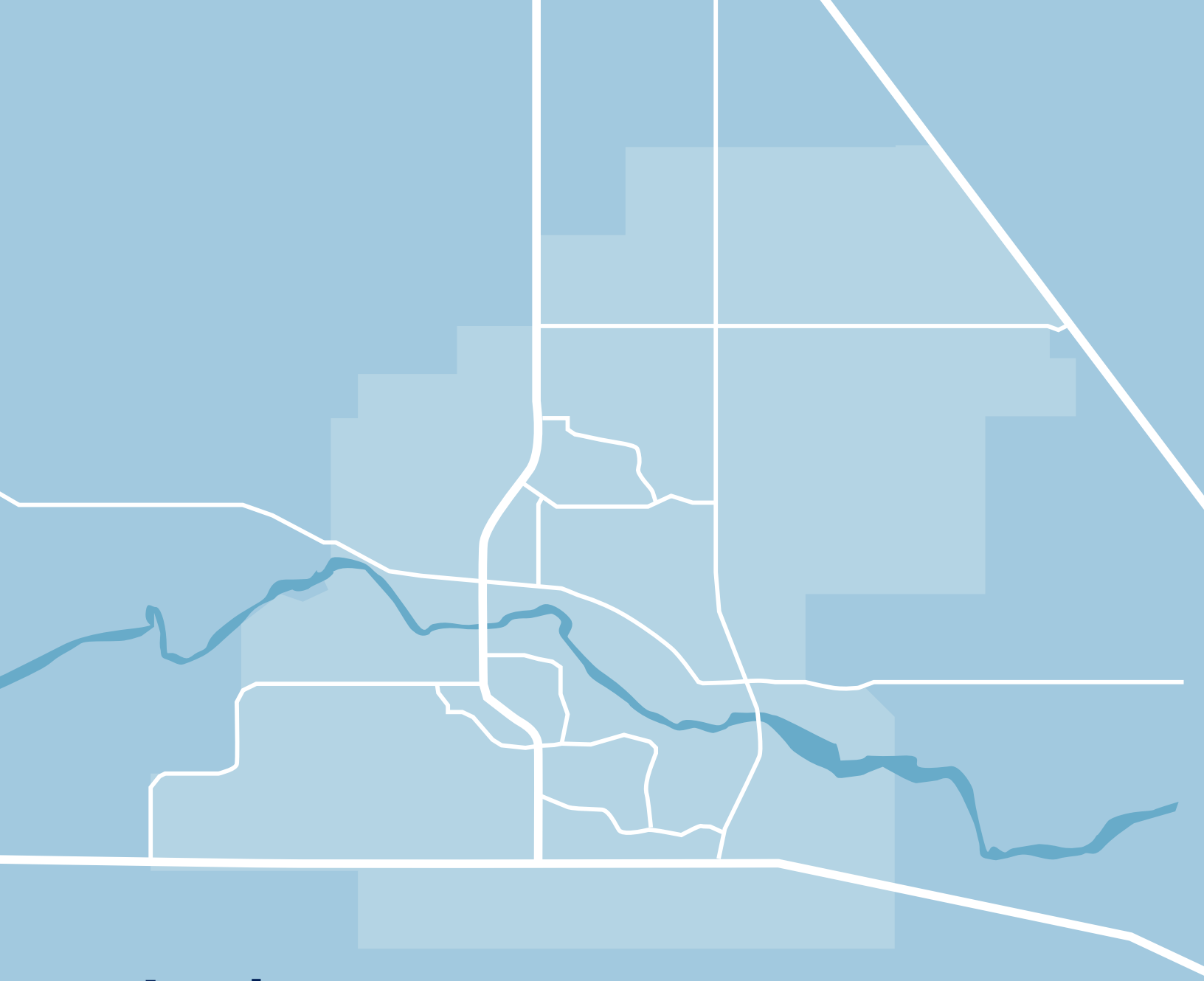
Okotoks

SOCIAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT & STRATEGY



Land Acknowledgement

The Town of Okotoks acknowledges the original stewards of this land that we know and call Treaty 7 Territory, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy First Nations the Kainai, Siksika and Piikani. The Stoney Nakoda First Nations, which includes the Bearspaw, Chiniki and Goodstoney, the Dene First Nation of Tsuut'ina and the Metis Nation of Alberta. We vow to continue honouring and respecting the Indigenous Peoples Sacred and Traditional ways of life and will carry on this special relationship with the land so that generations to come can enjoy, use, and live off the land as their ancestors did. We honour and respect this space, the water, the animals, and all the beings who have a spirit and have been here long before us.

Contents

Acknowledgements 4
Introduction 5

A Why a Social Needs Assessment? 7

B The Process Journey 8

C A Community Rich in Assets 15

D **The Five Social Priorities 17**

- **1** Community Affordability 19
- **2** Accessibility and Inclusive Services 22
- **3** Strengthening Community Connections 25
- **4** Community Awareness and Engagement 28
- **5** Growing in A Way that Supports Everyone 31

E An Action Oriented Community 34

F Enhancing Social Well-Being through Best Practices 35

G Short-Term Strategies 40

H Medium-Term and Ongoing Strategies 41

I Evaluating Progress – A Starting Point 43

References 44
Appendices 45

- **I** Closing the Loop on the Social Needs Assessment
- **II** Engagement Overview
- **III** Community Validation Survey Results
- **IV** Youth Validation Survey Results
- **V** Design Lab Results
- **VI** Engagement Materials

Acknowledgements

The Okotoks Social Needs Assessment and Strategy did not come together by itself. This document is the culmination of a multi-month process that involved the voices and input of over 1300 residents, dozens of key impacted parties from community, organizations, Town Administration and many others.

To our volunteer community conversation hosts – thank you for putting your names forward and building momentum through your time, efforts, and passion. Your efforts led to over 200 voices being heard in this report.

To everyone who participated in focus groups and workshops – thank you for attending, bringing your thoughts, efforts, and passions forward. We hope you feel heard and can see your feedback in this report.

To all the youth who participated in workshops and focus groups – thank you for your authenticity and passion. To your teachers who helped make these activities possible – thank you for your efforts and all you do for your students.

To all our community organizations – thank you for helping to coordinate focus groups, participating in all stages of this project, and helping to ensure the voices of your clients and program participants could be included. Your perspectives have been instrumental in building understanding and strategy.

To all Town Administration that participated – thank you for supporting the project with your passion for the community of Okotoks.

To bassa Social Innovations Inc. – thank you for your guidance and expertise throughout the project.

To anyone we may have missed – thank you for everything you brought to this project and helping to make it possible.

A vibrant, resilient, and connected community that fosters the wellbeing of land and people; a community to call home.

– Okotoks Town Vision

Introduction

The Town of Okotoks (Town) is a remarkable community of passionate, caring and proud residents who value the small town feel of a community that cares. Reflecting the community history, residents are hardworking, engaged and look out for each other through many acts of kindness such as delivering groceries for neighbours, mowing lawns for those who can't, and looking out for the safety of their community.

To help maintain that strong sense of community, connection, and well-being, the Town has prioritized the development of a Social Needs Assessment and Strategy that amplifies community voices, identifies social priority areas, and helps frame a community informed strategy that leads to coordinated action and positive results.

Generally, social well-being in a community exists when:

- The basic needs of all individuals are met;
- There are strong relationships and social networks between and amongst residents and community groups;
- Individuals feel safe and secure;
- Residents feel a sense of belonging; and
- The community uses, maintains and builds on its resources to sustain and improve on quality of life while responding to change.

At its heart, this project is more than a data-driven exercise—it is a deeply human process aimed at understanding the lived experiences of community members. It focuses on understanding the local experience of social issues and community well-being. It examines critical dimensions of daily life through the voices of residents and local data, helping to bring new strategies to life that improve well-being and support a "vibrant, resilient, and connected community" that residents are proud to call home.

Why a Social Needs Assessment?

The Town is committed to their town vision and has prioritized enhancing cultural and community health through the existing Strategic Plan (2022-2025). This bold strategy fosters community dialogue and provides timely access to relevant programs and services that support well-being.

The Social Needs Assessment and Strategy plays an important role in generating understanding of current social needs along with building a framework of strategy and action to align the efforts of the Town and community. The 2010 Social Wellness Framework was the Town of Okotoks' guiding document in the social development landscape. Now outdated, it served the community well for almost 15 years.

The community has changed since 2010 in the forms of growth, economic development and the completion of many successful projects. Community members have weathered a global pandemic and emerging social pressures that have shifted their experience. Therefore, it is important to create a new baseline from which to build the future.

Social Needs Assessments provide community value in several ways including:

1. **Identifying Gaps** – Finding out what services or support people are missing.
2. **Prioritizing Needs** – Understanding which issues matter most to the community.
3. **Improving Services** – Giving organizations access to community data to help improve or create programs.
4. **Guiding Funding Decisions** – Making sure resources go where they're needed most.
5. **Empowering the Community** – Giving people a say in shaping their own support systems.
6. **Strengthening Partnerships** – Encouraging groups to work together for bigger impact.
7. **Tracking Changes Over Time** – Seeing if things are getting better or worse and adjusting plans.
8. **Advocating** – Using real data and community feedback to advocate to other levels of government.

The Social Needs Assessment and Strategy seeks to provide decision makers and the community with up-to-date community data and feedback that helps prioritize actions and strategies that improve social well-being in areas most needed by the community.

B

The Process Journey

The journey of the Social Needs Assessment began with extensive groundwork, including reviewing detailed demographic and socioeconomic data to paint a comprehensive picture of the community. However, numbers alone are only part of the picture. To generate a deeper understanding of Okotoks, a large cross section of the community was engaged through interviews and focus groups, asset mapping, interactive community workshops, and a validation survey.

Residents, young and old, shared their stories, highlighting their day-to-day experiences, struggles, and hopes for the future. Asset mapping further enriched the narrative, uncovering a wealth of resources already present within the community—strong local networks, valuable public services, and vibrant social spaces that enhance well-being.

Engagement for this project went far beyond simply asking for feedback or responding to a survey. This project went deep into a level of consultation where Town Administration, residents, decision makers, and community organizations were working together to build toward a shared future. Each activity was strategic in building on what was heard at previous activities by using community feedback to ask deeper questions and understand the experience of Okotokians. Over the project duration, there were community members who participated at every chance – and by the end were on a first name relationship with Administration.

The energy and engagement of the community has helped to build momentum for enacting the actions and strategies from this report and moving forward, together.

Community Engagement Summary

The Town is committed to engaging with key impacted and interested parties when making decisions that have the potential to affect them. The Town follows these guiding principles every time we engage with the public; these are the foundations of our practice.

Accountable **Transparent** **Equitable** **Relational**

Purpose

To engage the community to help assess social priorities to inform and guide the Town in responding to social change and gain insight into the needs and aspirations of the community. Community feedback helped to identify key community priorities and was integral in the strategy development process.

Level of Public Participation

We build community engagement plans using the IAP2 spectrum below to assist in guiding the level of participation (engagement) that best fits the project's needs. This project had several phases of engagement which required different levels of engagement as shown in the How We Engaged chart.

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
GOAL	To provide balanced and objective information to assist the public in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives and decisions.	To work with public to make sure concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE	"We will keep you informed."	"We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge your concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision."	"We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision."	"We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible."	"We will implement what you decide."

How We Engaged

ACTIVITY	WHO WE ENGAGED	LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT	TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	DATE
Scoping Workshop	Project Team	INVOLVE	5	June 2024
Key Informant Interviews	Local community leaders and social organization staff.	CONSULT	17	August 2024
Internal Focus Groups	Administration	CONSULT	42	August 2024
Community Asset Mapping Workshop	Community groups and organizations	INVOLVE	131	September 2024
Community Conversations	Community volunteers and residents	INVOLVE	200+	October to November 2024
Community Focus Groups	Community residents from vulnerable groups including youth, people living with disabilities, social organization clients, newcomers to Canada, and more.	INVOLVE	126	October 2024
Community Validation Survey	Community members	CONSULT	323	November to December 2024
Youth Validation Survey	Okotoks youth	CONSULT	303	November to December 2024
Youth Design Labs	Okotoks youth	INVOLVE	103	February 2025
Community Design Lab	Community members and volunteers	INVOLVE	30	February 2025
Community Organization Design Lab	Community organization staff and leaders	INVOLVE	19	February 2025
Municipal Design Lab	Administration	INVOLVE	26	February 2025

"I feel my voice was valued."

– community member feedback

12
ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

1,300
RESIDENTS ENGAGED

400+
YOUTH ENGAGED

“I really enjoyed connecting with new people, exchanging ideas, and learning from different perspectives. It reinforced how diverse insights can lead to innovative solutions and stronger community initiatives.”

– community member feedback

Engagement Outreach

SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

60 on Town and Economic Development social medial channels between September 2024-February 2025

71,845 total reach on all platforms (Facebook, Instagram & X)

NEWSLETTERS AND EMAILS

600+ Targeted emails to community organizations, service clubs, schools, staff, etc.

822 Business Beat Newsletter subscribers

467 Citizen Panel Newsletter subscribers

384 Townie Times subscribers (internal newsletter)

PROJECT PAGE (SHAPE OUR TOWN)

80 Followers

3,931 Page Views

2,848 Page Visits

760 Contributions

386 Emails

MEDIA (NEWSPAPERS & RADIO)

3 Ads/day for **7** days – October 2024

10 Western Wheel Ads

2 Western Wheel Articles

2 Radio Interviews

1 Online Website Banner

SIGNAGE

2 LED Digital signboards (32nd Street & Southridge Drive)

+ Multiple posters and/or sign boards in Town & Community facilities (Municipal Centre, Recreation Centre, Library, Eco Centre, Vikings Rental Centre, Schools, Seniors Centre)

MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE AT

Project team conducted focus groups and promoted community and youth surveys by going to various locations in the community (schools, seniors residences and clubs, foodbank, library, various community organization locations).

Statement of Confidence

The Okotoks Social Needs Assessment engagement process allowed residents to provide valuable feedback that would shape social well-being in the community. The goal of the Okotoks Social Needs Assessment was to understand the community's key social needs and priorities. The outcome is the development of shared strategies and actions that will improve social well-being for everyone in Okotoks today and in the future.

Over the course of project, broad representation of the community was involved and heard through conversation, surveys and other authentic engagement. In total, 4% of the community's population was involved in the process, including youth, seniors, vulnerable communities, families with young children and young adults, among others. All community data collected was analyzed by an impartial third party and cross-referenced with existing public data. As such, project consultants from *bassa* Social Innovations Inc. can say with confidence that the Okotoks Social Needs Assessment provides an accurate and representative sample of the community of Okotoks that exceeds engagement and sample size best practice.

Okotoks Social Needs Assessment provides an accurate and representative sample of the community of Okotoks that exceeds engagement and sample size best practice.

– *bassa* Social Innovations Inc.

The Social Needs Assessment in Brief

The following pages will provide a detailed overview of community assets and social priorities as reported by the community and contextualized by data. This forms the understanding of where the community is today as it relates to social well-being. It will also highlight the desired future for each social priority giving the community voice to shape the future.

Next, it will highlight actions and strategies through best practice strategic approaches and more defined actions and strategies to support the short, medium, and long-term development of social well-being in the community of Okotoks

What we have **ASSETS**

- Social
- Public
- Support
- Built
- Economic
- Intangible
- Natural

What we need to focus on **PRIORITIES**

- Community Affordability
- Accessibility & Inclusive Services
- Strengthening Community Connections
- Community Awareness and Engagement
- Growing in a Way that Supports Everyone

How we get there together **ACTIONS**

Integrating Municipal Plans
- Municipal Development Plan
- Strategic Plan (2022-2025)
- Affordable Housing Strategy
- Economic Development Strategic Plan
- Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Master Plan

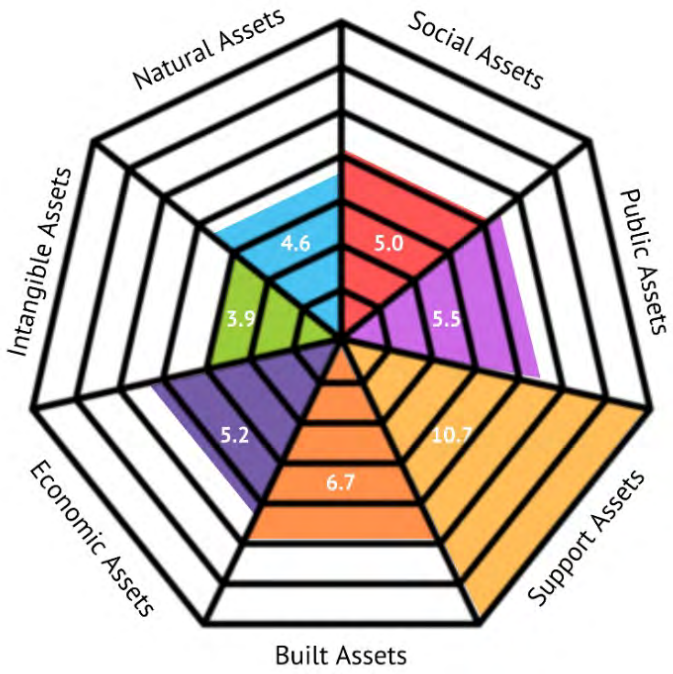
Integrating Best Practices
- Adopt a Social Policy Framework
- Use a Collective Impact approach locally and regionally
- Implement asset-based community development (ABCD) methods
- Develop a strategic approach to social development
- Measure success

Chart a Path Forward
- Early implementation - Closing the Loop
- Shorter term actions
- Medium and longer term actions

A Community Rich in Assets

Okotoks is a community built on connection, care, and shared resources. Instead of focusing on what's missing, residents and organizations were asked about the strengths and assets that make Okotoks a great place to live. Through a survey and community workshop, key resources that help Okotoks thrive – things that bring people together, support well-being, and create opportunities for the future were identified and celebrated.

In the survey, hundreds of community assets were celebrated across seven different categories. The chart shows the average number of resources that survey participants identified in each category of community assets in Okotoks. It provides insight into how easily individuals could name assets in each type, offering a glimpse into which community assets are most top-of-mind for residents. The results show that support assets were the most readily identified, likely reflecting the strong connections shared between respondents and local social support networks.



Support ASSETS

Okotoks offers many social programs and services, such as the Okotoks Family Resource Centre, Food Bank, Salvation Army, Rowan House, the Library, and local faith organizations to name a few. Survey participants identified over 200 services and programs, which is an incredible number for the community, and shows how much support is available. Support assets provide immediate interventions and supports for those in need, along with long-term preventative services that further build well-being and resiliency.

Economic ASSETS

Okotoks' small businesses are a major strength, with local shops, services and grocery stores frequently mentioned. These businesses play a big role in keeping the community healthy, vibrant and economically strong.

Intangible ASSETS

These "hidden gems" are the values, skills, and spirit that define Okotoks. Residents highlighted volunteerism, community care (like fundraising and helping others), and local expertise as key strengths. These intangible assets bring people together in tough times, help celebrate successes and make the community resilient and inclusive.

Natural ASSETS

Water features such as rivers and ponds were the most mentioned natural assets, followed by parks, pathways and wildlife. These spaces are vital for well-being—they boost mental and physical health, bring people together and help protect the environment. They also create a sense of pride and make Okotoks vibrant and resilient.

Built ASSETS

The Library, Recreation Centre, museums and performing arts spaces were the most popular built assets. These places give residents opportunities to stay active, learn, and connect with others. Built assets are key for creating safe, inclusive, and thriving communities.

Social ASSETS

Residents highlighted Okotoks' small-town feel, friendly neighbours and strong community spirit. Volunteering, community events, concerts and celebrations all help people feel included and connected. Social assets build trust, reduce loneliness and make the town a more welcoming and supportive place to live.

Public ASSETS

Top public assets included schools, health services and emergency services like police, fire and EMS. These assets keep people safe, healthy and connected. Schools also act as gathering spaces, strengthening ties across the community.

Okotoks is rich in assets with hundreds of community assets extending from natural spaces to small business to social programs, and beyond.

This provides the community with an incredible foundation to enable activating assets in new ways, amplifying underutilized assets, and creating new assets where appropriate.

The Five Social Priorities

Five social priorities for the community of Okotoks were identified by combining direct community input, qualitative research and data analysis. The following social priorities are presented using the combination of data from all forms of community engagement, the validation survey and public data sets to provide context and validation for each priority.

Among the feedback from the community was a consistent recognition that social needs do not happen in silos – fully disconnected from the other – they are often experienced in intersecting ways. The following stories are a combination of feedback heard from the community but are not representative of any single person or specific situation.

Meet Sarah and Her Son Jake

Sarah, a single mother, moved to Okotoks five years ago, drawn to the town's small-town feel and safe community for her son, Jake. She works full-time in retail and, while she makes ends meet, rising rental costs have forced her to make difficult choices.

For Sarah, affordability isn't just about having a place to live—it impacts everything. The increasing cost of food means she has less to spend on after-school programs for Jake, limiting his opportunities to make friends outside of school. When Jake expressed interest in joining a local league, Sarah just couldn't afford it. "It's just too much," she told him. "Maybe next year."

Without organized activities, Jake spends most of his time at home while Sarah is at work. He recently started feeling disconnected from his classmates, many of whom participate in team sports and talk about weekend games. "I just feel left out," he admits.

But it's not just about sports. Sarah has also found herself feeling isolated. She used to love attending community events but now hesitates due to transportation. With transit service being limited, she has to carefully plan every trip to make it worthwhile. Even though she wants to be more involved in town meetings or volunteering opportunities, these barriers make it harder. "I don't think people realize how much affordability affects everything," she says.

Meet Ahmed, a Small Business Owner

Ahmed and his family have called Okotoks home for nearly a decade. As a business owner, he runs a small restaurant, providing a welcoming space for locals to gather. Over the years, he's built strong relationships with customers, many of whom come in for their daily coffee and friendly conversation.

But recently, Ahmed has been struggling. His recently negotiated lease rates are reducing his profits, making it harder to hire staff and grow his business. When he does find workers, many of them can't afford to live in Okotoks and commute from Calgary or surrounding areas. "I've had great employees quit because they couldn't afford rent here," Ahmed explains. "It's frustrating because I want to hire locally, but the options just aren't there." One of his baristas, Emily, is a university student who would love to stay in Okotoks, but the lack of affordable housing makes it nearly impossible. "I spend nearly half of my paycheck on rent," she says. "I love working here, but at some point, I need to find a more sustainable option."

Ahmed has also noticed changes in his customer base. Many of his regulars—long-time Okotoks residents—are struggling with affordability and coming in less often. "People tell me they'd love to support local businesses, but when groceries and rent take up so much of their income, coffee is a luxury." Meanwhile, he also sees new residents coming into town, many from diverse backgrounds. He wants his café to be a place where everyone feels welcome, but he's noticed that newer residents often don't know about local events or where to meet people. "I see so much potential for community-building here, but we need spaces and opportunities for people to connect," he says.

Ahmed recently tried hosting a cultural night featuring food and music from different backgrounds, hoping to attract more customers and build connections among residents. The turnout was small. "I think people just didn't know about it," he sighs. "We need better ways to reach people and let them know what's happening in town."

Why These Stories Matter

These fictional experiences highlight the intersections of social needs in Okotoks. Housing, employment, accessibility and social belonging do not exist in silos—they are deeply connected. Without affordable housing, businesses struggle to retain workers. Without reliable transit, community members miss out on economic and social opportunities. Without accessible and affordable community programs, youth and families risk social isolation.

These stories reinforce why an integrated approach—where social priorities are addressed holistically through multiple Town strategies—is essential for Okotoks to remain a thriving, inclusive, and connected community.

1

Community Affordability

A Thriving, Sustainable Community

Affordability is a key priority for Okotoks residents, as it directly affects their quality of life and sense of stability. With rising property costs and limited affordable rental options, many residents – especially young families, seniors and newcomers – are finding it increasingly challenging to secure affordable housing. As one resident shared during a community gathering, "I came here for the small-town feel, but with rent so high, I don't know how long I can stay." This sentiment reflects a broader concern, particularly among seniors, who face limited affordable options for aging in place. "Affordable options for aging in place are few and far between," noted another resident, explaining the difficulties of finding accessible housing that meets mobility needs.

The need for affordability extends beyond housing. Small business owners and those wanting to start a business have pointed out that high lease rates make it difficult to start or expand local businesses, and that housing affordability impacts the ability to attract and retain talent, which are key to maintaining the community's charm. "There's plenty of support for homeowners, but very little for small business owners wanting to open shops here," one business owner remarked. This challenge not only affects the local economy but also limits residents' access to unique services and gathering spaces that make Okotoks feel like home. Together, these issues highlight the community's desire for a more affordable and sustainable Okotoks, where both residents and businesses can thrive.

OVER

85%

of those who participated in the Okotoks Community Validation Survey **agreed that affordability is a priority for them, their families, their friends and the community of Okotoks.**

Impact on the community

To better understand the social impacts of affordability in Okotoks, the community survey provided several opportunities for the community to share their experience. Although 82% of respondents shared that they felt they could afford the things they need, over 16% indicated the opposite. Interestingly, when asked about the perceived affordability of buying a home, 45% indicated agreement that homes are affordable and 39% indicated disagreement, demonstrating a relatively split experience for residents. For those who responded to the question "renting in Okotoks is affordable for me", 72% indicated disagreement, suggesting challenges in the rental environment for individuals and families in the community.

These financial pressures disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including seniors and low-income families, with increased reliance on food banks and social services. "The number of 'have-nots' is increasing. Basics are now luxuries," noted a respondent. Local data tends to support this sentiment – annual usage has increased steadily since 2021 (Figure 3).

Small businesses are also feeling the strain, with high commercial rents and limited affordable housing for employees leading to closures and high turnover. In the words of one participant, "Difficult for small businesses to start up because retail space rentals are so incredibly high." These issues collectively highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to address affordability and foster community resilience.

Figure 1.

Buying a Home and Rental Affordability

Buying a home

✓ **45%** in agreement that homes are affordable

✕ **39%** indicated disagreement

Rental Affordability

✕ **72%** indicated disagreement

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 2.

Recreation Activities Affordability

Recreation activities in Okotoks are affordable for me and my family

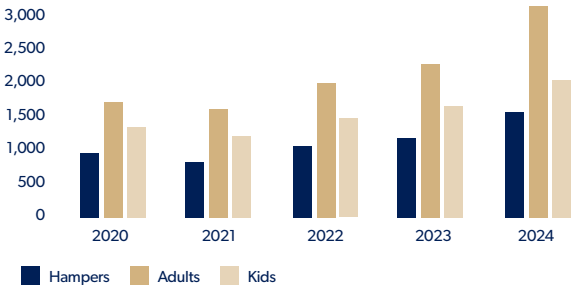
✓ **70%** agree

✕ **19%** disagree

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 3.

Okotoks Food Bank Hamper Distribution by Year



Source: Okotoks Food Bank, 2024

Figure 4.

Affordability of Needed Things

16%

indicated they **cannot afford things they need.**

Source:Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 5.

Affordability of Utilities

66% agree

31% disagree

I can afford to pay for utilities without financial strain.

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 6.

Public Transit Affordability

44% agree

14% disagree

Public transit options in Okotoks are affordable for me.

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Why is it important?

Addressing affordability is vital for community well-being, as high living costs and housing unaffordability are linked to negative health outcomes, economic inequities and reduced social cohesion. Canadian research highlights that unaffordable housing contributes to stress, poorer mental health and increased reliance on social services (Gaetz et al., 2016). Additionally, financial strain disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations, including low-income families and seniors, limiting their ability to participate fully in community life (Hulchanski, 2020). By addressing affordability challenges, communities can improve health outcomes, strengthen social inclusion and enhance economic resilience.

