

THE FUTURE IS YOUTH

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY



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About



We want Innisfil to be a place that makes youth feel **safe, supported** and **equipped** with diverse opportunities that empower them to take ownership over their lives and their community. **Why?** We believe that investing in young people is vital to the future of Innisfil.

The Town of Innisfil's **The Future is Youth - Youth Engagement Strategy (YES)** was designed with youth to guide the municipality in their pursuit to better engage young people. This strategy outlines what issues matter most to youth (residents of Innisfil in grades 8-12), what barriers exist to participation in municipal-wide decision-making, and recommendations for creating a place that is attractive to youth now and in the future.

This strategy is a living document, meaning that it will grow and change with the community, and it will be actively used by the Town and community partners to keep youth centered in all that we do.

Strategy at a Glance

Youth in Innisfil

Between 2011 and 2015, the number of children

AGES 0 - 16

+ 14.7%

AGES 7-14

+ 7.9%

There is 1 public high school, 1 Alternative Secondary School, and 10 elementary schools in Innisfil. Some students also travel outside of Innisfil to attend elementary and secondary schools in neighbouring communities.

Implementing the Strategy

1. Apply Learning
2. Educate Others
3. ASK "How are we doing?"
4. Continue Engaging
5. Keep the Strategy Updated



Guiding Principles

Youth-Centered Approach

Commit to listening, encouraging, and empowering youth to share their own thoughts and opinions about their community.

Continuous Engagement

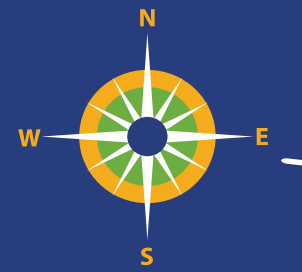
Commit to continuous engagement to incorporate new voices, diverse backgrounds, and diverse experiences. **One voice does not represent all youth voices.**

Authenticity & Transparency

Avoid tokenism and provide safe, no pressure environments for youth to share their honest thoughts and opinions.

Commitment to Learning

Accept that adults are not the experts in youth experience and that meaningful engagement involves a commitment to lifelong learning.



What Matters to YOUTH

Places to Go, Spaces to Belong

Youth feel connected to their community when they are in a safe space with like-minded people.

Getting Around Town Easily & Safely

Youth do not want to rely on their parents to get where they need to go. They want cheap, safe, and convenient options for transit.

The Environment

Youth care about protecting and expanding access to parks, trails, and green spaces.

Health & Wellness

Youth care about their mental and physical well being.

The Future

Youth plan for success and look forward to the future.



Our Approach

AUTHENTICITY & TRANSPARENCY

We approached this strategy with an open mind and blank slate. We did not want youth feeling tokenized or patronized throughout the process, so we took necessary steps to ensure that participants knew that their opinions and feelings were valid, their ideas were valued (no matter how big or small), and that we had no idea what the final result would look like because we were leaving our own predictions and opinions at home. Each activity began with a statement to youth about the safety of the space and importance of honesty. We also acknowledged socio-political events that may affect participation and the outcome of each session.



YOUTH-CENTERED APPROACH

The Town of Innisfil is committed to listening, encouraging, and empowering youth to share their own thoughts and opinions about their community. All engagement activities were planned to provide youth with a platform to speak and lead the conversations that took place. The Town also adjusted the format, tone, and navigation of activities to make them more accessible and meaningful to youth.



COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

It is imperative as adults working with and for youth, that we commit to learning and accepting that we are not always the expert. In order to engage youth in a meaningful way, we must act as listeners, supporters, critical thinkers, and life-long learners. We approached this strategy with the mindset that youth are experts in their own experience and with the goal of seeking authentic youth feedback.

CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT

We held the mindset that we are creating a foundation document that will need to be consistently reviewed, in order to incorporate missed voices and remain relevant.

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With youth, we identified 5 areas of common concern amongst young people in Innisfil:

1. Places To Go, Spaces To Belong

Youth connect most with others when they are in a safe space with like-minded and/or authentic people. Youth tend to hang out at friends' houses rather than community spaces because they often feel unwelcome and disrespected because they are regularly accused of loitering. Youth want there to be more places they can be where they are treated with respect and can "just be". If youth could wave a magic wand, they'd increase opportunities to be entertained, starting with more food options, and more places to hang out (for longer than a meal).

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What YOUTH Asked For:

- Make current spaces more youth-friendly by allowing youth to be themselves instead of having rules that make them feel uncomfortable and unwanted.
- Create physical and virtual spaces where youth can go for homework help.
- Build more in-person relationships - youth are social and are more likely to listen if they know people who work or run programs in existing spaces.
- Create more teen-only programming on the weekends or later during the school week. For example, when building Town Square, make it teen-friendly by including lots of activities and short events that take place during the day (2 hour-long events are recommended).
- Make a dedicated teen space at the Library's Lakeshore Branch as it is in close proximity to Innisfil's high school.
- Build more attractions for youth, with diversity of culture in mind, so that they do not have to travel to Barrie. For example, youth would like to see a skatepark built in Alcona.



How Innisfil Can Make It Happen:

- Conduct an audit of programming and spaces across the One Town, One Team (OTOT). Work with youth to identify current barriers, and implement youth recommendations where possible.
- Work with community partners to design spaces and programs with youth's unique needs in mind.
- Involve youth in municipal planning, by creating opportunities for youth to collaborate with other standing committees of Council, encouraging youth to share their thoughts on the Town's online engagement platform Get Involved Innisfil, and by bringing information to youth in a way that speaks to them.
- Provide anti-racism/anti-oppression training to Town staff that will engage with youth, to foster a sense of belonging for everyone.



