



A How-To Guide for Government Consultations with the Nonprofit Sector

INTRODUCTION

This is a guide for government representatives who would like to seek out the perspectives of Ontario’s nonprofit and charitable sector. It is intended to spark dialogue and action to strengthen government-nonprofit sector relations through its recommendations for improved consultation approaches. It provides an overview of the broad scope of the nonprofit sector’s work, opportunities to consult the sector throughout the policy and program cycle, and principles of engagement.

Solving large-scale, complex social problems can’t be done in silos; it requires leadership from government and the nonprofit and private sectors. Each partner brings a critical perspective and resources to the task of social and economic change. Working collaboratively can drive continuous improvement, spur innovation, and maximize our collective impact.

Ontario’s 55,000 nonprofits are dedicated to building thriving communities and a dynamic province (see the Appendix for a profile of the sector). The nonprofit sector has a strong record of advocating for public policy and partnering with government to implement solutions in areas like eliminating poverty, protecting the environment, increasing access to affordable housing, and many others. The sector represents multiple perspectives, including as employers (about half of nonprofits have paid staff), social entrepreneurs and innovators, and service delivery agents. Nonprofits also represent diverse subsectors including arts, culture, sports and recreation, environment, social and community services, faith-based, housing, education, health, and law/advocacy/politics.

Nonprofit organizations contribute sector-specific expertise, on-the-ground experience, and local knowledge to inform prospective regulations, legislation, policies, and programs. The sector is also uniquely positioned to facilitate dialogue with the communities it serves. When government effectively consults the nonprofit sector, policy options and decisions reflect nonprofits’ diverse expertise and the needs of the communities they serve. There is also better buy-in to policy and program decisions and implementation issues can be addressed proactively. This ultimately leads to better outcomes for Ontarians.

Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN)

ONN is the provincial network for the 55,000 nonprofit and charitable organizations across Ontario. As a 7,000-strong network, with a volunteer base of 300 sector leaders, ONN brings the diverse voices of the sector to government, funders and business to create and influence systemic change.

CHECKLIST

You should consult your nonprofit sector partners when you need:

- Sub-sector specific expertise:** arts, culture, sports and recreation, environment, social and community services, faith-based, housing, education, health, law/advocacy/politics, philanthropy and grant making, volunteerism, and social economy
- Sector governance expertise:** including the *Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act* (2010), government investment/financing, social procurement, social enterprise, and shared governance platforms
- Employer perspectives:** about half of Ontario's 55,000 nonprofits have paid staff. Core issues include labour force development, labour market information, wages and benefits, and skills and leadership development
- Entrepreneur perspectives:** connect with social innovators and social enterprises, and develop business and technological solutions for government and the sector
- Service delivery perspectives:** including program development expertise, to test the feasibility of policy options in the real world, to identify partners for the policy implementation phase, for feedback on existing programs/policies and outcomes
- Community perspectives:** to facilitate access to the voices of people and communities actually experiencing the problem you're trying to solve
- Local insight and on-the-ground perspectives** on social and economic policy issues affecting communities across Ontario
- Data and research:** access local, regional or provincial-level data, including data government officials may not know exists, and identify gaps in data collection and research
- To assess risks** and the potential impact of proposed policy options on communities, existing government programs, funding arrangements, and communities
- "All-of-government" thinking** on horizontal issues that cross ministry mandates/priorities
- Buy-in:** cross-sector collaboration gives solutions credibility
- To drive social innovation** by convening multiple sectors for the greatest impact
- ? Still not sure?** Ask your nonprofit sector partners or contact ONN and we'll connect you to our network! (www.theonn.ca)

PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE ENGAGEMENT

- **Respect the sector's time** – recognize that time and effort are invested in the process and competing priorities (e.g. managing services) are being juggled. Provide adequate advanced notice to make the process and our feedback meaningful. Keep survey questionnaires short and focused.
- **Be purposeful** – engage with purpose to achieve specific outcomes (i.e., what can we realistically expect to achieve in the current context?). If you are only looking for an endorsement of a proposed option, be upfront, it will save us both time and effort.
- **Be realistic** – the process needs to match the complexity of the issues being explored. For example, a one-hour meeting with a large number of participants is unlikely to solve complex policy problems.
- **Be transparent and provide feedback** - share information before and after the consultation to deepen our dialogue. This includes sharing notes or meeting summaries from prior consultations (including those with other sectors).
- **Embrace diverse perspectives** – don't expect a single opinion; many voices enrich our policy dialogue and challenge your thinking. Be open to new and unexpected ideas.
- **Leverage policy networks that already exist** – nonprofits are collaborating and sharing information on policy issues all the time. Partner with existing networks of organizations, and leverage those connections to expand your network.
- **Be inclusive** – be proactive and don't rely on the "same old" stakeholder list. Your sector partners should evolve over time, and consultations should be tailored to the issue you are consulting on. Include as broad a range of representation as possible (e.g., rural and urban, multiple communities/regions, multiple subsectors, small/medium-sized and large organizations, individuals of different ages and backgrounds). Ask yourself who isn't at the table, and purposely invite new partners.
- **Build lasting relationships** – meaningful relationships inspire reciprocity and make things happen. Proactively build your network, not just during consultation phases, but throughout the policy/program cycle. Relationships will help you connect to the expertise you need, when you need it.