A community informed future

When asked about affordability, community members that participated in the design labs identified their best hopes for the community. Importantly, residents want Okotoks to be a community…

- Where no one is priced out of belonging. A future where affordable housing, fair wages, business opportunity, and accessible services allow all residents—families, youth, seniors, newcomers, and business owners—to build a life with security and opportunity.
- That balances economic growth with affordability, ensuring that homes, transit, and essential services remain within reach for every resident. It fosters a diverse range of housing options, supports local businesses, and ensures equitable access to financial resources.
- Where affordability is not just about housing, it's about ensuring everyone can participate fully in community life, access employment opportunities, and contribute to a resilient local economy.

What youth said

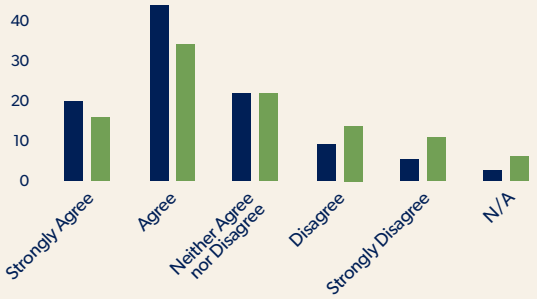
Related to affordability, youth responded specifically to program costs and the ability to find work. Although most youth (64%) indicated that programs are generally affordable for them, 24% suggested that cost is a barrier to them, as one youth said, "It is very hard to find activities to do that aren't expensive".

When we asked youth what makes it difficult for them to join youth programs and services 25% indicated cost is a barrier for them. This is exemplified by another youth's response when asked what the Town could do to help them feel more included or connected, "More sports teams that are cheaper and cheap hangout spots. I often want to hang out with my friends, but everything costs too much"

Finding work is important for a healthy youth population to thrive and build long-term resilience through work experience (Christmas & Khanlou, 2019). In Okotoks, 24% of youth who responded suggested that finding a job in Okotoks has been difficult for them, close to 1 in 4 youth.

Figure 7.

Youth Programs Affordability and Employment



Youth programs in Okotoks are affordable for me and my family

Employment I can find a paying job in Okotoks if I'm looking for one.

Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

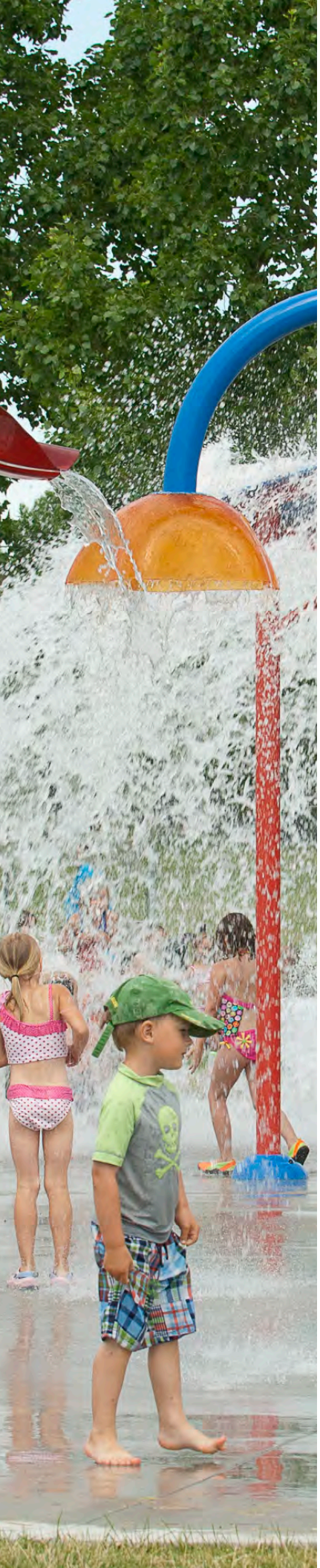
Youth employment rates among those 15-25 has steadily declined in Okotoks from a high of 70.6% in 2006 to 48% in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Additionally, 7% of families with children experience low income, 2% higher than the general population (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Youth Employment Rates (Ages 15-25)

71% 2006

48% 2021

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024



2

Accessibility and Inclusive Services

A Town for Everyone

Access to essential services—like transportation, recreational programs and healthcare—is vital for the well-being of all Okotoks residents, particularly seniors and individuals without private vehicles. Many residents rely on public transit to maintain independence and connect with the community, yet current transit options can be unreliable. For instance, some seniors shared stories of "being stranded for hours at Walmart waiting for the bus," a situation that underscores the desire for more consistent and scheduled transportation options. One resident commented, "We need transportation options that actually work for seniors and youth, not ones that require planning weeks in advance."

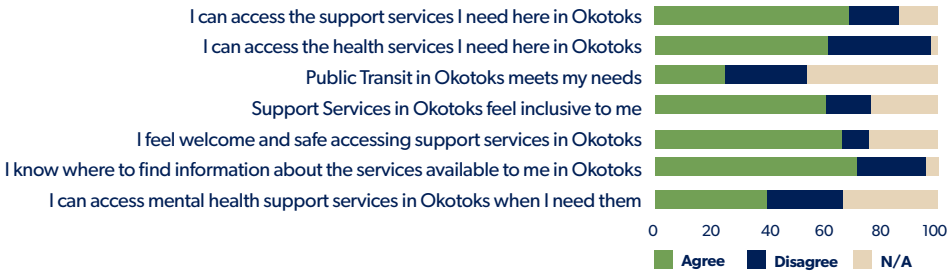
In addition to transportation, community spaces and services also play an essential role in community life and well-being.

86%

of those who participated in the Okotoks Community Validation Survey **agreed that accessibility and inclusive services are a priority for them, their families, their friends and the community of Okotoks.**

Figure 8.

Accessibility and Inclusivity of Services in Okotoks



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Currently, high demand, variety, and location challenges can make it difficult to access these services including arts, culture and recreation spaces and programs. The Recreation Centre, a noted community hub, often books up quickly, leaving residents waiting for popular programs. As one senior noted, "Getting in for aquafitness classes requires booking weeks ahead—it's frustrating." When youth were asked "Is there anything that could make it easier for you to get help in Okotoks when you need it?", the top response from them was access to transportation. Additionally, youth mentioned that accessing the library and other services can be challenging due to current travel options. While organized sports remains a top activity for youth, many also expressed that having more activity options beyond sports would be highly beneficial to ensure everyone has opportunities to participate and connect.

These barriers prevent residents from fully participating in social and recreational activities that contribute to their mental and physical well-being, highlighting the need for more accessible and inclusive services across Okotoks.

Impact on the community

Residents of Okotoks have shared concerns about accessibility and inclusivity in community services, highlighting areas where improvements could enhance quality of life. Mobility challenges are a significant issue, with many pointing out the need for better-maintained sidewalks, consistent snow clearing and improved wheelchair-accessible infrastructure. One resident noted their perception that "Only one intersection has accessible curb cutouts for anyone in a wheelchair." Recreational facilities also face challenges of overcrowding and limited availability, with activities like swimming lessons often filling up quickly. As one respondent shared, "I need to be up and READY the minute swimming lessons are available to register, or my kids won't get in as it sells out immediately."

Public transit was described as limited and less adaptable to last-minute needs, with calls for a fixed-route system to improve reliability. A participant observed, "Working residents cannot rely on transit, and this needs to be addressed ASAP." Additionally, there is a shared perception that population growth has placed pressure on infrastructure, recreation, transportation, and community programming. As one respondent explained, "Amenities are not keeping up with the town's growth—no new rec center, community center, etc."

Why is it important?

If accessibility and inclusivity challenges in Okotoks are not addressed, the community could face growing risks of social exclusion, health issues and reduced quality of life. Limited mobility infrastructure may isolate seniors and people with disabilities, reducing their independence and increasing health risks (Gaetz et al., 2016). Overcrowded recreation facilities and limited programs can restrict opportunities for physical activity, skill-building and social connection, especially for families and individuals with special needs (Hulchanski, 2020). Unreliable public transit further exacerbates inequities by limiting access to jobs, education and services, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups like seniors and low-income residents (Canadian Urban Transit Association [CUTA], 2021). Addressing these issues proactively can help create a more equitable and thriving community.

A community informed future

When asked about accessibility and inclusion, community members that participated in the design labs identified their best hopes for the community. Importantly, residents want Okotoks to be a community…

- Where barriers are removed, and opportunities are expanded for all. It's a town where transportation, recreation, healthcare and support services are universally accessible, ensuring that no one is left behind. Whether it's a senior accessing transit to maintain independence, a youth participating in a low-cost recreation program, or a newcomer finding inclusive community services, Okotoks is a place where everyone belongs and has what they need to thrive.
- Where access is not a privilege, but a given—where every resident, regardless of ability or income, can fully participate in the life of our town.

What youth said

Youth desire places and activities where they feel everyone is welcome to connect, highlighted by such sentiments as "Maybe [have] somewhere accessible to everyone or people my age. Like the beach is only accessible to certain people and I don't know anyone that lives around there or has access." and "Email or send out announcements saying that all people are welcome to the specific activity."

Figure 9.

Youth Programs Accessibility

What makes it hard to join youth programs or recreation activities in Okotoks?

35%	33%	32%
Having enough time	Program knowledge	Knowing others

Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 10.

Accessibility and Inclusivity of Services in Okotoks for Youth

	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
It is easy for me to find out about youth programs and recreation activities in Okotoks.	62%	19%	17%
Youth programs in Okotoks are affordable for me and my family.	64%	22%	13%
Transportation options (eg. buses) make it easy for me to get around in Okotoks.	42%	22%	19%
I fee comfortable asking for help if I need it.	60%	24%	15%
I feel confident that I know where to go or who to ask for help when I need it in Okotoks.	68%	18%	14%

Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

3

Strengthening Community Connections

A Town Where Everyone Can Belong

A strong sense of community is one of Okotoks' most cherished qualities, with residents deeply valuing their sense of belonging and the opportunities to connect through shared spaces, events and friendly interactions. From popular events like "Light Up Okotoks" to the Okotoks Dawgs baseball games, community gatherings are vital for bringing people together. "The events here really make you feel like you're part of something bigger," one resident noted, capturing the shared joy of connecting with neighbors and celebrating town traditions. The sense of community developed by events and community gatherings downtown was another key element the community celebrated.

90%

of those who participated in the Okotoks Community Validation Survey **agreed that strengthening community connections is a priority for them, their families, their friends and the community of Okotoks.**

Figure 11.

Belonging in Okotoks

I feel like I belong here in Okotoks.

79% **Strongly agree/agree**

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 12.

Close Friends in Okotoks

I have family or close friends I can rely on for help here in Okotoks.

88% **Strongly agree/agree**

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 13.

Belonging in Public Spaces

I feel included and welcome in public spaces like the library, parks or Recreation Centre in Okotoks.

81% **Strongly agree/agree**

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Beyond formal events and the downtown core, everyday encounters in places like the Recreation Centre, local pathways and the library foster a sense of belonging. "I love that you can say hi to anyone on the street—it makes Okotoks feel like home," shared one resident. However, while there are many that feel connected, there are some who find it more difficult to find belonging. Some shared that they feel judged by the community or that "we are treated differently because we are an easier target." Others shared that experiences of racism and discrimination have left them feeling outside of the community or unwelcomed in public spaces. As the community grows, maintaining and nurturing existing and new connections is key to supporting mental health and social well-being, ensuring that Okotoks remains a place where everyone feels they belong.

Figure 14.

Volunteerism in Okotoks

	How often have you volunteered with a local organization or service group	Volunteered your time to help friends, family, or others here in Okotoks	Volunteered with a culture, sports, or recreation activity	Volunteered with Town committees, groups, etc.	Volunteered with a political organization or group
Weekly	19.16%	20.26%	14.8%	1.65%	.65%
1-2 times per month	12.01%	20.92%	7.24%	5.28%	.33%
3-4 times annually	16.56%	27.78%	11.51%	7.92%	2.94%
Once per year	14.61%	10.13%	14.47%	10.56%	7.19%
Never	37.66%	20.92%	51.97%	74.59%	88.89%

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 15.

Community Connections

86% Agree
I feel a **sense of belonging** in Okotoks

83% Agree
I **know my neighbours**

84% Agree
I have **family or friends** in Okotoks I **rely on for help**

79% Agree
I feel my **identity and background is respected**

68% Agree
I feel **safe expressing my opinions** in the community

91% Agree
People in Okotoks are **generally welcoming**

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Impact on the community

Residents of Okotoks have expressed both concerns and opportunities regarding community connections, highlighting challenges with inclusivity, social isolation and maintaining the town's sense of belonging. Many feel that isolation disproportionately affects seniors, newcomers, individuals with disabilities, and marginalized groups, with one resident noting, "Families with children with disabilities often feel unsupported and isolated." The perception of rapid population growth seems to have exacerbated these feelings for some, diminishing their experience of "small-town charm" and may contribute to a sense of disconnection for both new and long-term residents. As one person reflected, "The bigger Okotoks gets, the less connected I feel. I've been here almost 20 years, and for the first 15, I'd always run into someone I knew. That's changed." Discrimination also remains a concern, with some identifying racism, classism, and a lack of inclusivity for LGBTQ+ individuals and racial minorities as barriers to full community participation.

Why is it important?

Losing community connections can lead to serious challenges, including lowered mental health, greater social inequity and weakened local economies. Research shows that social isolation increases risks of depression, anxiety and chronic illness, particularly among seniors and marginalized groups (Government of Canada, 2021). When people feel disconnected, they are less likely to participate in community programs or events, which reduces civic engagement and weakens the social fabric of a community (Helliwell et al., 2020). Vulnerable groups, such as newcomers and low-income families, face greater risks of exclusion when inclusive and accessible spaces are lacking, further perpetuating inequities (Hulchanski, 2020). Additionally, local businesses and initiatives often depend on strong social networks, and a loss of connection can hurt the community's economic vitality (Federation of Canadian Municipalities [FCM], 2019). Fostering inclusive community connections is essential for overall well-being and resilience.

Figure 16.

Finding Help in Okotoks

What makes it difficult to find help in Okotoks when you need it?

44% Finding information

30% Fear of judgement

27% Uncomfortable asking for hlep

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

A community informed future

When asked about strengthening community connections, community members that participated in the design labs identified their best hopes for the community. Importantly, residents want Okotoks to be a community…

- With a deep sense of connection—neighbors who know each other, businesses that serve as gathering places, and public spaces that bring people together. It's a community where no one feels isolated, and every resident can participate in the life of the community. Through events, volunteerism, and inclusive gathering spaces, we continue to strengthen social bonds and build a town where people of all backgrounds feel valued and included. Whether through youth-driven initiatives, cultural celebrations, or intergenerational programs, we are committed to fostering a town that remains deeply connected, even as it grows.
- Where people don't just live but truly feel at home.

What youth said

Some youth emphasized the need for accessible and safe environments where youth can gather, socialize, and feel supported. This was highlighted by youth responding to the question of what could help them feel more included in Okotoks with "Include more accepting programs" and "Create a space for people who actually have a hard time with socializing, making friends etc. It's hard for me to feel happy with where I am when I don't have any friends or people I'm comfortable with." It is important to also note that 39 youth responded to that question in the positive, saying things like "nothing else, I already feel included in Okotoks".

What makes it hard for you to join youth programs or recreation activities in Okotoks? A third of youth responded not having enough time, not knowing about the programs or activities or not knowing anyone else going to the program and not wanting to join on their own.

Youth praised events like "Light Up Okotoks" and called for more regular community events that foster connection and inclusion, saying things such as, "More town activities. Those are my favourite." and "Maybe they could host more events so me and my family can spend more time with each other. (Events like light up Okotoks)"

Figure 17.

Youth Programs Accessibility

What makes it hard to join youth programs or recreation activities in Okotoks?

35% Having enough time

33% Program knowledge

32% Knowing others

Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 18.

Youth Appreciation for Parks and Spaces

Youth expressed their appreciation for Okotoks' parks and open spaces where they can gather with friends in unstructured ways.

Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Community Awareness and Engagement

How the Town Communicates and Shares Information with You

Clear and transparent communication from Town leadership is essential for residents who wish to stay informed and actively participate in decision-making processes. Many residents expressed frustration about feeling "out of the loop" when it comes to local initiatives or updates on services. As one resident noted, "I don't know where to find information about events or changes in services." This leaves residents feeling disconnected and uncertain about how decisions are made—particularly those that significantly impact their daily lives. Although this may not be at first glance a "social need", this is a key issue for the community that if resolved, can help increase civic engagement, participation, and build social capital.

95%

of those who participated in the Okotoks Community Validation Survey **agreed that community awareness and engagement are a priority for them, their families, their friends and the community of Okotoks.**

Figure 19.

Participation in Engagement

77% **never, rarely, or only sometimes** participate in community engagement opportunities.

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

A key aspect of this is improving awareness of community services and changes. However, effective communication is a shared responsibility between the Town and its residents. This mutual accountability ensures that community plans, strategies, and actions are clearly communicated, and that resident feedback is genuinely considered.

To address this gap, many residents have called for greater interaction with Town Council and Administration through more accessible and informal community discussions. These discussions would provide opportunities to ask questions and voice concerns in a welcoming environment. "We don't want decisions made for us without knowing why," one resident remarked, emphasizing the importance of a more inclusive and transparent approach.

Beyond two-way communication, there is a clear need to "close the loop" on public engagement. This means not only sharing updates and decisions with residents but also demonstrating how their perspectives have been incorporated. Closing this loop fosters trust and empowers residents to play a more active role in shaping the future of Okotoks.

Figure 20.

Town Information

84% Agree
I know where to find **reliable information**

72% Agree
Information from the Town is **clear and easy to understand**

62% Agree
I feel the Town keeps residents **informed about important decisions**

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Impact on the community

There are residents in Okotoks who feel disconnected from community awareness and engagement efforts due to challenges with communication and the narratives of growth. A reliance on online platforms, particularly social media, seems to exclude groups like seniors and those less familiar with technology, as one resident noted, "There are still seniors who don't use the internet well or often."

Communication gaps leave some unaware of events or decision-making processes, with another saying, "There is no communication system for residents to rely on for community information." An existing narrative of rapid development has diluted the sense of community for some who expressed that "a sense of community is being lost." Additionally, frustration over perceived tokenism in public consultations has eroded trust, with residents feeling that "public consultations… seem more like 'this is what we are doing' rather than 'we want your input.'" While some point to complacency as a barrier to participation, others believe improving communication and transparency could foster a stronger sense of belonging and engagement.

Why is it important?

The challenges (both real and perceived) in community awareness and engagement in Okotoks pose risks to community well-being. Canadian research highlights that when residents feel excluded or disconnected, it can lead to lower levels of trust in local government, decreased civic participation, and weakened social cohesion (Helliwell et al., 2020). For seniors and other groups without internet access or digital proficiency, the reliance on online platforms can further isolate vulnerable populations, increasing risks of loneliness and reduced access to essential services (Government of Canada, 2021).

Additionally, development without inclusive engagement can erode a community's identity and sense of belonging, contributing to social fragmentation and dissatisfaction (Federation of Canadian Municipalities [FCM], 2019). When public consultations are perceived as tokenistic, residents may disengage entirely, leaving important voices unheard and perpetuating a cycle of mistrust (Hulchanski, 2020). These risks emphasize the importance of fostering transparent communication, inclusive engagement processes and accessible information-sharing to maintain a resilient and connected community.

A community informed future

When asked about community awareness and engagement, community members that participated in the design labs identified their best hopes for the community. Importantly, residents want Okotoks to be a community…

- Where every voice matters and clear communication, accessible information, and meaningful public engagement thrive. There are inclusive decision-making processes, where residents—from youth to seniors—feel empowered to contribute ideas and participate in civic life.
- Where residents feel informed and experience ongoing trusting relationships with decision makers built on a shared vision of the future.

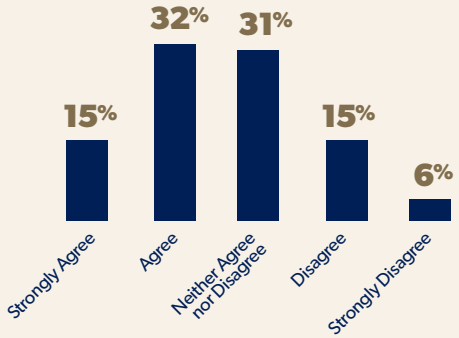
What youth said

Many youth felt unaware of existing events and programs. Suggestions for improving communication to youth in the community and increasing awareness included using social media, school-based announcements and community bulletin boards. As one youth put it, "Keep going with events and add some ways for students to voice opinions. Also have easy ways to see clubs or other activities that may interest them so that they can make more friends in that area." Engaging directly with younger residents through schools, surveys and social media could help ensure they feel heard and informed.

Figure 21.

Youth Voice

I feel like my voice matters to the Town of Okotoks and its decision-makers.



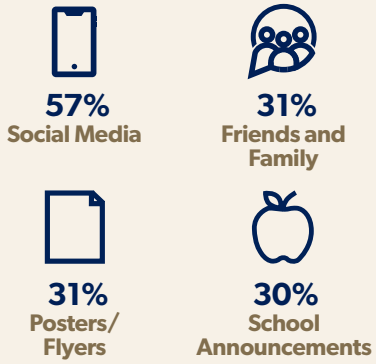
Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 22.

Youth Preferences for Hearing about Events

How do you prefer to hear about events and programs in Okotoks?

(Top 4 answers)



Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

5

Growing in A Way that Supports Everyone

Okotoks is known for being a friendly, charming and unique town. Residents take pride in helping their neighbours, volunteering and having access to local services that bring everyone together. Many residents say they feel safe and secure, which adds to the sense of belonging that makes Okotoks special.

As Okotoks grows, people want to make sure it stays a great place to live. They're asking for more spaces and services where people can connect, like recreation centers, gathering places, youth programs and social supports. These things help everyone feel part of the community and make it easier to meet and spend time with others. One resident put it simply: "We need more places where people can come together."

88%

of those who participated in the Okotoks Community Validation Survey **agreed that growing in a way that supports everyone is a priority for them, their families, their friends and the community of Okotoks.**

Figure 23.

Okotoks Growth and Development

53% Agree

New developments in Okotoks include community spaces and encourage interaction

76% Agree

Development in Okotoks should include opportunities for affordable housing for all

57% Agree

Okotoks provides opportunities for residents to participate in decisions about growth and social development

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

At the same time, there is a concern about maintaining Okotoks' distinct identity as the town grows. Residents want to ensure that new developments preserve the charm and character that makes Okotoks special. Long-time residents have noticed that Okotoks is starting to feel more like a city and doesn't yet have the services to match. One person said, "We're turning into a city, but we don't have city services." There are concerns about whether infrastructure (e.g., roads, water) and social infrastructure (e.g., social services and programs) will keep up with the growing population.

Despite these concerns, residents share a common vision for the town's future: a well-planned, connected community where people can thrive. They desire more places to gather and bring community together in addition to existing parks, pathways and recreation facilities. They also want services and programs that are easy to access and work for everyone, no matter their age or background. By creating these spaces and supporting social connections, Okotoks can keep its small-town spirit alive even as it grows.

Figure 24.

Feeling Safe as Okotoks Grows

72% Agree

I feel safe in my community as it grows

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 25.

Events Reflect Cultural Diversity

66% Agree

Town events and programs reflect diverse cultural backgrounds of Okotoks

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Impact on the community

The varied perceptions of growth in Okotoks are contributing to feelings of loss of the small-town charm that defines the town. There are shared perceptions that current growth is contributing to strained infrastructure and traffic concerns, leaving some feeling disconnected and frustrated. One resident expressed that: "The rate of new development recently feels too much to sustain the current 'feel' or vibe." Others worry that essential services like schools, healthcare and recreation are not keeping up, with another saying, "We need a new high school immediately, more doctors." These changes are prompting some residents to call for better planning to balance growth with preserving the community's character.

At the same time, efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity are met with mixed reactions. Some residents value initiatives that celebrate inclusiveness, noting, "It was great to see the United Church become an affirmed place for LGBT2S+ folks." Others, however, view these efforts as overemphasized contributing to tensions and division. One respondent remarked, "Resources are taken away from the majority in favour of a select minority." Cultural divides and social disconnection are also concerns, with comments like, "Newcomer groups are becoming siloed instead of integrated in the community."

Why is it important?

Canadian research highlights that community cohesion is critical for addressing challenging topics like growth, diversity and development. Communities with strong social connections are better equipped to manage change, reduce tensions and foster inclusivity, as mutual trust and open dialogue create a foundation for collaboration (Helliwell et al., 2020). When residents feel included and heard, they are more likely to engage positively with diverse perspectives and adapt to changes, such as population growth or infrastructure development (Federation of Canadian Municipalities [FCM], 2019). Conversely, a lack of cohesion can lead to divisions, resistance to change and the erosion of community identity. Research underscores the importance of transparent communication, inclusive engagement and shared decision-making to strengthen cohesion and build resilient, adaptive communities (Government of Canada, 2021).

Figure 26.

Racism and Discrimination

✓ **YES 30%**

Have you, or someone you know experienced racism, discrimination, or judgement?

✕ **NO 65%**

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

A community informed future

When asked about growth, community members that participated in the design labs identified their best hopes for the community. Importantly, residents want Okotoks to be a community…

- That grows with purpose, intent, and care for both its people and its environment. Development is not just about expansion but about enhancing quality of life—where new neighborhoods are thoughtfully planned to preserve the small-town charm, provide housing diversity, and maintain green spaces that connect people to nature and each other.
- Where sustainable growth means ensuring that infrastructure, public services and social supports keep pace with population increases, creating a community that is both economically resilient and environmentally responsible.

What youth said

Youth shared that they value the variety of outdoor spaces and parks that they use often to gather and engage with their friends. As the community grows, they hope to be included in decisions that impact them and that growth will bring new opportunities for youth gathering spaces.

Figure 27.

Youth Engagement

Youth want to be a part of the conversations about growth and change that will affect their future.

Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

An Action Oriented Community

The Town has several existing municipal strategies and action plans that play a role in social development and well-being in direct and indirect ways. It is important to recognize the existing work being done by the Town through other plans to ensure strategies and actions from this project are unique, complimentary, and focused on social well-being without duplicating existing work.

Social Priority	Municipal Development Plan (MDP)	Strategic Plan 2022-2025	Affordable Housing Strategy	Economic Development Strategic Plan	Recreation Parks & Leisure Master Plan
Community Affordability	Expand affordable housing stock and encourage sustainable urban development	Advocate for policies that address affordability across multiple sectors	Increase housing diversity, implement grant programs, and facilitating partnerships to get affordable housing constructed	Support small businesses through affordable leasing options and economic incentives	Provide subsidized recreation programs to enhance affordability for all
Accessibility and Inclusive Services	Promote equitable access to community amenities and services	Improve access to health and well-being programs, expand municipal social support services	Integrate social service delivery with affordable housing initiatives, create intergenerational programs	Encourage workforce training programs for underrepresented groups	Ensure accessible and inclusive recreational opportunities for people of all abilities
Strengthening Community Connection	Develop walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods to enhance social connectivity	Foster a culture of volunteerism and civic engagement	Ensure affordable housing developments include community spaces for engagement	Develop business hubs and community-oriented commercial spaces	Expand public gathering spaces to foster social connection
Community Awareness and Engagement	Encourage active transportation and accessible public transit options	Enhance partnerships with cultural organizations to improve community dialogue	Improve communication on available housing programs and support services	Strengthen local entrepreneurship and small business networking opportunities	Host community-led recreational and cultural events
Growing in a Way that Supports Everyone	Support integrated urban planning that prioritizes inclusivity and community well-being	Ensure town growth policies are aligned with sustainable development goals	Incorporate accessibility standards in new housing developments, enhance mixed-income neighborhoods	Incentivize development of mixed-use spaces that integrate housing, business, and recreation	Design inclusive parks and recreation spaces that accommodate diverse needs

Because there is already work being done to address housing affordability, small business supports, economic development, growth planning, and many other realms covered by the Social Needs Assessment, recommendations and actions in this report will be focused on applying best practices within the realm of social well-being as well as strategic actions that address the intersecting nature of social needs without duplicating existing work.

