

**The Role of Planners in Fostering Successful Public Participation
Among New Immigrants in the County of Simcoe, Ontario**

by

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A Major Paper submitted to the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Master in Environmental Studies
York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

July 31, 2025

Abstract

This research examines the evolving role of municipal Planners in fostering meaningful public participation among new immigrant communities in Ontario, with a focus on the County of Simcoe. As a rapidly growing County composed of sixteen municipalities and home to over half a million residents, Simcoe is experiencing significant demographic shifts. Between 2016 and 2021, the immigrant population in the County grew by over 33%, with a substantial proportion identifying as part of a racialized group. These changes bring Planning challenges related to housing, infrastructure, and services, but also expose a growing democratic gap when immigrants are not adequately engaged in local decision-making. Despite their increasing presence, many immigrants face persistent barriers to participating in Planning processes. These include language difficulties, unfamiliarity with Canadian systems, cultural mistrust, and socio-economic limitations. Such barriers go beyond access. They reflect deeper patterns of exclusion that can compromise the legitimacy and equity of Planning outcomes. To understand and address these challenges, the study draws on interviews with Planners, community engagement professionals, community service providers, and a few residents from the Town of New Tecumseth. The findings highlight the shortcomings of conventional engagement approaches and underscore the importance of trust-building, clear communication, cultural sensitivity, and flexible engagement formats. Effective strategies include partnerships with local organizations, arts-based methods, plain-language outreach, and compensating participants for their time. The study calls for a shift in how Planners work, with an emphasis on relational practice, empathy, and long-term commitment to communities. It argues that inclusive participation requires more than checking procedural boxes; it demands structural, cultural, and professional change. To support this transformation, the research presents a practical Public Participation Toolkit offering grounded strategies for equitable engagement. The goal is to support municipalities in developing Planning processes that are not only inclusive but truly representative of the communities they serve.

Foreword

This research begins with a personal journey, one that spans continents, cultures, and questions about belonging. Having lived in Delhi, India for over two decades, I witnessed the uneven impacts of urban development firsthand: gleaming infrastructure often rising alongside deepening inequalities. When I immigrated to Canada in 2019, I was drawn to Planning not just as a technical discipline, but as a powerful tool to shape how people live, interact, and feel included or excluded in their communities.

As I settled into a new country, I became increasingly aware of how immigrant communities often remain at the edges of Planning conversations. Their experiences, languages, and perspectives are seldom reflected in Official Plans or public engagement processes. It was not until I started my internship placement at the Town of New Tecumseth, that I realised the disconnect between theory and practice. This disconnection inspired my research: to examine the role of Planners in enabling or preventing genuine public participation for new immigrants in Simcoe County, focusing specifically on the Towns of Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth. South Simcoe was a deliberate geographical choice due to my familiarity with the urban boundaries through daily municipal work.

This research draws on both theory and practice: from the foundational ideas of Arnstein (1969), Rocha (1997), and Fung (1997), to contemporary calls by scholars like Healey (1992), Innes & Booher (2004), and Umemoto (2001) for collaborative, empathetic, and justice-oriented Planning. Through interviews with professionals and a handful of New Tecumseth residents, and a review of Planning policy and practice, I explore not only what prevents participation but also what enables it in this context. The insights gathered culminate in a proposed Public Participation Toolkit, an adaptive, practical resource for Planners aiming to foster more inclusive, culturally responsive, and empowering engagement strategies in similar contexts.

But more than a toolkit, this work is a call to reimagine the role of the Planner, not just as a facilitator of public meetings, but as a connector of people, ideas, and lived realities. The study

asks us to rethink what it means to participate, who gets to shape public spaces, and how we make our Planning systems more just, more human, and more reflective of the communities they serve. In an era of rapid demographic change and growing calls for equity, this research matters, not only for today's immigrant residents, but for the future of participatory democracy in Planning.

In this paper, appropriate components from reviewing policy documents and conducting qualitative analysis have been integrated, while capitalising on the knowledge acquired through relevant coursework, my work experience as a Planner, and academic research. My focus centres on the following three key learning components with some objectives for each:

1. Socio-Spatial Justice

- 1.1. To develop an understanding of modern and historical context at the core of socio-spatial justice that necessitates the need for Planning for diverse communities
- 1.2. To acquire a strong working knowledge of land use planning and analyze its role in the domain of spatial manifestations of justice

2. Public Participation

- 2.1. To acquire knowledge of the theories and approaches that are instrumental in building communities through inclusion
- 2.2. To gain a strong understanding of various public participation/engagement tools to recommend strategies for comprehensive feedback

3. Planning Policy Framework

- 3.1. To obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the program requirements of the Ontario Professional Planners Institute for candidate membership
- 3.2. To develop a strong foundation of Planning policies and processes at various levels of government to understand a Planners' evolving role in fostering public participation among immigrant communities

3.3. To understand how and what planning policy tools can be used by municipalities to increase public participation among new immigrants

Conducting this research has extended beyond academic inquiry. It identifies an existing gap and represents a meaningful contribution to Planning practice. It is my hope that this research will support participatory Planning initiatives, assist Planners in anticipating potential barriers faced by new immigrants, and serve as a valuable resource to design and implement potential solutions for fellow Planners. I look forward to sharing the insights from this work at forums such as the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) Conference. Most importantly, this paper contributes to my professional development by aligning with the knowledge and competencies required for candidate membership with OPPI. Preparing me to engage with Ontario's evolving Planning landscape. Ultimately, this work bridges scholarly research with practical application for Planning professionals engaged in participatory planning processes within the County of Simcoe.

Acknowledgments

This paper would not have seen the light of day without the contribution and support of several people who helped make it a reality. I offer my deepest and most sincere gratitude to my mentors - my research supervisor, Dr. Luisa Sotomayor, for her timely support and able guidance throughout the year; to my advisor, Dr. Felipe Montoya, who helped shape my Plan of Study so that this research could come to fruition; to Dr. Shira Taylor, who played a vital role in guiding me through my summer internship project, which was a turning point in choosing the topic for this research paper, and to all my other professors, and staff at the Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change who were critical in helping me choose my Planning specialisation and providing a space for me to learn and grow as an academic and as a Planner.

I am sincerely grateful to York University for supporting me financially through bursaries and scholarships and to the Provincial and Federal Governments for aiding students such as myself through Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and other grants and loans, when I needed it the most.

I'm forever grateful to my MES cohort for their friendship and support, and who have been an inspiration and a joy to have studied and collaborated with.

I extend a heartfelt thank you to all my interviewees who agreed to participate and share their valuable insights. This paper would not be here without their consent and co-operation.

I am deeply indebted to my parents for their love and support, especially during the low and stressful phases of my journey. The daily video calls fueled my determination and motivation to complete this degree despite several health challenges. And to my younger brother for taking care of our parents back home so that I could focus on my life in Canada without worrying about their safety and well-being.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my mentor, philosopher, and guide in India, Mr. Viswanath Devarajan for always boosting my morale emotionally, spiritually, and professionally and for

always being my North Star when I felt lost. I am also sincerely grateful to my aunt in Boston for her timely advice, continued support, and tough love to help me navigate the Canadian system, the economy, and culture.

I wholeheartedly thank my friends in Canada for their undying moral support. Special mentions here include the Narula family, who provided unconditional love and guidance to make me a part of their lives and give me a home away from home; to Chhavi, who believed in me against all odds and without whom Planning would not have materialised as a career choice for me; to Carol, who was my first neighbour when I moved to Canada in 2019 and continues to push and motivate me until this day with her positive spirit and energy; and to Destiny, who encouraged me to complete my research proposal through our online study sessions together and for always rooting for my success.

And finally, to all my doctors in India and Canada for helping me with the right treatment so that I could continue my personal and professional journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem

In an era of increasing global mobility and cultural diversity, Canadian municipalities face both an opportunity and a responsibility to foster inclusive, equitable, and participatory planning processes. Public participation stands as a cornerstone of democratic governance, promoting transparency, legitimacy, and accountability in decision-making (Innes & Booher, 2004). Yet, despite strong policy frameworks and institutional commitments, meaningful engagement in Planning remains elusive for many, particularly new immigrants (Grewal, 2020a).

This research emerges from a growing recognition that traditional models of public participation often fall short when applied to culturally and linguistically diverse communities. As Purcell (2009) argues, even beyond the challenges of cultural diversity, traditional participatory frameworks are increasingly constrained by neoliberal planning paradigms that emphasize procedural consensus over substantive power-sharing. In such contexts, participation risks becoming a depoliticized exercise, reaffirming existing hierarchies rather than challenging them and thereby undermining its transformative democratic potential. He therefore argues, “What is needed is not for a more efficient form of participation in existing political arrangements, but the construction of new political arrangements altogether” (Purcell, 2009, p. 152). Immigrants frequently encounter systemic and structural barriers that hinder their involvement in Planning processes, from limited awareness and information gaps to deeper cultural and institutional disconnects. Without intentional and inclusive strategies, these barriers risk reinforcing exclusion and limiting the transformative potential of participatory planning.

Census 2021 data shows that racialized groups in Simcoe County account for over 65,000 or 12.4 per cent of the County’s total population (82,290), including South Asians (3.1%), Africans (2.4%), Southeast Asians/Filipinos (1.7%), and East Asians (1.5%). Simcoe's population increased by 9.7% between 2016 and 2021, outpacing the provincial average, with a

significant portion attributed to immigration (Statistics Canada, 2022). This population growth is placing substantial pressure on municipal services, land use planning, housing, and infrastructure. These trends underscore the importance of inclusive and responsive Planning practices, particularly in ensuring that immigrant communities, many of whom are settling in fast-growing municipalities such as the Towns of Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth, are not left out of the Planning process.

