



Innovations
in Housing
Governance for
First Nations in BC

HOME-LANDS
TOOLKIT

2022



Innovations in Housing Governance for First Nations in BC

Overview

This module is meant to serve First Nations across British Columbia as they navigate housing governance options for their communities. It includes an overview to better understand the current Indigenous housing system, a critical examination of why the system does not tend to work, and solutions to help First Nations set up innovative community-centered housing governance models that are self-determined and based in cultural, ecological, and economic well-being.

This is one module within a broader toolkit intended to facilitate the goals and projects of First Nations communities related to housing and homelands governance. Each module can be used individually, in connection with other supporting modules, or in conjunction with the toolkit as a [whole-system approach](#).

What is “housing”?

Housing means something different to everyone, and the definition of housing often depends on people’s history or personal

experience with housing. Some associate it with basic needs — a shelter, a place to be safe and secure. Others relate it to more holistic visions of community — family, connection, and belonging in a place. Many people associate housing with certain feelings, often negative, that it is stressful, not necessarily comfortable, a crisis, and something that requires a large financial investment.

The Indigenous Home-Lands Initiative uses a definition of housing that is not just about the frame of a physical dwelling. Housing is at once physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. It is what connects us with our homelands, families, culture, and society. Housing is what keeps us safe and comfortable, and gives us the opportunity to be both host and guest in our relationships with one another and the land.

It is this holistic definition of housing that we will use throughout this toolkit — one that understands housing as intersectional with other community needs, and necessary as a basic need, a human right, and an ingredient of sustainable development.

Exercise

“What does housing mean to you?” Without thinking, jot down 1-2 sentences (or 3-5 words) that come to mind.



Diagram showing the many different definitions of housing.

It seems there is a big difference between “housing” and “good housing”— in other words, what housing often *is* versus what housing *ought to be*. Good housing, according to the definition established by the Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC), is a home that is adequate, suitable, and appropriate. In the CMHC framework, a household is in “core housing need” if it is below one or more of their adequacy, suitability, and affordability standards, or if the household would have to spend 30% or more of its before-tax household income to access local housing that meets all three standards.

However, this is a sub-par definition that equates bare-minimum needs with “good.” Instead, “good housing” needs to be redefined, with a benchmark that is much higher than just “okay”.

“housing” as simply the frame of a shelter, rather than as a key part of a larger systemic approach to well-being and sustainable development. It is much more than this.

In a sense, to have a “home” is to have access to both housing and homeland. For community members to be able to “return home”, housing needs to be at the core of holistic models of community wellness, resilience, and development. This includes understanding housing in relationship to health, education, economic development, culture, social cohesion, and the environment.

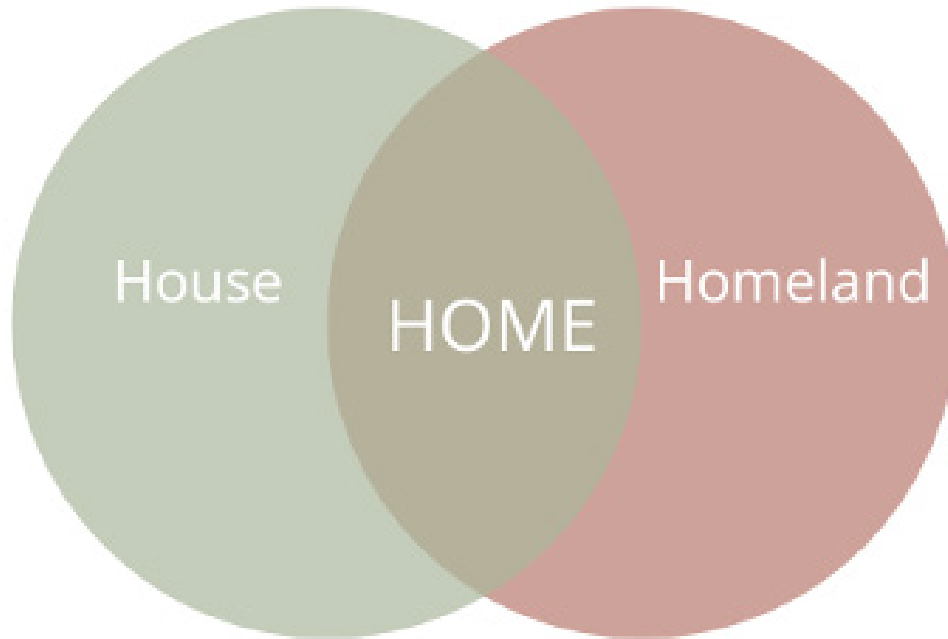
It's a loop. Lack of housing leads to lack of access to health, which leads to lack of housing.