F

Enhancing Social Well-Being through Best Practices

Building social well-being is a shared responsibility between a municipality, its citizens and many other impacted/interested parties including government and non-governmental organizations. Like other municipalities, Okotoks is governed through the *Municipal Government Act (MGA)* which empowers municipalities to shape their communities by developing strategies, policies, programs, and services that directly and indirectly influence resident well-being.

Developing well-being is more than a set of programs, policies, or initiatives, it requires an all-of-community approach that Okotoks already demonstrates in many ways. Aligning municipal, community, and impacted/interested parties efforts can be enhanced through the strategic application of the following recommended best practices. Best practices recognize that social well-being is not developed in one direction and requires intersectional efforts that maximize impact without significant increases in resources.

1 Adopting a Social Policy

A social policy framework outlines at a high level the roles, responsibilities, and priority methods for the community to address any social need as they arise. The Province of Alberta and municipalities such as Red Deer and Lloydminster have successfully implemented frameworks that align the municipalities priority approaches across all departments to social development.

A social policy framework provides municipalities with a structured and proactive approach to addressing evolving social needs. By establishing clear roles, responsibilities, and methods for collaboration, a framework ensures that municipal actions are aligned over the long term.

A well-defined governance structure is essential. Within the framework, Okotoks can outline its role as a convener, facilitator, or service provider for example and how to decide when each is appropriate. This clarity fosters accountability and strengthens the overall support system for residents. Additionally, frameworks should be embedded across municipal business centres to ensure that social well-being is a core consideration in decision-making.

Decision-making within a social policy framework should be grounded in evidence. Using data collected from social needs assessments, community feedback, and service usage trends can help guide policies and investments on priorities over the long-term.

By adopting a structured social policy framework or similar, Okotoks can build a resilient and responsive social infrastructure. A well-implemented framework ensures that social needs are met efficiently while fostering an inclusive, connected, and thriving community.

2 Collective Impact and Regional Approaches

Collective Impact is a structured approach to solving complex social issues by bringing together organizations and leaders from different sectors to work toward a shared goal. Instead of individual groups working in isolation, or in separate collaboratives, this approach ensures that efforts are aligned, resources are effectively used, and long-term, meaningful change is achieved (Tamarack Institute, n.d.).

According to the Tamarack Institute, successful Collective Impact initiatives are built on five key conditions. First, organizations must establish a common agenda, meaning all participants share a unified vision and a clear understanding of the issue they are addressing. Second, shared measurement systems ensure that all members collect and analyze data in the same way, allowing them to track progress and adjust their strategies based on evidence. Third, the collective members engage in mutually reinforcing activities, meaning that while each group has its own role and expertise, their efforts are coordinated to complement one another. Fourth, continuous communication is essential to build trust, maintain alignment, and keep impacted/interested parties engaged in the initiative. Finally, a backbone support organization provides dedicated staff and infrastructure to coordinate activities, manage data, and support participating organizations in maintaining focus and momentum (Tamarack Institute, n.d.).

Although the Social Needs Assessment focused on residents of Okotoks, many of the social priority areas experienced here are likely being felt across the region. Okotoks can take a leadership role in convening local and regional systems leaders to focus collective efforts toward social priorities such as affordability, housing, service accessibility, and youth employment.

Collective impact in a regional setting requires time, relationship, formality and resources to have the best chance of success. In the shorter term however, Okotoks can begin the process by convening local and regional action tables focused on the identified social priorities. Approaches such as these demonstrate an ability to coordinate services and actions, and evaluate efforts, with greater effect across a community (Collaborative Public Safety Programs, 2024). Regional approaches are important for Okotoks due to the regional proximity to Calgary and other similar sized and smaller communities who regularly access Okotoks services and amenities.

3 Leveraging Asset Based Community Development

Okotoks is a community built on connection, care, and shared resources. Instead of focusing on what's missing, amplifying existing assets can have immediate impact on the lives of residents. This is what Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is; building social well-being by amplifying what is already working. The process has already begun, this project identified the key assets that help Okotoks thrive—things that bring people together, support well-being and create opportunities for the future.

With the asset mapping process completed, the next step is to activate these assets in a way that strengthens community resilience, fosters local engagement, and drives sustainable development. Asset-Based Community Development therefore provides a strategic and integrated method to mobilize local strengths—people, organizations, physical spaces, cultural resources, and economic opportunities—to create positive change from within the community.

4 Applying Long-Term Strategy to Funding

The community of Okotoks is experiencing moderate growth which is expected to continue and accelerate as new infrastructure is finalized. Growth, while positive, can add pressure to the network of social service providers across the municipality, including the Town. Residents frequently cited concerns about ensuring local services can meet future needs which was echoed by service providers themselves.

With rising population and complexity, the role of the municipality will naturally start to be pulled away from direct service provision for social well-being as local and external service providers begin to fill gaps. Municipalities that plan for this shift in a strategic way can move with purpose into a desired direction and ensure an appropriate and effective mix of services by building local organizational capacity and seeking external specialized services where appropriate.

Engaging in a strategic planning process to identify future service and funding priorities can be complex, yet the process can be started by having regular conversations within the municipality around questions such as:

1. The types of services the Town intends to remain in a service provision role in the short, medium, and long-term.
2. The types of services the Town intends to continue funding locally in the short, medium, and long-term.
3. The types of services the Town is likely to seek from outside providers (such as from Calgary), in the short, medium and long-term.
4. The role(s) most appropriate for the Town to fulfill in building capacity among local service providers.

Although these questions may appear simple on the surface, they require a deeper analysis and strategic conversation regarding the long-term philosophy of service provision, funding and evaluation the municipality intends to pursue. Not dissimilar from economic strategies designed to support local business development, having a clear long-term strategy to support a healthy local service delivery ecosystem is vital to ensuring sustainable social well-being for Okotoks residents.

5 Measuring Success

To effectively measure progress on social priorities many communities explore and implement a comprehensive social well-being evaluation framework. Many social well-being frameworks can align with existing FCSS metrics and would further enable the municipality to systematically define, monitor, and evaluate the social outcomes desired by the community, aligning with strategic priorities identified in the community engagement process.

Social well-being evaluation frameworks have been successfully utilized in municipalities such as Calgary and Lethbridge to guide decision-making, assess impacts, and identify areas requiring intervention or additional support. A well-structured evaluation framework would assist Okotoks in establishing clear indicators and benchmarks that reflect the community's vision for its future state, such as inclusivity, community cohesion, service accessibility, and overall resident satisfaction. Regular monitoring and reporting against these benchmarks can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of social policies and programs, ensuring ongoing alignment with community aspirations.

Adopting a social well-being evaluation framework can support transparent decision-making processes, enhance accountability, and foster greater community trust by clearly demonstrating the outcomes and impacts of municipal actions. This strategic tool is important for Okotoks to proactively manage the social dimensions of community growth, ensuring that social infrastructure, services, and supports not only keep pace with but also anticipate the evolving needs of residents. As it relates to regional strategies identified above, alignment and consistency among local groups and organizations will help to provide more comprehensive insights necessary for targeted strategies.

6 Charting the Path Forward

While keeping the strengths and assets of Okotoks in mind, the following section will provide recommended actions to respond skillfully to the community's most pressing social challenges. These areas address critical issues such as sustainable growth, community affordability, inclusive services, strengthened community connections, and meaningful engagement. Each recommended action is rooted in extensive community feedback, ensuring that actions taken align closely with residents' priorities and lived experiences. Collectively, these actions aim to fulfill a community-driven future vision of Okotoks as an inclusive, resilient community where every resident thrives and contributes meaningfully to community life.

While the five social priority areas above are presented individually, they are deeply interconnected and collectively shape the overall well-being of the community. Progress in one area will naturally influence and strengthen others, reinforcing a comprehensive approach to social development. This creates opportunities to apply best practices and effective strategies that have a positive impact across multiple areas, helping to build a more inclusive, resilient, and connected Okotoks.

PRIORITIES

Priority Implementation Steps

Before describing the recommended actions for each priority area, it is important to provide cross-cutting and overarching priority steps and actions needed to ensure the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy is set up for success and to lead to meaningful improvement in community social well-being. Therefore, it is crucial to transition swiftly from planning to action. The following cross-priority and overarching steps are recommended to ensure timely and effective implementation.

Recommended Action	Description	Impact on Social Well-Being
Begin implementation without delay	The community should move forward immediately, ensuring that momentum is maintained from the successful engagement sessions and that these initial priority steps are taken immediately to support and sustain the Strategy.	Sustains momentum, builds trust, and ensures early progress on urgent social needs, reinforcing community confidence and long-term well-being.
Align funding and resource allocation	Future funding cycles should be structured to support the priorities identified in the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy, ensuring financial sustainability for recommendations that address community social needs.	Secures long-term sustainability, supports priority social needs, and strengthens community well-being through targeted resource allocation.
Engage champions across sectors	Success will depend on building a coalition of champions from both within the social sector and beyond. Maintaining connection with, and identifying new, influential voices and supporters across different sectors.	Sustain momentum, encourage innovation, and enhance community engagement in the implementation process.

By embedding these steps into ongoing decision-making and strategic planning, Okotoks can create a strong foundation for a more connected, inclusive and resilient community.

ACTIONS

Recommended Actions for each Priority Area

A summary of the recommended actions are compiled into quick-reference charts, colour-coded by priority area and separated into short-term and medium-term/ongoing tables. Following the summary charts, the remainder of this report is written to deepen knowledge of the recommended actions, advancing social well-being toward the five community priorities.

G Short-Term Strategies

Community Affordability

Accessibility and Inclusive Services

Strengthening Community Connections

Community Awareness and Engagement

Our Growing Community

Recommended Action	Description	Priority Area(s)	Impact on Social Well-Being
Adopt a Social Policy Framework	Establish clear municipal roles, responsibilities and methodologies for addressing emerging social needs.		Ensures policy consistency, reduces service gaps, and provides a foundation for long-term affordability and accessibility for all residents have equitable access to essential services and support.
Identify key indicators from the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy to evaluate progress.	Identify key indicators and evaluation metrics for each social priority that can help guide annual evaluation and decision making in the short-term.		Enables data-driven decisions, ensuring programs remain effective and responsive to community needs.
Leverage municipal expertise to build capacity	Offer capacity-building workshops leveraging Administration's expertise to improve communication and engagement skills among community organizations and businesses. This can also include training and mentorship programs to build leadership skills.		Equips and strengthens local organizations and local leadership thereby improving service quality and community engagement. Changemakers are empowered to take ownership of initiatives.
Build out action tables around social priorities	Utilize the unique ability of the Town to convene key local and regional impacted/interested parties to begin forming action-oriented committee tables, facilitated by the Town, to deepen collaboration, action, and data gathering specific to social priorities.		Will continue building relationships and shaping mutually reinforcing actions, helping to lead to collective impact.
Close the Loop with the community on the Social Needs Assessment	Ensure all volunteers, youth, residents, and impacted/interested parties who participated in the Social Needs Assessment have access to the final reports and notes of appreciation. (See Appendix A)		Builds trust with residents and increases their likelihood of maintaining momentum.
Continue building community capacity through training and development.	Continue engaging in efforts to build capacity through training and development with focuses on Asset Based Community Development, Collective Impact, and other priority areas.		Builds capacity of local social organizations to implement future priorities and actions. Deepens relationships for collective action.

H Medium-Term and Ongoing Strategies

Community Affordability

Accessibility and Inclusive Services

Strengthening Community Connections

Community Awareness and Engagement

Our Growing Community

Recommended Action	Description	Priority Area(s)	Impact on Social Well-Being
Engage in regional level leadership for social priorities	Convene local and regional leaders to focus systems level collective efforts on affordability, housing, service accessibility and youth employment, among others.		Strengthening collaboration fostering a more unified approach to addressing affordability, housing, and service accessibility through improved resource allocation.
Explore ongoing engagement opportunities outside of traditional norms	Use methods like focus groups, design labs, and citizen advisory groups to reach diverse populations, enhancing community dialogue and understanding.		Supports more voices to be heard in decision-making, strengthens representation, builds trust, and shapes policies that reflect real community needs.
Include resident advisors in collaborative groups	Integrate residents, especially from underrepresented groups, into collaborative forums to support resident-led decision-making processes.		Fosters social cohesion by promoting decision-making to be reflective of lived experiences. This enhances social cohesion, improves program effectiveness, and strengthens a sense of belonging within the community by ensuring community priorities guide implementation.
Develop and Implement a Comprehensive Social Well-being Evaluation Framework	Develop systematic processes for measuring progress, evaluating outcomes and aligning with community aspirations and strategic priorities. Include measuring impact through community-led evaluation processes to ensure continued effectiveness (like hosting an annual social well-being summit or similar).		Enables data-driven decisions, ensuring programs remain effective and responsive to community needs.
Amplify cultural exchange within existing events	Integrate deeper cultural exchange elements into current community events to enhance understanding, inclusion and community bonding.		Fosters inclusion, reduces social isolation, and builds community pride.
Explore the adoption of Inclusive Policy Analysis and Program Planning	Adopting a framework like Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) or Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) is beneficial for ensuring programs and services are truly inclusive. These analytical tools can effectively identify hidden disparities and biases, allowing the town to develop targeted, equitable policies that address the nuanced needs of diverse and marginalized populations, both now and in the future.		Facilitates equity in policies and programs, reducing systemic barriers and fostering inclusivity.

Medium-Term and Ongoing Strategies (continued)

Community Affordability | **Accessibility and Inclusive Services** | **Strengthening Community Connections** | **Community Awareness and Engagement** | **Our Growing Community**

Recommended Action	Description	Priority Area(s)	Impact on Social Well-Being
Leveraging existing spaces (e.g., community centers, parks, and vacant buildings) to create opportunities for learning, engagement, and economic activity.)	Transforming underutilized public spaces into gathering places, co-working hubs, or cultural centers.		Enhancing public spaces and social infrastructure supports residents to have more opportunities to engage, build relationships, and contribute to a resilient and inclusive community.
Enhancing placemaking initiatives, such as public art projects, pop-up markets, and recreational programming.	Implement community-driven placemaking activities to strengthen identity, promote engagement, and encourage social connections.		Enhances community vibrancy, fosters local economic opportunities, and strengthens social ties through shared public experiences.
Using inclusive design principles to ensure that spaces are welcoming and accessible to all residents.	Implement accessibility-focused urban design strategies, including barrier-free pathways, sensory-friendly areas, and multilingual signage.		Promotes equitable access to public spaces, ensuring all residents can fully participate in community life.
Explore an ongoing strategic approach to service delivery and funding	Identify which services the municipality will provide, fund, or outsource and clarify the Town's role in capacity-building among local service providers.		Enhances efficiency and sustainability, ensuring essential programs are well-funded and accessible.
Supporting resident-led initiatives, ensuring that the community drives solutions rather than relying solely on external interventions.	Provide resources and mentorship for grassroots projects, ensuring that local voices shape community solutions.		Encourages self-sufficiency, innovation, and local leadership, fostering a sense of ownership and long-term commitment to community well-being.
Creating volunteer networks where individuals can contribute based on their strengths and expertise.	Further develop structured volunteer networking opportunities that match skills with community needs to enhance civic participation.		Strengthens social capital by building relationships, fostering a culture of giving, and addressing community challenges through collective action.
Establishing funding models that support grassroots projects, such as cooperative ownership, local investment, and micro-grants. (e.g. Youth Innovation Fund)	Develop cooperative ownership models, local investment opportunities, and micro-grant programs such as a Youth Innovation Fund to support small-scale, high-impact community initiatives.		Encourages local economic participation, supports innovative solutions, and enhances long-term financial sustainability for community-led projects.

Evaluating Progress A Starting Point

Ensuring social initiatives in Okotoks are effective and sustainable requires a strong commitment to evaluation. A well-designed evaluation framework helps the Town measure impact, improve services, and allocate resources where they are needed most. By tracking progress over time, decision-makers can make informed adjustments to social programs, ensuring they remain relevant to community needs.

Best practices emphasize the importance of gathering feedback, using data-driven insights, and involving residents in the evaluation process. Integrating independent assessments further strengthens accountability and ensures that social programs deliver meaningful, long-term benefits. Although a regular systematic evaluation of social well-being is a medium-term strategy, a starting point can be using sample indicators as shared below and using this report and validation survey as the baseline.

Priority Area	Sample Indicators
Community Affordability	▪ Reduction in financial barriers to essential services ▪ Increase in access to affordable housing ▪ Economic stability metrics (e.g., youth employment)
Accessibility and Inclusive Services	▪ Increased use of public transportation by diverse groups ▪ Higher participation in recreation and social programs ▪ Expanded access to social and recreational services
Strengthening Community Connection	▪ Growth in volunteer participation rates ▪ Increased attendance at community events ▪ Improved social cohesion (e.g., belonging, connection)
Community Awareness and Engagement	▪ Higher engagement in town meetings ▪ Expanded digital reach for community information ▪ Increased resident feedback on public initiatives
Growing in a Way that Supports Everyone	▪ Balanced development planning ▪ Inclusion of social considerations in growth strategies ▪ Resident satisfaction with new community spaces

By implementing an annual approach to evaluation using these indicators or other existing FCSS indicators used by the Town, there can be annual progress reports that can help guide decision making and provide updates to the community.

References

Canadian Urban Transit Association [CUTA]. (2021). *The case for better public transit in Canada.* Retrieved from https://www.cutaactu.ca.

Christmas, C. M., & Khanlou, N. (2019). Defining youth resilience: A scoping review. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 17(3), 731–742.

Collaborative Public Safety Programs. (2024). *Safe Communities: Situation Tables in B.C.: 2023 Analysis.*

Federation of Canadian Municipalities [FCM]. (2019). *Building better lives through smarter growth.* Retrieved from https://fcm.ca.

Gaetz, S., Gulliver, T., & Richter, T. (2016). *The state of homelessness in Canada 2016.* Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press. Retrieved from https://www.homelesshub.ca.

Government of Alberta. (2021). Community Revitalization Levy Program, webpage, n.d. Retrieved from https://www.alberta.ca/community-revitalization-levy.aspx.

Government of Canada. (2021). *Social isolation and loneliness among seniors in Canada.* Retrieved from https://www.canada.ca.

Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (2020). *World happiness report 2020.* Sustainable Development Solutions Network. Retrieved from https://worldhappiness.report.

Hulchanski, J. D. (2020). Canada's growing income gap and its effect on housing affordability. University of Toronto Cities Centre. Retrieved from https://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca.

Okotoks Food Bank. (2025). Statistics. Retrieved from https://okotoksfoodbank.ca/statistics/.

Statistics Canada. (2024). Social inclusion indicators for Canada's ethnocultural groups: Participation in the labour market. Retrieved from https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2023004-eng.htm.

Statistics Canada. (2023). (table). *Census Profile.* 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

Statistics Canada. (2022). Focus on Geography Series, 2021 Census of Population Okotoks, Town. Retrieved from https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/fogs-spg/page.cfm?topic=2&lang=E&dguid=2021A00054806012

Tamarack Institute. (n.d.). *Collective impact toolkit.* Tamarack Institute. Retrieved from https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/collective-impact-toolkit.

Appendix I

Closing the Loop on the Social Needs Assessment

The following recommended action items focus on bridging the transition from developing the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy to putting it into action. These recommended actions aim to build on the progress made so far, maintain momentum, and move toward meaningful implementation in Okotoks.

Strategies:

1. Close the loop on the development of the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy
2. Update workplans – Integrate the Strategy into municipal and partner plans
3. Evaluation Plan – Tracking efforts and outcomes
4. Planning an annual check-in for the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy

Close the loop on the development of the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy

This includes closing the loop on the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy with the community, internally within the municipal government, and with community partners.

Recommended Action	Objective	Timeline
Update a Social Needs Assessment and Strategy webpage	User-friendly webpage updated, including access to a copy of the final document	Short-term
Provide access to copies of final document to participants and interested community members	Everyone that participated or is interested in the development of the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy receives a copy of the final document	Short-term
Public announcement	At least one news story and social media post with links to the final document	Short-term

Integrate the Strategy into municipal and partner plans

- Update workplans within the Town
- Update workplans with community partners / tables
- The Town and key partner organizations should align their operational plans and priorities with the goals and recommendations outlined in this strategy. Doing so will help ensure coordinated efforts and efficient resource allocation.

Recommended Action	Objective	Timeline
Thoroughly review the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy with Town partners and community partners	Presentation and conversation with all key and vested internal and external partners and tables in Okotoks and region	Short-term
Identify staff leads for implementation	Each priority area has a lead, with the Town's role and responsibility for each identified as well	Short-term
Identify the lead's strengths and needs related to being the lead for a recommended action(s)	Leads have identified their strengths and needs, with appropriate sources / resources engaged to help address those needs	Short-term
Update, implement, and check in on 2025 work plan progress.	2025 work plans are updated and implemented in alignment with the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy and mid-year check ins are scheduled.	Short and Medium-term
Plan 2026 workplans and beyond	2026 and ongoing work plans are developed	Long-term

Appendix I

Evaluation and Monitoring Plan to track activities and outcomes

Develop clear workplans based on the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy Action Table, updating them regularly to track progress, identify risks early, and measure success across short-, medium-term, and ongoing actions. The Evaluation and Monitoring Plan should be accessible to all impacted/interested parties for transparency and accountability.

Recommended Action	Objective	Timeline
Develop an activities and outcomes/ indicators tracking process with timelines	Evaluation and Monitoring Plan developed with activities and outcomes/ indicators tracking	Short-term
Track activities and outcomes related to the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy	Ongoing tracking	Short-term
Make status updates publicly available and promote awareness of them	A space on the webpage is provided for status updates	Medium-term; Ongoing
Identify any changes / improvements and implement	Improvements/changes identified by team are implemented	Medium-term; Ongoing

Annual check-ins on the Social Needs Assessment and Strategy

Host an annual check-in with impacted/interested parties, partners, and community members to share progress, highlight key milestones, and maintain engagement. These check-ins will strengthen existing relationships, foster new connections, and reinforce shared ownership, ensuring the Town remains actively and authentically engaged with the community.

Recommended Action	Objective	Timeline
Define how the Town will engage in annual Social Needs check-ins with the community.	Define a method and schedule for annual community check-ins on the Social Needs Assessment	Medium-Term

Appendix II

Engagement Overview

PROJECT SCOPING

Central Purpose:
Ensure the consulting team and municipal project team have a shared understanding and clarity about the project and how it can best serve the Town and its residents.

Participants:
Municipal project team (N=5)

Key Insights:

1. Local context through community engagement, feedback, qualitative and quantitative data is important to the project.
2. Seek to understand and address root causes through an equity and informed lens. Prioritize social needs that reflect Okotoks.
3. Create community support for municipal document.
4. Provide clarity for municipal and community roles and responsibilities.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Central Purpose:
By meeting with a small number of community leaders working in the sector, an overview of Okotoks community and social environment is generated.

Participants:
Local leaders in community and social development (N=17)

Key Insights:

The community is facing a variety of challenges that threaten to impact the well-being of its residents. Youth mental health, homelessness, and safety appear to be critical issues, as is the increasing visibility of homelessness and domestic violence. Seniors and low-income residents are particularly vulnerable signaling concerns about affordability. Social fracturing, judgement, and intolerance is particularly affecting youth, immigrants, and Indigenous people.

INTERNAL FOCUS GROUPS

Central Purpose:
The Town of Okotoks provides a variety of programs, services, and supports that affect quality of life. This session gathers insights and applies a social lens to municipal services.

Participants:
Administration (N=42)

Key Insights:

The municipality aims to enhance service delivery through proactive planning, integrated social policies, and community-centric decision-making. Priorities include addressing social inequities, improving collaboration, and supporting vulnerable populations. Emphasis is placed on inclusivity, accessibility, and better communication to engage residents and adapt services to evolving community needs, fostering overall well-being and organizational alignment.

COMMUNITY ASSET MAPPING

Central Purpose:
A workshop and pre-workshop survey were used to engage community organizations in determining local assets to affirm the intention of building on existing strengths.

Participants:
Community groups and organizations (N=131)

Key Insights:

The community thrives on strong local businesses, accessible education, health services, and vibrant social connections. Natural spaces, volunteerism, and inclusive events foster belonging. Opportunities include expanding mentorship, enhancing medical and transit services, and improving communication. Balancing growth with environmental preservation, the community aspires to support local talent, strengthen social networks, and promote resilience, well-being, and inclusivity for all.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS & FOCUS GROUPS

Central Purpose:
Several methods were deployed to hear from community members including discussions hosted by trained volunteers, targeted focus groups, and an evening of conversation cafes.

Participants:
Community members and participants in local programs and services (N=300+)

Key Insights:

Okotoks residents value community hubs like the Recreation Centre and library, local events, and natural spaces for fostering connection. However, rapid growth strains infrastructure, healthcare, and housing, raising concerns about affordability and inclusivity. Gaps in public transit, youth programs, and mental health services hinder engagement. Residents seek balanced growth, improved services, affordable housing, and inclusive, well-promoted community activities.

VALIDATION SURVEYS

Central Purpose:
Two surveys (community and youth) were administered to test the extent to which the engagement processes generated topics and priorities that resonate in Okotoks.

Participants:
Community members (N=323) and youth participants (N=303)

Key Insights:

Across both surveys, the majority of respondents live in Okotoks—88.75% in the community survey and 96.28% in the youth survey. Overall, participants showed strong agreement with the five community priority statements, with over 85% consistently agreeing or strongly agreeing that these priorities are important for themselves, their families, and the broader community. Among youth, 88% agree that they have access to family or close friends they can rely on for help in Okotoks.

COMMUNITY SOCIAL PRIORITIES

Community Affordability

Accessibility and Inclusive Services

Strengthening Community Connections

Community Awareness and Engagement

Growing in A Way that Supports Everyone

DESIGN LABS

Central Purpose:
Engagement up to and including the validation surveys was intended to identify priorities while the design labs gathered insights and perspectives on actions and strategies.

Participants:
Youth Design Labs (N=103)
Community Design Lab (N=30)
Community Organizations (N=19)
Municipal Design Lab (N=26)

Key Insights:

Youth identified ideas to help strengthen employment opportunities, access to safe spaces, and options for transportation as their highest concerns.

Community members focused on engagement and access to resources for newcomers, transportation options, and mental health as their priority actions.

For community organizations, affordability, accessibility, and opportunities for connection were most cited in their design ideas.

A future-oriented focus emerged for Town Administration as they pulled comments from the youth engagement to focus on employment, advanced education opportunities and actions for infrastructure and connectivity.