WHEN SHOULD YOU ENGAGE THE NONPROFIT SECTOR?

The best time to reach out to nonprofit organizations in the policy and program cycle is in the early stages to ensure meaningful participation. Consultations should not be an afterthought; to get the best outcomes you need to engage your partners throughout the policy cycle. Figure 1 summarizes some of the expertise the sector brings to the table at each stage of the cycle.

While nonprofit organizations contribute sector-specific expertise, on-the-ground experience, and local context to inform prospective regulations, legislation, policies, and programs, it is not a substitute for engaging communities and the broader public in policy development. One of the sector's unique strengths is its ability to facilitate access to the communities it serves. Government should leverage the sector's regional and local networks to ensure its policies address the needs of Ontarians.



Figure 1. Opportunities to partner with the nonprofit sector throughout the policy and program cycle.

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- There is no “one size fits all” strategy or method of consultation. The methods will vary according to the goals, timelines, and available resources. ONN supports a public engagement approach that focuses on meaningful dialogue and building partnerships across sectors, between government, the nonprofit sector, and the private sector. Incorporating a network approach into your consultation strategy means*:
 - Government is engaged as an **active participant** (rather than a passive observer).
 - Responsibility for identifying issues, solutions, and achieving outcomes rests with **all partners** and **all partners bring resources to the table**.
 - Government plays **multiple roles** as convener (bringing partners together) and catalyst (for collaboration, shared leadership, and innovation).
 - Your process facilitates **relationship building**. Abiding by the principles of engagement builds trust and buy-in for the next stage of the policy/program cycle. As well, strong facilitation skills are essential and an area where sector leaders can provide support.
 - You recognize that it takes time to develop a **common language**. Use plain language and avoid jargon in supporting materials and during dialogue.
 - To the greatest extent possible, you focus on **progress over process** – progress keeps partners engaged over the long term.
 - You reflect and **apply lessons learned** to the next consultation.
- Time is a critical element of the consultation process. Engage the sector early as it allows nonprofits to research and consult their networks and communities and, in some cases, develop consensus and identify share priorities/recommendations. Adequate time strengthens our dialogue with government.
- The reality is that time is not always on our side and opportunities to move policy issues forward sometimes develop unexpectedly or with short timelines. This does not mean that government should not engage, but both partners have to be realistic about what can or cannot be accomplished. When you face time pressures:
 - It is imperative that you clearly communicate what you need from the consultation process. For example, instead of asking for feedback on an entire piece of legislation, focus on specific parts.
 - Let s know who else you consulted with and what they said – it helps to move the conversation forward and avoid going in circles.
 - Consultation is a function that crosscuts government ministries. Consider establishing a one-stop-shop for consultations as part of an Open Government agenda. This would help to address survey fatigue and overlapping/conflicting consultation windows.

* The approach summarized above is based on the work of Don Lenihan ([Rescuing Public Policy: The Case for Public Engagement](#)) and June Holley (*Network Weavers Handbook: A Guide to Transformational Networks*).

GETTING STARTED

1. Don't wait until it's time for a formal consultation – get started now!

- Building relationships and identifying partners takes time and should start long before an official consultation is needed.
- Be strategic – use informal interactions (e.g., meetings or external events) as opportunities to grow your network and enhance your capacity to partner with the sector.

2. Build on good things happening in government

- Consult within your ministry, with other ministries, and outside government to find out what works.

