



# CASE STUDY | EVALUATING HAMILTON'S NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION STRATEGY

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The City of Hamilton celebrated their Neighbourhood Action Strategy's first seven years by doing an in-depth evaluation of the outcomes and impacts of the strategy. The results of the evaluation indicated that developing a neighbourhood action strategy is the starting point to engage residents and is an effective catalyst for community change. Evaluation is an important process in community work and Hamilton is using this opportunity to design a new path forward.

## BACKGROUND OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION STRATEGY

The City of Hamilton began implementing its first Neighbourhood Action Strategy in 2011. This strategy was originally designed in response to a series of articles published in the Hamilton Spectator which identified a growing disparity in health equity between the city's most and least affluent neighbourhoods.

The Neighbourhood Action Strategy (NAS) involved four main areas of work:

- Enhancing community development work;
- Developing resident-led neighbourhood plans;
- Increasing investments in neighbourhoods; and,
- Building partnerships to support healthy neighbourhoods.

Building on 10 years of neighbourhood and community development undertaken by Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF), the City of Hamilton partnered with HCF in supporting the 11 NAS neighbourhoods to establish and implement Neighbourhood Action Plans (NAP) and was the catalyst for many neighbourhood based projects. In some cases, NAPs identified similar priorities; these precipitated projects that extended beyond individual neighbourhoods. These large-scale enduring initiatives include the Neighbourhood Leadership Institute, Xperience Annex, & McQuesten Urban Farm.

### City of Hamilton

The City of Hamilton lies on the Western shores of Lake Ontario. Long established as a center of industrial activity, in recent years the city has undergone a renaissance and become increasingly known for its thriving artist community and as a center for community-based change.

**Incorporated:** June 9, 1846

**Population:** 537,000 (2016)

**Density:** 480.6/km<sup>2</sup>

**Motto:** "Unstoppable"

**Website:** [www.hamilton.ca](http://www.hamilton.ca)

### Neighbourhood Leadership Institute (NLI)

The Neighbourhood Leadership Institute offers residents the opportunity to develop their leadership capacity through a training process wherein residents gain the skills to move their neighbourhood-enhancing ideas into reality.

### Xperience Annex

The Xperience Annex is a one-stop shop for youth to get connected to employment and volunteer opportunities, and education and health care resources and supports. It is an initiative that grew out of actions identified across NAPs. It is guided by a steering committee of youth, supported by community agencies and funders, and hosted by the Hamilton Central Library. The overarching goal of the Xperience Annex is to support youth in achieving their employment and educational goals.

### McQuesten Urban Farm

McQuesten Urban Farm was born out of a desire to increase food security and establish accessible, sustainable local food sources within the McQuesten neighbourhood while providing residents with opportunities to develop transferable work skills and reducing the stigma of receiving free food. The farm was built through community build events with local schools, community groups and residents. Additional funding and support led to the development of a natural outdoor classroom and playground.

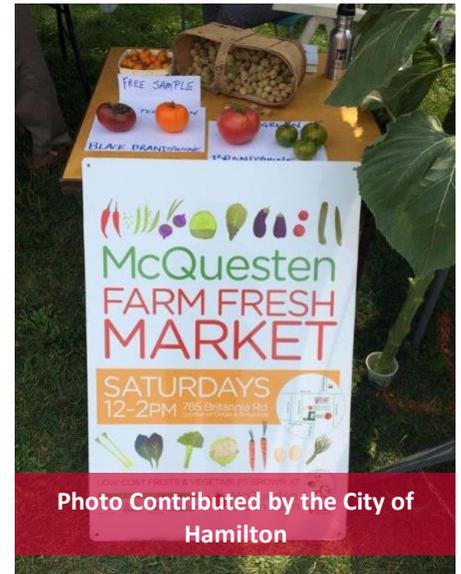


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## EVALUATING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION STRATEGY

Evaluation played an important role in understanding the impact and outcomes of the Neighbourhood Action Strategy. Since 2013, a Neighbourhood Action Evaluation (NAE) team has been working with NAS neighbourhood residents, service providers and City Staff to provide an annual in-depth look at how the NAS is being implemented and the impact it is having in the lives of residents. This information was gathered through a robust combination of surveys, focus groups and interviews.

In 2018, the NAE completed a final report which captured their learnings over the five years they had been evaluating the NAS. Four of the key learnings from the evaluation were:

### Health Equity

Health equity remains a top concern. With the influx of new residents and the many positive changes happening in Hamilton, displacement of the most vulnerable residents becomes more likely as neighbourhoods become less affordable. Neighbourhoods need to increasingly work to support their neighbours to remain in their homes by ensuring their voices are heard and sustained efforts to prevent displacement.

## Unintentional Stigma

The NAS was originally implemented to address health inequities as highlighted in the Hamilton [Spectator's Code Red series](#). Despite the best intentions to reduce inequities, residents within the NAS neighbourhoods reported experiencing stigma based on where they lived.

