both roots and wings.”**

Theme 4: Collaboration and Capacity Building

Agencies highlighted collaboration as both a strength and a struggle. Many organizations already work together through networks, partnerships, and coalitions. These collaborations help stretch resources and create holistic support for residents. But participants explained that collaboration takes time and resources — luxuries that smaller agencies often do not have.

Competition for funding can also make collaboration difficult. Agencies want to work together, but when resources are scarce, they sometimes feel forced to compete rather than partner. Smaller grassroots organizations especially said they want to collaborate with larger agencies but need more support to participate fully.

Agencies want to grow stronger, but lack resources for training, technology, and leadership development.

- Agencies suggested providing incentives and resources specifically to support collaboration.
- They recommended creating regular spaces to connect and share knowledge, such as community of practice groups or City-hosted forums.
- They asked for capacity-building investments in areas like training, technology, and staff development.
- Some proposed shared reporting or backbone organizations that could reduce duplication and support collective impact.

One participant described it this way: **“We want to collaborate, but collaboration is not free. It takes staff time, tools, and resources — things we don’t always have.”**

Theme 5: Reporting and Demonstrating Impact

Reporting back on the use of funds was seen as important and necessary. Agencies understand the need to show accountability and share their results. However, they said that current reporting processes feel heavy and, in some cases, disproportionate to the amount of funding received.

Smaller organizations described reporting as a major burden, pulling staff away from direct service delivery. Many also felt that the focus on outputs — numbers served, workshops held, hours delivered — often misses the deeper story of impact. Agencies want to be able to show not just what they did, but how lives were changed.

- Agencies asked for streamlined reporting, with fewer repetitive questions.
- They stressed the importance of right-sizing reporting, so requirements match the size of the grant.
- They recommended a stronger focus on outcomes and stories, not just numbers.
- Many said they would welcome clearer guidance and support from City staff when completing reports.

As one agency put it: **“Our impact can’t always be counted. Sometimes it’s in the story of a family who found stability or a newcomer who felt welcome. Reporting should help us tell those stories.”**

Conclusion

The Community Funding Framework (CFF) was built to strengthen Ottawa’s social services sector. Three years in, this midterm review shows a solid foundation—but the work must continue.

Agencies value the stability CFF provides, especially through the Sustainability Fund. But stability alone isn’t enough. Inflation, rising needs, and systemic inequities are straining organizations. Grassroots and equity-deserving groups still face barriers. Reporting and application processes, while better than others, remain burdensome for smaller agencies. Collaboration is valued but under-resourced. Demand is outpacing capacity.

Agencies see opportunities to:

- Simplify processes for accessibility.
- Create equity-focused funding streams.
- Invest in staff and capacity.
- Support collaboration across agencies.
- Shift reporting to outcomes and stories.
- Expand and adapt funding to meet community realities.

This review is a checkpoint—not an endpoint. Funding is about trust, fairness, and partnership, ensuring every Ottawa resident has equitable access to support. Findings will inform updates to CFF policies, procedures, and evaluation, driving changes that strengthen safety, well-being, social infrastructure, and inclusion.

Learn more at Ottawa.ca/communityfunding or email communityfunding@ottawa.ca.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey questions

Context about the organization type, services offered, client demographics, and geographical reach.

1. Organizational Profile

- a. What type of agency best describes yours?
 - i. Non-profit
 - ii. Charitable organization
 - iii. Community group
 - iv. Social enterprise
 - v. Other (please specify)
- b. How long has your organization been operating in Ottawa?
 - i. Less than 1 year
 - ii. 1-5 years
 - iii. 5-10 years
 - iv. Over 10 years
- c. Which funding streams do you currently receive or have been receiving since 2022? (Select all that apply)
 - i. Sustainability Fund
 - ii. Capital Funding
 - iii. Emerging Community Need Funding
 - iv. Emergency Funding
 - v. Project funding
 - vi. Civic events funding
 - vii. None
 - viii. Other (please specify)