Table 1: Immigrant Demographics (Statistics Canada, 2021)

Area	Population	Immigrant Share (%)	Top Source Countries
County of Simcoe	533,169	15.6%	India (most among racialized groups)
Innisfil	43,326	19.6%	UK, Italy, Portugal, Russia
New Tecumseth	43,948	20.6% (1st gen)	India, Iraq, Syria, Philippines
Bradford West Gwillimbury	42,880	32.6%	Portugal, Italy, India, Pakistan

One of the most pressing issues linked to this growth is housing. Immigrants in suburban and rural regions often face compounded barriers to accessing affordable and suitable housing, including lower average incomes, lack of rental history, and discrimination in the housing market (Carter et. al, 2008). Without engaging immigrant residents directly in Planning consultations and policy development, housing strategies may fail to address their specific challenges or reflect their lived experiences. This is especially critical in places like Simcoe, where development pressure must be balanced with equity considerations.

Another key challenge lies in service accessibility. Public services such as transit, childcare, and healthcare are not evenly distributed across the County, and immigrants, particularly recent newcomers, often rely more heavily on these services due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with local systems, and a lack of private transportation (Agrawal &

Schuttenbelt, 2011). Many of these residents, however, remain underrepresented in public engagement initiatives.

Cultural inclusion is also a growing concern. Immigrant communities bring with them a range of social, religious, and cultural needs that must be reflected in the design of public spaces, community programming, and land use decisions. For example, inclusive spaces of worship, multicultural community centers, or public festivals can play a critical role in promoting social cohesion. Planning that ignores these needs can inadvertently reinforce marginalization (Qadeer, 2009). Participatory Planning that includes immigrant voices offers a pathway to more representative and culturally aware policies (Sandercock, 2003a).



Figure 1: Week of Welcome Community/Job Fair (Town of New Tecumseth, 2023)

Newcomers also face underemployment (with 48 % citing difficulty finding work and half struggling to get credentials recognized), limited English proficiency, housing and transit challenges, social isolation, and experiences of discrimination

(Berlo, 2024). Many are engaged in low-income

work or seasonal jobs and lack access to essential services. Cole (2025) argues that the issue is less about lack of interest as immigrants show up for community events like the Week of Welcome and career workshops, but more about exclusion due to communication gaps and inappropriate outreach (e.g. failure to use language interpretation or community-based channels). Evidence from Local Immigration Partnership surveys and County reports shows that while immigrants are eager to participate, they often don't receive invitations through trusted, culturally relevant channels or languages they understand (Berlo, 2024). By involving immigrants in Planning, local governments not only tap into their aspirations and local knowledge but also design more effective services, ultimately fostering belonging, improving integration, and ensuring Planning reflects the needs of all residents.

Focusing on the County of Simcoe, specifically the Towns of Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth, this study explores the role of Planners, not just as critical facilitators, but also as relational agents of new immigrant engagement. By examining the methods, competencies, and collaborative approaches used by Planners, this research aims to uncover practical pathways toward more inclusive public participation. With a strong emphasis on socio-spatial justice, Planning policy frameworks, and the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how Planners can serve as both advocates and bridge-builders in their communities.

Through qualitative inquiry, including interviews and content analysis, this study identifies current barriers to participation, explores culturally appropriate engagement strategies, and highlights the potential of arts-based methods to amplify immigrant voices. By designing a Public Participation Toolkit focused on the needs of new immigrant communities, the research aspires to equip Planners, policymakers, and community organizations with tangible tools to support immigrant integration and inclusive development.

The research question – *‘What is the role of the Planner in the participatory planning process to achieve successful practices for public participation among new immigrants in the three municipalities - Town of New Tecumseth, Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, and the Town of Innisfil - within the County of Simcoe?’* is a multifaceted issue, deeply embedded in the intersection of policy frameworks, demographic shifts, and socio-cultural dynamics. The question is guided by the following objectives:

- a) Identify the current barriers to engage new immigrants in Planning processes,
- b) Research culturally appropriate ways to improve participation in these communities,
- c) Review factors that define and shape successful practices in public participation,
- d) Explore the potential of arts-based methodologies to inform public participation,
- e) Design and develop a Public Participation Toolkit for implementation.

1.2 Positionality Statement

In this research, I acknowledged my dual role as a Planning professional and student researcher, recognising the impact of reflexivity and positionality on the study. I interned full-time as a student with the Town of New Tecumseth from September 11, 2023 – December 22, 2023, and was offered a 16-month Contract Planner position from January 15, 2024 – May 9, 2025. Through my Planning experience at the Town, I reviewed and processed several types of development applications (minor variance, Zoning By-law amendment, Plan of Condominium) under the *Planning Act*, coordinated internal and external circulation of applications, and compiled agency comments accordingly. I conducted policy research and analysis and applied Provincial, County, and local policy frameworks such as the Town's Official Plan policies and Zoning By-laws as applicable to development and policy planning. I facilitated discussions and led pre-consultations for collaborative solutions among applicants & developers. I prepared Staff reports with recommendations to Council and Committee of Adjustment to support transparent & informed decision-making as well as attended Committee/Council meetings. I also supported public participation initiatives through special projects such as the Town's Official Plan Review and Growth Management Study and by responding to daily public enquiries regarding land use planning.

For the first time in my career, I was studying and working full-time. Balancing full-time graduate studies with a full-time Planning position at New Tecumseth was challenging and quite demanding both personally and professionally, but it was also uniquely valuable. The goal of this study was an applied need to conduct academic independent research. This was based on identifying that my research question emerges out of a need for technical capacity to examine the issues in engaging immigrants. While I read papers, attended course lectures, and completed assignments, I realised that Planning theory was rendered ineffective unless practical application followed. Working as a Planner required switching gears from being a

student to a Planning professional while wearing multiple hats and learning to connect theory and practice. The overlap between my academic research and professional responsibilities often created synergy but also required careful boundary-setting to avoid conflicts of interest or burnout. On the work side, my role in municipal planning regularly provided real-time insight into the challenges of engaging immigrant communities. For example, during the Town's undertaking of the Official Plan Review and Growth Management Study, the Planning department had conducted online surveys, open houses, and public meetings intended to gather broad community input. Despite significant outreach through the Town's website, e-blasts, posterage at local libraries, social media, and local newspaper ads, there was little to no participation from immigrant residents. The engagement sessions lacked diversity. There was a need to proactively identify the demographic at the onset of the project and to specifically target immigrants. A primary reason was limited staff capacity, resource, and budget constraints to explore alternate outreach methods. These patterns informed my research questions around barriers to participation.

However, to avoid any ethical concerns or misuse of internal data, I never incorporated confidential municipal information into my academic work. Instead, I submitted formal data requests and conducted interviews through ethics-approved channels, treating the Town like any other case study. I was also transparent with both my employer and my academic supervisor about my dual role. I documented how my research remained independent from my professional duties and anonymized or generalized all municipal references unless explicit permission was granted. My supervisor reviewed any sections involving the Town to ensure compliance with ethics guidelines. In terms of time management, I relied on strict compartmentalization. Academic work was blocked into evenings and weekends. The Town supported my academic work, and I always ensured to keep them informed. I worked methodically and planned around major academic milestones and Council deadlines.

Working as a Planner, I often heard my peers say that ‘municipalities are creatures of the province’. The biggest tension I encountered was the disconnect between Planning theory and municipal practice, especially when it comes to public participation. As my research aims to interpret the difference between consultation, engagement, and participation, through my work I observed that each term has significance based on the nature of the project or activity even though the terms are used interchangeably in Planning. In theory, public participation is framed as central to good Planning. Planning literature emphasizes inclusive, iterative, and culturally sensitive participation, often citing Arnstein’s ladder or communicative planning models. But in practice, public participation can be treated as a procedural checkbox rather than a meaningful exchange. For example, while developing a statutory notice for a public meeting, I knew from both research and community feedback that English-only notices weren’t reaching immigrant audiences. However, limited staff capacity, budget constraints, and tight legislative timelines often meant there wasn’t room to translate notices or partner with cultural organizations for outreach. Even when Planners recognize the shortcomings of standard engagement tools, we’re often forced to prioritize legislative compliance and development review deadlines over deeper engagement, especially in rapidly growing municipalities like New Tecumseth.

I found that theoretical ideals of co-creation and participatory design are difficult to implement when internal pressures emphasize efficiency, risk avoidance, and legal defensibility. If I had more time, a dedicated budget, I would have suggested proposals to pilot more inclusive engagement, such as multilingual workshops or arts-based consultation methods to translate academic ideas into practical pilots that aligned with municipal priorities. For instance, I would have proposed incorporating short surveys in multiple languages during pop-up events the Town was already organizing, rather than pushing for separate engagement initiatives. This strategy would have helped build buy-in incrementally.

This perspective enriched the ethnographic research, enhancing understanding of community dynamics and ensuring academic rigor. As a researcher, I recognized that my

background, experiences, and perspective might shape my interpretation of data and interactions with participants. My academic training and position as a Planning professional could impact how I approached the research. I was, however, mindful and aware of the privilege I held and made efforts to engage with participants in a way that was respectful, empathetic, and conscious of the power dynamics inherent in the research process. As a junior level Planner and being the only other person of colour in the department, I worked to mitigate any biases by creating space for participants to share their experiences and perspectives on their own terms. This research aimed to be inclusive and reflective, ensuring that the voices of the participants were accurately represented and that my personal assumptions did not overshadow their lived realities.

I journaled some of my thoughts, feelings, and reactions to fieldwork. This involved being transparent about my positionality in my writing and a conscious effort to approach the research with critical self-awareness. By continuously examining how my own background, personal biases, and interactions might influence the research process and outcomes, I ensured that the research is both ethically sound and contextually grounded, fostering a more nuanced and authentic representation of the community and processes studied. Juggling both roles required discipline and care, but it also helped me bridge the gap between theory and practice. It sharpened my awareness of the systemic barriers Planners face in pursuing meaningful public participation and gave me the tools to suggest realistic, incremental solutions grounded in lived experience.

1.3 Summary of Findings

This research used a qualitative methodology to explore the barriers, opportunities, and evolving role of Planners in fostering inclusive public participation with new immigrants in three municipalities in the South Simcoe. Based on my expert interview data, in this Major Paper, I argue that public engagement with immigrant communities must be culturally responsive and

relational. This is not simply a matter of outreach but requires a deep understanding of how immigrants experience participation, often shaped by unfamiliarity, mistrust, and broader pressures of resettlement.