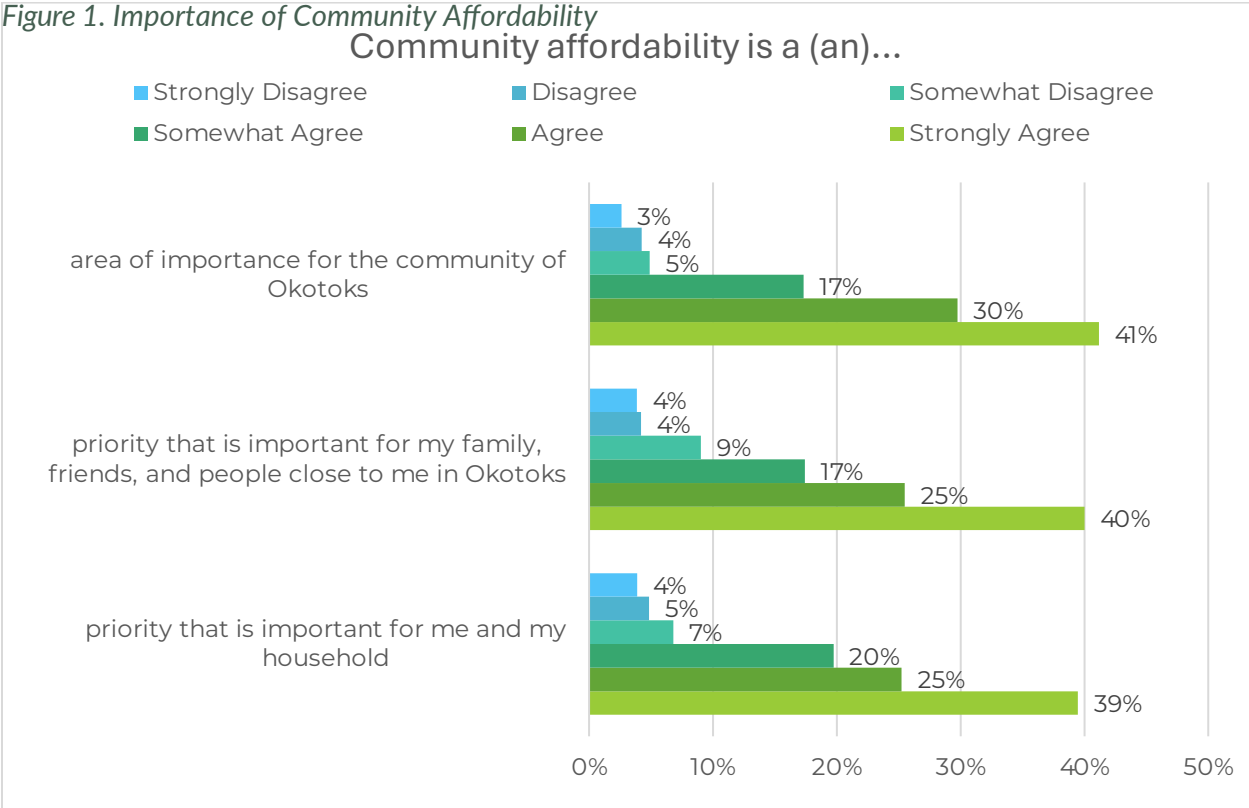
Appendix III

Community Validation Survey Results

As part of the overall engagement process, the community was invited to participate in a validation survey designed to provide community validation for the social priorities, as well as helping to set community level indicators and deepening knowledge of how social needs are impacting their lives. In total there were 323 contributions to the survey from the community.

Community Affordability

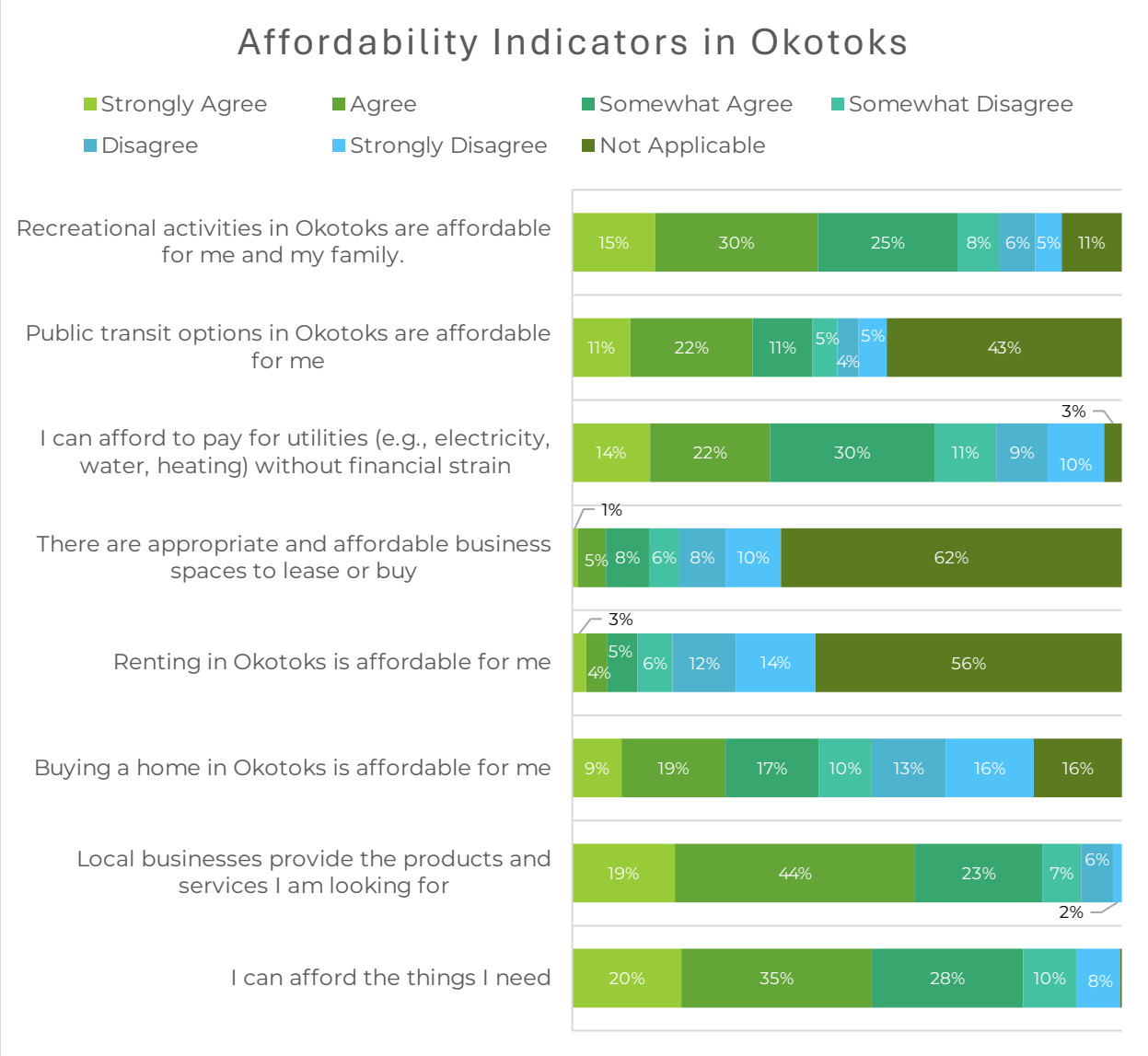
Figure 1. Importance of Community Affordability



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

The community was provided with an opportunity to share their level of support for community affordability as a priority area for them. There was a high level of support for this priority as over 80% of respondents felt it was a priority for them, their families, their friends, and their community.

Appendix III



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Affordability indicators used were designed to provide a snapshot of the community's perceptions of personal affordability in their lives. Although most people feel they can afford most things they need, including products, services, and recreational activities, there are areas of note. 30% of those who responded indicated they had some difficulty with paying utilities. Additionally, housing remains a challenge; 39% indicated that buying a home may be unaffordable for them currently, and 31% suggested that rentals feel unaffordable for them. Commercial rentals also felt unaffordable to those searching for them as 63% of those who responded other than Not Applicable felt commercial rentals were unaffordable for them.

Together, these results suggest that there are pressures being experienced by Okotokians as it relates to affordability in their lives. When asked how affordability is impacting their lives,

residents shared housing costs—both for renters and buyers—are forcing tough decisions. Young adults suggested they can't afford to move out or stay in the community they grew up in. Families felt they are struggling to make ends meet, and single-income households find it nearly impossible to keep up. Seniors on fixed incomes worry about whether they can afford to stay in their homes. Many expressed frustration that new developments aren't addressing the real issue—affordable options remain scarce.

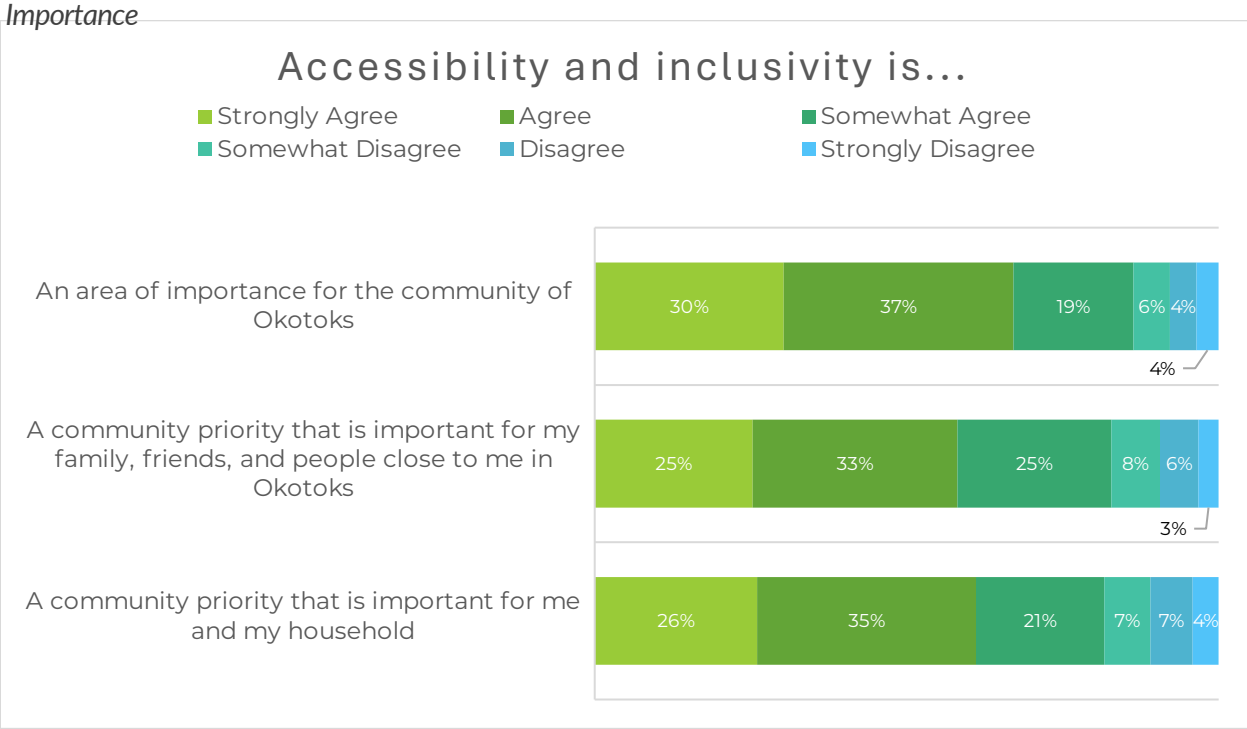
Survey responses also highlight the broader ripple effects of affordability challenges. People shared stories of cutting back on essentials, relying more on food banks, and scaling down their spending in the community. Businesses are feeling the impact, with some struggling to stay open as fewer customers can afford to support them. Many residents pointed to rising taxes, utilities, and service fees as a growing burden, especially as wages fail to keep up.

Community members shared a range of ideas on how to make Okotoks more affordable and livable, with many focusing on improving public services, recreation, and transportation. Residents called for expanded medical services, better public transit with regular routes and accessible booking, and more affordable housing options—including a mix of rentals, starter homes, and multi-family developments. Many pointed out that recreational opportunities, while valued, are often limited or expensive, making it difficult for families, seniors, and those on lower incomes to participate fully in community life. Calls for a larger recreation center, more public swim and fitness options, and better access to green spaces reflected a strong desire to invest in facilities that benefit the whole community.

Appendix III

Accessible and Inclusive Community Services

Figure 3. Accessibility and Inclusivity Importance

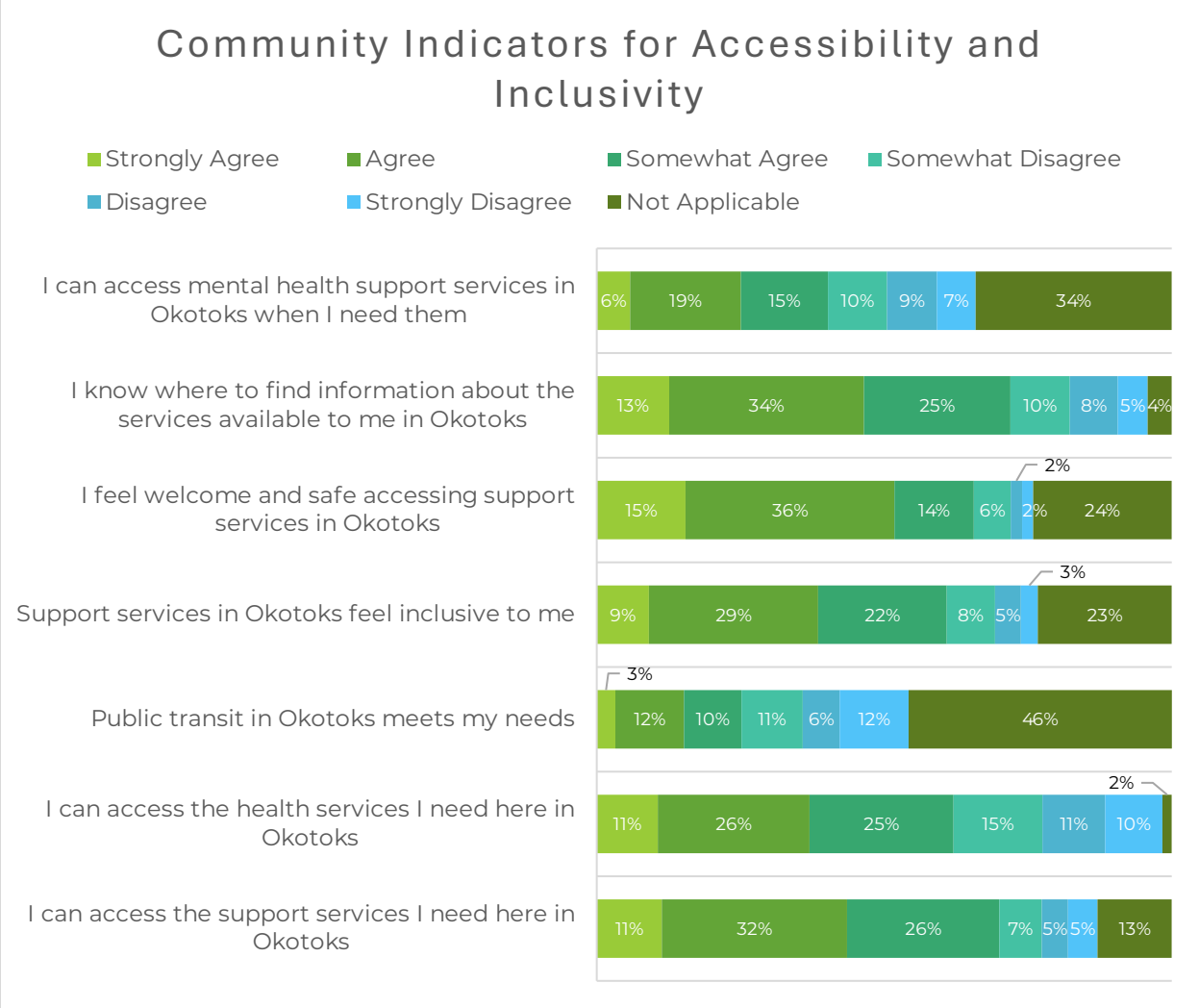


Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Participants in the survey felt strongly that this is a priority, with over 81% identifying it as important for themselves, their community, or their friends and family.

Appendix III

Figure 4. Accessibility and Inclusivity Indicators



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

The community indicators used were focused on assessing the level of access people felt they had to support services including health, mental health, transportation, or other support services. Most participants felt they had access to general supports services that feel safe and inclusive. However, 36% felt they have limited access to health services and 26% felt the same for mental health services. Additionally, 53% of those who responded (outside of not applicable) to the transit question felt that current transit does not meet their needs (46% of total respondents said applicable). The results tend to suggest that although services generally feel supportive and inclusive, there are opportunities to improve access and continue to work towards greater inclusiveness.

When asked to provide context to how current accessibility and inclusivity of programs and services is impacting their lives, community members shared a range of experiences. Many noted that while services like transit and recreation exist, they can be difficult to access due to overcrowding, inconvenient scheduling, or physical barriers. Parents of children with disabilities

expressed a lack of inclusive programs, making it difficult for their children to participate in sports and community activities. Seniors and people with mobility challenges reported difficulties accessing businesses, recreation facilities, and public spaces, with concerns about heavy doors, inadequate parking, and uneven sidewalks—especially in winter. Others pointed out that programs and activities tend to be geared toward specific demographics, leaving limited options for adults, non-sports activities, and those with unique needs.

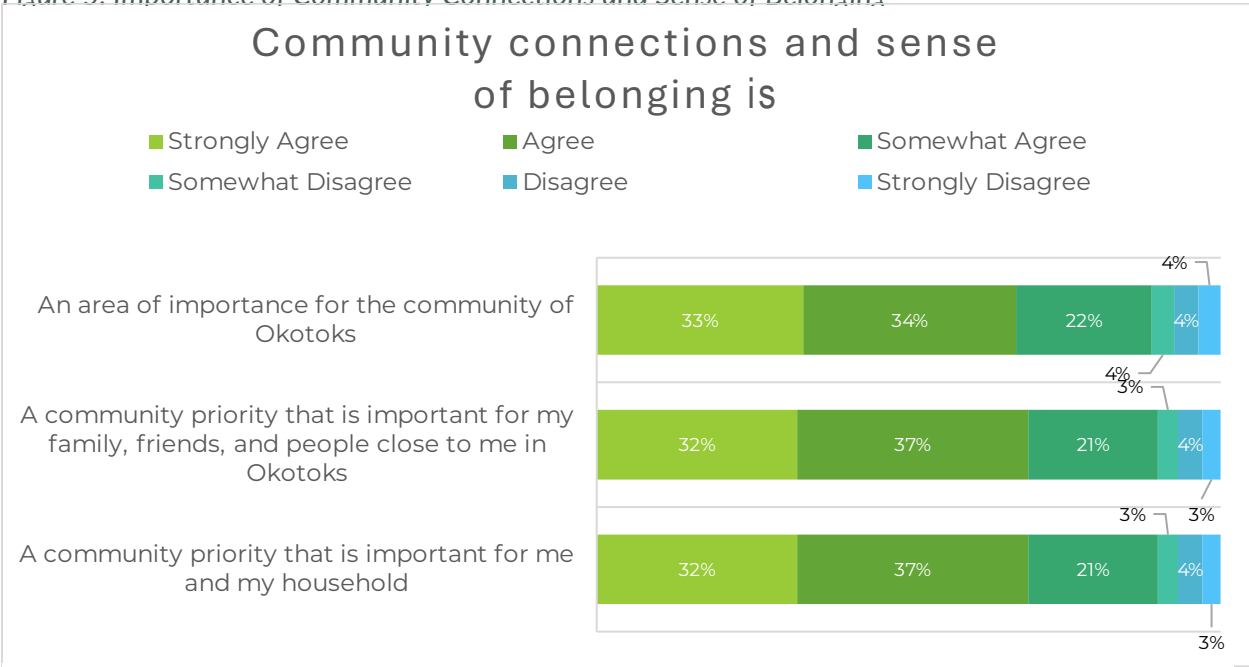
Residents shared many ideas on how to improve accessibility, inclusivity, and access to essential services in Okotoks. Expanding healthcare services was a major focus, with suggestions for attracting more family doctors, creating a local hospital, increasing urgent care hours, and improving access to mental health support. Some proposed partnerships with local psychologists to offer sliding-scale services and expanding social work support in schools to ensure early intervention for children and families. Others suggested creating a centralized hub—both online and in print—to clearly communicate available services, making it easier for residents to access healthcare, counseling, and other support programs.

Improving public transportation was another key theme, with calls for a fixed-route bus system that regularly connects key locations in town and provides better links to Calgary for medical appointments and work commutes. Expanding recreation facilities, including a larger aquatic center, more multi-sport complexes, and additional community spaces for arts and culture, was suggested to keep up with population growth. Residents also supported enhancing accessibility, such as widening sidewalks, ensuring businesses have push-button doors, and providing more mobility-friendly parking and public spaces. A mentorship program between seniors and youth, more affordable recreation options, and expanded free or low-cost community programs were also among the ideas presented to foster a more connected and inclusive community.

Appendix III

Community Connections and Sense of Belonging

Figure 5. Importance of Community Connections and Sense of Belonging

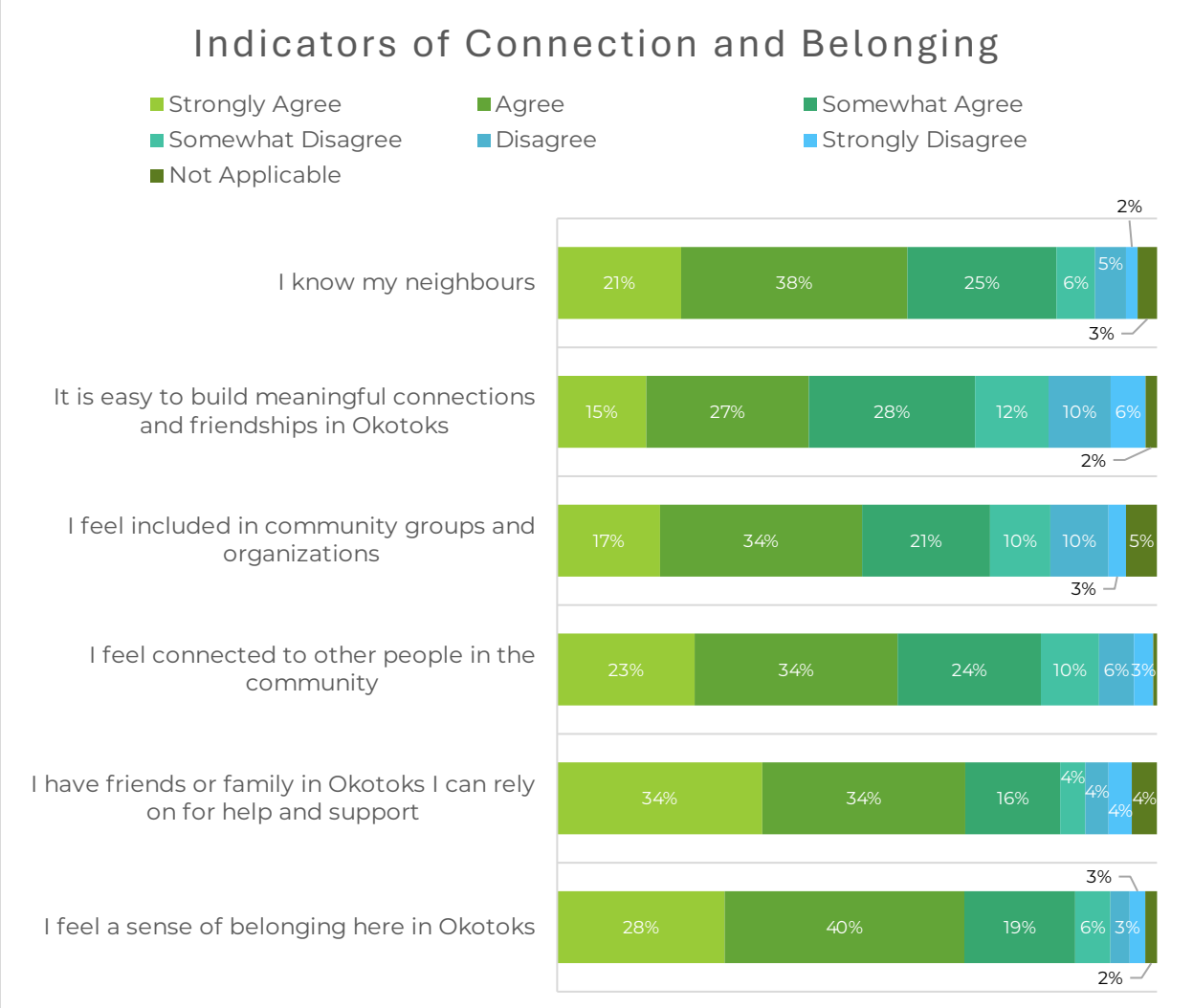


Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Connection and belonging is an important priority for Okotokians; 90% of survey respondents shared that this is a priority for them, their families, and their community.

Appendix III

Figure 6. Connection and Belonging Indicators 1 of 2

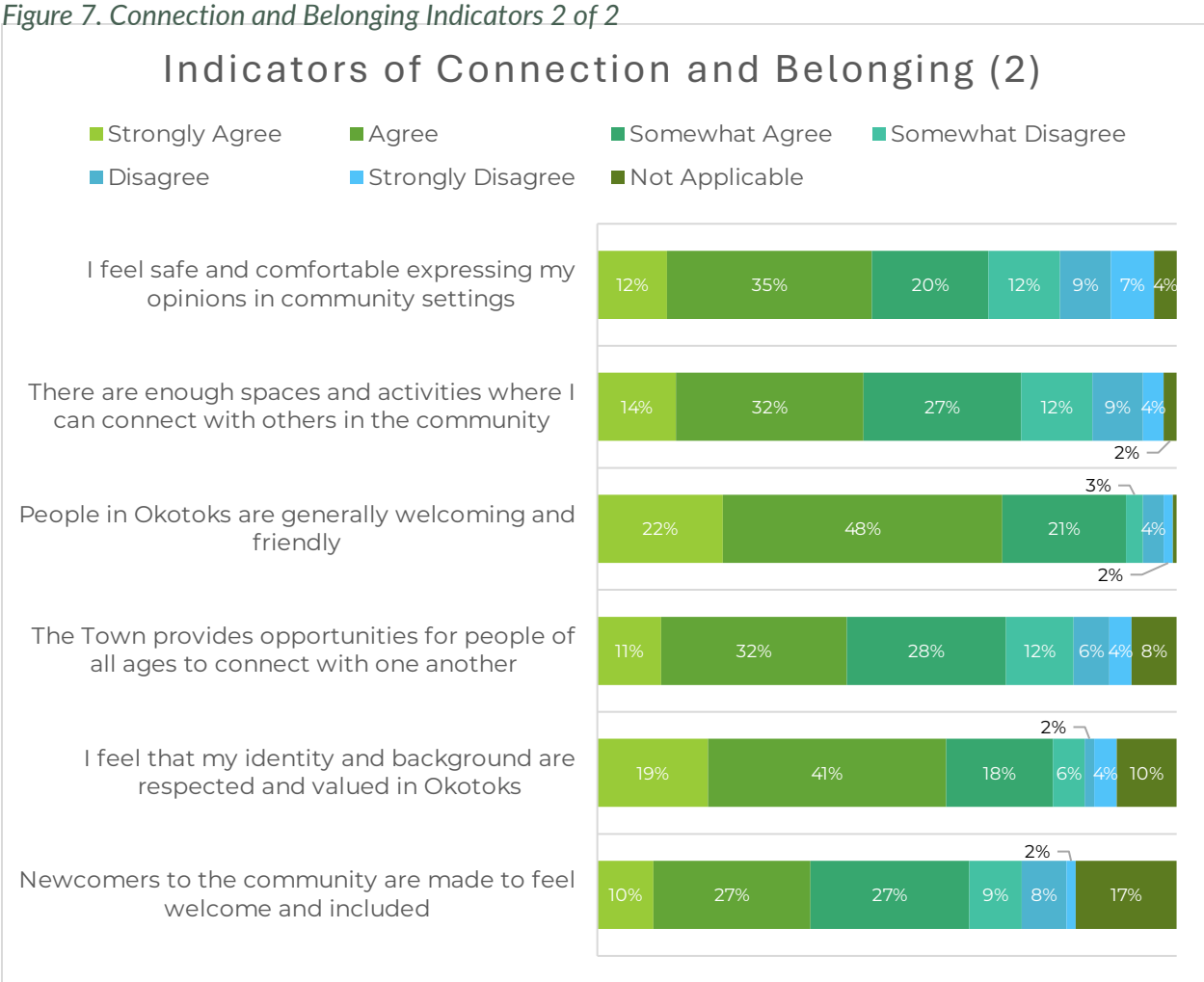


Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

The survey used a comprehensive set of indicators to better understand the current state of belonging and connection within the community. For the majority of survey respondents Okotoks is a welcoming community where they enjoy a sense of belonging and connections with others and groups. That being said, 28% indicated it can be difficult to connect and build friendships in the community and 23% reported not feeling included in community groups and organizations.