- Dr. Lyana Patrick, Carrier Nation

Housing as part of a system

Many current housing governance models see

While not all people wish to return to their homelands, and equal attention should be given to good housing off-reserve in urban settings, the option to return should be available. **Indigenous People**



In the context of First Nations housing, “home” is often the ability to have both a house and access to one’s homeland.

should not have to choose between their *homelands and a house*, when in fact both are human rights, defended under many federal and international doctrines, including the United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. **In a sense, to have both house and homeland is to have a home.**

Current Challenges

Housing is not working for many First Nations across British Columbia because the system was set up to divide and dismantle rural First

Nations communities, not to support them. Now, while much of the available funding comes from provincial and federal government agencies, some of it can only be used for certain types of physical housing structures and governance models that may not fit the needs of each community. The current system also furthers the dependency cycle — that is, it locks communities into situations where they need to be reliant on (and at the whim of decisions by) the Canadian government, when in fact many communities’ goals are to regain their autonomy and self-determination.

5 principles of good housing governance

It is important to note that each community has specific needs and values, and not all housing models will work when adapted to each community context. That said, many community-based housing professionals agree that the following five principles are at the core of any successful Indigenous housing governance model:

1. Community stewardship, involvement, and “buy-in” of all processes and elements of the housing governance model. This means the community is actively involved in all stages of the project, including its design, implementation, and monitoring.

2. A localized and circular supply chain. This means that, as much as possible, the materials and supplies to build and maintain houses come from nearby places.

3. Local resource capacity to fulfill housing goals. This means both financial resources and human resources — that is, the skillsets of community members.

4. A plan that includes the long-term vision of sustainable community development. This means seeing housing as part of a larger system, and which supports other community initiatives, including health and education.

5. Culturally, climatically, and socially relevant designs. This means that the use of the land, as well as the architecture of the buildings themselves, is aligned with social needs, cultural values, and environmental needs due to climate change.

See the [Housing Ecosystem Overview Toolkit](#) for more information on best practices.

Key people to have on your housing team

As shown in the [Māori case study](#), the actual

construction of housing is a small component of housing governance. A long-term interdisciplinary team of local people who have open communication and a trusted relationship is key to successful housing governance.