1.3.1 Participation is Shaped by Lived Realities

Immigrants face overlapping barriers that make participation in Planning processes difficult. These include language and communication challenges, unfamiliarity with Canadian Planning systems, cultural mistrust of government, and socioeconomic constraints such as survival stress and time poverty. For many, participation feels unfamiliar, burdensome, or even risky. Standard outreach tools, such as formal meetings, online surveys, and English-only materials, often fail to engage or reflect these lived experiences.

To be meaningful, engagement must acknowledge these realities. Culturally responsive strategies include using demographic data to guide outreach, providing translated and plain-language materials, and working through trusted community partners. Engagement efforts are more effective when held in familiar, accessible locations like schools, religious institutions, or community centers and when they take the form of small group discussions, storytelling, or food-based events. Offering supports such as honoraria, childcare, or transportation helps lower practical barriers.

1.3.2 Trust is Built Through Relationships, Not Transactions

A consistent theme across interviews was that trust is foundational to participation. Building trust takes time and cannot be achieved through one-off consultations. Planners and professionals emphasized the need to “show up” consistently, close feedback loops, and prioritize long-term relationships beyond individual projects. This relational approach helps reduce skepticism and encourages sustained participation.

Creative, arts-based approaches, such as murals, visual mapping, or storytelling, were noted as especially powerful for making Planning processes tangible, culturally resonant, and emotionally accessible. These methods allow for engagement that is not only informative but expressive and participatory in deeper ways.

1.3.3 Clarity and Influence Matter

Interviewees clearly distinguished between three modes of public input:

- **Consultation** (one-way communication, limited influence),
- **Engagement** (two-way dialogue and relationship-building), and
- **Participation** (shared decision-making and co-creation).

While all three may have a role, most agreed that genuine participation is particularly important when working with immigrant communities. Participants must know in advance what influence they have, or risk feeling misled or disengaged. Being honest about goals, timelines, and expectations is part of respectful, relational engagement.

1.3.4 Planners Must Develop New Capacities

Supporting culturally responsive and relational engagement requires Planners to expand their roles and adopt new competencies. The following skills emerged from interview data as essential:

- **Active Listening & Empathy:** Planners must center the voices of communities, especially in unfamiliar or emotionally charged spaces.
- **Cultural Competency:** Understanding diverse norms, trauma histories, and communication styles helps build respectful processes.
- **Relationship Building:** Engagement must be sustained, not project-bound.

- **Facilitation & Plain Communication:** Clear, jargon-free communication fosters inclusion.
- **Data Literacy:** Knowing community demographics and using that knowledge to inform outreach is crucial.
- **Flexibility & Creativity:** Planners must be willing to adapt methods and embrace creative, culturally relevant formats.
- **Continuous Learning:** Ongoing reflection, equity training, and openness to feedback are vital for building inclusive practices.

1.4 Research Outline

This paper is organized into seven (7) main chapters. The 'Introduction' outlines the context of the study, the research background and problem, and its significance, followed by the research objectives and questions. The 'Background' provides a demographic and geographic overview for the study area within the context of Ontario's Planning framework and highlights the general Planning policy landscape within the three municipalities. It also provides an overview on policies specific to public participation. The 'Literature Review' examines in-depth the existing scholarship on public participation, socio-spatial justice including barriers faced by new immigrant communities, and inclusive Planning practices. The 'Methodology' chapter details the qualitative research design, including the use of one-on-one interviews, participant selection, data collection, and ethical considerations. The 'Findings and Analysis' present key themes that emerged from the interviews, supported by participant insights and linked to relevant literature. This is followed by 'Recommendations' with Planning examples for successful public participation from both Professionals and lived experiences of Town residents. Finally, the 'Conclusion' summarizes the main findings, reflects on their implications for Planning practice, and suggests directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Background

2.1 Demographic and Geographic Overview

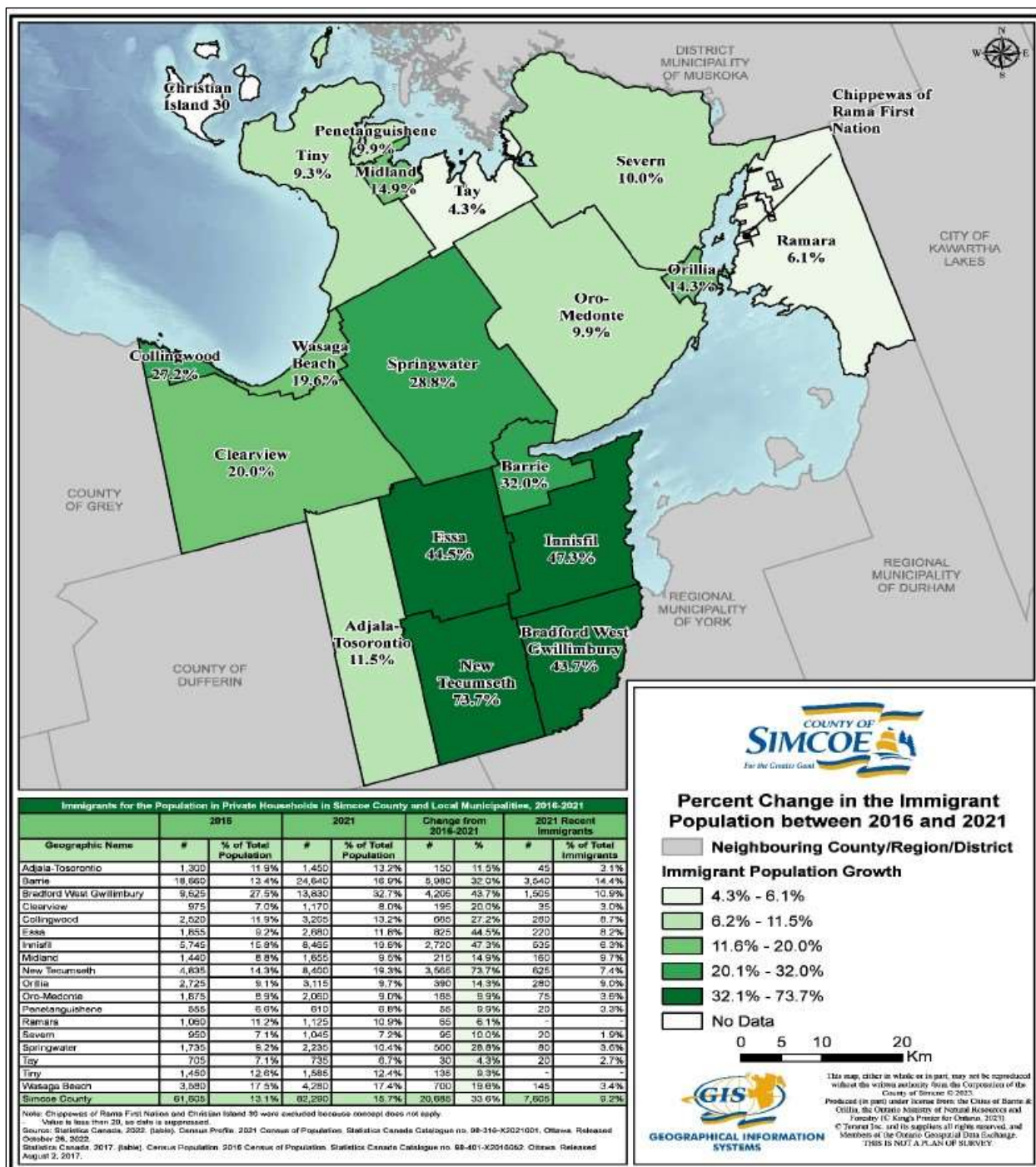


Figure 2: Immigrant Data for County of Simcoe, 2016-2021 (County of Simcoe, 2023)

Before providing policy contexts for the three municipalities selected for this research, understanding their demographic and geographic landscape is crucial for tailoring inclusive Planning practices. The Towns of Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth are lower-tier municipalities in the South Simcoe. According to the 2021 Census data, 32.7% of the population in Bradford West Gwillimbury were immigrants, with 10.9% of these having arrived between 2016 and 2021; 19.3% of residents were immigrants in the Town of New Tecumseth, with 7.4% arriving between 2016 and 2021); and 19.6% of the population were immigrants in the Town of Innisfil with 11.8% arriving between 2016 and 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2021). While comparing the immigrant population between 2016-2021, three municipalities recorded the highest percentage changes - New Tecumseth (73.7% increase), Innisfil (47.3% increase), and Essa (44.5% increase).

The 25 to 54 age group represents the largest share of the population across all immigration categories within the County (see Figure 3). This group includes 37.0% of non-immigrants, 42.8% of all immigrants, and a notably higher 64.8% of recent immigrants. Recent immigrants, in particular, are more likely to fall within this working-age range compared to the non-immigrant population. The overall median age within the County is 42.8 years. Among immigration groups, immigrants have the highest median age at 55.2 years, while recent immigrants and non-permanent residents are considerably younger, with median ages of 32.8 and 26.0 years, respectively. Since 2016, the immigrant population in the County has seen the most significant growth in the 35 to 39 age group (93.2% increase), followed by children aged 5 to 9 (76.2% increase) and adults aged 30 to 34 (69.0% increase). In contrast, the total population experienced its largest percentage increases in older age groups: 85 and over (32.5% increase), 70 to 74 (29.3% increase), and 75 to 79 (26.6% increase). Some age groups within the total population declined, notably those aged 50 to 54 (13.2% decline) and 20 to 24 (1.4% decline), both of which fall within the broader core working-age category of 25 to 54 years

(Statistics Canada, 2023). In comparison, all age groups among immigrants grew over the same period.