2. Service Scope and Focus

- a. Which primary areas of service does your organization provide? (Select all that apply)
 - i. Basic Needs
 - ii. Food Insecurity
 - iii. Mental Well-Being
 - iv. Skill Development
 - v. Social Inclusion
 - vi. System Navigation
 - vii. Community Development
 - viii. Program, Organizations, Networks and Coalition Capacity
 - ix. System Planning and Change

- b. Which specific populations does your organization primarily serve? (Select all that apply)
- i. Francophones
 - ii. Immigrants
 - iii. Indigenous Peoples
 - iv. 2SLGBTQQA+
 - v. Older adults
 - vi. People living in poverty
 - vii. Individuals with disabilities
 - viii. Racially marginalized communities
 - ix. Rural residents
 - x. Women
 - xi. Youth
 - xii. Other (please specify)

3. Geographical Reach

- a. Which areas of Ottawa does your organization primarily serve? (Select all that apply)

- i. Central Ottawa
- ii. East Ottawa
- iii. West Ottawa
- iv. South Ottawa
- v. Rural Ottawa
- vi. Citywide

- b. Are there specific priority neighborhoods within Ottawa where your services are focused? Kindly refer to the [Neighbourhood Equity Index](#)

- i. Yes (please specify)
- ii. No

4. Client Demographics and Service Volume

- a. Approximately how many unique clients does your organization serve annually?

- i. Fewer than 100
- ii. 100-500
- iii. 500-1,000
- iv. 1,000-5,000
- v. Over 5,000

- b. Does your organization serve clients primarily in person, online, or through a hybrid approach?

- i. In-person only
- ii. Online only
- iii. Hybrid (both in-person and online)

5. Community Needs

How well do you feel the CFF is addressing the most pressing community needs, such as poverty, mental health, food security, and access to essential services?

- i. Very ineffective / Somewhat ineffective / Neutral / Somewhat effective / Very effective
- ii. Please explain (mandatory)

6. Impact of Socio-Economic Changes

How has inflation and the rising cost of living impacted your organization's ability to serve the community?

- i. Minimal impact / Some impact / No Impact / Moderate impact / Significant impact

If you answered moderate or significant impact, please feel free to use specific examples of inflationary pressures that have impacted service deliver

7. Challenges and Pressures

What are the top 3 challenges your organization faces in delivering services today? Select up to three (3).

- i. Increase in demand for programs and services
- ii. Governance structure
- iii. Partnerships and collaboration with other organizations
- iv. Financial sustainability
- v. Accessing new sources of funding
- vi. Recruiting and retaining staff
- vii. Recruiting and retaining volunteers
- viii. Other (please describe)

Please tell us more about the nature of the current challenges and pressures faces by your agency.

8. Service Delivery Shifts

How has your agency adapted its service delivery models in response to the changing needs of the community since 2022?

9. Funding and Sustainability

How can Community Funding Framework policies better support your agency to maintain operational sustainability?

10. Additional Comments

What processes can the Community Funding Framework implement to better support your agency?

Appendix 2: Focus Group Questionnaire

Themes and Questions

1. Access to Funding
 - a. How easy or hard is it to apply for City funding?
 - b. What would make the application process easier and fairer?
 - c. Have you ever decided not to apply? What stopped you?

2. Meeting Community Needs
 - a. How has your work changed to meet community's needs?
 - b. How has funding supported or hindered these changes?
 - c. What other support would help you do more for your community?
 - d. What issues are you seeing more of?

3. Planning for the Future & Working Together
 - a. What could the CFF do to help you plan for the future?
 - b. What kind of partnerships or collaborations are helping your work?
 - c. Besides money, what tools or support would make your organization stronger?

4. Transparency and Equity
 - a. How do we increase the power of smaller grassroots organizations?
 - b. How could we be more clear or open about how funding is decided?
 - c. What are the ways to make the funding system more inclusive and equitable?

5. Reporting and Demonstrating Impact
 - a. What's it like to report back on the funding you receive?
 - b. What would make reporting easier and more useful for you?
 - c. How can reporting help you show your impact?