2. Getting Around Town Easily & Safely

Youth want to be able to get to school and places of interest in a way that is easy, safe, predictable, and cost effective, and without having to rely on their parents. Youth feel disconnected from public spaces and they are unaware of services available to them. To youth, it feels like recreation centres and facilities are only available in Alcona and travelling to Barrie for entertainment, education, work or co-op can be difficult. Since Innisfil is a rural area made up of many communities, youth realize that transit is a challenge, but many feel that getting around Innisfil could be improved with their input. Youth would like to be more involved in future planning of Innisfil Transit, sidewalks and trails.

What YOUTH Asked For:

- Research options to complement/expand the on-demand Uber service, in consultation with youth.
- Update transit brochures and continue to make this information available in schools.
- Include a "teen-rate" similar to the Fair Transit Program.
- Give youth the tools they need to feel safe and make informed decisions through education and safety campaigns.

How Innisfil Can Make It Happen:

- Encourage youth participation in discussions surrounding transit, trails, and ways of connecting to community spaces, by meeting youth where they are and engaging them the way that works for them.
- Educate youth on the existing transit system so that there is more awareness of the Innisfil Transit flat fee of \$6.00 to travel to the Barrie South Go Station.
- Work with youth on solutions to help them get around now, and also involve them in conversations about the Mobility Orbit and major future developments that will act as transit links for youth in the future.
- Encourage community partners to create co-op opportunities in Innisfil so that youth do not have to travel outside of their community.



3. The Environment

Youth enjoy the natural environment and recreation opportunities in Innisfil and care about protecting their access to green spaces. Many youth love the rural elements of Innisfil and they associate safety and personal comfort as luxuries of living in a small community. Youth in Innisfil look particularly forward to the summer months, where they can bike, enjoy the beach, and play outdoor sports. They want these spaces to be protected and recommend that any form of development builds “high” instead of wide. In the future, youth would like to see themselves involved in the creation of sidewalks and trail master plans.

What YOUTH Asked For:

- Protect and expand access to green spaces.
- Get youth involved in the Sidewalks and Trails Master Plan.



How Innisfil Can Make It Happen:

- Increase youth awareness of public engagement projects and planning processes by immersing them in the process. Create more opportunities for youth to collaborate with other standing committees of Council and meet youth where they are to share information in a way that is meaningful to them.
- Educate youth about the Mobility Orbit, and share the thought process behind protecting natural spaces through this high-density design.
- Work with Nantyr's Eco Team to address gaps in sustainability programming.
- Expand access to low-cost, outdoor programs and activities for youth through collaborations with the Library's Teen Involvement Group (TIG) and the Town's Youth Connex Committee.

4. Health And Wellness

Youth care about health and most strive to be healthy, but mental health, suicide, and addiction are real in Innisfil. Young people want to feel more supported when talking about the issues they have and the things they see around them. They recognize the challenges that some youth face accessing mental health services, and want to find opportunities to de-stigmatize asking for help.

What YOUTH Asked For:

- Increase virtual mental health supports.
- Have open conversation with youth about suicide and how it has affected them or their peers.
- Support parent education to teach parents how to talk to youth and make them feel supported.
- Create an anonymous, youth-centered virtual mental health chat.
- Centralize all resources for youth mental health to increase accessibility.
- Create additional information on nutrition & proper routines.
- Create an outlet for mental health for teens who can't go to their parents.



How Innisfil Can Make It Happen:

- Work with youth and the Town's Health and Wellness team to develop a health and wellness strategy for children and youth 0-24 years (see Our Health, Objective 6.1 under Resources).
- Work with the ideaLAB & Library, Leisure, Health and Wellness teams, as well as local teen advisory groups and community organizations, to increase access to health and wellness programming for youth.
- Utilize spaces such as the Rizzardo Health & Wellness Centre and ideaLAB & Library branches to facilitate teen-focused health and wellness programs and services.
- Advocate for our young residents by sharing what we heard with the experts delivering mental health services. Encourage service providers to implement youth-driven recommendations in their programs and services.
- Continue to host the Speak Your Mind mental health summit for youth in Simcoe/Muskoka.
- Help reduce the stigma of asking for help, by facilitating programs and services that meet youth where they are, in a way that is meaningful to youth.



5. The Future

Youth care about their future. They want to work and be independent and most youth have goals and a path for achieving them. When thinking ahead to the challenges and opportunities that they may face, they want to learn more practical skills and they want to be educated about financial responsibilities. They believe there is a need for education reform (e.g. more high school learning opportunities related to how to pay your taxes, how to buy a house, how to navigate Canada's electoral systems, etc.). Many youth plan to attend post-secondary education, acknowledging that they will have to leave their community to do so. There is significant interest in seeing what the world has to offer, but this does pose significant financial stress and anxiety associated with "the fear of the unknown".

What YOUTH Asked For:

1. Explore opportunities to connect Innisfil Transit to Barrie transportation, to open up more opportunities for jobs.
2. Create courses both in and outside of school that prepare young people for the future (e.g. teach basic life skills including taxes, finances, how to buy a house, etc.).

How Innisfil Can Make It Happen:

- Create and deliver "Adult 101" programming to teach youth basic life skills.
- Collaborate with local organizations, in Barrie and the surrounding area, to create satellite services for youth in Innisfil so that youth do not have to travel outside of their community for support.
- Work with the Economic Development team to increase access to employment and business opportunities for youth.
- Involve youth in conversations about the Mobility Orbit and major future developments that will act as transit links for youth in the future.
- Encourage youth to return to Innisfil after post-secondary school by offering attainable housing through the Orbit and a robust job pool fueled by Innisfil's tech ecosystem.

Key Recommendations

Throughout our conversations with youth, it became clear that youth want to be part of conversations about Innisfil's growth. It was also evident that inviting youth to public meetings isn't the right approach - youth require a specialized reach out, rather than a "one-size-fits-all" style of engagement.