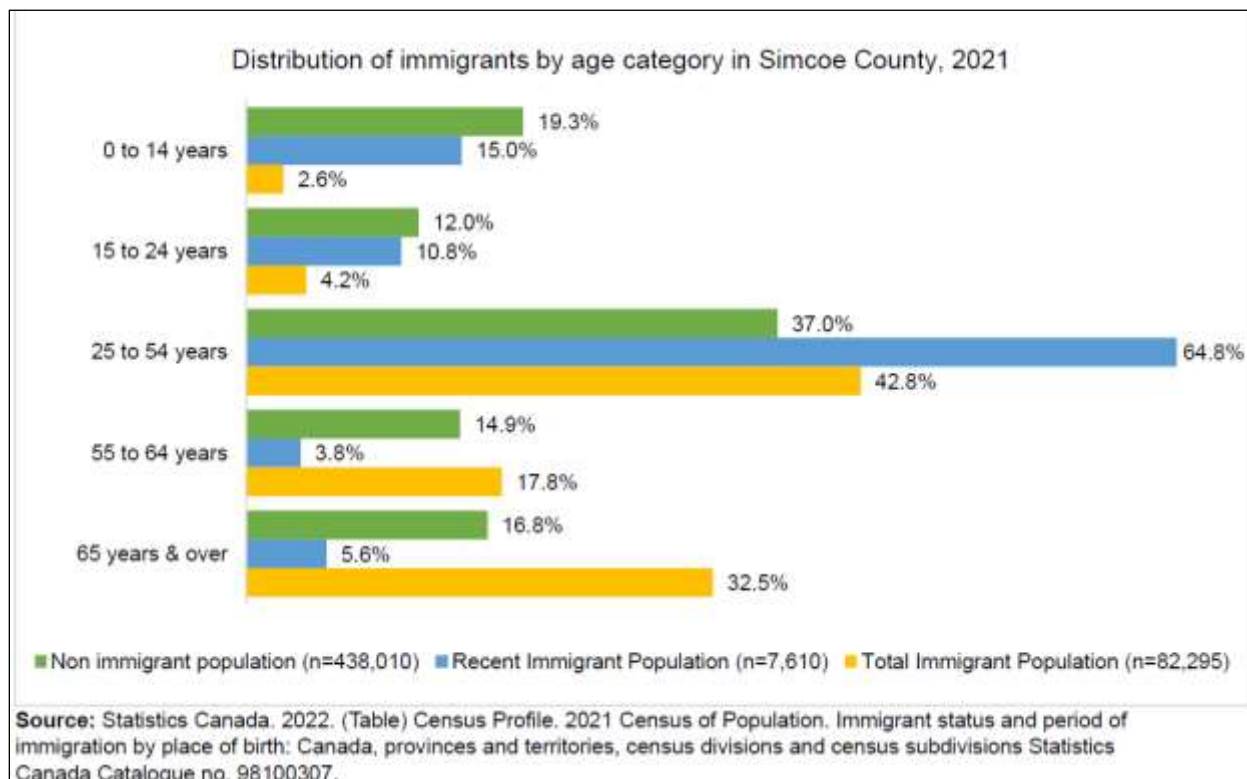


Figure 3: Immigrant Data by Age in Simcoe County, 2021. (Simcoe County, 2023)

According to the 2021 Census, 78.9% (64,970) of immigrants in County of Simcoe were Canadian citizens by naturalization. This represents a 30.0% increase from 2016. During the same period, the number of immigrants who were not Canadian citizens rose by 49.1%. Overall, the total immigrant population in the County grew by 33.6% between 2016 and 2021. Among recent immigrants, India was the most common country of birth in 2021, accounting for 18.5% (1,405 individuals) of this group (see Figure 4). For the total immigrant population in County of Simcoe, the United Kingdom remained the top country of origin, with 15.5% (12,765 individuals) identifying it as their place of birth. The highest percentage of immigrants within the County were from Europe (49.4%), while the majority recent immigrants were from Asian countries (57.8%). Additionally, in 2021, the three largest racialized groups in the County by proportion

were South Asian individuals (10.8%, 8,885), Black individuals (6.1%, 5,025), and Latin American individuals (5.6%, 4,645).

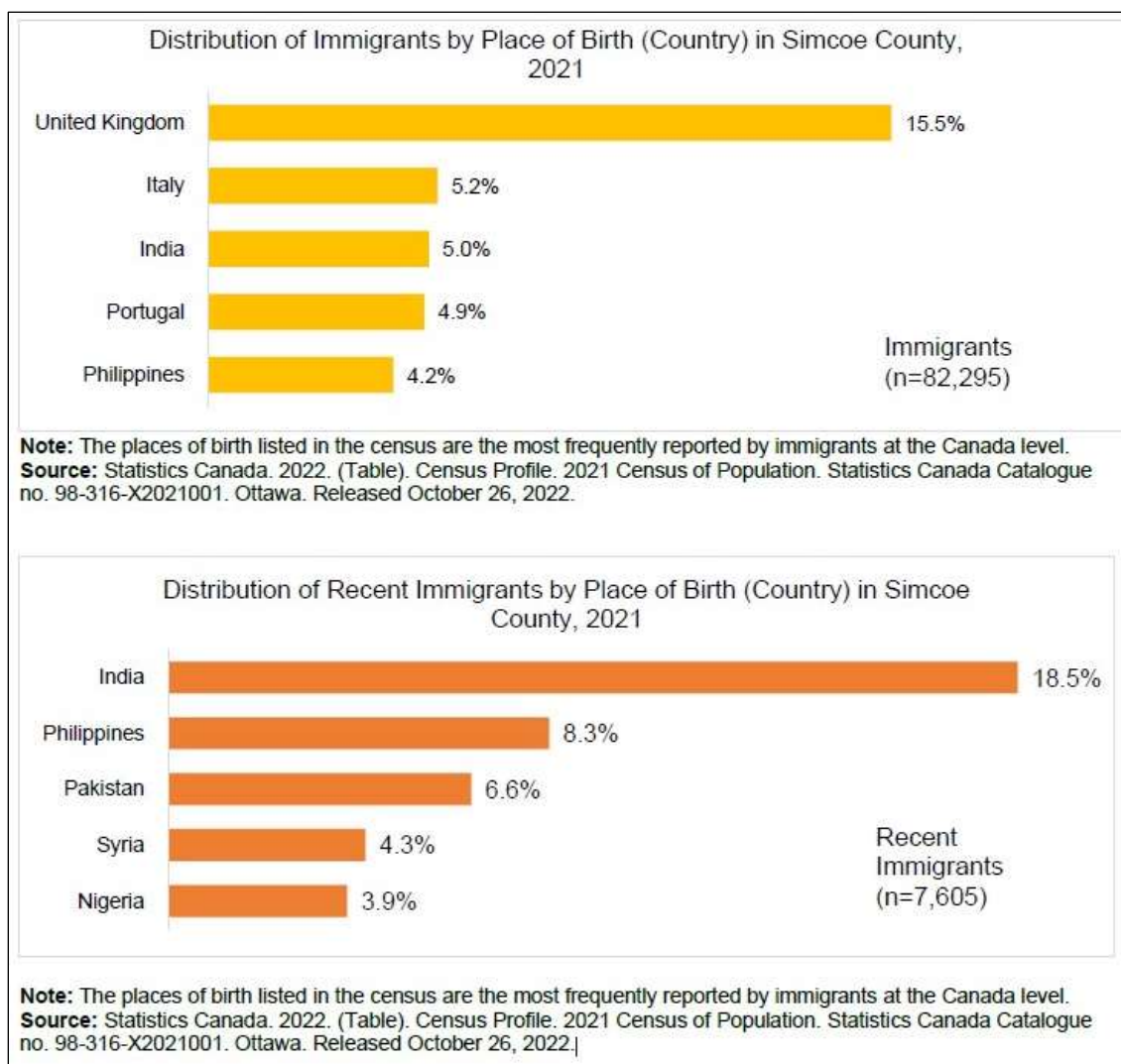


Figure 4: *Immigrant Statistics by Place of Birth (Country), 2021 (County of Simcoe, 2023)*

In 2021, BWG had the highest proportion of first-generation residents in the County at 34.4%, followed by Innisfil at 20.9% and New Tecumseth at 20.6%. These three municipalities also had the largest shares of second-generation individuals, typically the children of immigrants, with BWG at 31.1%, New Tecumseth at 25.5%, and Innisfil at 25.0%. These figures indicate a significant and growing immigrant presence, across the three municipalities. The influx of recent

immigrants underscores the need for Planning processes that are responsive to the unique challenges and perspectives of diverse communities.

2.1.1 Town of Bradford and West Gwillimbury (BWG)

As a lower-tier municipality, BWG, situated just north of the Greater Toronto Area in the County of Simcoe, has grown rapidly from around 23,100 residents in 2001 to roughly 48,600 by 2024, with projections expected to double to approximately 84,400 by 2051 (Owen, 2024). The Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury was established in 1991 through the amalgamation of the former Town of Bradford and parts of the former Towns of West Gwillimbury and Tecumseth and is located between the City of Barrie and Toronto. It has three main settlement areas namely: Bradford, Bondhead, and Newton Robinson. The Town spans approximately 200.7 km² with a population density of about 214 people/km². Access to the Town can be gained via Provincial Highways 89 in the North and Highway 400 in the West. Immediate neighbouring municipalities include Innisfil to the North, King and Newmarket to the South, East Gwillimbury, and Georgina to the East and New Tecumseth to the West.