Appendix III

Figure 7. Connection and Belonging Indicators 2 of 2



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Additional indicators follow similar trends that tend to suggest that most people feel the community is welcoming and friendly and that identities and backgrounds are respected. In contrast, 28% of respondents suggested feeling some discomfort expressing opinions while 25% felt there are opportunities to increase access to spaces where they can connect with others.

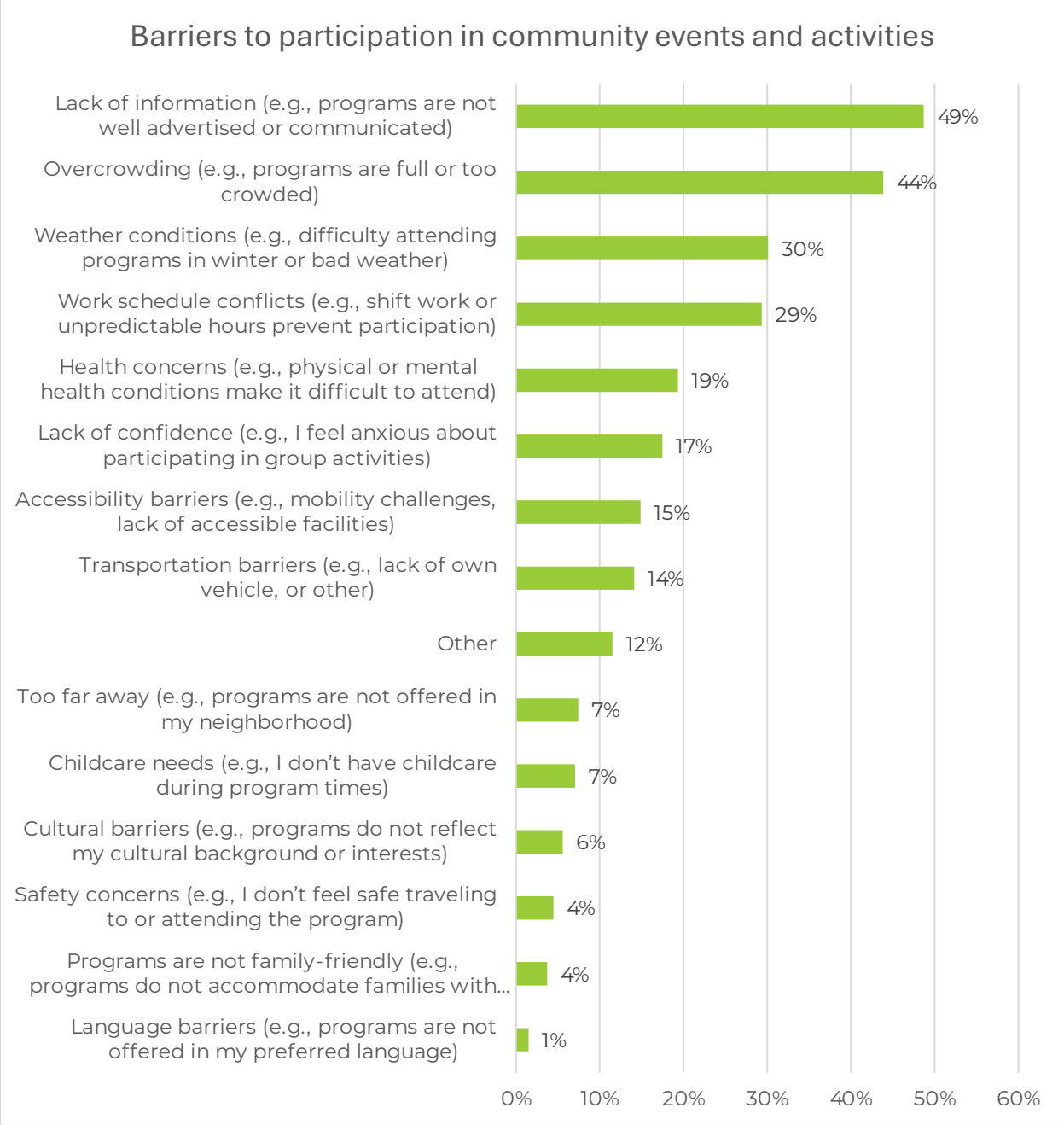
Some Okotokians felt a change in the fabric of the community, making it harder to foster strong relationships between neighbors. Respondents spoke about a shift away from the small-town feel, with fewer opportunities for casual social interactions and a sense that new developments prioritize expansion over community-building. Others noted that connection is particularly difficult for people with disabilities, newcomers, and those without established social networks. Some respondents shared positive experiences, highlighting the role of local events in bringing people together, while others emphasized the need for more inclusive, low-cost, and neighborhood-focused initiatives that encourage participation across different demographics.

Appendix III

A recurring theme in the feedback was the importance of spaces and programs that make it easier for residents to engage with one another. Some pointed to the role of local businesses, churches, and recreational facilities as gathering places, while others called for a more intentional approach to strengthening cultural inclusivity, such as incorporating Indigenous place names and offering town materials in multiple languages. Residents largely agreed that fostering a welcoming and connected community requires both structured opportunities for engagement and a shared commitment to treating all members with respect and support.

Appendix III

Figure 8. Barriers to Participation in Community Events and Activities

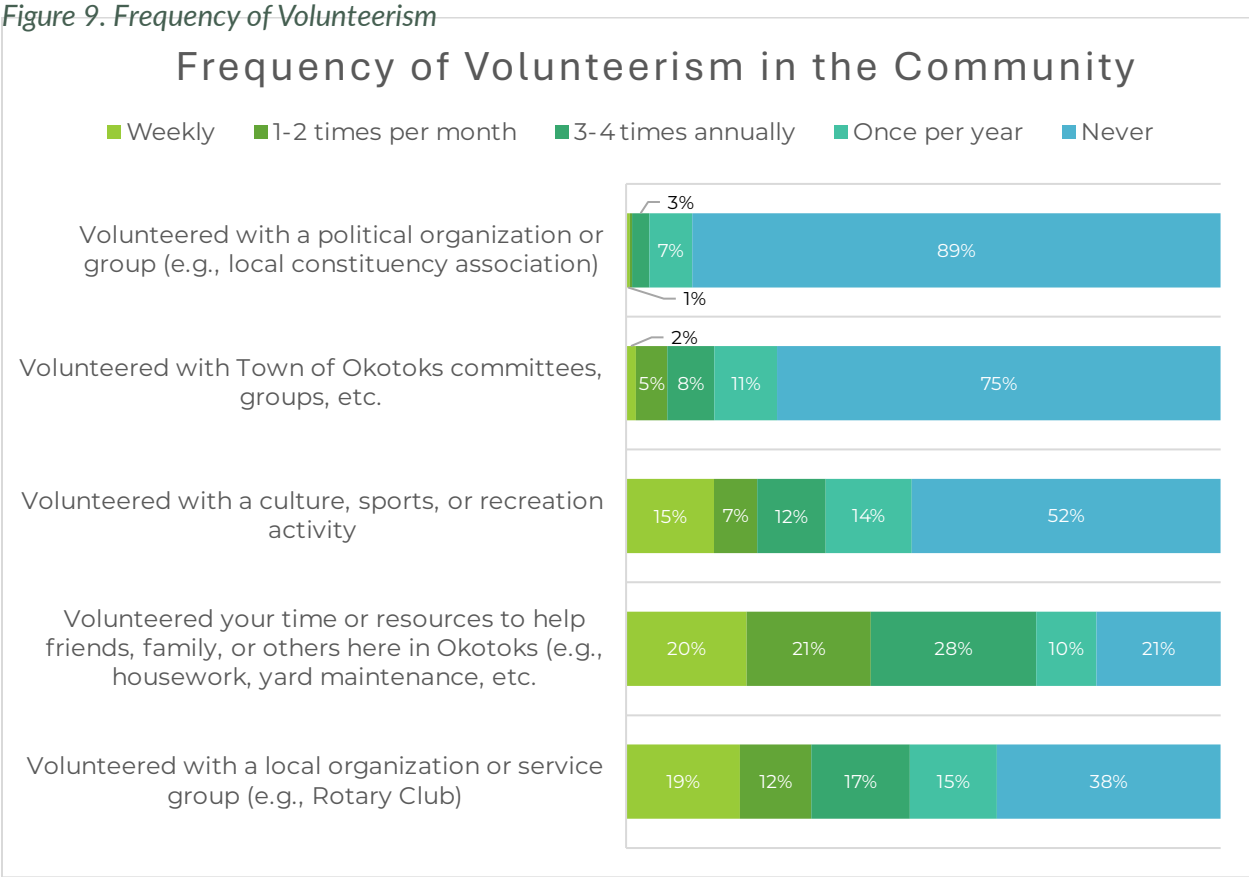


Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Appendix III

Participants highlighted information, overcrowding, weather, and work schedules as the most common barriers to accessing events and programs. When asked to detail "other areas", residents shared that personal interests, location, and family-focus seem to be getting in their way.

Figure 9. Frequency of Volunteerism



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Community connection and belonging can be supported by volunteerism. To gauge current volunteerism trends, participants indicated the frequency with which they volunteered in different capacities across the community. The most frequent form of volunteerism was informal volunteerism for friends and families, followed by volunteering with a local organization or group. Worth noting is that although overall volunteerism rates are relatively high, only 15-20% of volunteers contribute frequently, suggesting an opportunity to increase engagement.

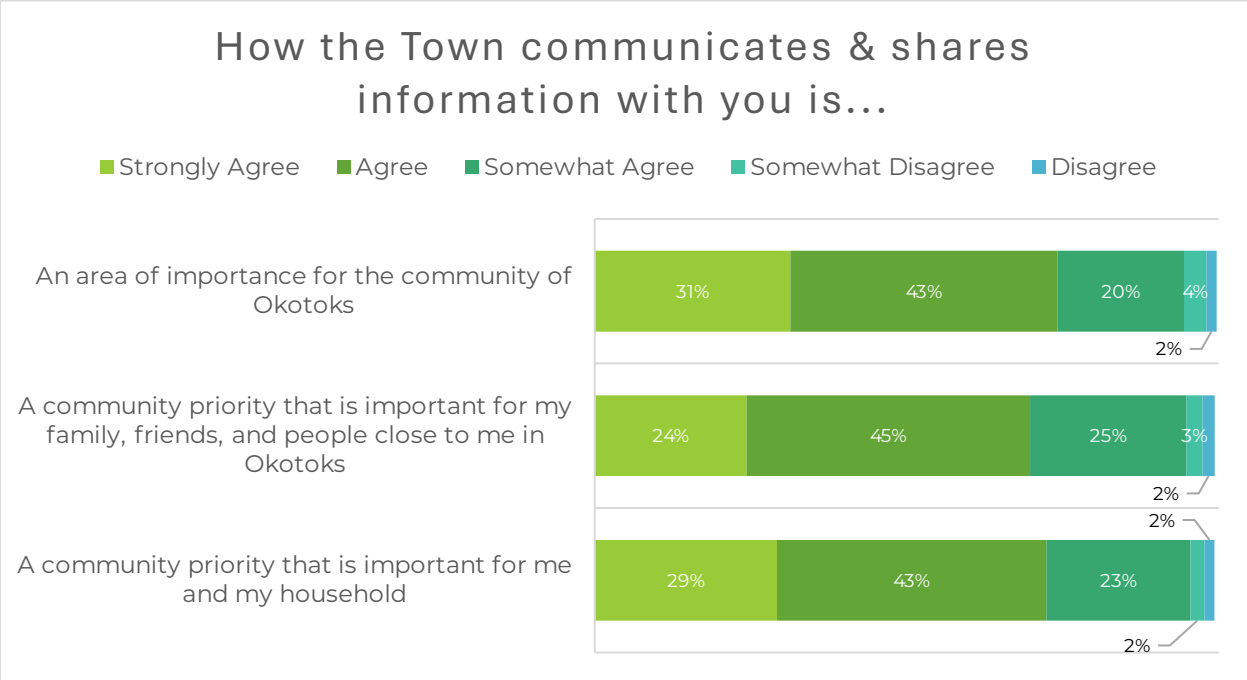
Appendix III

How the Town Communicates & Shares Information with You

Civic engagement, awareness, and communication had a high level of agreement from the community. 94% of respondents indicated agreement with this priority for the community.

When asked to indicate the impact this priority area has on their lives, participants felt that they feel disconnected from community decision-making and sometimes struggle to find timely information about town initiatives and events. A shared concern is the perceived lack of transparency from town council, with many feeling that public engagement efforts are simply a formality rather than a genuine opportunity for input. While some appreciate the town's outreach through social media, newspapers, and community meetings, others express difficulty in accessing important information. Participants shared a perception that feedback from engagement sessions gets ignored, and decisions seem predetermined, which tends to lower their willingness to participate in the future.

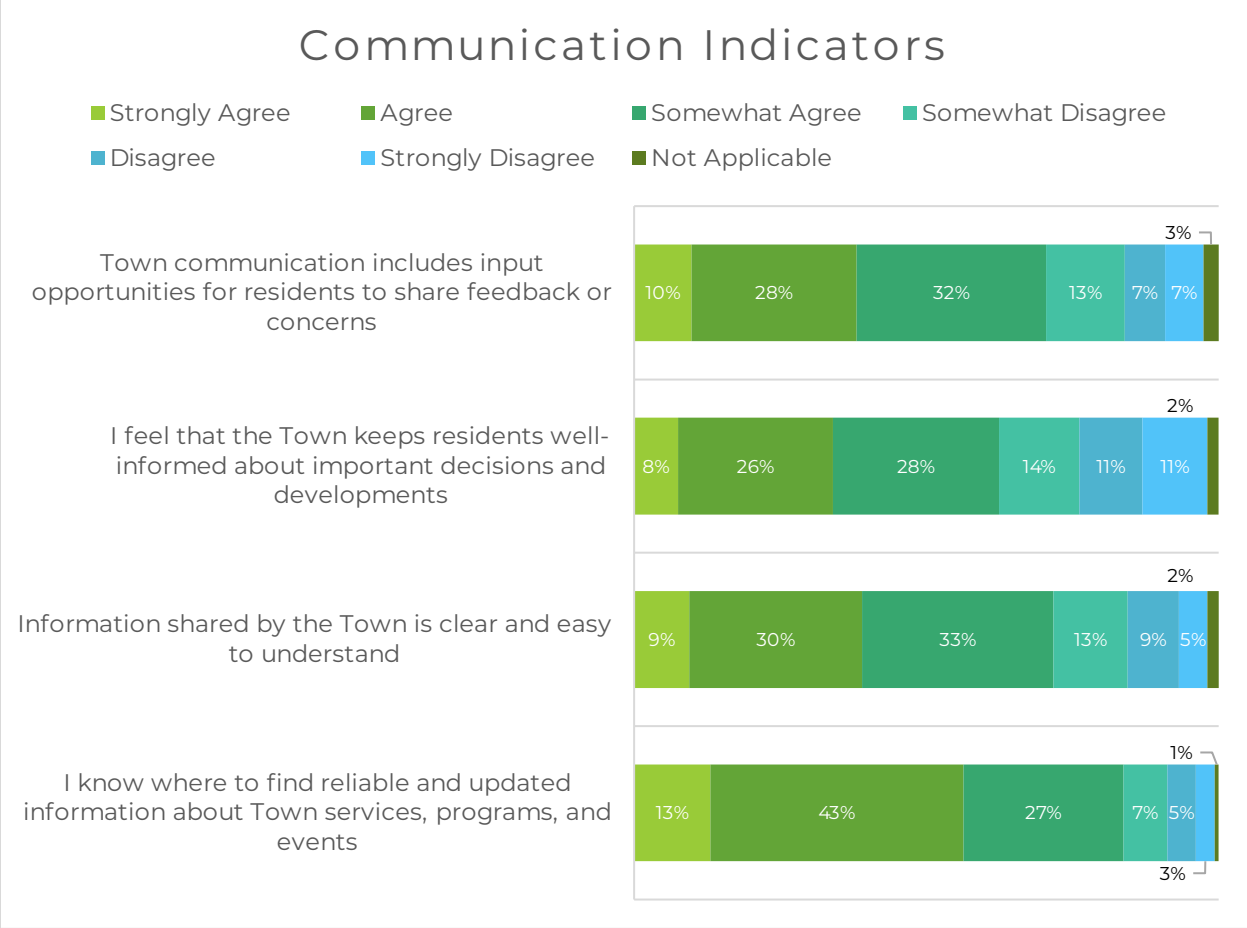
Figure 10. Importance of Town Communication and Sharing Strategies



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Appendix III

Figure 11. Communication Indicators

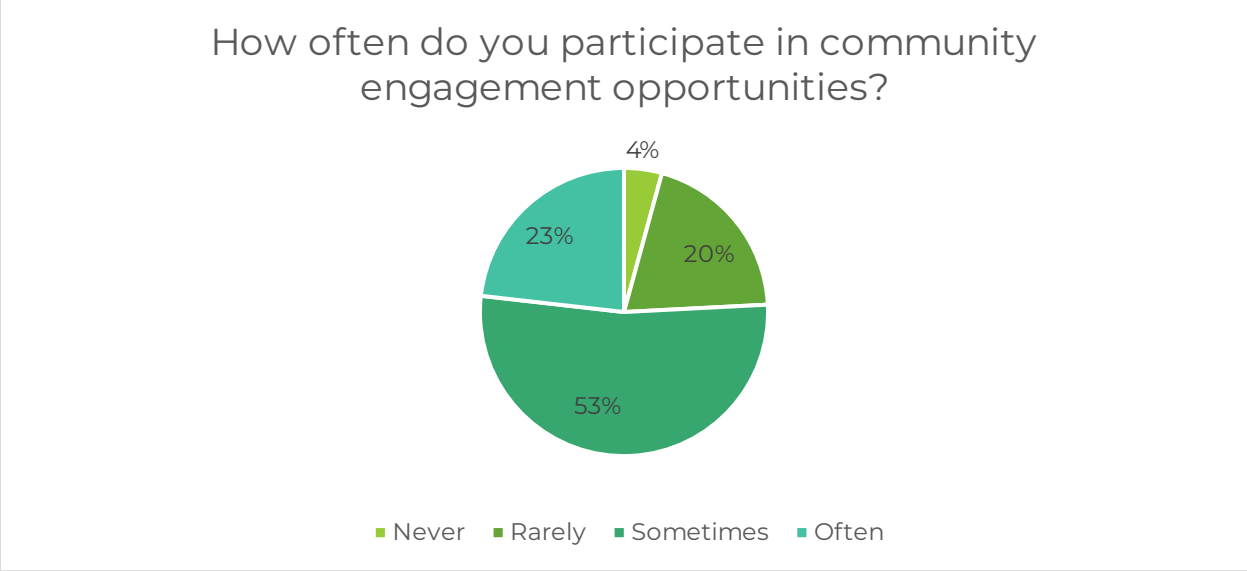


Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Respondents suggested they tend to know where to find reliable information (83%) and that the Town tends to share information that is clear and easy to understand (72%). Alternatively, 36% indicated feeling under-informed by the Town and that 27% feel there could be more opportunity for feedback. These results tend to suggest there is dynamic tension in the experience of individuals where although they know where to access clear information, they may also be seeking more from the Town to fill gaps.

Appendix III

Figure 12. Engagement Participation



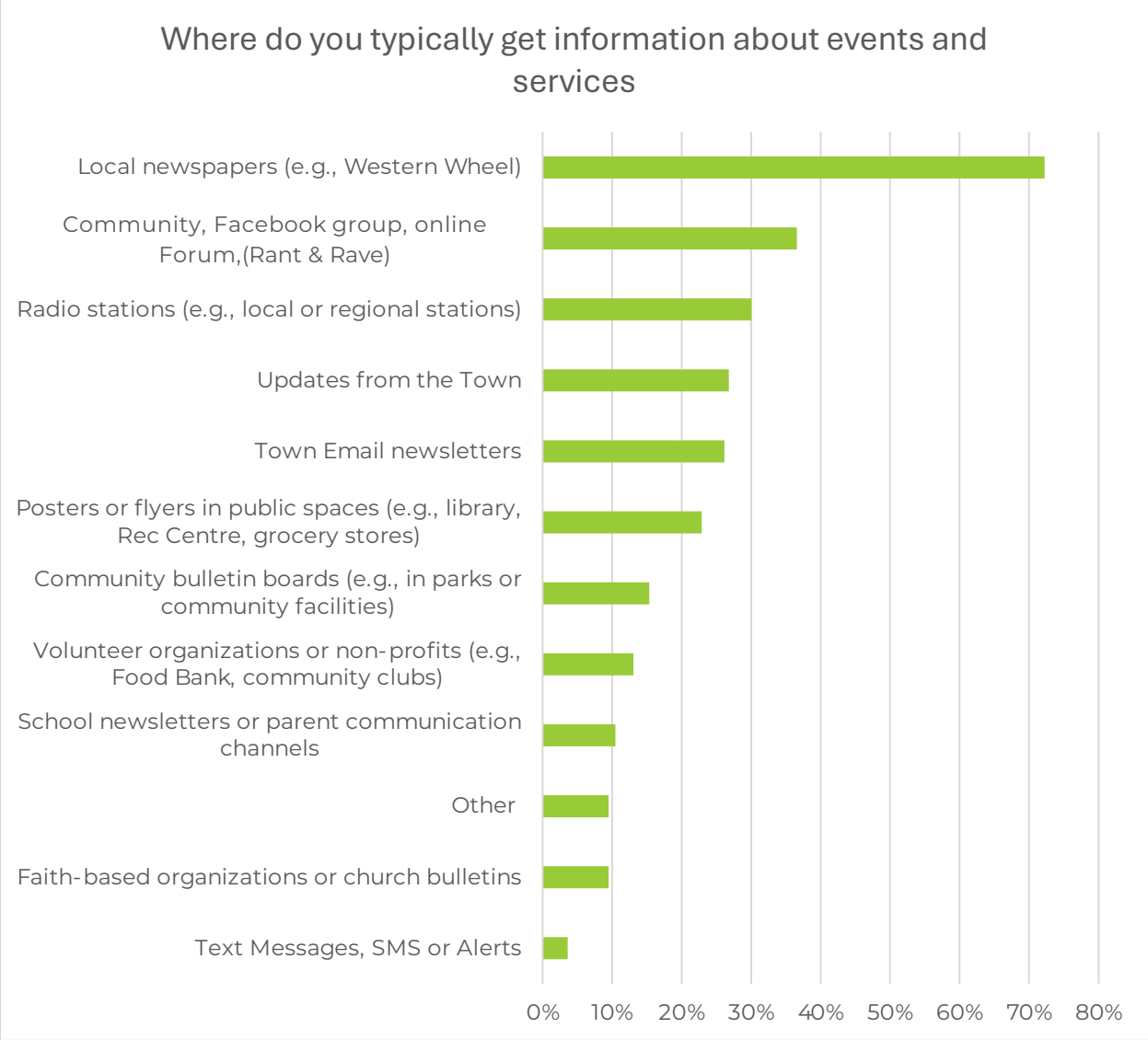
Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

This is made clearer through the feedback above. 76% of respondents indicated participating sometimes or often in community engagement activities while 24% indicated rarely or never participating. However, it is worth noting that many of the survey participants may have participated in this project throughout its duration and therefore the numbers may be higher than through the general population.

For those who participated, the local newspaper, online sources, and radio are the most frequently cited sources of information about events and services. Written in responses in the "other" category included word of mouth and the town website.

Appendix III

Figure 13. Sources of Information about Events and Services



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Appendix III

When asked what methods participants would like the Town to utilize to communicate with them, they shared that digital and traditional communication is the most preferred way including email, websites, newspaper, and radio.

Table 1. Frequency of Preferred Communication Method from the Town

Communication Method	Frequency of mention
Email	Very High
Town Website	Very High
Western Wheel (Newspaper & Online)	Very High
Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.)	Very High
Word of Mouth	High
Radio	Moderate
Billboards/Digital Signs	Moderate
Direct Mail/Printed Newsletters	Moderate
Town Council/Public Meetings	Moderate
Community Boards/Posters	Moderate
Community Organizations (e.g., Seniors Club, Recreation Centers)	Low
Text Messaging	Low
QR Codes	Low
Town Surveys	Low

Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

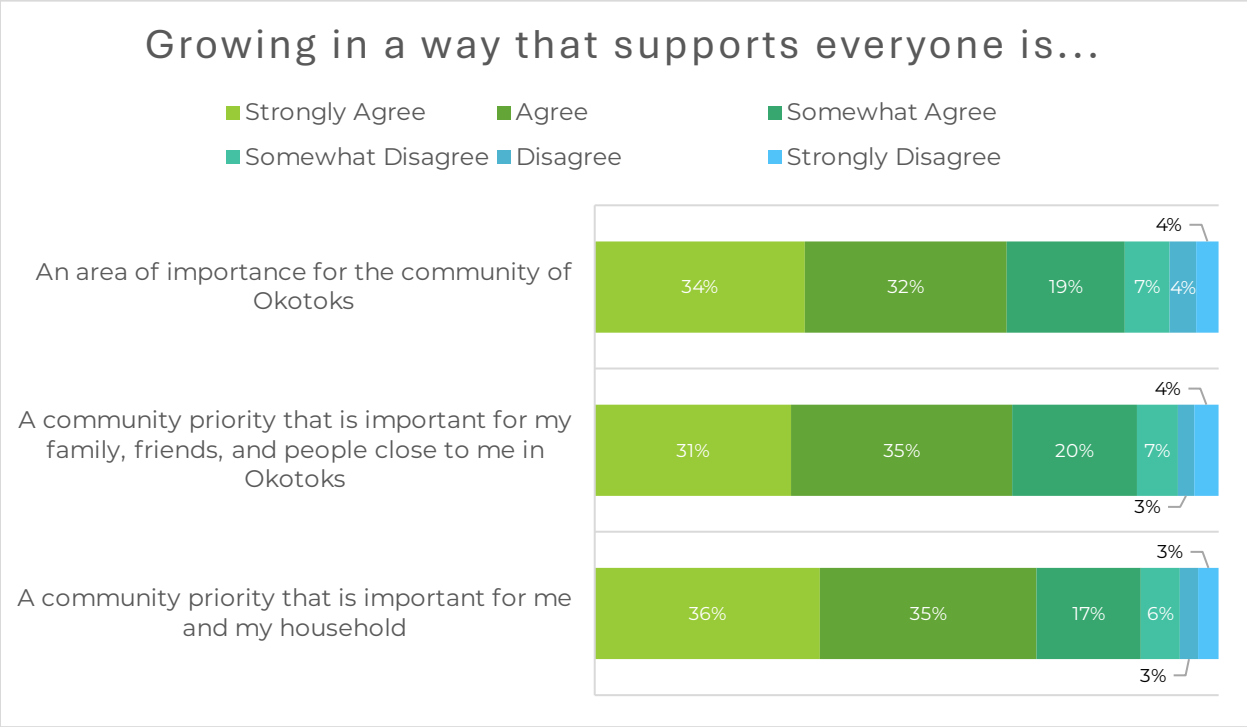
Participants were also asked what might encourage them to participate more fully in Town engagement activities. They highlighted that having convenient timing, options for online participation, shorter surveys, and transparency of follow-up could be significant leverage points to increase participation. Other opportunities such as drop-in or informal methods, having incentives for participation, and singular topic engagement were also mentioned with some frequency.