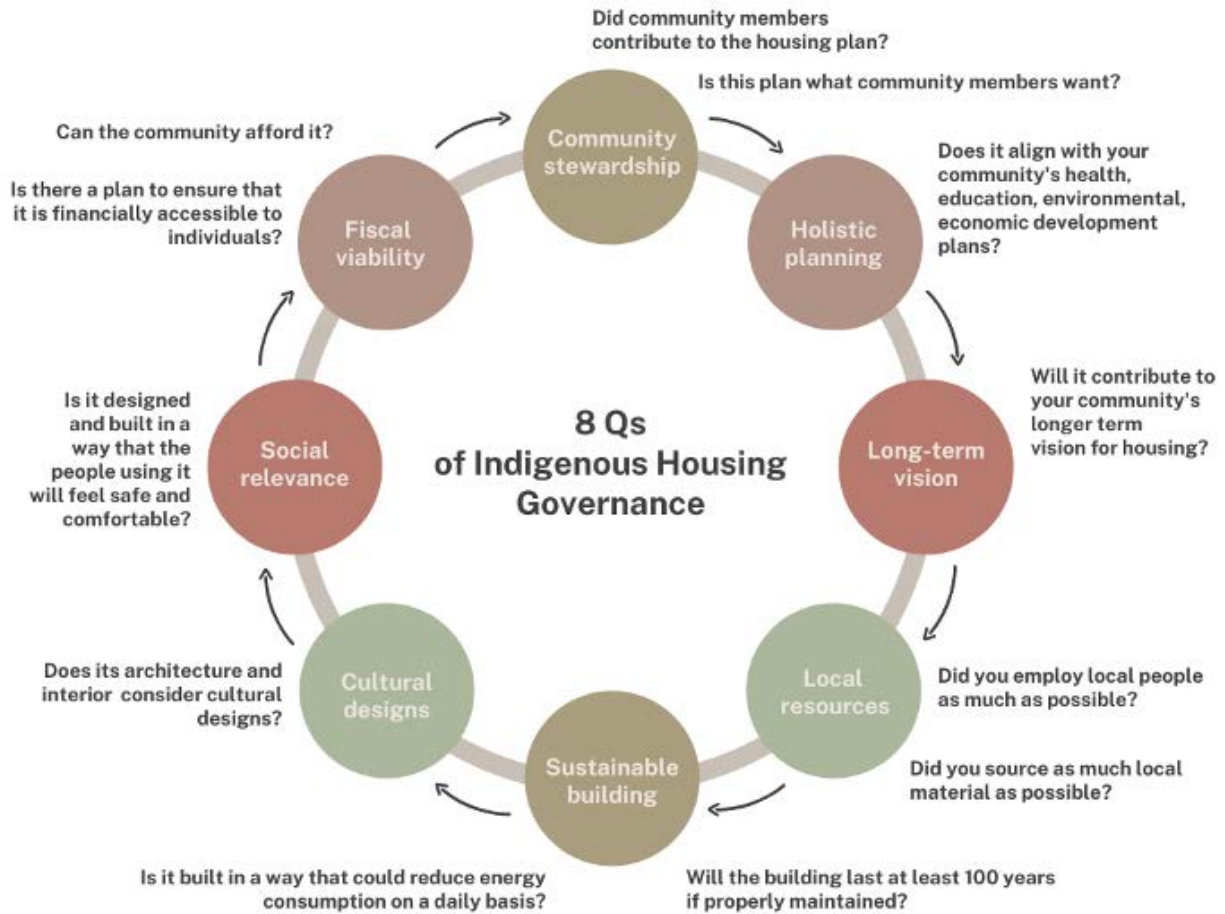
Many First Nations create Housing Governance Committees that oversee all five stages of projects – design, funding, implementation, maintenance, and monitoring. However, there are different ways to set up such a committee (i.e., through the Band or by creating a non-profit society, etc.).

In many communities, the following people are needed:

- Community planner
- Administrative officer / Business administrator
- Accountant / Financial administrator
- Cultural expert
- Environmental expert
- Surveyor
- Architect
- Interior designer
- Builders (carpenters, roofers, contractor/supervisor)
- Electrician / Alternative energy technician
- Plumber / Certified gas fitter
- Suppliers
- Bank liaison

8 questions to assess when setting up a housing governance model

Basic needs related to a reduction of overcrowding, the safety of the physical structure, and affordability are important, however, they are not the whole story. A house’s cultural and social relevance, its fit with the community’s long-term development plan, and its alignment with principles of sustainability



This diagram is meant to help guide First Nations to evaluate best practices related to housing governance. It is in a circle to indicate that these types of questions need to be continually asked and re-evaluated throughout the whole process with an understanding that the project may need to be adapted along the way.

may be factors to consider as well.

While each community will have different values and priorities, here are some general questions to ponder when considering whether housing is “good housing” for your community.

See the [Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Housing](#) for more information.

Conclusion

Good housing governance is an ongoing process that requires continued engagement with community members and a willingness to adapt

as community needs change over time. Many successful housing governance models prioritize five key principles — community stewardship, circular supply chain, local resource capacity, long-term vision, and relevant design. To see an example of how innovative governance policies can work in practice, check out “[Lessons from Māori housing](#).”

If your community would like support to develop a unique, context-specific housing policy and governance structure, please reach out to the Indigenous Home-Lands Initiative at Ecotrust Canada.