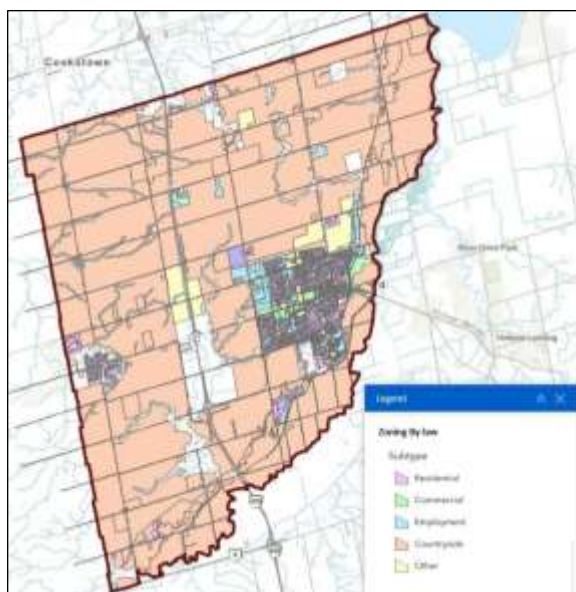


Figure 5: Zoning Map of BWG. (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, n.d.-a)

BWG's economy remains tied to its agricultural roots, most notably the Holland Marsh "Salad Bowl" (Owen, 2025), while diversifying into sectors like manufacturing (with recent 18 % growth), construction, retail, professional services, logistics, and agri-food production (BWG Economic Development, n.d.). The Town is actively expanding industrial land (over 1,300 acres) and supporting new logistics hubs,

including major projects like Toromont and Rieker Shoes facilities (Business View Magazine, 2025). Between 2019 and 2023, BWG experienced a 54% increase in agriculture-related jobs, a 25% growth in manufacturing, and a 69% increase in

professional services employment. The local labour force also reflects this shift: natural and applied science occupations grew by 114%, while business and administrative roles increased by 63%. Self-employment has risen steadily, with over 3,200 businesses recorded in 2023, up from 2,585 in 2018. While the average household income rose to \$128,880 in 2020, average individual wages (\$57,691) remain slightly below the national average, highlighting an emerging affordability concern amid rising housing and service demands (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2024).

Land use is a mix of agricultural green fields, new residential subdivisions adjoining Bradford's downtown core, and commercial-industrial zones along highways and commuter corridors. Zoning allows for low, medium, and high-density residential buildings, open spaces



Figure 7: Aerial View of the Holland Marsh
(Owen, 2025)



Figure 6: BWG Downtown Intersection at Barrie St. W. and
Holland St. W. (County of Simcoe, 2023)

uses, community zones including commercial spaces as well as environmental protection zones. Housing is dominated by single-detached homes (about 75 %), with attached homes making up around 23 % and apartments just under 2 %. A notable share of dwellings is newer, with over 31 % built post-2011 and 18 % between 2001 and 2010, typically featuring 3-4+ bedrooms (Point2Homes, n.d.-a). The Official Plan update anticipates an additional 16,270 housing units and 449 hectares (ha) of greenfield development to support growth (Owen, 2024). BWG recently launched its Growth Services Hub to track approval status for development proposals and building permits in real-time (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, n.d.-b).



Figure 8: (Left) BWG - Mixed Use Development and (Right) Single-Detached Homes
(Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2022)

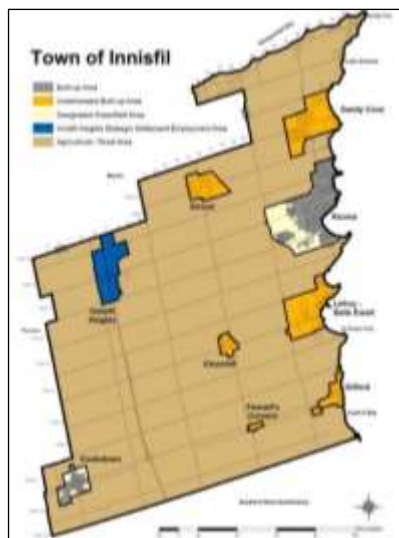
Demographically, the median age in the Town is about 37, significantly younger than Ontario's approximate average of 41, and families with children represent over half its

households, compared to under 46 % province-wide (Business View Magazine, 2025).

Immigration continues to reshape the community: in 2021, of the 13,830 total immigrants in Bradford West Gwillimbury, 6,395 came from Asia, 5,175 from Europe, 1,850 from the Americas, 370 from Africa, and 40 from Oceania and other places. Immigrants from Portugal were the highest in the Town with 1,570 people, followed by Italy (875), India (860), and Pakistan (780) (Statistics Canada, 2021). This growing diversity is also reflected in newer suburban developments. Together, these trends underscore the Town's transition from a historic farming town to a dynamic, family-oriented community with diversified land use, accelerating housing and population growth, and an increasingly multicultural demographic profile.

2.1.2 Town of Innisfil

The Town of Innisfil is located on the western shore of Lake Simcoe, North of BWG, South of Barrie and East of New Tecumseth. The Town recorded a population of around 44,000 in 2021 with 262 km² in land area. It has experienced substantial growth, about 55% over three census periods, resulting in a population density of roughly 165 people/km² (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-a). Innisfil borders two major highways, Highway 89 and Highway 400. Regional transit access centers on the Barrie South GO Station, which residents can reach via subsidized Uber



rides and a future Innisfil GO train station currently in Planning. This station is part of Metrolinx’s Barrie line expansion and is tied to transit-oriented development plans like *The Orbit*, envisioned to accommodate up to 90,000 residents and 20,000 jobs near the station site (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-c).

Though historically rural, Innisfil has evolved into a dynamic municipality balancing agricultural heritage with residential growth and modern urban development. Its early development

Figure 9: Settlement Boundary Map of Town of Innisfil (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-b)

was slow due to dense forests and limited road access, but the community gradually expanded through farming,

logging, and trade along Kempenfelt Bay and Lake Simcoe. Today, it includes several distinct communities, such as Stroud, Sandy Cove, and Alcona Beach, and continues to transition from



Figure 10: Highway 89 through the Community of Cookstown, Innisfil (Aquitaine, 2009)

a seasonal cottage destination to a year-round, full-service town with ambitious infrastructure and economic development plans.

With regards to demographics, the median age is around 42 years, and average household income is approximately \$97,780, higher than the provincial average, while: the median employment income sits at \$39,885 and the labour force participation rate is 70.7%, with an employment rate of 63.5%. As of 2021, approximately 8,460 residents of Innisfil (19.6% of its total population) were immigrants with permanent residency (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-a).

During the preceding five-year period (2016–2021), Innisfil had 535 recent immigrants, representing 6.3% of its immigrant community (Statistics Canada, 2023). Among all immigrants, the most common countries of origin are the United Kingdom (11.5%), Italy (7.4%), and Portugal (6.9%) (Statistics Canada, 2023). For recent arrivals, the leading places of birth in 2021 were India (13.1%), the United States (7.5%), and Brazil (6.5%). Racialised groups make up about 14.6% of the total population in private households. The largest groups include Black individuals (3.3%), South Asian (2.8%), Latin American (2.6%), and Chinese (1.0%), with smaller proportions represented by Filipino, Arab, Southeast and West Asian communities. Together,



Figure 11: *Innisfil Town Square (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-d)*

these figures illustrate a moderately diverse population, and one with clearly shifting immigration patterns, as more recent newcomers originate from non-European countries (e.g. India and Brazil), indicating gradual demographic diversification in what has historically been a less multicultural municipality. In an effort to integrate newcomers, the Town offers Welcome Packages (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-e) with relevant information accessible through their website

and all residents can stay informed on Town activities, municipal updates and services, and other community events by creating an account via the MyInnisfil portal.

Housing typologies are characterized by high ownership rates (~85.7%), average household size of 2.8, and many single-detached homes built after 2011 (about 22.8%) alongside a mix of older stock dating back to mid-20th century (Point2homes, n.d.-b). The Town's 2025 Housing Needs Assessment highlights a need for more affordable, smaller, multigenerational, infill, secondary-suite, and culturally appropriate housing to meet provincial housing targets of 6,300 units by 2031 (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-a).

Economically, Innisfil has over 26,000 workers, with 14,090 jobs in 2024 (up from 9,763 in 2020), a strong rebound post-pandemic, with a projected 3% further growth over five years (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-f). The workforce is well educated (55% post-secondary), particularly in



engineering, construction trades, mechanics, and health professions. Self-employment is notable: nearly 3,865 people are

Figure 12: *Friday Harbour with Condos in the Background* (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-g)

self-employed, although small

firms (1–9 employees) still dominate the local economy; however, the Innisfil Heights Employment Area is anticipated to attract larger firms in coming years (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-h). Industry employment by North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) shows construction (~15%), retail trade (~12%), manufacturing (~10%), health and social assistance (~10%), transportation and warehousing (~6%), and professional, scientific & technical services (~6%) (CAPopulation, n.d.). This mix reflects Innisfil's evolving economic base, shifting beyond its agricultural and recreational identity (e.g., Friday Harbour resort and Georgian Downs Casino) toward diversified service and manufacturing employment hubs.

2.1.3 Town of New Tecumseth

Incorporated in 1991, the Town of New Tecumseth is a lower-tier municipality with three main communities – Alliston in the North, Beeton in the center, and Tottenham in the South. The

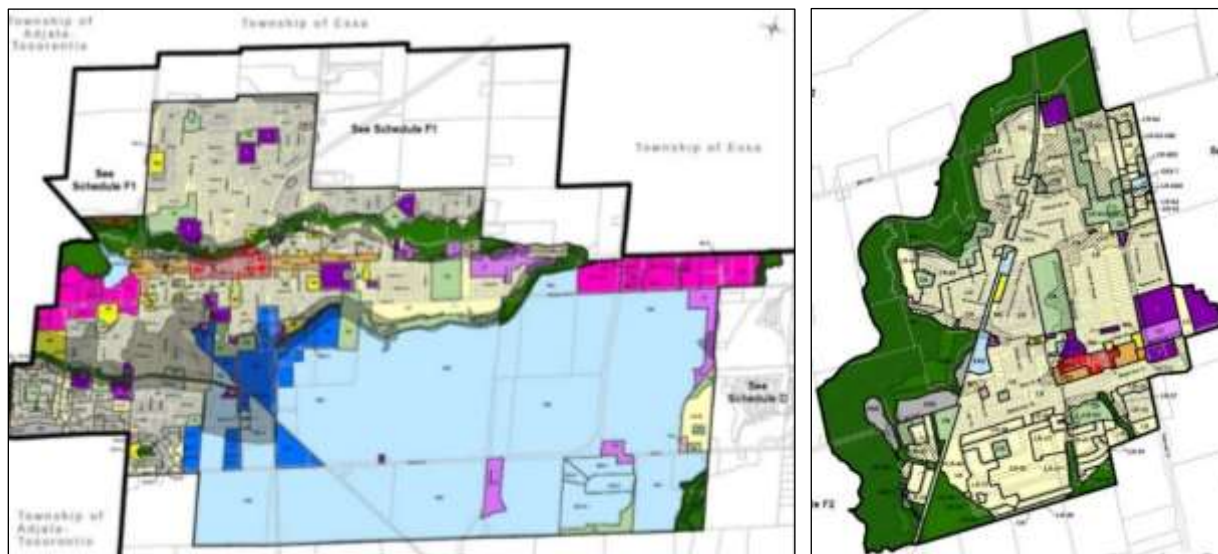


Figure 13: Zoning Schedule Maps of Alliston (Left) and Beeton (Right) (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-b)

area that is now the Town of New Tecumseth is part of the Lake Simcoe-Nottawasaga

Purchase (Treaty 18), which was signed in 1818 by representatives of the Chippewa Nation (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-a).