## Diversity and Inclusion

Planning teams have worked hard to be inclusive and include all residents in their neighbourhoods by reaching out to under-represented groups and by getting involved in neighbourhood issues and campaigns identified by residents. Planning teams have also taken training to help them become more inclusive. Even so, creating welcoming spaces and ensuring diversity within the Planning Teams continues to be a challenge.

## Emerging Priorities

Residents and community groups have ideas about how to enhance their neighbourhoods and want to provide input into decisions that affect their neighbourhood. Under the NAS, Planning Teams developed Neighbourhood Action Plans. NAPs are typically longer term and less adaptable to shifting or emerging priorities.

In addition to the findings of the NAE, City Staff, residents, community groups, service agencies and others have noted that Hamilton's context has changed considerably since the inception of the NAS. The changes are both from a perception of the City with the City welcoming many newcomers, as well as an attractive real estate market. Some of the context changes that have been observed are:

- Focusing on building community at the neighbourhood level has been mentioned as an attractive feature from purchasers and potential buyers.
- The City has been an inviting place for newcomers based on services and supports available along with creating a very welcoming environment.
- The issue of the attractive real estate market has brought many Toronto buyers to Hamilton where generous character homes could be purchased at a fraction of Toronto housing prices.
- While some neighbourhoods have seen an investment that has not been visible in the past, issues such as displacement, gentrification, affordable housing and differences in cultures have brought interesting opportunities for engagement.



Photo Contributed by the City of Hamilton

## GROWING FORWARD

Gleaning from and building on the evaluations and reflections of residents, funders, City staff, community developers, service providers and researchers in Hamilton, a review of the NAS was undertaken by the Hamilton Community Foundation, a community partner in NAS. This review was named [\(re\)Imagining](#) the NAS and provided several recommendations for both the Hamilton Community Foundation and the City of Hamilton to consider in moving its neighbourhood-based work forward. Informed by the report and these recommendations, the City of Hamilton has started the process of refocusing their neighbourhood work.

### Health Equity

The goal of health equity for all Hamilton residents continues to be of utmost importance. According to [\(re\)Imagining the NAS](#): With this lens, building healthy neighbourhoods means ensuring that regardless of where a person lives they have access to education, meaningful work, health care, recreational opportunities, and groceries.

### Unintentional Stigma

As the work in neighbourhoods evolves, the message is clear: City Council and the City of Hamilton staff remain committed to supporting residents. As the scope of work of the NAS broadens to include all neighbourhoods and residents, the NAS has shifted to now be known as Neighbourhood Development. This decision reflects both the desire not to perpetuate the stigma that was attached to NAS as a poverty reduction exercise and to reflect the City's broadening scope of engagement and desire to support all residents within the City in creating positive change in the communities they call home. With this in mind, City Council approved enhanced capital funds to support resident engagement and initiatives.

### Diversity and Inclusion

Planning Teams have been an important part of the NAS. They have been the connection sites for residents and stakeholders. However, the evaluation highlighted the need for greater diversity in order to ensure that the engagement activities capture and represent the diversity of a neighbourhood. To address this need for a greater level of inclusion and diversity, the City is moving towards a model of working with community where they are at. This means going to and working with individuals and grass-roots, informally and formally organized community groups, including Planning Teams, on emerging priorities that align with goal of health equity.

### Emerging Priorities

Neighbourhoods are dynamic and, with Hamilton's rapidly changing landscape, they are ever-changing. In this context, the Neighbourhood Action Plans, while valuable, quickly become out of date. As the

**“ Health Equity means that everybody should have a fair opportunity to reach their full potential. Nobody's health outcomes should be disadvantaged because of race, religion, gender, income, sexual orientation, neighbourhood or other social condition. Health inequities are a result of an unfair distribution of power, resources, and opportunities.**

(Re)Imaging the Neighbourhood Action Strategy – Hamilton Community Foundation

neighbourhood work in Hamilton evolves, a new process for identifying and addressing emerging priorities is needed. Over the course of the NAS, many residents participated in the Neighbourhood Leadership Institute's training and had the opportunity to put the skills learned into practice.

For events and small-scale initiatives, Hamilton's residents have the capacity to self-organize without the added assistance of community developers or other staff support. For bigger initiatives that address larger scale neighbourhood concerns, City Staff, City Council, community groups, agencies, businesses and residents can work together. Working this way, there will be opportunities for resident-led activities where residents plan, lead and implement initiatives; and, there is a new space for working with resident champions on collaborative projects.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

What does all of this mean for the City of Hamilton and their neighbourhood work? Learning from the evaluations and reflecting on the recommendations shared by the Hamilton Community Foundation, both the City and the Foundation have refocused their work. Below are some of the highlights of their next phase of neighbourhood development.

### City of Hamilton

Among the initiatives that will continue to receive support is the Xperience Annex. The Xperience Annex is focused on youth aged 18-29 years and was supported by a three-year grant from the Local Poverty Reduction Fund. Originally, success of the Annex was determined by assisting 50 youth a year with system navigation. Over the grant period, the Annex was visited by over 1000 youth plus individuals outside of the youth age range who recognized the non-institutional system navigational opportunities. Given its success, the City looks to collaborate with community organizations to explore the expansion of the Xperience Annex in order to serve more youth.