With that in mind, it is recommended that the OTOT:

- 1 Create space for youth voices to be heard, by taking a closer look at opportunities within existing youth committees such as the Youth Connex and TIG.
- 2 Develop opportunities for collaboration between youth committees and standing committees of Council, in a way that truly invites youth in.
- 3 Meet youth where they are and engage in a way that is meaningful to them. A dedicated Youth Engagement Coordinator would help ensure that youth are actively engaged across the Community Programming service bundle.
- 4 Make youth engagement a natural part of everything that we do.



IMPLEMENTING THE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Implementing the Future is Youth will help the municipality and community organizations build relationships with youth, grow their capacity as leaders, and ensure the Town's decision-making centres youth voices.

A detailed implementation plan is being drafted, combining what we heard from youth to take tangible next steps that OTOT can take to activate our youth's recommendations.



The strategy will be implemented in the following five ways:

1. APPLY LEARNING

- Involve youth in decision-making by bringing them into the process.
- Remove barriers to engagement by meeting youth where they are.
- Review and assess programs, spaces, and services for youth and fill gaps where needed.

2. EDUCATE OTHERS

- Educate Town staff on the strategy and finalize implementation plan with clear deliverables.
- Make youth engagement a part of everyday work, as well as strategies and master plans by providing staff with resources for engaging Youth (e.g. see Youth Engagement Checklist on Pg.18).
- Deepen relationships with organizations that serve youth by sharing what we learned while creating the strategy.



3. ASK – HOW ARE WE DOING?

- Continually assess programs, spaces, or services for youth - do they address interests, issues, or recommendations included in the Strategy? Were youth involved in the planning process?
- Ask youth, staff, and residents how we are doing. Have they seen improvements? What additional ideas do they have to implement the strategy?

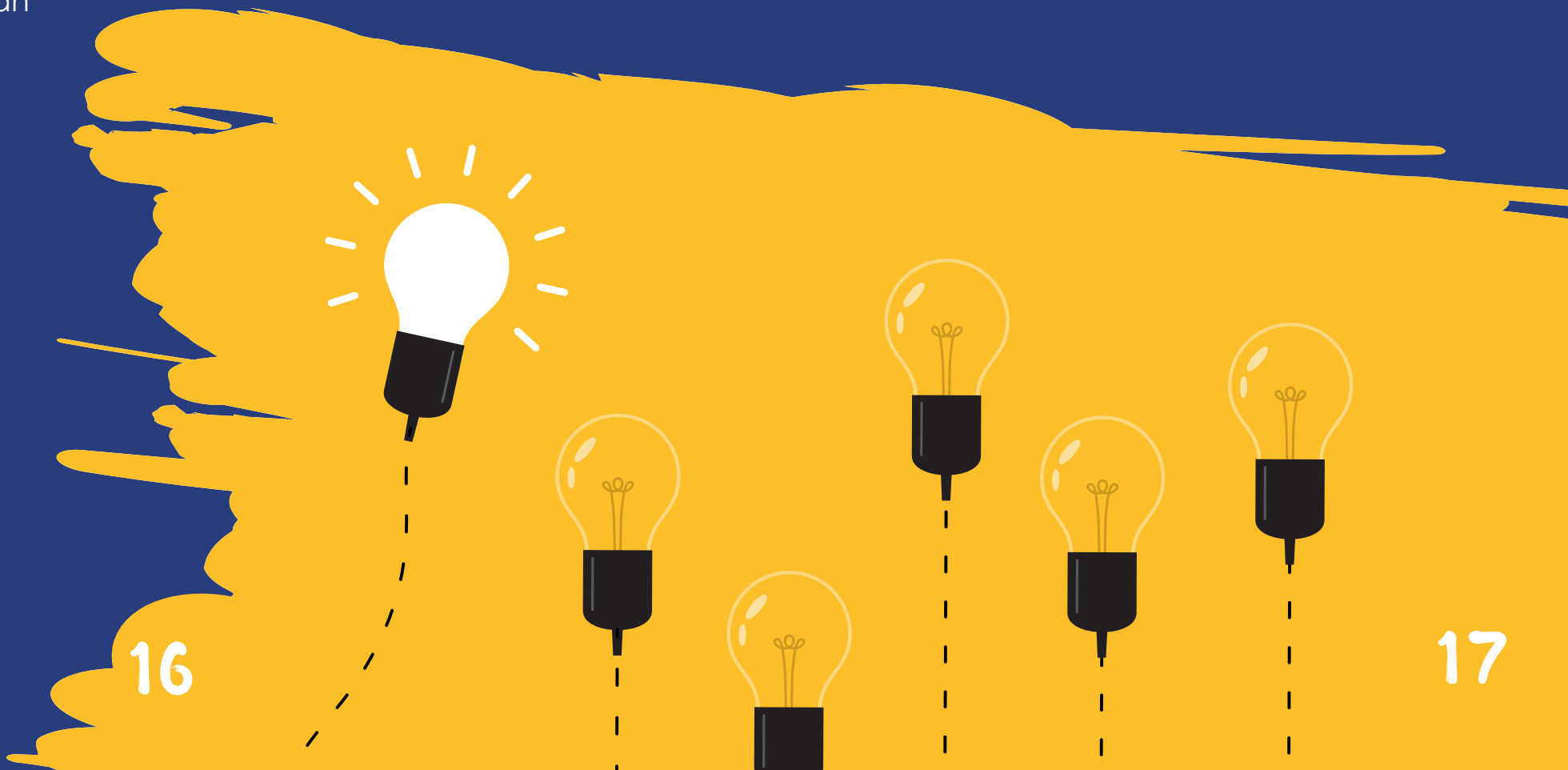
4. CONTINUE ENGAGING

- The strategy is a living document and will evolve when new priorities are identified. It's important that we maintain a presence with youth and encourage engagement so we can continue to learn and adjust.
- Build relationships earlier by consulting future high school students (e.g. grade 8s) during their last semester of elementary school.
- Talk regularly to parents and local organizations to support the current and future needs of youth in Innisfil.