The Town is bordered by three (3) major Provincial Highways - Highway 89 to the North, Highway 9 to the South, and Highway 27 to the east and a County Road 50 to the West. It is also located minutes away from Highway 400 in the east with easy



Figure 14: Zoning Schedule (C) Map of Tottenham

connections to rail lines and border crossings. With a rural and agricultural dominated landscape, the Town has been designated as a growth area by the County. Between 2016 and

2021, it was among Canada's fastest-growing municipalities with a projected increase in population to approx. 81,000 residents and employment to 31,000 jobs by 2051, triple the rate of the provincial average and almost double from its current population at approx. 44,000 residents (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-c). Planning documents project balanced expansion across residential and employment lands, including 448 hectares for housing and 75 hectares for industrial parks by 2051 representing a 40% intensification target (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-d).



Figure 15: Victoria St. E. in Downtown Alliston



Figure 16: Honda Plant Complex in Alliston (Godkin, 2025)



Figure 17: Zoning Schedule (K) Map of Beeton Heritage Conservation District

Land use patterns combine traditional rural/agricultural areas with growing urban centres in Alliston, Beeton, and Tottenham, with strategic intensification of townhouses, semi-detached homes, apartments, and retained agricultural greenfields. Each community has a unique character and identity. Development in the Town is concentrated within the urban settlement areas across the three communities, which allow for residential, commercial, employment and other industrial uses. The Town's largest employer is Honda in Alliston, employing about 4,200 people. In April 2024, the

Japanese auto giant received \$15 billion in funding from the Government to build an electric

vehicle battery plant and two separate battery parts facilities. The plans, however, are now put on hold for two years on account of uncertainties looming in the industry attributed to the recent U.S. tariffs imposed on imported vehicles (Phillips, 2025). A part of Beeton's downtown core is designated as a Heritage Conservation District to

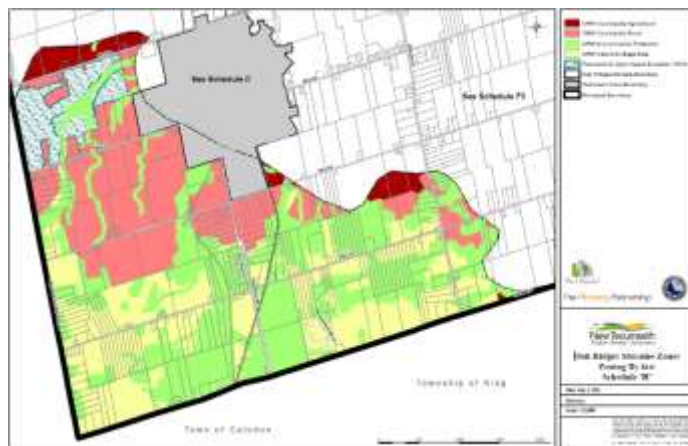


Figure 18: Zoning Schedule (H) Map of Oak Ridges Moraine
(Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-b)

preserve the Victorian-style architecture of the community. Greenlands Zones are scattered throughout the Town's landscape to preserve rural and agricultural lands. The South-West corner of Tottenham and the Town in general is environmentally protected and designated as Oak Ridges Moraine with multiple zones including Natural Linkage, Country-Side Rural and Countryside Agricultural Zones. The Tottenham Conservation Area spans 41 acres to include parklands, wetlands, campsites, fishing and hiking trails on the Oak Ridges Moraine. The Trans Canada Trail is a popular non-motorized trail and is suitable for a variety of activities, including walking, cycling, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding. Built in phases, 16 of the planned 26 kilometres have been completed so far, forming part of the national trail network that stretches across the country. Additional trail connections and designated parking areas are planned for future development (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-f).

The housing typology includes a mix of single-detached homes (70.8%), with attached homes (28.4%) and apartments (0.5%) filling out the market; 44.2% of units have three bedrooms, and 33% have four or more (Point2Homes, n.d.-c). June 2025 real estate data show a strong buyer's market: seven (7) months of inventory, median home price around \$799,000, and average days on market at 34 days (Wahi Realty Inc., n.d.). The average age of a New Tecumseth resident is 41 years-old in line with the Ontario's average of 42 years. 63% of the



Figure 19: Townhomes in the Treetops Subdivision in New Tecumseth (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-g)

population is aged between 15-64 years. Census 2021 data indicated 19.1% of the population were immigrants. Town recorded a 73.7% increase in immigrants between 2016 and 2021, which is the highest in the County. 65% of the Town's labour force lives outside the Town and industry-wise, sales and service sector are the largest followed by manufacturing, which employs 16% of the labour force, while transportation and warehousing employ 14%. The average wage in manufacturing is \$67,498 (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-i).

Some local community groups include GreysforGreen, a seniors' collective to raise awareness on climate change and encourage climate action and Strong Towns of New Tecumseth. The Town also hosts some major festivals to celebrate its agricultural and artistic roots such as the Alliston Potato Festival, the Beeton Honey Festival, and the Tottenham



Figure 20: Tottenham Conservation Area (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-h)

Bluegrass festival. Some tourist attractions include the South Simcoe Rail, Banting Homestead and Heritage Park that celebrates the legacy of Sir Fredrick Banting, and the Museum on the Boyne.

2.2 Planning Governance and Policy Landscape

2.2.1 Ontario's Planning Framework

Ontario's land use planning system is designed to manage growth, protect the environment, and support healthy, livable communities. It operates within a tiered framework made up of legislation, policy statements, and Regional/County and local planning tools. This framework is applicable to all municipalities within the province. There are a variety of policy documents at the Provincial and Municipal levels (see Figure 21). Beginning with the *Planning Act* at the top, the *Act* sets out the legal regulations for land use planning in the province and across all municipalities, which must have regard to the *Act*. The Provincial Policy Statement (PPS) is a consolidated document that provides province-wide policy direction on key issues such as efficient land use and resource management, housing and affordability, transportation and

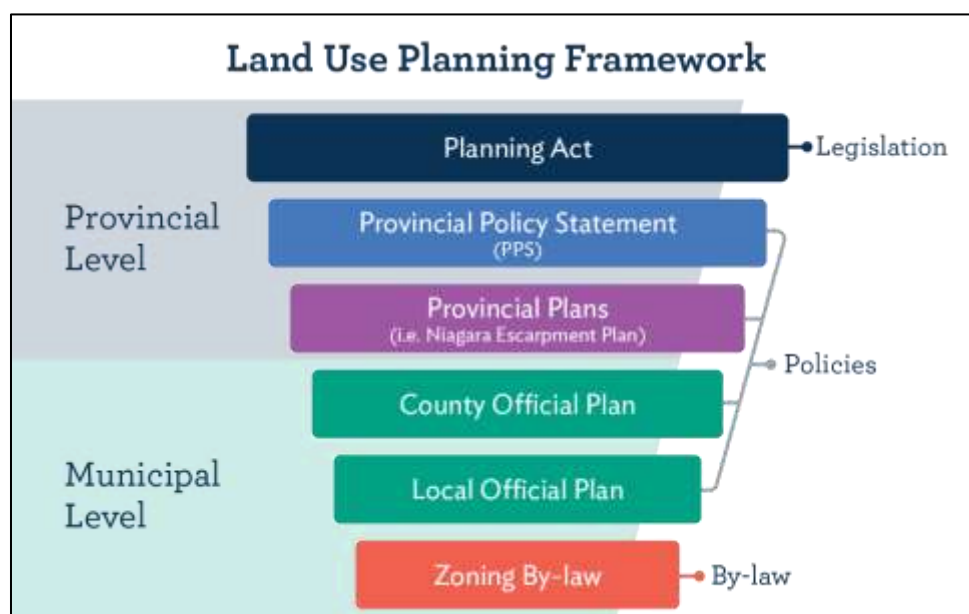


Figure 21: Planning Framework in Ontario with the Inverted Pyramid (Bruce County, n.d.)

infrastructure, natural heritage and agricultural protection. It sets a broad vision for sustainable, long-term growth. All municipal decisions must be consistent with the PPS. As of October 20, 2024, Ontario replaced the Provincial Policy Statement 2020 and the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe with a unified Provincial Planning Statement, 2024 (PPS, 2024). Other Provincial Plans such as the Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan are specific to each municipality where lands have been designated for natural heritage and environmental protection.

The second part of Ontario's Planning framework focuses on the role of municipalities under the guidance of a Region or County. The Simcoe County Official Plan (SCOP) is a document designed to assist in growth management and applies to the sixteen (16) Towns and Townships in the County that are expected to experience continued strong growth in population and urban development over the next twenty years. Each municipality develops an Official Plan, aligned with the Region or County's vision, which lays out land use policies to guide growth and development in a way that's tailored, organized, and efficient. While all municipalities, whether single-tier, upper-tier, or lower-tier, are required to have Official Plans, the content and scope of these plans vary based on the level of government and their Planning responsibilities. Municipalities can also adopt Secondary Plans, which function like Official Plans but are focused on a specific area, allowing for more detailed and localized Planning. These plans inform the most direct tool municipalities use to implement Planning policies: Zoning By-laws. Zoning By-laws regulate land use by specifying what types of development are permitted, where they can occur, and the physical characteristics of buildings. Through zoning, municipalities translate the broader vision set out in Official and Secondary Plans into on-the-ground outcomes.