In response to the increase in beyond youth visits to the Xperience Annex, the City is exploring the development of an "Experienced Annex." The Experienced Annex would be designed to support older residents in navigating relevant systems. While there are some similarities in the needs, there are also differences that can be supported in a more relevant way.

Uniquely, during the NAS, the municipality had taken on the leadership in co-building the McQuesten Urban Farm with residents. The goals of this urban farm were to both facilitate food security and build engagement opportunities for the community. The City is now exploring how to turn the initiative into a not-for-profit or partner with an organization who can scale the opportunity up both in food production and in creative new engagement opportunities to build capacity within the neighbourhood.



As more people move into apartment buildings, engaging residents of these vertical neighbourhoods

has become an increasing priority. Utilizing the resident engagement techniques learned through NAS, the City is undertaking a deliberate engagement strategy within two social housing apartments to support the residents through onsite services and to learn from residents about how to improve the property to best meet the needs of the residents.

Wanting to ensure health equity for all, the City of Hamilton is also striving to establish Community Hubs throughout the city. Community Hubs are central spaces where multiple resources exist together in the hopes of creating a one stop shop for health, social, cultural and recreational needs. Using the human service needs identified through resident engagement, the City is deliberately looking at opportunities to bring services locally to serve the residents to eliminate distance or transportation as barriers to accessing service.

### Hamilton Community Foundation

Similar to the City of Hamilton, the Hamilton Community Foundation remains a strong supporter of neighbourhood development and community engagement. As they consider their role in this work, their two priorities are: Small Grants Funding and the Neighbourhood Leadership Institute.

Hamilton Community Foundation remains committed to providing a funding stream to residents to assist in holding events, implementing actions and/or developing programs which support a healthy equity outcome. A new funding model is being developed which will be open to all residents City-wide.

The success of the NLI has been greater than expected. Instead of just offering the same program, there is a desire to determine how to both scale it up in terms of increasing participation and in expanding the range of programming and provide programming to reflect the needs of the residents to build capacity.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

The City of Hamilton's commitment to ongoing evaluation is noteworthy. When you have built a solid foundation of neighbourhood work and there are obvious, visible successes, it is tempting to continue on without pausing to reflect. However, this is exactly what the City of Hamilton has done. Beyond yearly evaluations, the comprehensive review of the NAS was a demonstration of the City's commitment to health equity for all residents. By using what they are hearing from the community, the City is able to ensure that Neighbourhood Development remains alive to the current lived realities of residents and to demonstrate how evaluation can drive social innovation.

As the City evolves from NAS to Neighbourhood Development, and expands from specific neighbourhoods to city-wide support, City staff are continually amazed by the resiliency of the

**“While so many people focus on building well designed, pedestrian friendly communities we cannot forget the interactions of people. Supporting community development within neighbourhoods strengthens relationships, improves safety when you get to know your community and creates greater feelings of home and hope. This work is not easy, sometimes messy, but worth the effort to encourage residents to champion change.”**

Al Fletcher, City of Hamilton



residents, the overwhelming volunteerism, neighbourhood pride, innovation and creativity, and newly built trust and relationships, all of which is not easily quantifiable in numbers.

The City of Hamilton continues to build on the established partnerships with institutions, community partners and education partners on how to continue to make an impact and create healthy and vibrant communities while addressing the healthy equity imbalances. While it is easy to look at the recently released “Code Red 10 Years Beyond”, Hamilton Spectator March 2019, and judge whether their efforts have addressed the healthy inequities, it is also important to look at what factors the City, on its own, can affect change without having direct decision-making abilities on Provincial and Federal policy making and funding decisions.

With policy in mind, many of the health inequities that have been studied require generational changes to affect real change and break the cycles of generational poverty. With the support of the residents, the City has changed the landscape on community engagement and how to have residents champion change. Promising new partnerships and community partner engagement have only just begun and need time to gain traction to determine the results.

Overall, the Neighbourhood Action Strategy, as a starting point to engaging residents, was an effective catalyst for positive community change. Continuing to build on this foundation, the City is committed to authentic engagement and deliberate neighbourhood development work, knowing full well that community development can be very “messy” work. The past eight years have demonstrated the power of resident engagement and continuous evaluation and learning. As the City refocuses this work, the question they remain curious about is: what will the City of Hamilton look like in another 10 years!

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## RESOURCES

- [City of Hamilton: Neighbourhood Action Strategy](#)
- [\(Re\)Imaging the Neighbourhood Action Strategy – Phase II: Recommendations for an Operational Framework.](#)
- [Neighbourhood Action Evaluation: Final Report](#)
- [Hamilton Neighbourhood Action Strategy 2016 Annual Update: Growing Neighbourhoods](#)
- [Our Home, Our Future: Community Health Profile of Vanier Towers](#)

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