5. KEEP THE STRATEGY UPDATED

Review the strategy annually in Q1 and Q3, as well when the following situations require another look:

- There are changes in the community (e.g. demographics as the result of new Census data, the construction of a new school, etc.).
- New community feedback is received (solicited through new engagement projects).
- Emerging trends in youth engagement arise and need to be reflected in the strategy.
- Social and cultural factors arise (e.g. are we being forward thinking and inclusive of the social diversity of Innisfil?).
- There are changes in strategic alignment (e.g. does this strategy align with the Town of Innisfil's strategic priorities?).



Youth Engagement Check List

Are you thinking of involving a youth perspective in the design of a local space or program? Do you want to start a relationship with youth but are not sure how to engage them? Use this Youth Engagement Checklist to centre youth voice and avoid tokenizing behaviours.



We have considered:

- The benefits of this engagement for youth and believe this is something that youth care about and would benefit from.
- Asking youth how they want to be involved.
- Contacting local youth groups and organizations who serve youth and invited them to participate in the planning and execution of projects.
- Contacting local schools to investigate opportunities to engage youth.
- Visiting places where youth frequent, to meet them virtually or in-person, instead of expecting them to come to you.
- Using plain language in communication with youth, including promotional materials.
- Using youth leaders to recruit other young people.
- Compensating youth fairly for their time and involvement.
- Providing training and support for young people to develop meaningful skills and connections.
- Identifying potential barriers to engagement as they relate to communication (e.g. language or method of communication), physical or virtual space (accessibility for people with different abilities), public events or holidays that may affect attendance, etc.

Our Commitment to Youth

We want to make Innisfil a great place for everyone to live, work and play, and that means that we must make sure that there are opportunities for young people to learn, grow, and thrive. It also means that we are providing youth with a platform to share their voices and opportunities for them to participate in project development right from the start.

Benefits to Youth Engagement

Research over the past twenty years suggests that young people benefit from engagement because it:

- Increases self-esteem, grows connections, and reduces depressive symptoms—all of which contribute to a decreased risk of suicide.
- Increases a young person's ability to cope, life satisfaction, hope and overall well being functioning.
- Reduces substance use and smoking.
- Helps develop key coping mechanisms (e.g. self-regulation, coping).
- Promotes the notion of taking responsibility for one's own care.
- Contributes to factors that help to strengthen youth resiliency.
- Promotes personal growth and identity development.
- Increases critical thinking skills.
- Improves academic performance and reduces dropout rates.
- Enhances leadership skills.
- Builds positive youth-adult partnerships.
- Broadens and strengthens social networks.
- Supports mental health awareness and the reduction of stigma.



Barriers

Throughout our conversations with youth, we heard that there are many barriers to engagement. If we keep the following barriers in mind, we will have more success in reaching young people:



Lack Of Youth-Led Programs And Events

Currently, youth do not feel that there is anything specifically aimed at teenagers or planned with teenagers. Youth need to be involved in the planning and execution of programs and events, otherwise the events will likely not appeal to them.

“Events aren’t planned with youth, so they do not appeal to young people.”

Promotion And Communication

Many organizations, including the Town, place too much of a focus on online marketing and engagement. While youth use social media, they prefer to be engaged face-to-face. That said, youth encouraged the Town to use more than one platform to get the word out—the more the better.

“I don’t really feel like you’re getting to me.”

Intimidation

Youth are intimidated to participate in community decision-making because they are under the impression that adults don’t want to hear what they have to say.



“Make sure it’s not too little too late”.

Poor Timing For Engagement

We reach teens when they’re almost out of high school when they don’t have a lot of time to contribute to things. We need to target younger people so that they’re not scrambling to get involved.

Trust And Consistency

Youth are social and they are more likely to listen and attend events if they know somebody there. They need consistency and relationships to feel comfortable attending programs and events.



Reaching Diverse Youth

Young people have a diversity of backgrounds, skills, interests, and experiences, and despite some common themes identified in this strategy, it is important to remember that **one voice does not represent all voices.**



Transportation

Innisfil's a "community of communities" and there is no location that is central and/or convenient for a majority of youth. Many rely on their parents to get places because it can cost too much to get to places where youth want to hang out (e.g. Cookstown Outlet Mall, Innisfil Beach Park, Nantyr Shores Secondary School).



Local And/Or Global Events

Social, environmental, and political events affect youths' motivation and comfort in participating in discussions that will help shape the community. Engagement must be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of those who may be affected by both local and global events. It is difficult to predict how these factors will affect the timeline and scope of a project, but also how people will respond to being consulted during times of turmoil and/or widespread change. Throughout the development of the first draft of this strategy, for instance, the Town worked with youth while they experienced a strike at school, a global pandemic, and the rise of the Black Lives Matter and Anti-Black Racism Movement.



Parents

Parents are often viewed as a barrier to youth participating in community events or achieving their goals – sometimes there isn't enough time in a day to commit to extracurricular activities.

Scheduling And Timing Conflicts

Youth are busy with school, work, co-curricular activities, planning for their future, and hanging out with their friends—especially during the week. On the weekends, many enjoy sleeping in and having the freedom to escape weekly stress. It is difficult to manage their time after school and in the mornings on the weekends. Unfortunately, that is when most programs and events outside of their regular schedule are planned.



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Terms to Know



Adult Ally

An adult who is friendly, positive, honest, and respectful of youth, their situations, and their experiences. Often, this means someone who has experience raising the awareness of youth needs or actively engaging youth in participatory activities.