Appendix III

Growing in a Way that Supports Everyone

The community of Okotoks strongly supports growing in a way that supports everyone, recognizing it as a shared priority and concern for them. Between 85% and 88% of survey respondents agreed this is a priority for them, their families, and their community.

Figure 14. Importance of Growing in a Way that Supports Everyone



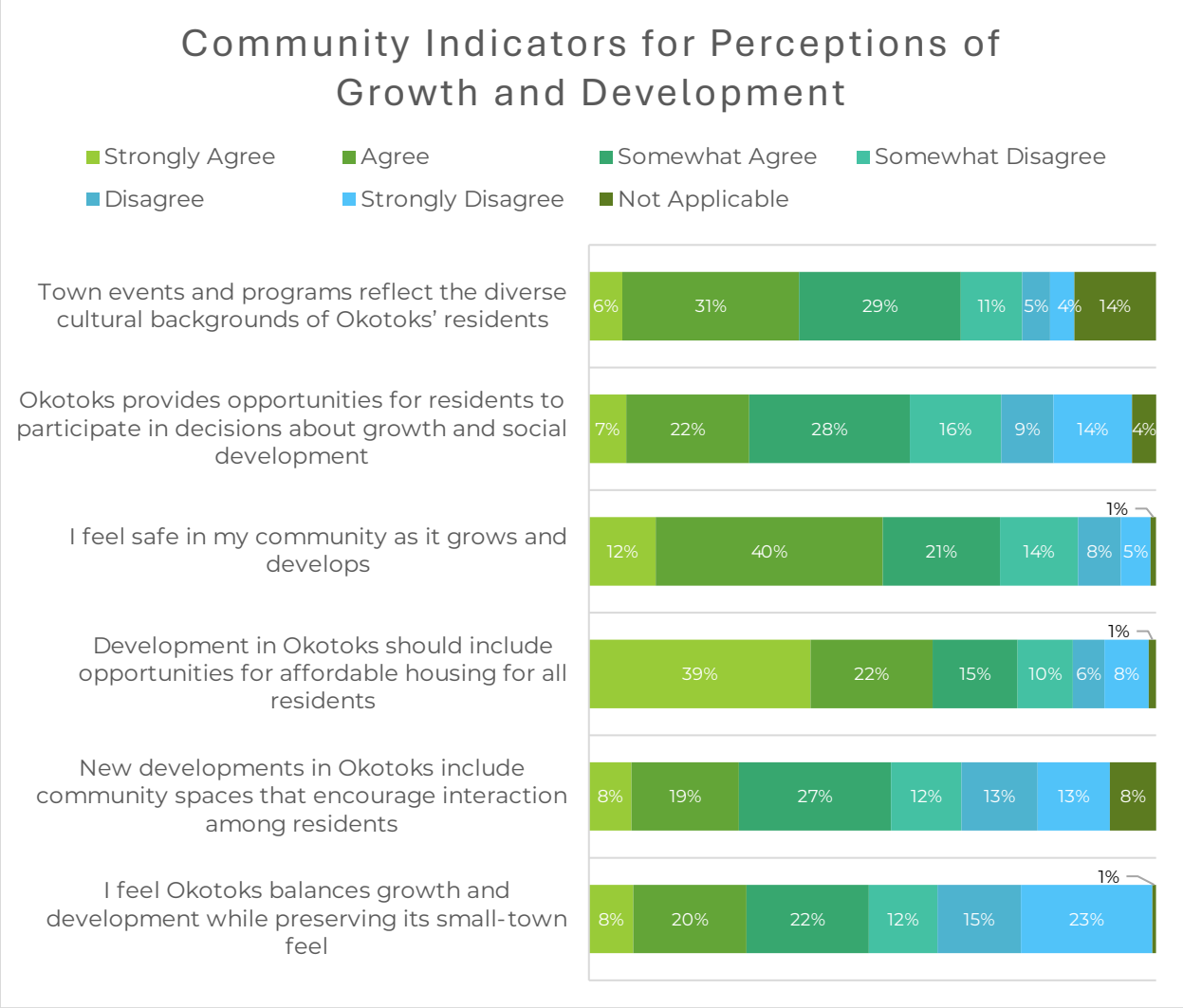
Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

When asked what impact this priority has on their social well-being, participants shared a concern that the town is expanding too quickly without adequate infrastructure, health services, or community planning. Some believe that high-density developments are compromising the small-town feel, increasing traffic congestion, and straining local resources such as schools and healthcare. While some recognize the need for affordable housing and inclusivity, others feel that growth is being prioritized over maintaining the quality of life for existing residents. The tension between welcoming new residents and preserving community identity is evident.

Some residents appreciate the town's focus on diversity and cultural recognition, while others feel these initiatives cater too much to minority groups at the expense of long-standing community traditions. Concerns about increased crime, declining social cohesion, and a loss of community connection were raised, with some residents perceiving a growing divide between different demographic groups.

Appendix III

Figure 15. Perceptions of Growth and Development Indicators

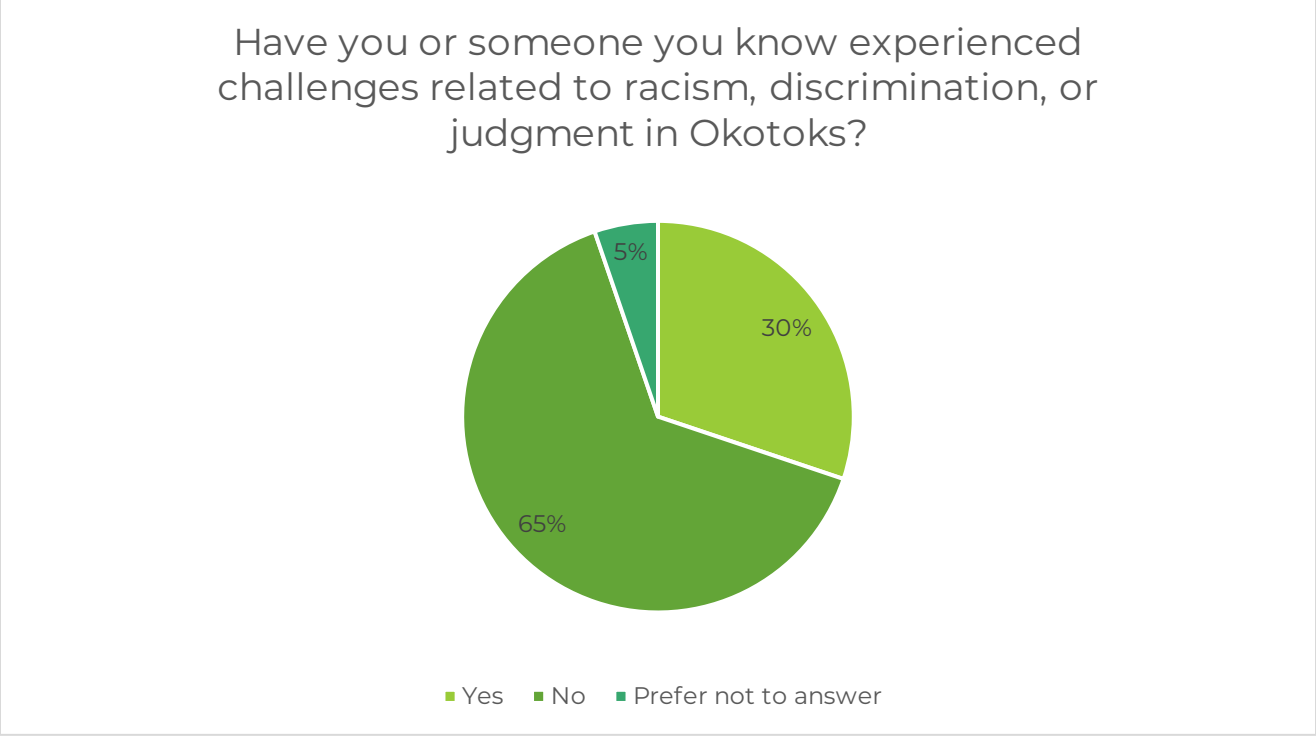


Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Community indicators provide an additional window into contextualizing some of the emerging tensions in the community surrounding the impact of growth. Although residents recognize the need for affordable housing in the previous survey sections, only 74% indicated agreement that development should include affordable housing. While this is a strong result, it indicates a need to continue building awareness and momentum. Additionally, there is an even 50/50 split between those who feel growth and development is balanced and those who do not.

Appendix III

Figure 16. Racism, Discrimination or Judgement Experiences



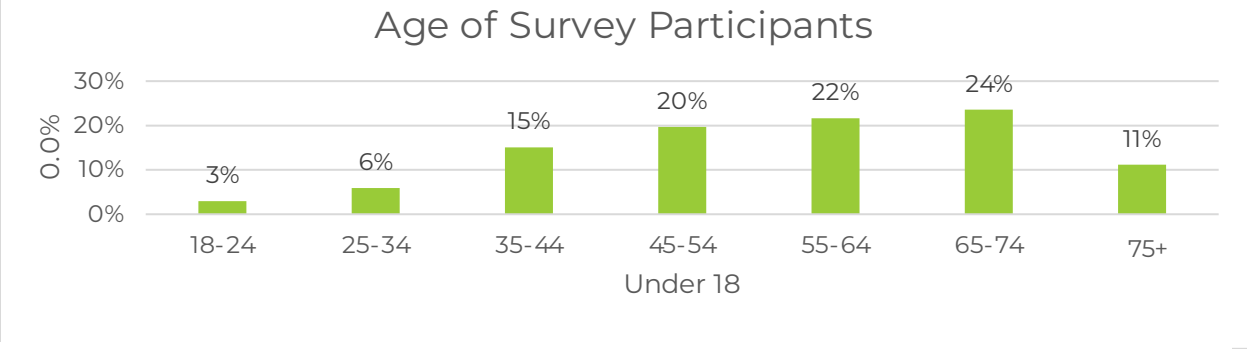
Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

It will be important to amplify efforts for community inclusion and belonging as 30% of respondents indicated experiencing racism, discrimination, or judgement in the community.

Appendix III

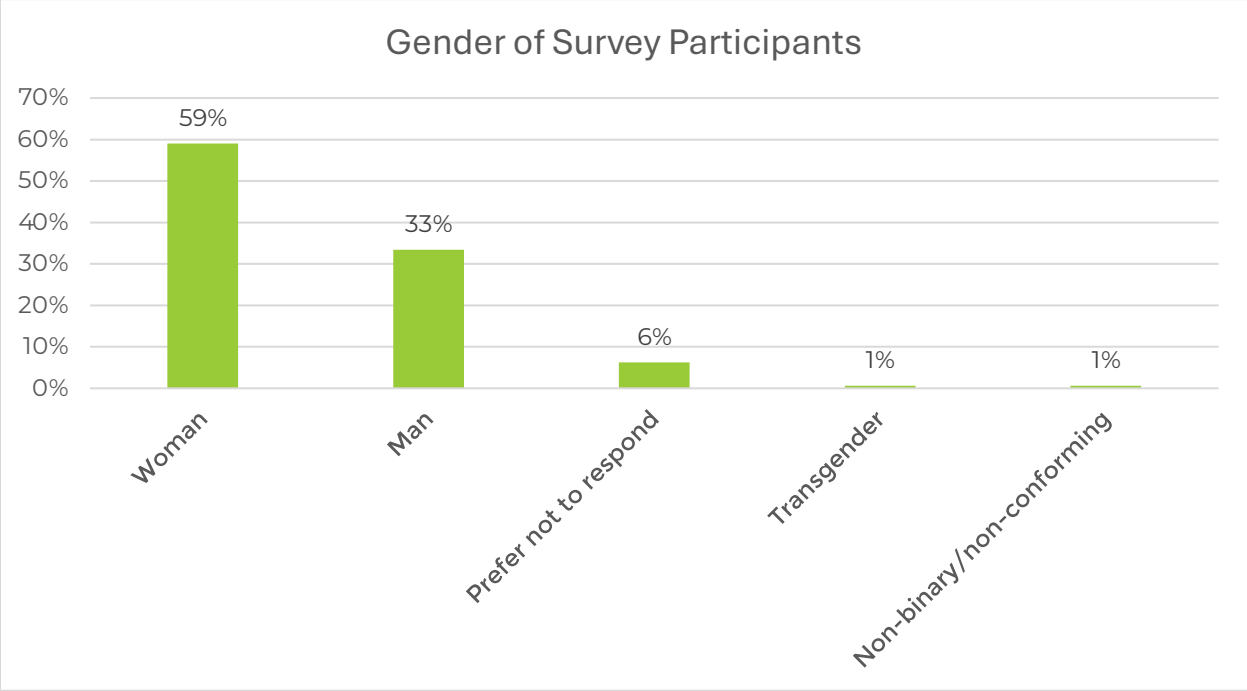
Survey Demographics

Figure 17. Age of Survey Participants



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

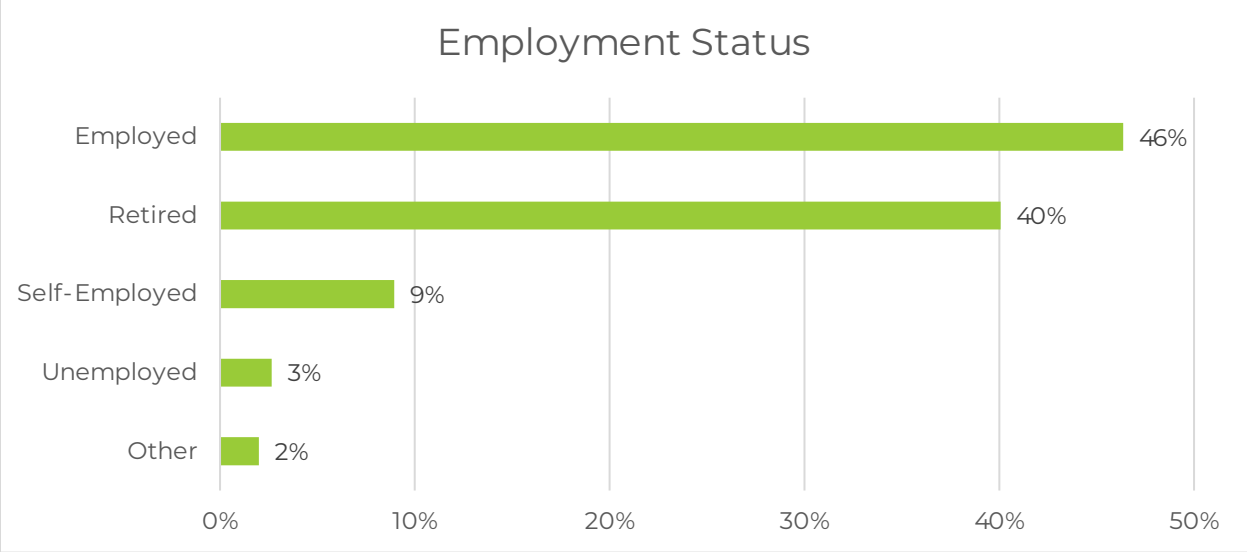
Figure 18. Gender of Survey Participants



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

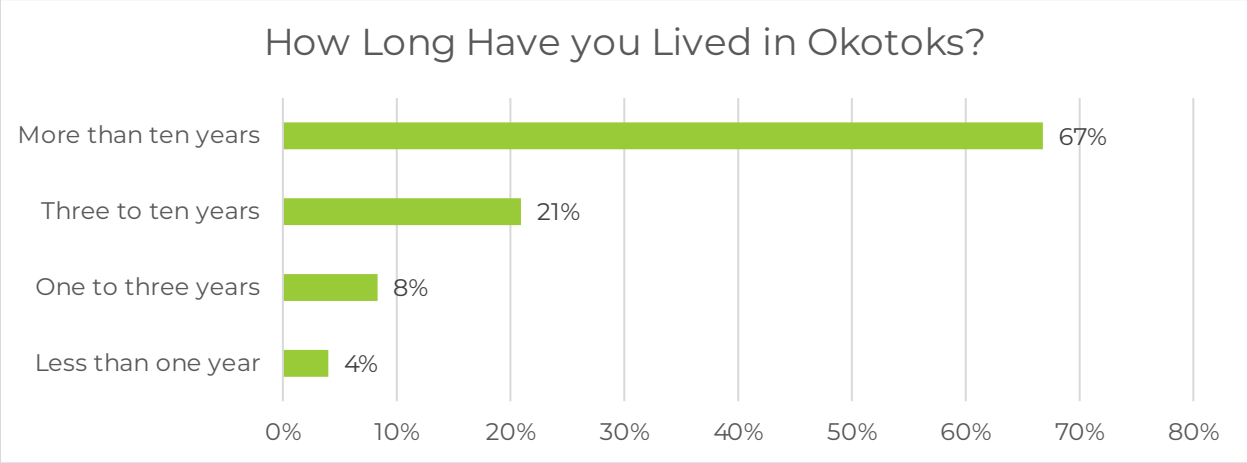
Appendix III

Figure 19. Employment Status of Participants



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

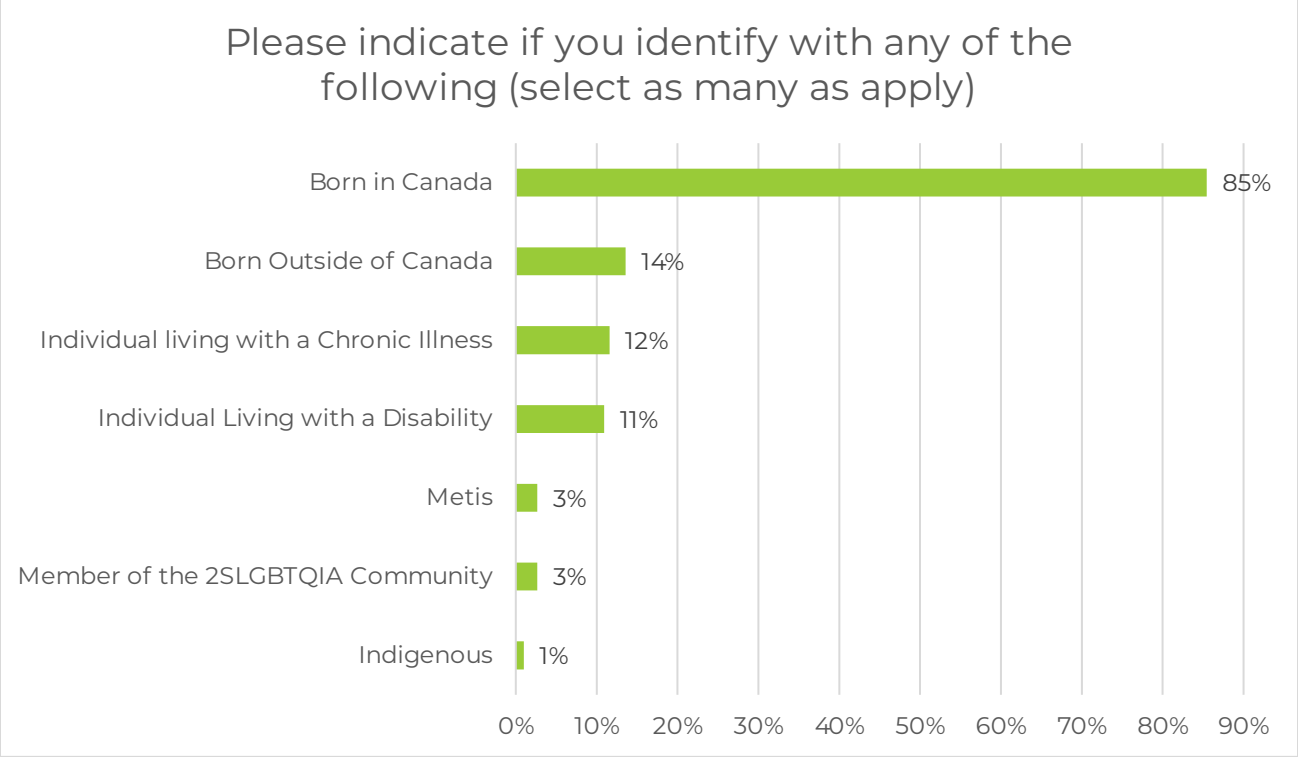
Figure 20. Duration of Residence in Okotoks of Participants



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Appendix III

Figure 21. Identity of Participants



Source: Okotoks Community Validation Survey, 2024

Appendix IV

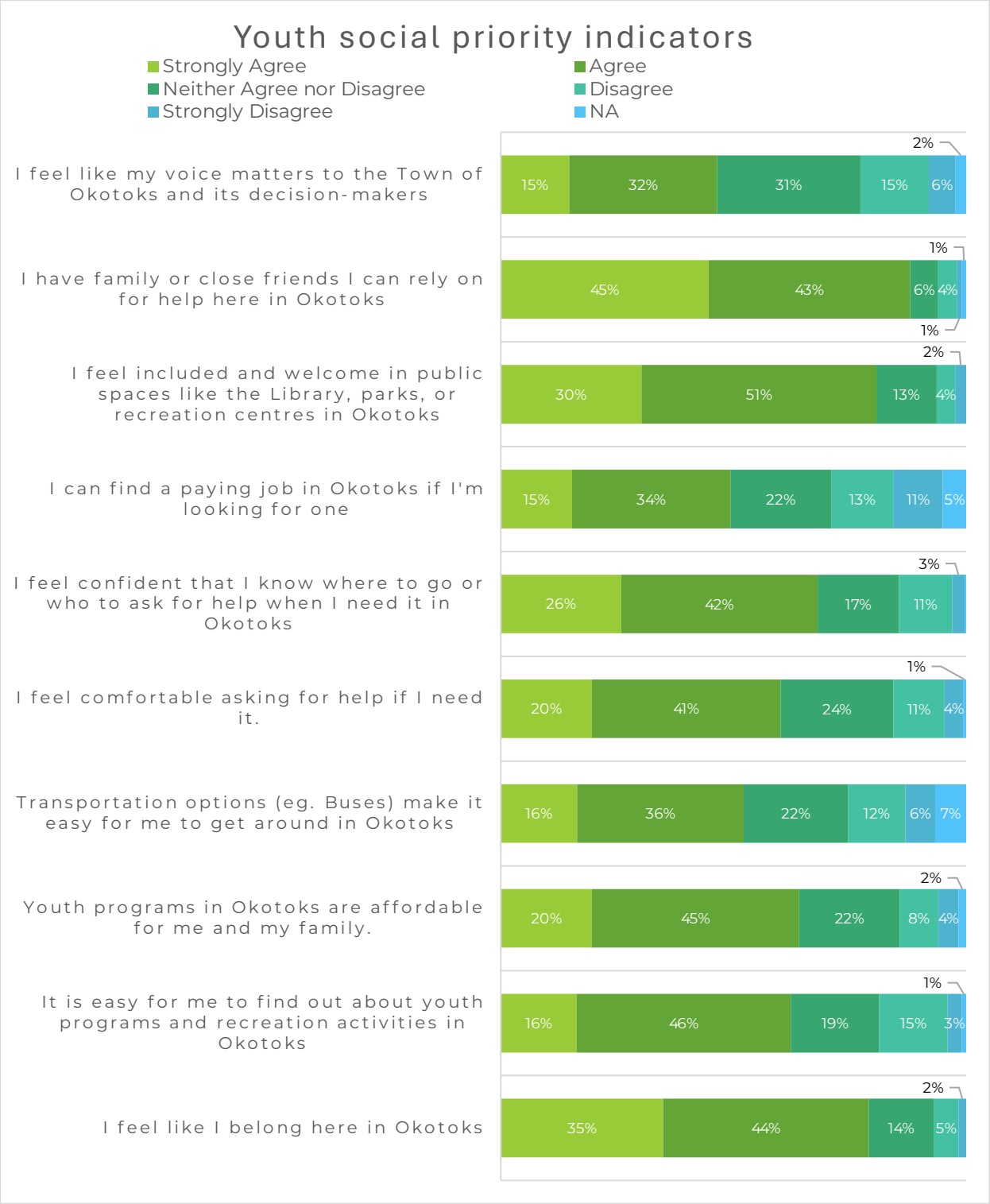
Youth Validation Survey Results

Youth were provided with a customized survey to maximize their input into the Social Needs Assessment. Over 300 youth participated in the survey and shared their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives on social needs and priorities.

Youth survey feedback was broadly categorized into indicators that will help provide a baseline for future engagement and provide context to current social priorities. Most youth who participated (79%) feel a sense of belonging in the community and they feel welcome in public spaces (81%). Importantly, 88% indicate having a close family member or friends in the community who can support them. Among the greatest areas of opportunity are ensuring youth feel their voice can be heard, addressing transportation challenges, and seeking opportunities to increase youth employment.