Examples of consultations considered effective by nonprofits

<p>Child Care Modernization (2012-2014)</p> <p>Ministry of Education</p>	<p>The Condominium Act Review (2012-2014)</p> <p>Ministry of Government and Consumer Services (MGCS)</p>	<p>Hybrid Legislation: Corporations that combine social good with profit (2014-2015)</p> <p>MGCS</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflected partners' input at each stage of the policy process (from issue identification through to proposed legislation, funding formulas, and implementation) • Used multiple methods of input, e.g., written submissions & in-person meetings • Shared a discussion paper to frame the process, including a summary of previous input/ consultations, clear timelines and expectations, and specific discussion questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathered advice from experts and people with lived experience (e.g., Condo Residents' Panel & Expert Panel) – leads to buy-in • Focused on partnerships – government, experts, and non-experts worked collaboratively to identify issues, find and implement solutions • Contracted an outside facilitator with a strong track record of public engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convened diverse perspectives from the private and nonprofit sectors • Tailored the consultation to what is needed – in this case, 6 focused meetings to achieve specific tasks • Facilitated workshops – to foster open dialogue

3. Reach out

- Get to know the vibrant community of subsector and regional networks that connect nonprofits across the province. A helpful resource is [211](#), an online database of Ontario's community and social services.
- You likely already have partnerships with the sector, but on crosscutting issues or in cases where you are unsure where to start, ONN can help. Depending on the issue, ONN may be directly involved or can play a role as a convener of sector leaders and experts.

4. Stay connected to what's happening in Ontario's nonprofit sector

- Follow ONN:
 - [Twitter](#)
 - [LinkedIn](#)
 - [Facebook](#)
 - [Blog](#)
 - [YouTube](#)

MAXIMIZE YOUR CAPACITY FOR INCLUSION

Recognize the investment of time, energy, and resources being made by your nonprofit partners. Half of the sector is volunteer driven and resources and capacity vary across organizations.

Make inclusion a priority and reimburse the costs of participation as much as possible in planning consultations.

- Consider the impact of travel costs, the timing of meetings (e.g., volunteers may not be available to participate during business hours), and using multiple forms of communication (e.g., virtual, teleconference, in-person sessions, written submissions).
- Actively offer accommodations for persons with disabilities in line with the standards of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2005).
- Reimburse the costs related to sub-consultations when nonprofit organizations are asked to convene communities served or affected, in order to develop local or regional input to government.

APPENDIX: A Profile of Ontario's Community Nonprofit Sector

Ontario's community nonprofit sector is made up of 55,000 nonprofit and charitable organizations (excluding hospitals, colleges, and universities). Community nonprofits (or public benefit organizations) are guided by missions dedicated to providing a public benefit good to communities across Ontario.

Nonprofit organizations are rooted in communities across Ontario and vary in size, focus, and capacity:

- The sector is dynamic; subsectors include: arts, culture, sports and recreation, environment, social and community services, faith-based, housing, education, health, law/advocacy/politics, and philanthropic/volunteer intermediaries. This translates into a diverse array of activities and services, everything from soccer teams, symphonies, and places of worship to daycare centres, affordable housing, and employment services.
- Some are large, highly structured organizations, but the vast majority are small or medium-sized organizations.
- Research indicates that about two-thirds of Ontario nonprofits serve their local community, while about 1 in 6 organizations has a regional mandate.¹

Economic impact:

- Contributes 2.6% to Ontario's GDP – more than the automotive and construction industries.
- Economic growth outpaces Canadian GDP by over 22%.
- Leverages diversified revenue sources – 45% of nonprofit income is self-generated, earned independently of government funding (29%), gifts and donations (37%), and other income (4%).

Social impact:

- Nonprofit leaders have played a key role in identifying issues and advocating for progressive public policy in areas like reducing impaired driving, eliminating poverty, improving employment standards and access to affordable housing, fighting illiteracy, increasing access to arts and recreation, and many others.
- Nonprofits have a track record of developing on-the-ground solutions that improve the lives of Ontarians. A large number of organizations focus on serving the general public (42%)², while others target unique populations (e.g., children and youth, immigrants, ethnic groups, people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, seniors, the unemployed).
- The sector provides opportunities for civic participation and social inclusion – attracting over 5 million volunteers who contribute 811 million hours annually to their communities.

People power – talented and committed professionals lead the sector:

- The sector is a significant employer, providing 600,000 full-time jobs (and over a million jobs when including part-timers).
- Data on paid employees in Canada's nonprofit sector shows that about 1/3 are in professional occupations (more than in for-profit organizations) and nearly 60% have post-secondary education.³

1 Imagine Canada. [The Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector in Ontario - Regional Highlights of the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations](#). (2006). p. 6. (Note: this statistic includes hospitals, colleges and universities).

2 Ibid. p. 7. (Note: this statistic includes hospitals, colleges and universities).

3 HR Council for the Voluntary and Non-Profit Sector. [Towards a Labour Force Strategy for Canada's Voluntary & Non-profit Sector](#). (2008). p.17.