Anti-Black Racism

Policies and practices rooted in Canadian institutions such as, education, health care, and justice that mirror and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping and/or discrimination towards people of Black-African descent.

Anti-Indigenous Racism

Anti-Indigenous racism is the ongoing race-based discrimination, negative stereotyping, and injustice experienced by Indigenous Peoples within Canada. It includes ideas and practices that establish, maintain and perpetuate power imbalances, systemic barriers, and inequitable outcomes that stem from the legacy of colonial policies and practices in Canada. Systemic anti-Indigenous racism is evident in discriminatory federal policies such as the Indian Act and the residential school system. It is also manifest in the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in provincial criminal justice and child welfare systems, as well as inequitable outcomes in education, well-being, and health. Individual lived-experiences of anti-Indigenous racism can be seen in the rise in acts of hostility and violence directed at Indigenous people.

Systemic Racism

Organizational culture, policies, directives, practices or procedures that exclude, displace or marginalize some racialized groups or create unfair barriers for them to access valuable benefits and opportunities. This is often the result of institutional biases in organizational culture, policies, directives, practices, and procedures that may appear neutral but have the effect of privileging some groups and disadvantaging others.

Tokenism

When youth are invited to the table, but are not truly invited to the discussion or given the opportunity to express their views and have them heard, or when their feedback is not taken into account in the decision-making process.

Youth Engagement

The process of empowering youth to make decisions about the issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe is important.

Vulnerable Youth

Young people who are systematically excluded from meaningful participation in economic, social, political, cultural and other forms of human activity in their communities. As a result, they are denied the opportunity to fulfill themselves as human beings. People who identify outside of the dominant groups (e.g. white, heterosexual, able-bodied) are often marginalized.

RESOURCES

Town Of Innisfil Related Reading

Youth Engagement Process and Findings Report

The report details the full engagement process—who was engaged, when, where, and what we learned.

Inspiring Innisfil 2030

The Town of Innisfil's Community Strategic Plan outlines the overarching goals for the community, as they relate back to the vision and mission of the municipality. It specifically acknowledges the importance of creating opportunities for youth, who are the municipality's future leaders.

Innisfil Culture Master Plan

The Culture Master Plan was developed to guide the municipality in its mission to support and develop culture in their communities. Youth were engaged in the development of this plan and many of the insights are consistent with what was heard throughout engagement for the Youth Engagement Strategy.

Community Health and Wellness Strategy

Our Health was designed to guide the Town and the many organizations, agencies, and volunteers to improve residents' health and wellness so that they are able to thrive now and for years to come. Youth were identified in this plan as a group that is at greater risk of social isolation, a group that requires a strategy to guide engagement, and a group that is worth long-term municipal commitment and investment.

Youth Engagement Resources

Walking the Talk: A toolkit for engaging youth in mental health

This toolkit will give you a better understanding of how youth engagement can directly benefit youth, service areas and communities in Ontario's child and youth mental health sector. It was designed to help organizations implement youth engagement initiatives and showcase the many youth engagement success stories from across the province.

Gut Check on Youth Voice

The Tamarack Institute was hired to plan and facilitate the youth engagement workshops. In August of 2020, the Tamarack Institute published an article that summarized the guidance that we received throughout the process of writing the Youth Engagement Strategy.

Innisfil Culture Master Plan

The Culture Master Plan was developed to guide the municipality in its mission to support and develop culture in their communities. Youth were engaged in the development of this plan and many of the insights are consistent with what was heard throughout engagement for the Youth Engagement Strategy.

Engaging youth in research planning, design and execution: Practical recommendations for researchers

This article provides practical recommendations to help researchers engage youth in meaningful ways in academic research, from initial planning to project completion.



Thank You

Thank you to all of the youth, Staff, Town Council, and community partners who contributed to development of this Strategy, which will continue to evolve to incorporate new voices and meet need needs.

The Future is Youth was developed by the Town of Innisfil, with assistance from the Tamarack Institute.



Summary Report: Youth Engagement

The Process

The Town of Innisfil worked with the [Tamarack Institute](#) to develop a timeline and process for the development of the Youth Engagement Strategy.

The goals were to:

- Understand youth hopes for the future, topics of interest and barriers to engagement;
- Provide youth with ownership of the process and provide leadership skills;
- Generate ideas and understanding between youth and organizations that serve youth; and
- Connect with diverse youth.

This approach was designed with the intention of youth ownership over the strategy and therefore requires an investment of time from youth leaders. As such, we recognized that our methodology should ensure that youth leaders are recognized for their efforts in some way.

Throughout this strategy's research process, the Town relied heavily on adults to plan and execute engagement activities. This role was supportive and provided youth with access to safe spaces where adults acted as listeners and facilitators to important conversations.

Guiding Principles/Our Promise to Youth

Prior to engaging youth, the Town and Tamarack discussed the principles that would guide the development of the strategy, but also inspire a commitment on behalf of the municipality for future engagement. We hope that these principles will inspire other organizations to follow suit when planning programs and events or designing spaces for youth.



Youth-Centered Approach

The Town of Innisfil is committed to listening, encouraging, and empowering youth to share their own thoughts and opinions about their community. All engagement activities were planned to provide youth with a platform to speak and lead the conversations that took place. The Town also adjusted the format, tone, and navigation of activities to make them more accessible and meaningful to youth.

Authenticity and Transparency

We approached this strategy with an open mind and blank slate. We did not want youth feeling tokenized or patronized throughout the process, so we took necessary steps to ensure that participants knew that their opinions and feelings were valid, their ideas were valued (no matter how big or small), and that we had no idea what the final result would look like because we were leaving our own predictions and opinions at home. Each activity began with a statement to youth about the safety of the space and importance of honesty. We also acknowledged socio-political events that may affect participation and the outcome of each session.