Appendix IV

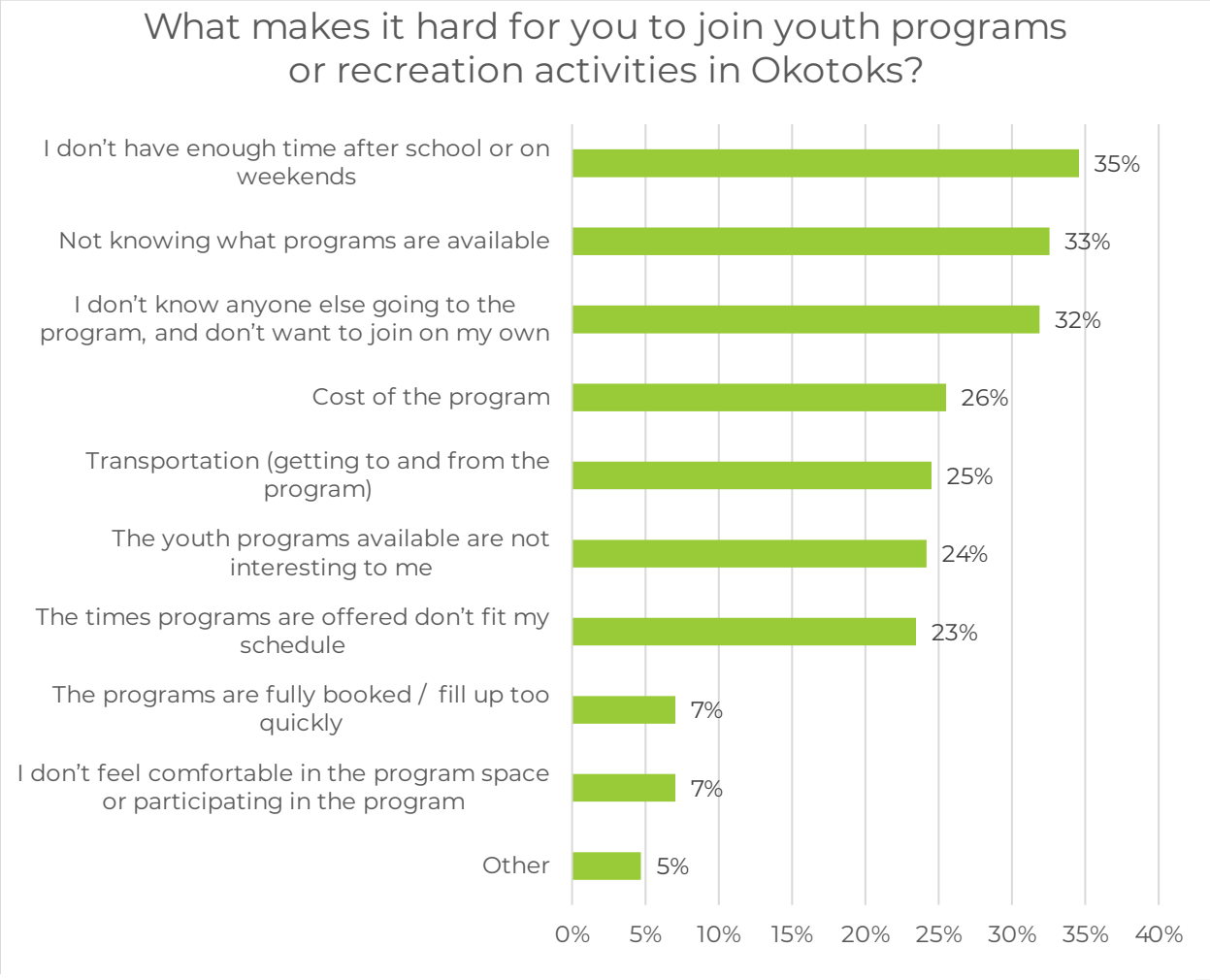
Figure 1. Youth Social Priority Indicators



Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Appendix IV

Figure 2. Barriers to Youth Participation in Programs and Recreational Activities

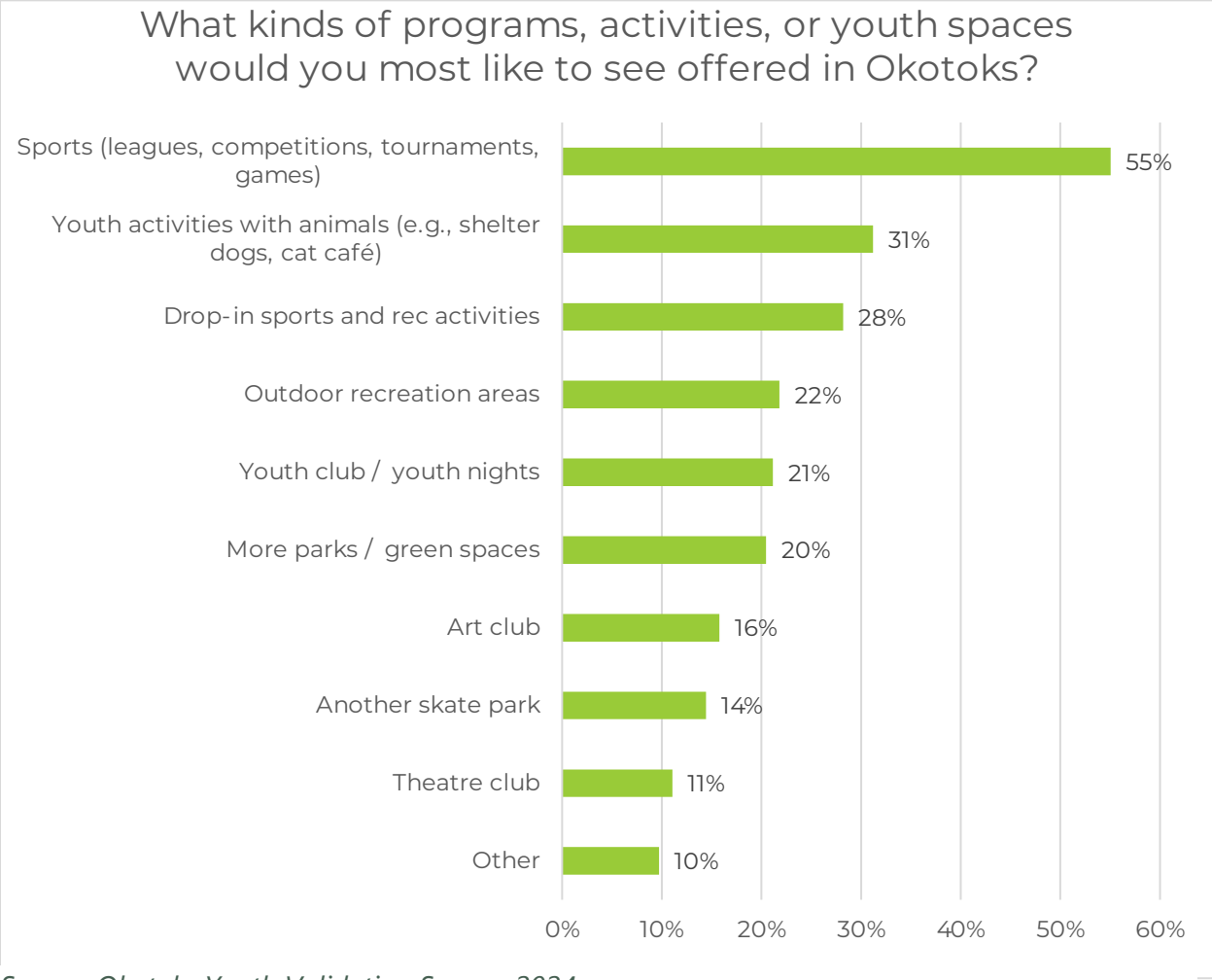


Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Youth suggested that the most common barriers to accessing programs and activities are schedule related, not knowing what is available, and not feeling comfortable going alone.

Appendix IV

Figure 3. Youth Preferences for Programs, Activities or Spaces

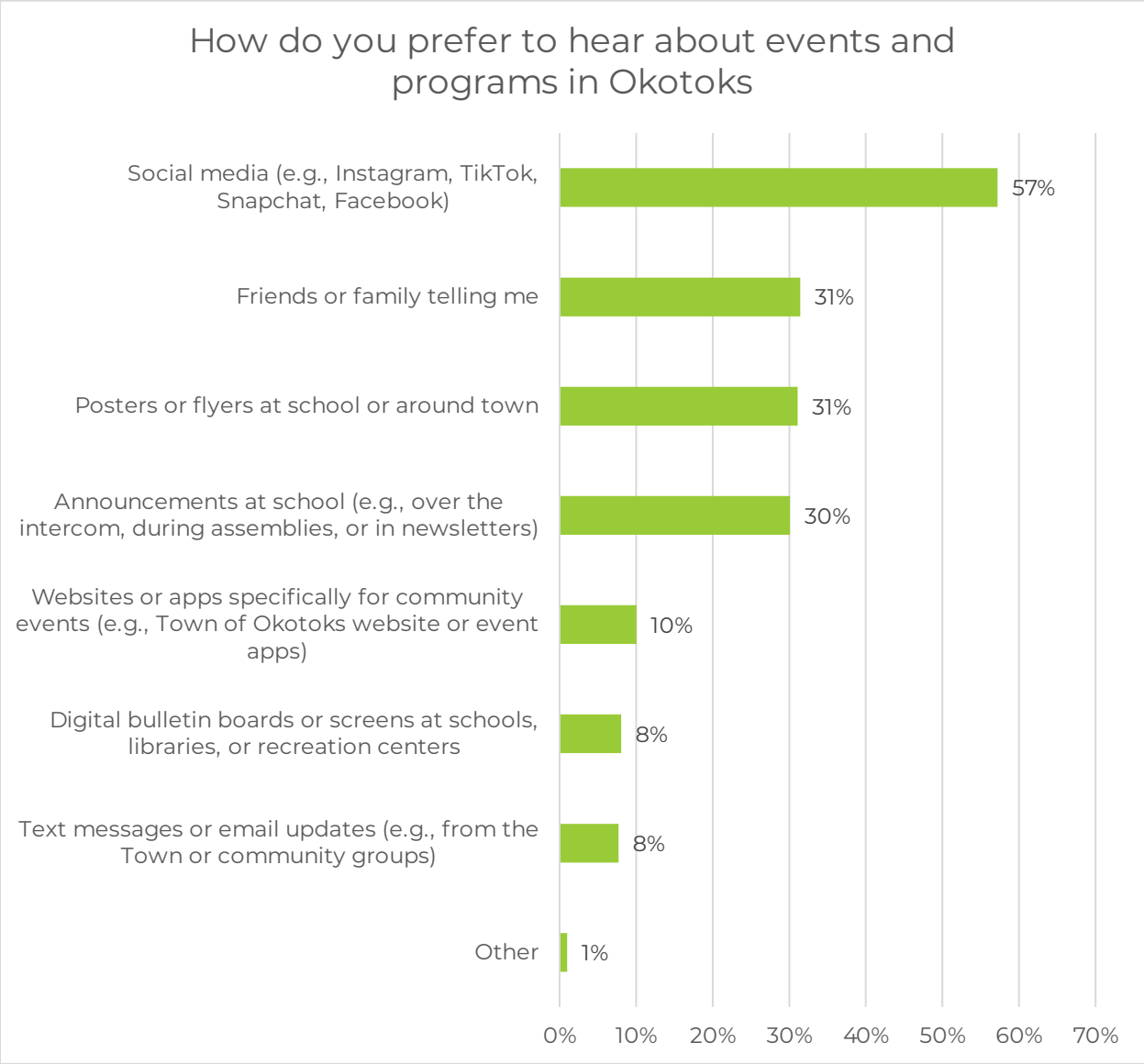


Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

When asked what ideas for programs or activities they would like to be offered, the most common answers were sports, activities with animals, and outdoor recreation.

Appendix IV

Figure 4. Youth Preference for Hearing about Events and Programs

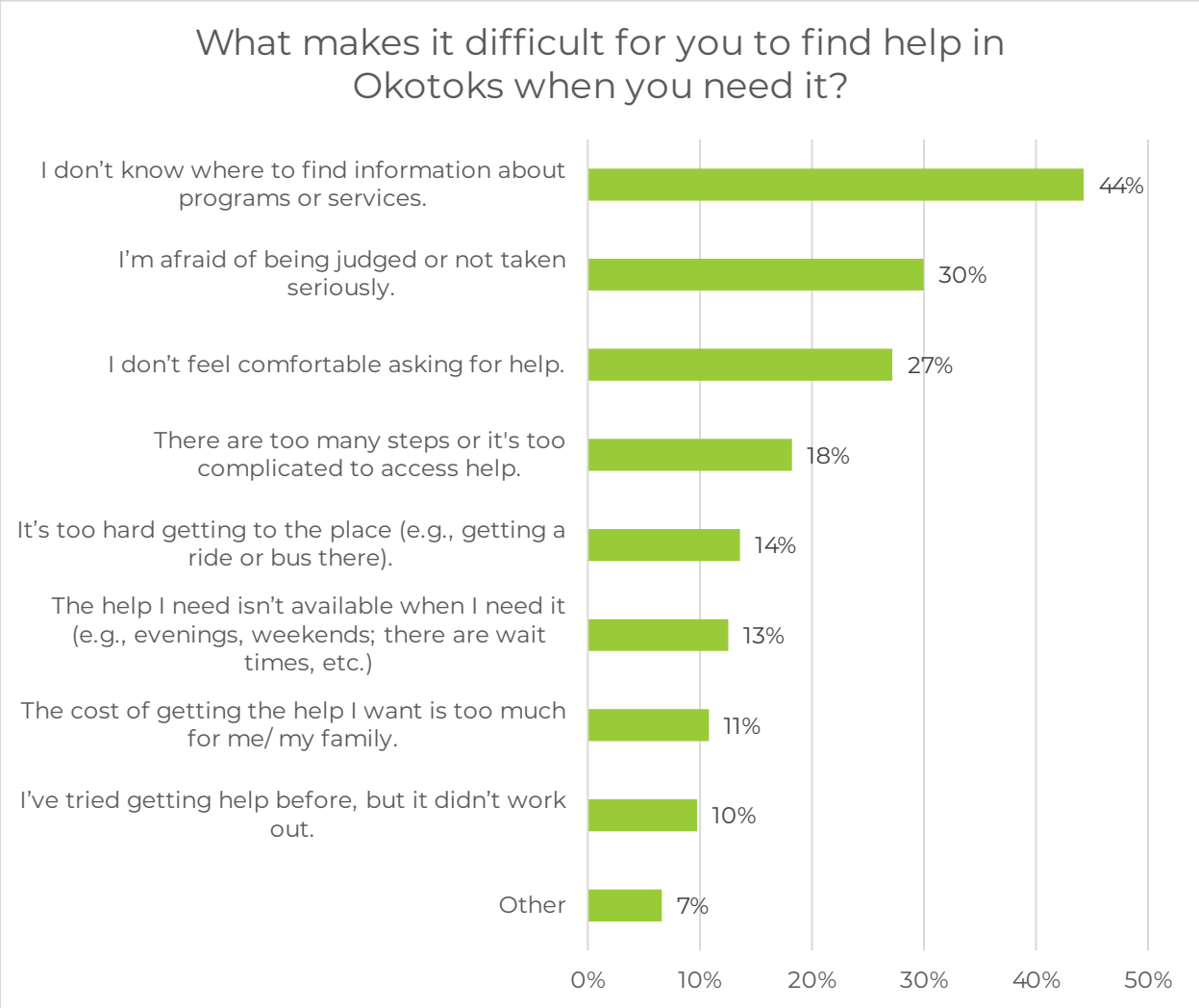


Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Youth tend to access information primarily from social media and from their friends or family through word of mouth. Posters and school announcements play a secondary, but important role, in getting the word out to youth in the community.

Appendix IV

Figure 5. Youth Barriers to Finding Help



Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Youth shared that the most common barriers to accessing help are access to information and personal challenges such as comfort or fear of being judged. This can indicate opportunities to bridge relationships between youth and support workers more frequently to reduce fear or anxiety.

Appendix IV

Summary of Key Themes from Youth Survey Qualitative Data

Community Affordability

Many youths expressed a need for more affordable recreational activities and spaces. The high cost of sports, programs, and daily activities makes participation challenging for some families.

Sports areas, facilities, outdoor space, competition and recreational sports teams came out as a top theme, with youth suggestions including the desire for additional facilities such as gyms, rinks, and multi-purpose recreation centers

Accessibility and Inclusive Services

A top theme when youth were asked what could make it easier for you to get help in Okotoks when you need it, and a top theme was transportation. There was a strong desire for programs that welcome all demographics, including those marginalized by race, ability, or socioeconomic status. Youths emphasized the need for more diverse recreational options beyond traditional sports to ensure everyone has opportunities to participate and connect.

Strengthening Community Connections

This was one of the top themes in the qualitative youth data, participants expressed the desire for additional communal spaces such as youth-friendly hangout spots, parks they felt welcomed to be at in a group, and cultural venues to support social connection.

"We need a meeting/hang out spot for teens that goes later then 9pm. Of course, this causes safety issues but so does having 16-year-olds driving around at 11pm because there's nowhere to go but McDonald's. In Calgary teens have the option to go to so many places that make teens feel welcome. There is none of that here, and if there is they're hard to get to or aren't open for long enough. We as teens need more places to hangout!"

"Have more teen spaces but like 15-18"

Community Awareness and Engagement

Many youths felt unaware of existing events and programs. Suggestions included using social media, school-based announcements, and community bulletin boards to increase awareness. Engaging directly with younger residents through schools, surveys, and social media could help ensure they feel heard and informed.

Growing in a Way that Supports Everyone

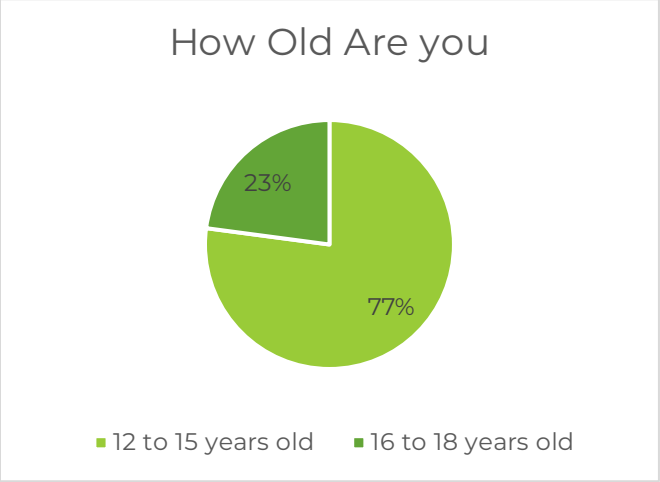
Youths praised events like "Light Up Okotoks" and called for more regular community events that foster connection and inclusion. Some emphasized the need for accessible and safe environments where youth can gather, socialize, and feel supported.

Of note, 39 youth participants responded positively that they do feel connected in Okotoks. For the open-ended question "What would help you feel included in Okotoks?" question 39 youth responded with variations of "nothing / all good /I feel connected" and generally in the positive.

Appendix IV

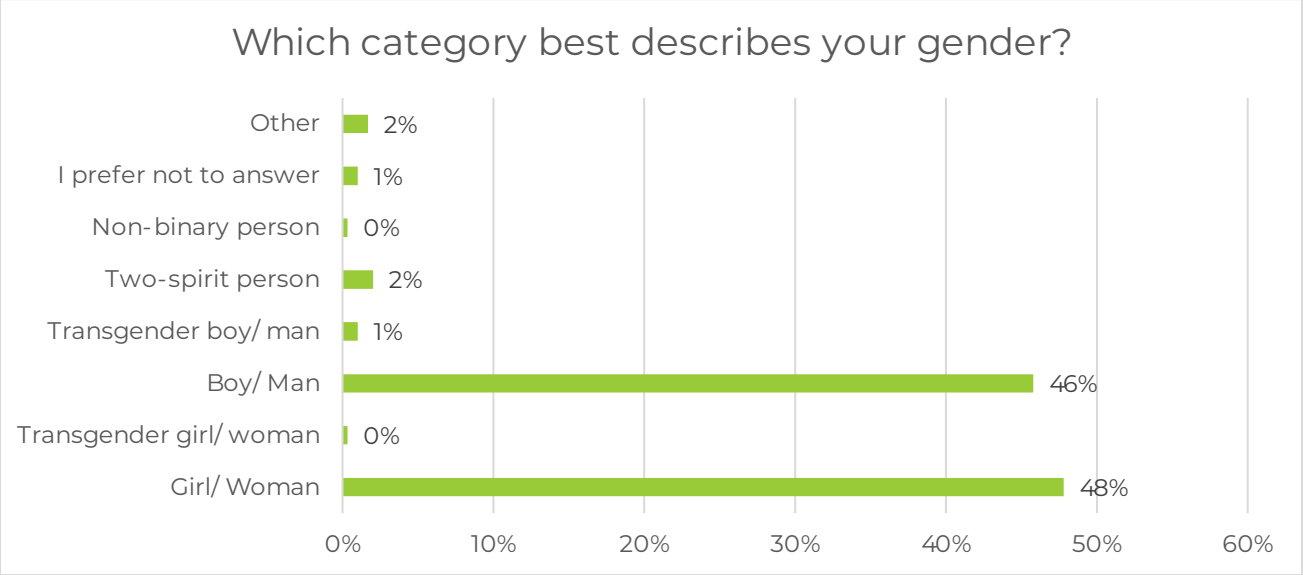
Youth Survey Demographics

Figure 6. Age of Youth Participants



Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

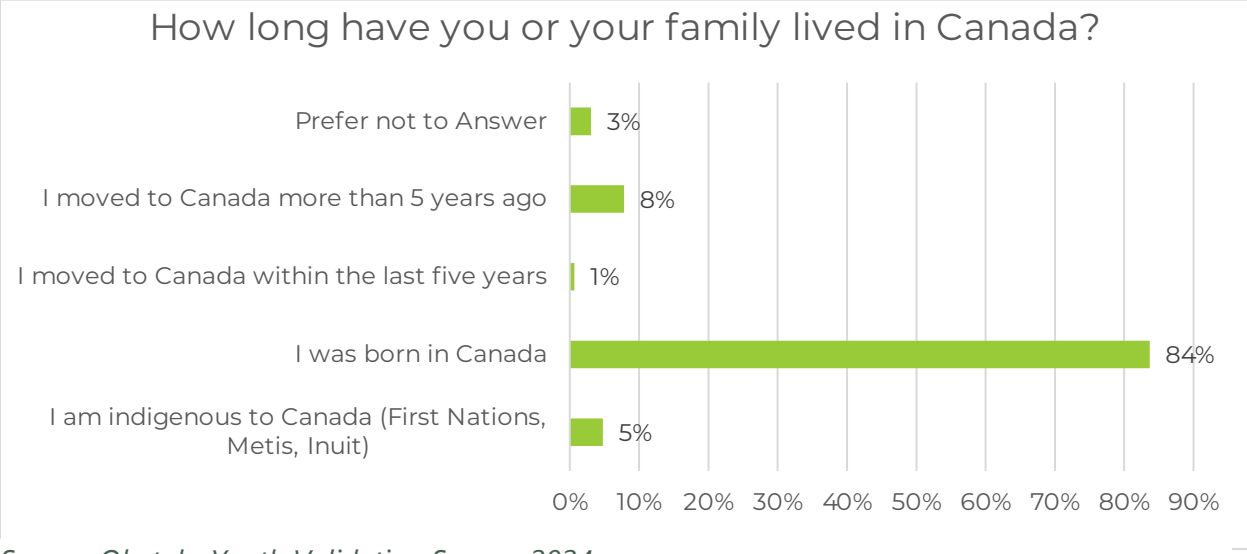
Figure 7. Gender of Youth Participants



Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

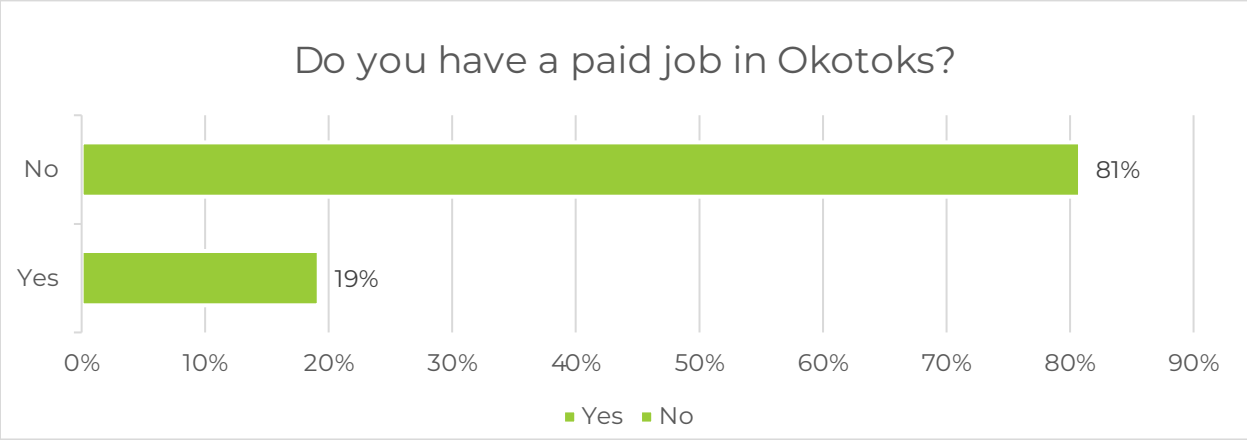
Appendix IV

Figure 8. Length of Living in Canada of Youth Participants



Source: Okotoks Youth Validation Survey, 2024

Figure 9. Paid Employment of Youth Participants



Source: Okotoks Youth Community Survey, 2024

Appendix V

Design Labs Summary

As the needs assessment moved along its critical path, it ended at a series of design labs workshops for youth, community, community organizations, and Town staff. These workshops were designed with the principle of community-based design where community priorities are held front and center.

Youth Design Labs

Town staff and *bassa* consultants went to a local high school in Okotoks and spoke with upwards of 103 youth directly. We asked them what their best hopes were for the future of their town, including what they would like Okotoks to "look and feel" like in 10 years. As launch points for their discussions, we introduced the 5 priority areas in plain terms which were:

a) Finding a job and affording things in Okotoks
b) Accessing the things I need and want
c) Making friends and connections
d) Having my voice heard
e) Building for the next generation

We had them work in small groups to share their best hopes and then brainstorm the "how" together on flip chart paper (through writing and drawings). The main take-aways from youth include:

More and better options for recreation and entertainment

The youth expressed a desire for more recreational and entertainment options in Okotoks. They listed specific activities like go-karting, trampoline parks, a wave pool, a new beach, and an escape room. They also wanted more and better recreational facilities, including another public pool, a larger movie theater, a teen center, and a more accessible recreation centre.

More affordable options

The youth expressed a desire for more affordable options in Okotoks. They specifically mentioned lower costs for housing, food, electricity, travel, and transit. They also wanted more affordable spaces to hang out with friends.

More opportunities for jobs and volunteering

The youth expressed a desire for more job and volunteer opportunities in Okotoks. They specifically mentioned jobs at small businesses, fast food and chain restaurants, summer camps, and thrift stores are desirable but hard to be hired for. They said there were not many opportunities for available jobs that were youth friendly, that it was difficult to get the positions that are open because they lack experience, or the hours do not work with their school schedule. The youth linked how having more options for recreation and

entertainment in the future would also increase the availability of jobs for youth. Some youth also wanted more opportunities to volunteer, including to gain experience that would help them secure employment, and for its own sake, such as at animal shelters and in mentorship roles to younger youth.

More events and activities

The youth expressed a desire for more town events and activities. They specifically mentioned summer markets, festive parades, lantern events, and meet-up nights, and to help plan events. They also wanted more opportunities to be involved in the planning and execution of these events.

Figure 42. Youth Posters

Improved infrastructure and services

The youth expressed a desire for improved infrastructure and services in Okotoks. They specifically mentioned another high school, better transit, safer roads, more green spaces, another water source, and better public healthcare. They also wanted updates to the pool change rooms and better-timed traffic lights.

More opportunities for youth voice and involvement

The youth expressed a desire for more opportunities to have their voices heard and to be involved in the community. They specifically mentioned a youth advocacy council, teen surveys, and opportunities to debate and share their perspectives. They also wanted to be involved in the planning of town events and have a say in how the town functions.

These flip charts were posted in the Community Workshop event space for participants to view and read/see what the youth discussed and drew for their vision of Okotoks in 10 years.

Appendix V

Community Workshop

In the Design Lab exercise, community participants were asked to envision a critical shift from a current state, describing a specific part of the system that is not currently working well, to a desired future state within their respective groups (Community, Community Organizations, and Town Staff). Critical shifts are specific "problem/priority spaces" that participants wanted to focus on designing solutions for and are designed to focus on systems-level changes and/or human experience changes. Critical shifts focus participants' attention on the specific and actionable changes we want to achieve together and help clarify our shared intent with a focus on ideas and opportunities and not on existing organizations.

Participants were asked to prioritize the critical shifts by considering which shifts had the most potential to move the community forward, which shifts would enable other shifts to happen more easily or powerfully, and which shifts would generate broad energy, enthusiasm, and leadership among the community. Town Staff were also asked to sort the critical shifts on an impact-effort matrix. Then they outlined steps and partners that could be involved towards successful implementing their chosen priority idea(s). The goal was to gather diverse perspectives to generate specific and tangible ideas on how to improve the community through addressing the key priorities of affordability, accessibility, community connections, awareness, engagement, and supportive growth.

Figure 1. Community Design Lab Photos

The following are the summaries of desired community future, sorted by social priorities, from the Design Lab activities, for a detailed list of strategies and ideas, please refer to Appendix A.

Appendix V

The Future of Community Affordability

Okotoks provides affordable and accessible options for residents to meet their basic needs, including transportation, housing, food and opportunities for connection.

A robust public transportation system offers affordable fares, regularly scheduled accessible options, and connects people to essential services. Initiatives like a "Homesteader" group, community gardens, and co-op programs promote self-sufficiency and reduce reliance on external resources. Downtown co-working spaces and mixed-use buildings foster collaboration, provide affordable housing, and create vibrant community hubs where small business thrives.

An Accessible and Inclusive Service Ecosystem

Everyone in Okotoks, regardless of age, ability, or background, has access to inclusive opportunities, services, and resources that support their needs and empower them to contribute to the community.