Additionally, municipalities may also have specific documents like Urban Design Guidelines, which provide direction on the physical design of buildings, streetscapes, public spaces, and communities to ensure high-quality, functional, and aesthetically pleasing urban

environments; Strategic Plan documents outlining long-term vision for the municipality to manage growth and employment goals; Community Improvement Plans to provide grants and funding for maintenance of buildings in downtowns and residential neighbourhoods, and Climate Action Plans offering action-oriented goals to prepare communities against the impacts of climate change.

2.2.2 Planning Landscape in BWG, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth

BWG operates under a Council system composed of a Mayor (currently James Leduc), a Deputy Mayor (Raj Sandhu), and seven (7) ward councillors (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, n.d.-c). The Council meets twice monthly, with agendas and minutes publicly available and livestreamed via the town's YouTube channel (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, n.d.-d). Oversight of Planning and development lies primarily with the Planning & Development Services Department, which encompasses community planning, heritage preservation, zoning enforcement, and operates the Committee of Adjustment—a five-member body appointed by council to adjudicate minor variances, permissions, and land consents under the Ontario Planning Act (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, n.d.-e).

The Planning Department includes several functional divisions. The Community Planning Division handles strategic policy, Official Plan and Zoning By-law administration, and reviews development applications. The Development Engineering division supports the technical aspects of projects, from infrastructure review to site monitoring, and administers the Fill and Site Alteration by-law (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, n.d.-f). Prior to submitting major applications such as Official Plan amendments, rezoning requests, subdivision or site plan proposals, applicants must participate in mandatory pre-consultation sessions with Planning and Engineering staff. Additionally, Council-approved tools like the Town-Wide Urban Design Guidelines (endorsed September 2022) and the Design Criteria Manual guide

architectural quality and urban form to ensure development aligns with community character (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2022). In recent years, council has supported enhancements to its Planning processes: notably, the PropelGrowthBWG “concierge” pilot launched in July 2025, which fast-tracks priority employment, institutional, and select residential projects under guaranteed timelines, reducing uncertainty for developers (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, n.d.-g).

BWG also operates with several Advisory committees that support Council decisions across Planning, accessibility, environmental initiatives, heritage preservation, and youth engagement. Each committee includes members of council and community volunteers who provide expert input, develop policy recommendations, and enhance public participation in local governance. Notable bodies include the Accessibility Advisory Committee, which ensures compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and promotes barrier-free access; the Municipal Heritage Committee, guiding the identification, preservation, and designation of culturally or historically significant sites; and the Green Initiatives Advisory Committee, which advises on strategies to support environmental health and sustainability in municipal operations and programming (Bradford Today, n.d.).

A particularly significant body is the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Advisory Committee. Established in 2020 to replace BWG’s former Anti-Racism Advisory Committee, it now plays a broader role in identifying and addressing systemic inequities across marginalized communities. The committee’s mandate includes improving representation, security, and sense of belonging among residents through initiatives like community education, policy reviews, and public programming. It supports and monitors implementation of the municipality’s *Diversity and Inclusiveness Action Plan*, which encompasses workplace culture, service delivery, and community advocacy measures. Supported by public events such as speaker series and open houses, this committee helps shape council policy and programming to foster a more inclusive community Council-wide (Bradford Today, 2023).

BWG is updating its Official Plan to manage anticipated growth through 2051, aligning with provincial and county mandates. Under Simcoe County's Official Plan Amendment (SCOPA) No. 7, the town is expected to grow to approximately 83,470 people and accommodate 30,900 jobs by mid-century, requiring up to 449–605 hectares of designated greenfield lands for residential development and strategic use of existing employment areas to support job growth (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2025).

The Growth Management Plan unfolds in two parts. Part 1 ("Intensification First") focuses on increasing density within current built-up areas including the Major Transit Station Area (MTSA) around Bradford GO Station, and policies targeting Corridor redevelopment along Bridge Street. The goal is a minimum density of 150 residents and jobs per hectare in the MTSA to meet provincial intensification targets while unlocking development potential without immediately expanding urban boundaries (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2025).

Part 2 addresses settlement boundary expansions, infrastructure servicing needs, and community facilities required for new growth areas. Planning staff have drafted boundary reviews, infrastructure assessments, policy updates, and background reports to guide this expansion process. Public involvement was significant: a Special Council Meeting launched the review in June 2024, followed by open houses and visioning workshops in late 2024 and early 2025. Residents provided input on expansion proposals, covering over 2,200 hectares of land requests for residential and employment uses and on downtown corridor redevelopment and transit-oriented plans near the GO station (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2025).

BWG faces three interconnected Planning challenges as it prepares for substantial growth by 2051. First, the Town must align infrastructure expansion, particularly water, wastewater, and transportation systems, with rapid population increases, a task complicated by delays in provincial and county approvals that affect development timelines. Second, balancing intensification targets with the preservation of community character remains a priority, especially in areas like the historic downtown and the Bridge Street corridor, where urban design must

support higher densities without compromising livability. Third, the Town is working to diversify its economy and make over 600 hectares of employment land development-ready, aiming to meet its target of nearly 31,000 jobs while reducing reliance on agriculture and outbound commuting. These challenges require careful coordination across policy, infrastructure, and land use planning to support sustainable, balanced growth.

Innisfil is governed by a Mayor (currently Lynn Dollin) and a Deputy Mayor (Kenneth Fowler), along with seven (7) ward councillors representing different geographic areas in the town (Town of Innisfil, n.d. -i). Council convenes regularly to oversee strategic growth management, infrastructure planning, and long-term policy, especially in relation to rapid population expansion. Innisfil also functions with a diverse array of committees and boards, staffed by volunteer residents, council members, and municipal staff, that provide expert advice and community input on key issues before Council (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-j). These bodies include the Committee of Adjustment (for minor variances and land consents) and the Property Standards Committee (handling property condition appeals) as well as advisory groups focused on policy and program guidance. These committees focus on community involvement in governance, each bringing specialized expertise to the municipal table. They play a significant role in institutionalizing public voice and technical insight across areas like accessibility, heritage preservation, sustainability, traffic safety, and public engagement.

Planning responsibilities reside within the Town's Planning & Development Services, supported by a Housing Needs Assessment and an Affordable Housing Strategy aimed at diversifying housing types and meeting provincial unit targets by 2031 (Town of Innisfil, n.d.- k). Strategic growth planning is tied to Simcoe County's Municipal Comprehensive Review, which allocates Innisfil a population of approximately 85,000 and 26,000 jobs by 2051, an increase of roughly 40,000 people and 16,000 jobs (Town of Innisfil, 2022). Key Planning initiatives include guiding transit-oriented development around the GO station through projects like *The Orbit*, expansion of employment lands at Innisfil Heights, and integration of infrastructure, heritage,

agricultural protection, and community amenities into future settlement boundaries (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-c).

The Town of Innisfil is committed to advancing equity, inclusion, reconciliation, and anti-racism throughout its policies, services, and community engagement. The municipality emphasizes intentional and ongoing efforts, particularly listening, learning, and taking action, to build a sense of belonging and safety for all residents, regardless of background (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-l). Innisfil has embedded these values in a publicly available *Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Policy* alongside a formal Land Acknowledgment and dedicated initiatives recognizing Black History Month and enriching the 2SLGBTQ+ community including partnerships to improve safe spaces across town. The Town supports inclusive programming through its Youth Engagement Strategy and collaborates with advisory bodies like the Accessibility Advisory Committee to reinforce accessibility commitments (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-l).

Public campaigns such as the annual declaration of #ITSTARTS Month (a County initiative, which began in March 2019) mark community-wide dedication to embracing acceptance, confronting discrimination, and celebrating diversity in its many forms. In Council sessions, Innisfil leadership has formally pledged to oppose antisemitism and all forms of systemic racism, engaging directly with the local Jewish community on education initiatives and remembrance events to foster inclusion at the municipal level (Browne, 2022).

The Town of Innisfil launched its Official Plan Review in late 2024, with the aim of shaping long-term growth and development through to 2051 (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-m). Key milestones include:

- The “How We Grow: Growth Options Report” and the first draft of the updated Official Plan (OP) were released in spring 2025.
- A public open house was held on March 5, 2025, during which the town sought feedback on settlement boundary expansion requests (53 submissions totaling 2,208 hectares for residential land and 605 hectares for employment lands)

- Work continues on the *Housing Needs Assessment and Affordable Housing Strategy*, which will recommend actionable housing targets; the finalized versions are expected in late 2025

Municipal staff are now evaluating boundary expansion requests and analyzing growth options, working toward incorporating community input into the first draft Official Plan. The updated Plan will guide future land use, infrastructure provision, and community services, ensuring growth aligns with objectives like compact development, housing variety, employment clustering near Highway 400, and the protection of agricultural and natural areas. The next phases, scheduled for Fall 2025, include:

- Public engagement rounds 2 and 3
- A statutory consultation period
- Final adoption of the Official Plan

In parallel, the town is integrating planning tools such as the Community Planning Permit System (*Our Shores*) and reinforcing pre-consultation requirements to streamline development reviews (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-n).

Similar to BWG, Innisfil is grappling with the challenge of providing adequate servicing infrastructure mainly water, wastewater, and stormwater systems, to support its rapid population growth. The planned expansion of the Lakeshore Water Pollution Control Plant is estimated at \$290 million, more than double initial estimates, raising concerns about funding mechanisms, long-term debt, and coordination between the Town, InnServices Utilities Inc., and development partners (Simon, 2024).