Continuous Engagement

We held the mindset that we are creating a foundation document that will need to be consistently reviewed, in order to incorporate missed voices and remain relevant.

Commitment to Learning

It is imperative as adults working with and for youth, that we commit to learning and accepting that we are not always the expert. In order to engage youth in a meaningful way, we must act as listeners, supporters, critical thinkers, and life-long learners. We approached this strategy with the mindset that youth are experts in their own experience and with the goal of seeking authentic youth feedback.



Notable Challenges and Opportunities

This project was developed before and during a labour strike, global pandemic, and a civil rights movement, all of which provided their own unique challenges and opportunities, including (but not limited to) the following:

1. In August of 2019, provincial and local contracts for all education workers in Ontario expired. This led to a series of contract negotiations that led to the loss of class time and less focus on extracurricular activities and events outside of the curriculum. In March of 2020, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) reached an agreement with the provincial government as they worked together to respond to the challenges presented by COVID-19. The Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association reached an agreement with the provincial government that same month.
2. In March of 2020, all public spaces, including Town Hall, libraries, and Ontario schools, were shut down due to the novel coronavirus. This significantly impacted the timeline of the Youth Engagement Strategy and the Town's ability to engage youth on a topic outside the uncertainty of their own lives. While we lost momentum, we had some time to re-evaluate what engagement looks like throughout a pandemic, how the pandemic would and should impact the data collected, and what engagement with youth looks like when partnerships in schools are not possible.
3. In March of 2020, the murder of Breonna Taylor, and in May the murder of George Floyd, sparked a wave of global civil rights movements protesting systemic racism, racial injustice, and police brutality. This movement led to a series of local protests where the Black Community shared their fears, stories of local racism, and the barriers faced as residents of Innisfil and the surrounding area. While themes of diversity and inclusion were discussed throughout the Town's engagement with youth, it became clear that many of the conversations with youth were dominated by one demographic, making it difficult for others to speak out about how race affects their ability to participate fully in society, as well as feel connected, safe, and respected. While this movement drew a lot of important attention to Black lives, it also propelled the Town to learn more about anti-Indigenous racism and the ongoing race-based discrimination against Indigenous people in Innisfil and Canada.



In addition to these three events, the Town experienced challenges engaging youth who attend school outside of Innisfil, who are homeschooled or do not go to school, and who represent LGBTQ2+ and non-North American communities. For example, survey results indicated that a majority of respondents identified as North American, English speaking females between the ages of 12 and 18 who attend Nantyr Shores Secondary School in Alcona. What we learned throughout this process is that there is no one size fits all model to engaging young people and that we must consistently meet youth in-person, establish consistency and trust, leverage relationships with organizations and adults who work with youth, and budget for the time it requires to do so.

Findings

Pre-Engagement

Prior to building the *Future is Youth - Youth Engagement Strategy (Appendix 1)*, the Town and Library came together to plan engagement activities at Nantyr Shores Secondary School. These outreach opportunities brought local government into the classroom, to inform students about different initiatives and responsibilities about the municipality. From budgeting and elections, to economic development and master plans, these sessions were stepping stones to building youth awareness of the political processes that affect them.

A youth perspective was also sought out during the consultation sessions leading up to our current [Culture Master Plan](#). We wanted to understand what youth currently enjoyed in their community and what opportunities they would like to see available without having to leave Innisfil. This plan revealed that the population of young people in Innisfil is growing rapidly and that there is the perception that there is more effort put into providing opportunities for families and young children over opportunities for youth. These findings were consistent with those that were identified in a series of youth engagement activities that took place from November-June of 2019-2020. As a result, it is a top priority to continuously have youth be a part of the important conversations taking place at the local government level.



1. In-person Workshop

In this first workshop, youth leaders gathered in their high school library to discuss the experience of young people in Innisfil and co-designed an approach for reaching the wider youth population. The purpose of this engagement activity was to better understand their experiences, hopes, and ideas. The top issues that emerged during earlier youth research was used as a starting point to focus the discussion, including findings from the [Town of Innisfil's Culture Master Plan](#) (pages 33-34 includes youth perspectives), conversations that took place with youth at Library programs and special events, and a report on youth engagement submitted to Council on May 23, 2018.

What did we hear?

It was made clear youth struggle getting around town, youth need more places to meet, and that while youth want to see more development, and they care about maintaining green spaces in Innisfil. Mental health and drug use are concerns – youth need more support. They also noticed that there was not enough diversity in age, ethnicity, and sexuality in the group, and that they'd appreciate sharing their voices in a more focused discussion with the people making the big decisions (e.g. government officials).

We also heard that:

- Youth feel the most connected to others when they're in a safe space with like minded and/or authentic people;
- Many youth find Innisfil boring, poorly connected, and quiet – although, some also felt that Innisfil is innovative and “amazeballs”;
- Out of all of the seasons, youth have the most to do in the summer, like going to the beach, playing sports, going on drives, and biking;



- Before graduation, youth want to learn more practical skills like time management, what to do with your life, how to feel better about yourself and your well-being, how to survive university, how to buy a house, and how to live on your own.

What did we keep in mind?

We went into the workshop knowing: there must be a clear understanding of the Youth Engagement Strategy process; there would be voices missing that needed to be identified and included in future engagement activities; and that youth were provided with the opportunity to co-design a plan to gather information from the wider youth engagement. We also kept in mind that participants were selected based on their existing leadership roles within the school community and that it would take more than one in-person workshop to incorporate and elevate the voices of underrepresented youth (e.g. vulnerable youth and those who are not necessarily vocal in class or interested in participating in activities outside of their mandated workload).