A multi-faceted recreation center with a director of inclusivity ensure inclusive programs and services for all. Transportation options adapt to diverse needs, with increased capacity and minimized wait times. Designated youth spaces and increased youth events foster empowerment, improve mental health, and enhance community engagement.

Unshakable Community Connections

Okotoks fosters a strong sense of community where residents feel connected, informed, and engaged, regardless of their background or length of residence.

Initiatives like a Newcomers Resource Center, an annual expo for community groups, and a social clubhouse facilitate connections and community involvement. Community organizations, the Town, and volunteers collaborate to share skills and foster intergenerational learning. Increased communication channels keep residents informed, and abundant volunteer opportunities connect people and foster belonging. Community Associations further strengthen neighborhood connections and empower residents to work together.

The Ideal State of Community Awareness and Engagement

Okotoks residents are well-informed about community issues, resources, programs, and events, and actively participate in shaping the future of the town.

Public communication campaigns, educational programs, and technology raise awareness and encourage responsible behavior. A comprehensive program and resource guide keeps residents informed about community offerings. Youth are actively involved in community design projects, fostering civic engagement and shaping the town's future.

Growing and Supporting

Okotoks grows in a sustainable and equitable way that benefits all residents, supports youth development, fosters business growth, and expands essential social services.

Appendix V

Okotoks is known for its welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, where events and initiatives bring people together and create a sense of belonging. Affordable options and the removal of barriers support business growth and the expansion of social services. Youth-friendly employment initiatives, skills programs, and a local post-secondary institution support youth development and economic growth.

Community Organization Workshop

Community Organization workshop participants were asked for their insights and "A-ha's" (as in aha moments) based on their observations of priority areas, the critical shifts and design lab work of the community workshop, as well as the youth posters. Below are main themes from their collective insights and a-ha's:

Community Affordability

Housing: Concerns were raised about the difficulties in finding affordable housing, particularly for seniors transitioning to different living arrangements and for low- to modest-income renters.

Youth Employment: The need for more job opportunities for youth and better support systems beyond the School Act was highlighted.

Social Services: The idea of centralizing social services in one location to reduce costs and improve access for Okotoks residents was proposed.

Accessibility and Inclusive Services

Mental Health: A significant gap in the provision and awareness of mental health and social support services was identified.

Inclusivity: The need to address various forms of discrimination, such as racism, ageism, and cultural bias, was emphasized.

Transportation: Transportation emerged as a more significant barrier than initially anticipated, with calls for expanded public transportation services.

Strengthening Community Connections

Community Building: The importance of community connections was highlighted, particularly for newcomers, seniors, and those without natural support networks.

Volunteerism: Emphasis was placed on the role of volunteerism in fostering community connections and a sense of belonging.

Mental Health: The need to grow the network of community services, especially mental health services and education, was reiterated.

Appendix V

Community Awareness and Engagement

Inclusivity: The suggestion was made to have event descriptions and information available in multiple languages to promote inclusivity and reach a wider audience.

Communication: The need for improved communication about events, including registration deadlines and easier access to event information, was identified.

Social Media: The potential of social media platforms to build community connections and reach diverse groups was recognized.

Growing in a way that supports everyone

Affordable Housing and Transit: The pressures of affordable housing and transit were highlighted as key areas needing attention for sustainable growth.

Recreation: The need for increased recreation options for youth and families was emphasized.

Business Development: Challenges faced by businesses in growing and new business, including roadblocks and delays in dealing with the Town were acknowledged as well as the need for more support was recognized.

Small Town Experience: The desire to maintain the small-town atmosphere while accommodating growth and providing more opportunities for youth was expressed.

General

Youth Engagement: The importance of social gathering spots and recreational activities for youth was emphasized, along with the desire for more youth employment opportunities.

Thrifting: The increasing popularity of thrifting among teens was noted, highlighting its affordability and potential for social interaction.

Role of Municipality in Critical Shifts

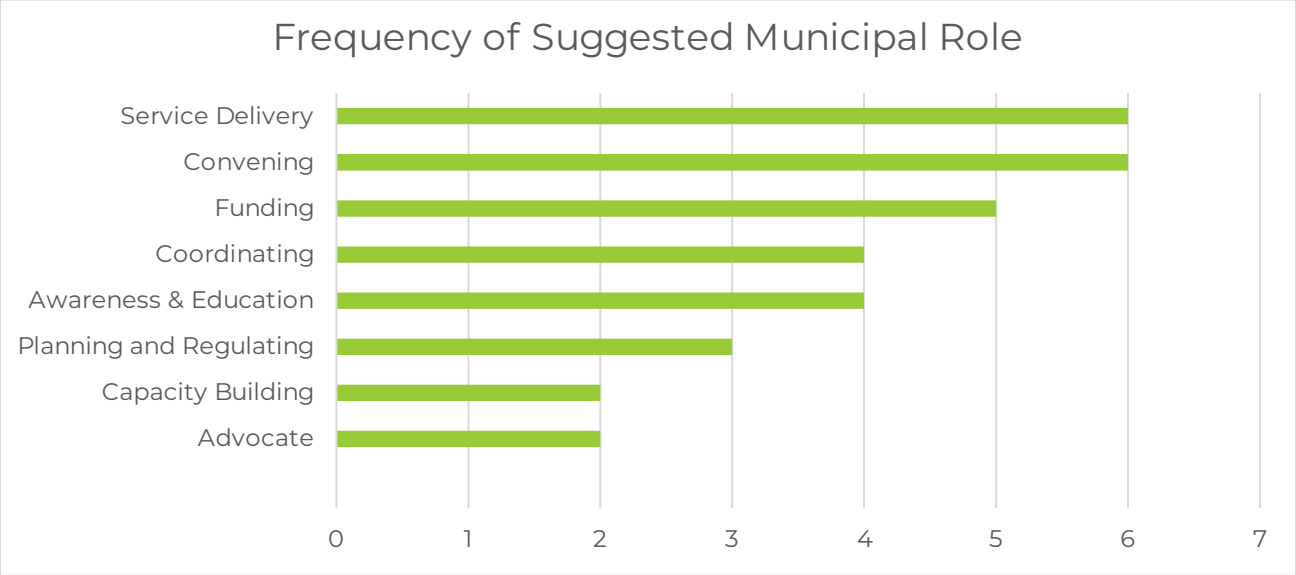
Community members, community organization staff, and Town staff were asked to indicate what the best matching role for the Town of Okotoks would be for their ideas. What roles a municipality can play are developed from The City of Red Deer's Social Policy Framework (2015) and include:

- Advocating: Influencing and informing decisions and policy through organized efforts.
- Awareness & Education: Sharing helpful and accurate information to help community members understand social issues, programs, or causes in the community.
- Capacity Building: Supporting and enhancing the ability of groups and organizations to more effectively contribute to well-being in the community.
- Convening: Bringing people and organizations together to explore, strategize, and address opportunities and challenges.

- Coordinating: Supporting and aligning initiatives, programs, and funding among individuals and organizations, enhancing focus, productivity, and outcomes.
- Funding: Financial investments to support actions that enhance community social well-being
- Planning & Regulating: Creating plans, policies, and regulations that guide actions within the community.
- Service Delivery: Providing services, programs, and facilities directly to residents to meet current and future community needs.

The most common chosen roles for the Town are Convening and Service Delivery, both appearing 6 times across the three workshops.

Figure 2. Municipalities Role Suggested by Community



Source: Design Lab Worksheets

Appendix VI

Engagement Materials

Media Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 23, 2024

Town Launches Social Needs Assessment to Help Strengthen Community Well-Being

Okotoks, AB – The Town of Okotoks is proud to announce the launch of a Social Needs Assessment. This is important as it will help to enhance the social well-being of our community by identifying key issues and ways to strengthen community connections. This work aims to evaluate our community's strengths, assets, and evolving social needs, and provide insights that will help shape the Town's policies and programs for years to come.

We are asking for participation from residents, businesses, social service organizations and other impacted groups that will help us identify priorities and emerging social trends. The information collected through the assessment will become a part of the foundation for the development of social wellness strategies, with actionable plans, aimed to be finalized in early 2025.

"This assessment is a pivotal step in understanding the social priorities of Okotoks," said Sian Anderson, community and social development team lead. "By actively engaging our community, we can better respond to social changes and make sure that our programs align with the needs and aspirations of our residents. Your participation is essential in this process."

Why Your Input Matters

Community engagement is at the heart of the Social Need Assessment. Partnering with *bassa* Social Innovations, we hope to gather meaningful input from our community that will inform our approach to sustainable social development. Together, we can shape a healthier and more connected community for all. Join us in making a difference!

Get Involved – Host a Community Conversation!

Help us identify emerging social needs in Okotoks by hosting or participating in Community Conversations. From **October 11-November 1**, community members are encouraged to volunteer to host relaxed, semi-structured discussions with family, friends, colleagues, or members of social circles. Training, tools, and guidance will be provided to assist in the facilitation of meaningful discussions. Please register for training by September 30.

For more information on the project and to register for training, visit: https://www.shapeourtown.ca/social-needs-assessment or email us at fcss@okotoks.ca.

Together, we can make Okotoks an even better place to live, work and thrive.

-30-

Contact:
Andrea Charlebois, Communications Advisor
Town of Okotoks
Ph: 403-464-1542 | Email: acharlebois@okotoks.ca

Appendix VI

Notification Methods

The following pages contain select samples of Western Wheel ads, posters, signage, social media posts and newsletters. These types of notification methods were used for each phase of the engagement process, in addition to radio ads and direct email.

Appendix VI

Okotoks

Share Your Thoughts!
Social Needs Assessment

The Town is hosting a community engagement opportunity to help identify priorities and emerging social trends in Okotoks. Tell us what is important to you, what is working well and what may not be.

Thank you for working with us to enhance social well-being in our community!

October 24, 6:30pm-8:00pm
Olympic Room
Viking Rentals Centre
#3, 204 Community Way
(formerly Centennial Arenas)

Learn more & register by Oct 22

shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/social-needs-assessment

Okotoks

Social Needs Assessment Focus Group

The Town is hosting focus groups of 12-20 participants to help identify priorities and emerging social trends in our community. Tell us what is important to you, what is working well and what may not be. Thank you for participating and sharing your valuable input!

Date:

Time:

Location:
Note: snacks are provided

We Want to Hear from You!

Learn more:
shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/social-needs-assessment

Okotoks

We Need Your Voice
Share your ideas about:

- The kinds of programs & activities you want to see in Okotoks
- How we can to make it easier for you to join in
- What makes you feel connected to the community

This is part of a social needs project in Okotoks! Take the 10 minute anonymous survey - your feedback will make a big difference!

Share your thoughts by December 15!

shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/social-needs-assessment

Okotoks

Join Us!
Social Well-Being Workshop

Previous Social Needs Assessment engagement has identified 5 key priorities:

- affordability
- accessibility & inclusivity
- strengthening community connections & belonging
- how the Town communicates with you
- growing in a way that supports everyone

Help us build practical, community-led actions to improve social well-being in Okotoks.

Event Details:
Strategies & Actions Workshop
February 5, 2025 5pm-9pm
(dinner provided)
Viking Rentals Event Centre
Meskin & Smith Rooms
#4, 204 Community Way
(formerly Foothills Centennial Centre)

Learn more about the project & register by **Jan 30, 2025**

shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/social-needs-assessment

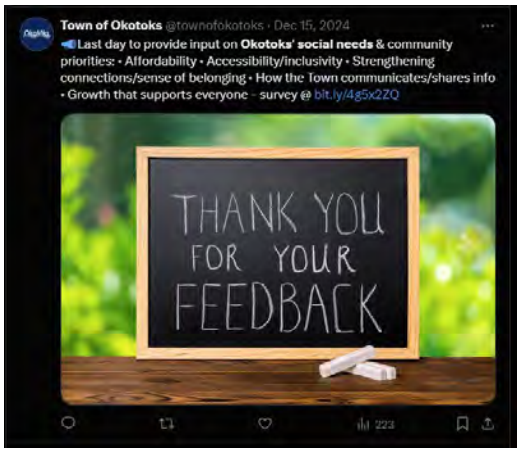
Appendix VI

Town of Okotoks
Published by Andrea Charlebois Pfeifer
· December 4, 2024 ·
Share your thoughts on social needs in Okotoks! We are asking you to weigh in on the 5 community themes we've gathered from engagement so far:
• Affordability
• Accessibility & inclusivity
• Strengthening community connections & sense of belonging
• How the Town communicates & shares info with you
• Growing in a way that supports everyone
Your feedback will help us create plans & actions making Okotoks an even better place to live, work & connect! Provide your input by taking our 10-15 minute anonymous survey by December 15 at https://shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/community-survey
Together, let's shape a thriving, connected future for Okotoks
FEEDBACK

12:27
OKOTOKSECONOMICDEVELOPMENT
Posts
okotokseconomicdevelopment
View insights
Boost post
2
okotokseconomicdevelopment We want to hear from you! Help us identify priorities & emerging social trends by hosting or participating in Community Conversations. From Oct 11-Nov 1, volunteer to host relaxed, semi-structured discussions with family, friends, colleagues, or members of social groups. Training, tools & guidance will be provided to assist in the facilitation of meaningful discussions.
Together, we can shape a healthier & more connected community for all. Join us in making a difference! Learn more about the Social Needs Assessment & register for training by Sept 30 at link in bio.
September 27, 2024

Posts
View insights
Boost post
3
townofokotoks Hey Okotoks Youth! Last few days to share your ideas about:
• The kinds of programs & activities you want to see in town
• How we can to make it easier for you to join in
• What makes you feel connected to the community
Take a short survey until Dec 15 as part of the social needs project for Okotoks; your feedback will make a big difference! www.shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/youth-survey
December 10, 2024

Town of Okotoks
Published by Andrea Charlebois Pfeifer
· October 17, 2024 ·
We need your input to help identify priorities and emerging social trends in our community. The Town is hosting a community engagement opportunity on Thursday, October 24 from 6:30-8:00pm in the Olympic Room at Viking Rentals Center, #3,204 Community Way (formerly Centennial Arenas).
Join us and share your thoughts on what is important to you, what is working well and what may not be. Learn more and register by October 22 at
shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/social-needs-assessment
Thank you for working with us to enhance social well-being in Okotoks!


Town of Okotoks @townofokotoks · Dec 15, 2024
Last day to provide input on Okotoks' social needs & community priorities: • Affordability • Accessibility/inclusivity • Strengthening connections/sense of belonging • How the Town communicates/shares info • Growth that supports everyone - survey @ bit.ly/4g5x2ZQ
THANK YOU FOR YOUR FEEDBACK
223

Town of Okotoks
Published by Andrea Charlebois Pfeifer
· January 30 ·
REGISTER NOW for the Social Well-Being Workshop on Wed, Feb 5, 5-9pm @ Viking Rentals Event Centre & help us build practical, community-led actions to improve social well-being in Okotoks. We look forward to collaborating with you! Learn more & last chance to register at
https://shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/social-needs-assessment
2

Appendix VI

Click here to view this newsletter in your browser

HAVE YOUR SAY

Okotoks

Town of Okotoks Social Needs Assessment

We Want To Hear From You!

The Town of Okotoks is proud to announce the launch of a Social Needs Assessment. This is important as it will help to enhance the social well-being of our community by identifying key issues and ways to strengthen community connections. This work aims to evaluate our community's strengths, assets and evolving social needs, and provide insights that will help shape the Town's policies and programs for years to come.

We are asking for participation from residents, businesses, social service organizations and other impacted groups that will help us identify priorities and emerging social trends. The information collected through the assessment will become a part of the foundation for the development of social wellness strategies, with actionable plans, aimed to be finalized in early 2025.

Help us gain knowledge of emerging social needs in Okotoks by hosting or participating in Community Conversations. From **October 11-November 1**, community members are encouraged to volunteer to host relaxed, semi-structured discussions with family, friends, colleagues, or members of your social groups. Together, we can shape a healthier and more connected community for all. Join us in making a difference!

If you are interested in hosting a community conversation, training is required to help you facilitate your discussion. The deadline to register is **September 30.** Learn more and register today by clicking the button below!

More info

Click here to view this newsletter in your browser

Business BEAT

Okotoks

October 2, 2024

Get Involved in Social Well-Being!

The Social Needs Assessment will help to enhance the social well-being of our community by identifying and evaluating our community's strengths, assets, and evolving social needs.

Help us gain knowledge by hosting or participating in Community Conversations from **Oct 11-Nov 1.** You are encouraged to volunteer to host relaxed, semi-structured discussions with family, friends, colleagues, or members of your social circles.

Training will be provided on **Oct 11** to give you the tools and guidance needed to facilitate meaningful discussions. Registration extended to **Oct 6!**

Learn more & register

HAVE YOUR SAY

Okotoks

Social Needs Assessment

Share Your Thoughts!

If you aren't able to host or participate in a Community Conversation, here is another opportunity to get involved!

We need your input to help us indentify priorities and emerging social trends in Okotoks. Provide your feedback on what is important to you, what is working well and what may not be at this upcoming community engagement session (*registration required*). Thank you for working with us to enhance social well-being in our community!

October 24
6:30-8:00pm
Olympic Room, Viking Rentals Centre (*formerly Centennial Arenas*)
#3, 204 Community Way

Learn more & register by October 22

Click here to view this newsletter in your browser

Business BEAT

Okotoks

December 10, 2024

Social Well-Being Priorities Feedback Needed

We Want to Hear from You! Take the survey until **December 15**

Help us better understand your perspective on five social well-being priorities we have heard from the community through conversations and engagement over the past months. After reading the summary of the themes, please participate in the community survey to have your voice heard!

Community Priorities

Take the survey

If you have youth at home aged 12-18, we need their ideas and thoughts too! We want to know what it's like to grow up in Okotoks; the input will give us an understanding about what important to help us make decisions that matter.

Youth survey

Appendix VI

Okotoks

Town of Okotoks Social Needs Assessment

Community Conversation Guide

Community Conversation Guide

The Town of Okotoks is learning and growing in how we work with the community to build social well-being for all. Part of this exciting project is building our awareness and knowledge to the social needs in our community through social needs assessment. To do this, we are looking to you, our community, for your voice, your input, and your leadership, to make sure we hear from as many voices and perspectives as possible.

To involve as many residents of Okotoks as possible, we are asking you, our valuable volunteers, to host one or more conversations within your networks to help gather feedback. These conversations are meant to be somewhat informal, and can be hosted over coffee, during a sports game, at the park, in your home, or wherever you choose to gather.

This guide will provide you with all the materials and information you need to host an incredible conversation. If you need any additional support after receiving this guide and the training, you are welcome to contact us, the project leadership team, at any time at the contact below.

Thank you for volunteering, your support is everything.

Sincerely,

Magan Braun, Community Wellness Specialist
Michelle Grenwich, Social Planner
fcss@okotoks.ca

Appendix VI

Table of Contents

Community Conversation Guide 2

What is a Community Conversation? 4

How to complete a community conversation? 4

Who should I invite? 5

What information is important to collect? 6

Setting Ground Rules 7

Community Conversation Guiding Questions 8

Conversation Tips and Tricks 9

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) 10

Conversation Notes: 12

Appendix VI

What is a Community Conversation?

A community conversation is a process designed to be a comfortable and effective way for communities to share their hopes and desires for improvement. Conversations are hosted by community volunteers who use guiding questions provided to gather feedback. The hosts take notes of emerging themes and ideas that help create context and data for a robust Social Development Strategy. This model has been used successfully across Canada in different communities to broaden feedback and reach a wide range of community members.

How to complete a community conversation?

We have tried our best to make this process as simple as possible. To complete a community conversation, just follow these steps outlined below (and more details follow in this guide).

Get a group of people together! This group can be family; friends; neighbours; co-workers; ethnic or religious community or group activity such as team sports or volunteer groups. Everyone should review the questions to think about their answers before meeting together.

→

Pose the questions provided and take notes: the host or someone else should include all comments, shared thoughts, opinions, as well as differing views as everyone's input and experience is valid.

↓

Submit your completed Conversation Kit to:

Magan Braun, Community Wellness Specialist at the Town of Okotoks

OR

Submit your notes to the Survey Link on Page 11

→

Deadline to complete: October 31, 2024

Who should I invite?

We suggest hosting one or more conversations with your social, work, family, or activity groups. Groups can be of any size, but usually no more than eight people at a time (more than that can make it difficult to take notes!). When you are deciding on who you would like to involve, here are a few guiding questions that can help you:

1. **Who do I most often connect with and what groups do I participate in?**
2. **Is there an existing group connection I can use without starting something new?**
3. **Out of those I connect with, who would not likely participate without my invite?**

These can help you identify groups that would benefit from a personal invitation to participate. Throughout this process we want to hear from seniors, parents, single parents, youth, young adults, new Canadians, business owners, people experiencing homeless or other forms of isolation, and more. The broader the feedback, the more robust the final product. But remember, although the hope is to have many different voices participate, whoever shows up to participate is welcome.

If you're having trouble identifying people to invite, please reach out for support!

6

What information is important to collect?

Well, in short, all information is important! Following the provided template will help you identify questions to ask and key information to collect, but here are some hints we can share.

First, we suggest only recording (writing) down information that is non-identifiable. As an example, if Stella (who owns the only toy store in town) is participating and is sharing a story about her store, we suggest not writing down the store name. By avoiding any non-identifiable information, it helps keep the process as confidential as possible.

Second, we suggest taking themed notes rather than detailed conversation notes. This means that instead of writing down everything someone says, we suggest letting themes emerge from the group. For example, if Stella is talking about her observations regarding the lack of parking in front of her store, you may want to let the conversation unfold to see if others have the same observation or have agreement. In this case, your notes would include a theme of "lack of parking in front of downtown stores" with some of the evidence from the stories shared. This can help you simplify your notes, so you aren't having to madly jot down everything being said!

Third, ask for clarification or details. If Stella is sharing her concerns about downtown parking and you don't hear much conversation, you can ask: *"does anyone else have an observation about downtown parking to share?"* or *"would anyone like to share anything about what Stella just shared?"*

These types of open-ended questions can help you get more detail and context, which greatly helps the conversation, and the project. A common tool is to paraphrase and say: *"Stella, to make sure I have captured your feedback, what I heard you say was you hope increased parking downtown to help increase store traffic. Is that correct?"*

We have shared more tools such as this in the sections following.

Finally, at the end of your conversation we encourage you to share your notes back. By reading your collected themes back to the group and allowing them to add any clarification or correction as necessary, you are providing participants with the opportunity to affirm what they have said and leave with confidence that they have been heard. This can be as simple as saying: *"Before we leave, I'd like to share back some of the themes I captured from your discussion. When we were talking about our desires for the community, I heard XYZ."* We suggest leaving about 10 minutes at the end for this process.

Appendix VI

Setting Ground Rules

Setting ground rules for your conversation can be a helpful place to start, however, if you'd rather, you can share the following suggestions for ground rules:

- **Encourage openness**: All participants should feel comfortable sharing their thoughts without fear of judgment. Everyone's viewpoint is valuable, and disagreements should be handled respectfully.
- **Invite all voices**: Actively encourage quieter participants to share their insights, while ensuring more vocal participants allow space for others. This includes ensuring each person can finish their thoughts before moving on.
- **Stick to the topic**: Keep the conversation centered on identifying social needs and avoid unrelated discussions. If the conversation veers off course, gently guide it back to the central focus.
- **No personal attacks**: Critique ideas, not individuals.
- **Consider all community members**: Ensure that suggestions take into account diverse groups within the town (e.g., youth, elderly, low-income, etc.).
- **Set a time limit for speaking**: To ensure everyone gets a chance to contribute, ask participants to keep their points concise.
- **What's shared stays here**: Emphasize that personal stories or sensitive information shared should not be discussed outside the meeting.

These ground rules can be provided ahead of the conversation to ensure all your participants have them and can review them before gathering together.
If the group wants, feel free to add to the ground rules prior to beginning the conversation.

Appendix VI

Community Conversation Guiding Questions

The following questions have been prepared to help us put together a robust social needs assessment. Please do your best to complete the provided questions in the time you have. If you do finish with time remaining, you are welcome to go back to any questions to dive deeper or add questions as appropriate.

1. What specific places or activities in Okotoks make you feel the most connected to your community? Why?

2. As Okotoks grows, how do you feel about the balance between preserving the town's small-town feel and embracing new development and opportunities? What concerns or hopes do you have for the future?

3. What services, programs, or supports do you use the most in Okotoks? Are there any services, programs, or supports missing that would improve your overall quality of life?

4. Some people feel really connected in our community, but others might feel left out. Why do you think that happens, how can we help everyone feel like they belong?

5. What changes or improvements would you like to see in Okotoks that would make life better for everyone?

Appendix VI

Conversation Tips and Tricks

Facilitating a community conversation is a rewarding and exciting endeavor but can have some difficult moments that we hope these tips and tricks can help avoid. The most likely challenges you may encounter are incomplete answers, or a lull in the conversation.

The first challenge can be experienced as incomplete answers, or what you may call "surface" level questions. As an example, someone may answer "Parking" as an issue holding the community back. However, that may need some expansion to help with analysis. One of the best ways to get people to expand on their answers is to ask some follow up questions such as:

- **"Tell me more about that"**
- **"What example can you share about that"**
- **"What about _____ is most important for you right now"**

Questions such as these are open-ended and encourage the person to dig a little bit deeper.

The second challenge is often experienced as "dead space" in the conversation, where no one is speaking, or feeling ready to speak. A few tips you can use here are:

1. **Move to the next question!** If one question is not resonating for people, that's ok! Move to the next and then come back after a while.

2. **Start with your own example.** Sometimes you may need to provide a spark to the conversation! That's ok! You're allowed to participate too!

3. **Let silence do its work.** Silence tends to make people uncomfortable, let that work for you! Someone will eventually fill the space with their thoughts.

Appendix VI

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

What is a Social Needs Assessment?
It is a process that identifies the unmet needs (e.g., housing, healthcare, education, safety) of a community, as well as its strengths and resources (assets), like organizations, skills, and infrastructure. This helps prioritize areas for improvement and leverage existing resources to enhance community well-being.

Where will this information be going?
All the information provided in this social needs assessment process will be collected by *bassa* Social Innovations Inc. They will analyze the data to create a thematic analysis and report that will serve as a primary input to the Social Needs and Assets Assessment. The analyzed data along with social data such as statistics and more will be used to create a preliminary list of common social needs that will be presented to the community through a survey to help prioritize and validate.

Will this be confidential?
Yes! All information collected is meant to be non-identifiable in nature. As an additional safeguard, *bassa* will be reviewing all the data during the analysis process to ensure there will be no identifiable information in the final report.

Why is my opinion important?
A social development strategy is only as strong as the data that serves as its foundation.

Appendix VI

Gathering Information

A survey tool has been designed for use by conversation hosts and participants to make the data gathering process easier.

Conversation Hosts

Feel free to handwrite your notes on the pages provided at the end of the Community Conversations Guide or, if you prefer to gather information electronically, you can do so by logging onto the online survey tool: shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/community-conversation-notes or by scanning the following QR Code:

Individual Participants

If there are conversation participants that wish to provide additional information following the discussion, they are welcome to do so by logging onto the same online survey tool: shapeourtown.okotoks.ca/community-conversation-notes or by scanning the following QR

Code:

Conversation Notes:

What specific places or activities in Okotoks make you feel the most connected to your community? Why?

As Okotoks grows, how do you feel about the balance between preserving the town's small-town feel and embracing new development and opportunities? What concerns or hopes do you have for the future?

What services, programs, or supports do you use the most in Okotoks? Are there any social needs or supports missing that would improve your overall quality of life?

Appendix VI

15

Some people feel really connected in our community, but others might feel left out. Why do you think that happens, and how can we help everyone feel like they belong?

Appendix VI

What changes or improvements would you like to see in Okotoks that would make life better for everyone?