2. Youth Survey

The Town's Communications and Community Engagement (CCE) Team designed a survey to provide youth who are homeschooled, do not attend school, who did not attend the first in-person workshop, or attend school outside of Innisfil, with the opportunity to share:

- Their thoughts and opinions of their community;
- How they see their role in key decision-making processes;
- Whether or not they would return to their community;
- What opportunities excite youth;
- What challenges youth face.

What did we hear?

The survey indicated that most respondents hang out at their friends' houses opposed to other community spaces, and there was [roughly] a split between those who do (58.7%) and do not (41.3%) attend community events.

Those who do not attend events shared that they don't know about them, they do not have enough time, they do not have reliable transportation, or the event is not interesting.



Youth also indicated that, for the most part, they hear about events through word of mouth (36.3%) and social media (33%). There is no consensus in regard to how youth feel about adults involving them in making important decisions about their community and whether or not they feel their opinion(s) matter. Lastly, most youth have plans to return to Innisfil once they have completed their post secondary education, simply because their families are here or they're curious to see how the community has changed in their absence.

What did we keep in mind?

Apart from age, there was no real diversity in participation - a majority of survey respondents were North American, English speaking females between the ages of 12 and 18 who attend Nantyr Shores Secondary School. It should be noted that the Town visited Nantyr Shores multiple times to engage with different classes, and as a result of this engagement, we will have more Nantyr Shores youth participate in the survey and peer-to-peer interview activities. Additionally, Nantyr Shores is the only high school in Alcona, the target age group of the YES is youth grades 8-12 (a majority being in high school), and the Town has a strong relationship with the staff who support us in our efforts to plan full-day workshops as well as short, spontaneous engagement activities. More targeted engagement will need to take place to incorporate missing voices.

3. Peer-to-Peer Interviews

Peer-to-peer interviews are an innovative way to gather more intimate details about the everyday lives of youth, by eliminating the power-structure and intimidation of adult-led engagement, and allowing youth to lead their own information-gathering activity.

Interview questions were co-created with youth and the interviews were conducted by youth. This activity was designed to gather more intimate details about the everyday lives of youth in Innisfil, reach youth whose perspectives were not yet captured, and to provide youth with an opportunity to lead their own data collection activity and connect with one another.



What did we hear?

Respondents were from a diverse group of people who have lived in Innisfil for their entire lives or had moved here within the last 5 years. Almost all youth identified cafes (e.g. Tim Hortons and Starbucks) as places where they hang out outside of school and almost all noted that in the next 10 years they see themselves attending post-secondary education. Almost all stated that they feel connected to the people in Innisfil, however, they feel disconnected from places due to transportation challenges.

What did we keep in mind?

This particular type of activity asks for youth to take on more of a leadership role in the development of the strategy and that not everyone would feel comfortable reaching out to their peers for the purpose of research.

4. Pop-up Engagement

Throughout consultation, the Town's Community Engagement (CCE) Team learned that youth are most engaged in the moment, and lose interest once in-person engagement ends. Accordingly, the team made an effort to meet youth in-person, in their spaces, spontaneously. These activities were referred to as "pop-up engagement" and the purpose was to gather information and build stronger relationships with youth.

In the fall of 2019, the Town visited two local high schools for grade 9 orientation to familiarize themselves with new faces and educate students about community resources available to them. The Town continued to visit the local high school for pop-up engagement:

- We hosted a *Pizza and Politics* program with Nantyr Shores Secondary School's Eco Team, crafting questions with youth and recruiting youth leaders to assist with Innisfil's *100 Debates on the Environment*.
- The Town attended the local high school's *Unity Fest* event, which was a full day of cultural education with students.
- The Town visited students on their lunch breaks to encourage survey and peer-to-peer interview participation, providing snacks and Town swag to participants.



- In collaboration with the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library, the Town provided students with healthy snack packs during exams to continue fostering a collaborative, welcoming environment/safe space with the municipality.

What did we keep in mind?

These activities would allow the Town to reach students who were not aware of previous activities or who were not hand selected by their school librarian or teachers. At the same time, there was still the risk of students missing out on the opportunity to participate.

5. Youth Video

Students were engaged at their high school and the Lakeshore Branch of the Innisfil ideaLAB & Library to participate in short video clips detailing what life is like as a teen right now in Innisfil. This was a spontaneous, voluntary activity designed to get students to think on the spot and to capture real, in-person emotion.

What did we hear?

Youth in Innisfil feel connected to their peers and that they are a diverse and inclusive group of people. Transportation challenges and a lack of sidewalks make them feel unsafe and disconnected from places in their community. They're sick of pizza, but [for the most part] they really enjoy using the Library. We also heard that life is "pretty normal" for youth in Innisfil, teens are partying and doing typical things, and youth appreciate that the Library doesn't treat them like babies.

What did we keep in mind?

There is a lot of pressure when it comes to sharing your experiences and opinions on camera. We knew that not all students would want to participate in this initiative and that, in the context of time and for the purpose of effectiveness, we could not incorporate everyone's footage. To alleviate pressure and to combat feelings of intimidation, students were provided with the option to participate and were encouraged to be honest and sincere. No opinions were discouraged, and those that were not incorporated into the video, were included in the overall data collection process.



6. Virtual Workshop 2

In consultation with the Tamarack Institute, the Town identified 5 main themes that came out of all of the engagement activities that took place before this workshop and dived deeper into those themes with Nantyr's leadership class. Prior to building on these themes, students were consulted, felt the themes represented what they cared about, and did not have anything new to add.

Throughout the workshop, students in the leadership class were divided into 6 teams who met in virtual breakout rooms via Zoom to discuss assigned themes. Town staff facilitated each group and [collaboratively took notes](#). Each group had time to discuss 2 out of the 5 themes before meeting to discuss collectively.

Toward the end, a group discussion took place with Mayor Lynn Dollin to discuss how youth want to be engaged.

What did we hear?

We heard that students hang out at the places they can conveniently get to - Pizza Pizza, Tim Hortons, and the Library. Interestingly enough, these were also the spaces where they didn't always feel comfortable because they get accused of loitering. Transportation challenges and a lack of public space for youth were also prominent themes.

Summer presents more outdoor opportunities and spaces for youth to gather, but winter often pushes them to other places, such as Barrie, where there are more indoor activities for youth.

We heard that youth want more spaces that are easy to travel to and where it's okay to be themselves (e.g. movie theatre, skate parks, restaurants). We also heard that youth feel some discomfort with the current transit system. Despite Uber's multi-step safety screening and criminal record checks, there can still be anxieties related to travelling alone in a stranger's car.



This workshop was the first to take place during COVID-19. Many students shared that they felt isolated, bored, stressed, and fearful that they're going to be the generation that "misses out" on traditional opportunities. As a result of COVID-19, we heard that teen drinking and drug use has increased because they are bored and lacking purpose. At the same time, we also heard that some youth are breaking bad habits now that they have more time to focus on themselves (e.g. working out) and reconnecting with their families. Additionally, grade 11s and 12s were stressed about maintaining high averages, catching up with the classes they missed during COVID-19, and anxious about what post-secondary would look like in September.

What did we keep in mind?

As a result of the stress and fear surrounding the pandemic, the shift from in-person to no school to online learning, and a delay in engagement activities related to the YES, some students may have forgotten about the YES, some may not have been ready to be engaged or some may not have the experience with the technology required to participate in a meaningful way. We needed to make sure that the virtual environment was comfortable, that there was enough time dedicated to re-explaining the purpose and process of the YES, and that there was enough time to address technological issues. Moreover, this workshop engaged a particular audience (e.g. students who chose to be a part of Nantyr's leadership class) and many voices were not included.

7. Virtual Workshop 3

This was the first youth-led workshop that we hosted with local politicians and organizations who serve youth. In one hour, four youth presented the 5 main themes from the previous workshop to the Mayor, Council, and the organizations who serve them. Their peers were present, as well as their librarian and school principal. Participants were then divided into breakout groups to share their perspectives and brainstorm opportunities for alignment.



What did we hear?

Youth expanded on the themes above, educating community organizations on the work that has been done in the past and how they can move forward together. We also heard that young drivers are concerned about the quality and condition of roads in Innisfil.

Each group made recommendations that can be found on pages 8-12 of *Appendix 1 - The Future is Youth – Youth Engagement Strategy*.

What did we keep in mind?

As a result of the stress and fear surrounding the pandemic and world events related to anti-Black racism, students may not have felt the motivation to participate. We needed to ensure that we established a “no pressure environment” and that anti-Black racism was addressed by community leaders before we got into the discussion. Furthermore, we needed to make sure that there was a healthy balance between youth and adult allies so that youth felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions, and that they held the power in the room.

8. Stay Home Campaign

The *Stay Home* campaign was introduced to engage teens throughout COVID and to encourage teens to practice physical distancing, stay home, and share the message with their peers. The campaign ran as a giveaway contest through the Town’s official Instagram page, inviting Innisfil’s youth between the ages of 12 to 18 to participate. Eligible entrants had to share the post, tag three friends, and follow the Town of Innisfil on Instagram. This contest encouraged youth to take ownership of the Stay Home message, share it with their peers, and follow other important Town updates by staying engaged with the Town’s social media platform. The contest reached 6,163 unique accounts, of which 70% were between the ages of 13-17 and 30% were between the ages of 18-24. 77% of the accounts reached through this campaign were not following the Town of Innisfil.

The winner and their three friends each received a \$100 gift card to support a local restaurant of their choice. The contest ran from April 9 to April 24, 2020 with a total of 80 eligible entries.



9. Community Needs Assessment

COVID-19 had a significant impact on all community members, and that is why the Town initiated a Community Needs Assessment to identify short, medium, and long-term community concerns. A detailed project summary can be found via [Get Involved Innisfil](#).

What did we hear?

We heard that the mental health of youth is suffering significantly and that a youth-specific virtual chat service would be helpful. We also heard that teachers are struggling to engage youth throughout COVID-19 who are hands-on-learners and that transportation is a major issue linking youth to co-op opportunities. Additionally, Nantyr would like to work with the Town and community organizations to connect youth to more volunteer opportunities.

What did we keep in mind?

Conversations that took place throughout the [Community Needs Assessment](#) were adult-dominated. Parents expressed their concerns for youth in our community, but they weren't necessarily the same concerns that we heard directly from youth in other consultations. At the same time, those who participated in the Community Needs Assessment roundtable sessions worked directly with youth and COVID-19 was discussed in detail during the 2nd and 3rd virtual Youth Engagement Strategy workshops.

10. The Future is Youth! Video Contest

Throughout the final stages of writing the *Future Is Youth - Youth Engagement Strategy*, we decided to reach out to youth one last time. On September 28, 2020, the Town launched a video contest *The Future is Youth!* to encourage young people to talk about what they hope the Strategy will do for the future of young people in Innisfil. Participants were to be entered in a draw to win a \$100 Uber gift card.



The contest was advertised on all of the Town and Library's social media channels, and we partnered with Nantyr Shores and St. Peter's Catholic Secondary Schools to help get the word out. Despite some initial interest, the contest closed on October 16, 2020 and there were no submissions. In reflection with staff and local schools, it was determined that despite this contest was unsuccessful for the following reasons: 1) We may have asking a lot of young people and future contests should be more simple 2) Early fall is not an ideal time to engage youth and they're just getting comfortable being back at school and 3) The impact of COVID-19 on communication and engagement with students has proven to be negative. More emphasis needs to be put on building relationships in a virtual environment, with the stress of COVID-19 in mind.