Innisfil also faces significant transportation and transit planning constraints. Its vast, low-density geography limits the feasibility of traditional fixed-route transit. Although the pioneering Uber-on-demand model partially addresses mobility gaps, the town is now developing a Transit Master Plan and exploring hybrid transit solutions, including limited bus services to meet future needs, particularly with the anticipated population exceeding 63,000 by 2034 (Simon, 2025a).

The Town must reconcile the affordability and housing shortfalls amid rising demand. While Innisfil has historically exceeded provincial housing start targets, its 2024 performance dropped to around 50–57% of the target (~300 of 525 units), potentially jeopardizing access to provincial funding and contributing to local cost pressures for residents (Simon, 2025b).

New Tecumseth is also governed by a Mayor, Richard Norcross (elected 2022), a Deputy Mayor, Stephanie MacLellan, and eight (8) ward councillors across New Tecumseth's three key communities (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-j). Council oversees strategic decision-making, budget allocation, and Official Plan amendments. The Town Council meets regularly in a Committee-of-the-Whole format to review and direct growth management and large-scale development plans. The Town also has several other Advisory Committees with members appointed by Council at the beginning of a term or when a seat becomes vacant (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-k). Their role is to actively engage with the public and provide feedback or suggestions on issues or challenges being faced by community members.

Development and policy planning are managed through the Planning & Building Department. The Planning Department is responsible for reviewing, analysing and processing a variety of development applications through relevant policy implementation including Zoning By-laws, and Official Plan policies and participate in Committee of Adjustment meetings. With regards to development applications, the Town also works with external agencies like the Conservation Authorities, relevant School Boards, Emergency and Postal Services, Utility companies, the County and the Ministry of Transportation and other consulting agencies as appropriate from time to time. The Town's Urban Design Guidelines updated in 2023 and adopted on January 24, 2024, aims to provide clear standards for sustainable neighbourhood design, placemaking, and complete community principles (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-l).

Unlike BWG and Innisfil, the Town lacks any clear DEI policies regarding the Planning process. The terms 'diverse' and 'inclusivity' are mentioned in the Town's Vision statement and Strategic Plan for 2022-2026 respectively (Town of New Tecumseth, 2025). There is, however,

little or no direct or action-oriented approach to actively engage diverse communities. The Council budget for 2025 included the approval of a Diversity Committee (Town of New Tecumseth, 2024), which could have an impact on going forward.

It's worth mentioning that the New Tecumseth Public Library has an Immigrant Hub led by Simcoe County Libraries (New Tecumseth Public Library, n.d.). It is a centralized resource designed to support newcomers settling in communities like Alliston, Barrie, Innisfil, Midland, Orillia, and Wasaga Beach. The libraries help newcomers access key services through their local branch. They offer support with health cards, cultural passes, and multilingual materials, along with connections to YMCA programs for employment, settlement, and language training. The Welcome Centre Mobile Unit visits smaller towns, and video calls with specialists, including interpreters, are available on-site. Libraries also provide language-learning tools, multilingual resources, and access to multiple translated publications online. For families, the Settlement Workers in School (SWIS) program supports children adjusting to school. The Hub is a one-stop entry point for newcomers to find trusted support and community connections.

The Town is currently advancing a comprehensive Official Plan Review and Growth Management Study (initiated in January 2023) with Hemson and LURA consultants (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-m). This work supports the Town's response to the County's Municipal Comprehensive Review, assessing Council is steering future growth with a focus on infrastructure timing, mainly water and sewage upgrades, road and transit improvements, and community facility expansion to match the projected 77% population increase and 52% employment increase by 2051. The comprehensive process involved three project phases with extensive public engagement with community members and developers: evaluating growth areas, developing expansion scenarios, and drafting policy amendments.

By April 2025, staff presented a recommended Official Plan Amendment (#5) that includes proposed Settlement Area Boundary Expansions (SABE) for Alliston, Beeton, and Tottenham. These expansions total roughly 448 hectares for residential/community use and an

additional 75 hectares, plus a growing allocation for new employment lands, driven partly by Honda's EV plant expansion (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-m). The proposed policy framework updates include maintaining a 40% intensification target, setting out the SABE procedure by considering different growth distribution scenarios with significant public consultation phases in 2023–2024, introducing a Secondary Planning structure, and aligning land use designations with the PPS 2024 (notably distinguishing “Employment” vs. “Employment Transitional” areas).

A joint open house and statutory public meeting held in April 2025 gathered public feedback on the draft amendments and maps. Following community input, staff finalized the Amendment for review by Town Council and resubmission to the County and the Province, in line with *Planning Act* requirements (Town of New Tecumseth, n.d.-m). With formal approval pending from the Province (Town of New Tecumseth, 2025), the next steps include commissioning a Master Servicing Plan to ensure water, sewage, transportation, and community infrastructure are in place before any development. Secondary Plans will be tailored to each expansion area to guide details like land use mix, parks, schools, and active transportation networks. This approach sets a clear policy pathway toward creating compact and serviced communities across the Town’s three settlement areas by 2051.

New Tecumseth faces a complex set of Planning challenges as it prepares for significant population growth expected by 2051. One of the most pressing issues is the limited capacity of existing infrastructure, primarily water, wastewater, and transportation systems, which threatens to delay new development and raises public concerns about livability and service delivery. At the same time, the Town is working to meet provincial intensification targets while maintaining the small-town rural character of communities like Beeton and Tottenham. This requires balancing higher-density housing with local expectations, especially in heritage and low-rise areas, a goal supported by ongoing updates to the Town's Urban Design Guidelines. Additionally, Alliston, Beeton, and Tottenham have different development pressures, servicing

levels, and economic roles. Ensuring that growth is equitably distributed across the three communities remains a challenge, given that much of the recent housing and employment development has been concentrated in Alliston. This is being addressed through the growth scenarios across all three communities aiming to support more balanced development, economic diversification, and infrastructure investment across all settlement areas.

2.2.3 Overview of Planning Policy on Public Participation

Ontario's *Planning Act* (R.S.O. 1990, c. P.13) establishes the legal foundation for land use planning across the province. It mandates public participation in several key areas:

- Section 17(15): Requires that, before adopting an official plan or an amendment, Planning authorities must hold at least one public meeting to ensure community input.
- Section 34(12): Mandates a public meeting before passing a Zoning By-law or an amendment, providing a platform for participants to express their views.
- Section 51(20): Stipulates that a public meeting must be held before approving a plan of subdivision, allowing for community engagement in the development process.

While these statutory provisions aim to promote transparency and inclusivity in Planning decisions, the findings of the research, however, highlight that the effectiveness of these mandated public meetings in engaging immigrant communities remains limited. This underscores the need for more proactive and culturally sensitive engagement strategies beyond the statutory requirements. One Planner, also an engagement specialist called for a proactive approach at the onset of any process, "One of the first things that you should be doing is a stakeholder analysis, that actually identifies who lives here? Who are we actually doing this for?... I think that that's a really important step that sometimes gets skipped" (Professional 4).

The PPS, 2024, issued under Section 3 of the *Planning Act*, emphasizes the importance of public engagement in several sections:

- Policy 6.1.6 mandates that Planning authorities keep their zoning by-laws and development permit by-laws up to date with the PPS 2024, ensuring that public engagement reflects current policy directions.
- Section 6.2.3 encourages Planning authorities to involve the public and stakeholders early in the process of implementing the PPS and to share relevant information that supports informed participation from local residents, including equity-deserving groups.
- Sections 6.2.5 and 6.2.6 require Planning authorities to engage with the public, school boards, and publicly assisted post-secondary institutions to facilitate early and integrated Planning efforts.

While the policy intent aims to foster more inclusive and proactive public participation in Planning processes, the findings, however, indicate that, in practice, engagement often remains superficial, particularly concerning immigrant communities. As one Senior Planner observed, “I would see consultation as a mere formality. There's statutory language in the *Planning Act*, but I do think that there is a connotation that comes with consultation, which I think we need to move away from” (Professional 6). This sentiment reflects the gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities, highlighting the need for more meaningful and culturally responsive engagement practices.

The *Planning Act* and the PPS 2024 emphasize the need for inclusive and transparent Planning processes. These provincial directives, rooted in broader democratic values, align with Planning theorists like Innes and Booher (2004), who argue for collaborative rationality and inclusive dialogue as essential components of effective governance. Simcoe County's Official Plan and local municipal documents attempt to operationalize these mandates by outlining community engagement strategies, but the findings from professionals suggest that implementation often falls short of these ideals.

The findings showed that there's a big difference between what's written in the plans and what happens on the ground. This disconnect illustrates the challenge identified in the literature

between policy intent and institutional culture. Healey (1997) emphasizes that for Planning systems to be truly inclusive, they must embody communicative practices in both structure and spirit, not just rhetoric. Despite Planning documents referencing the importance of engagement, professionals described a lack of consistent follow-through, particularly in ensuring immigrant voices are represented in both process and outcome.

Moreover, the findings revealed that many municipalities rely heavily on check-the-box outreach formats without considering the structural supports needed for genuine participation. As stated by a long-term Planning professional, “When you put together your consultation plan, you’re looking at who are you serving from a customer centric piece rather than your job as a Planner to check a box to say I’ve done an open house or a public meeting” (Professional 1). This insight resonates with Grewal’s (2020b) argument that equity in participation demands tailored, relational approaches rather than one-size-fits-all procedures.

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, municipalities will need to embed inclusive participation standards into all phases of Planning and not just at the consultation stage. This requires clear accountability mechanisms, capacity-building for staff, and culturally attuned strategies that reflect the lived realities of Simcoe’s increasingly diverse population.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Understanding Participation from Consultation to Empowerment

Public participation is widely recognized as foundational to democratic planning (Innes & Booher, 2004) as it enables inclusive decision-making, builds trust in institutions, and fosters more equitable and responsive urban outcomes. Scholars have long argued that involving citizens in Planning processes strengthens democratic legitimacy (Arnstein, 1969; Innes & Booher, 2004), ensures that diverse voices, especially underrepresented ones, are heard (Healey, 1997), and enhances the overall quality and effectiveness of Planning decisions (Forester, 1999). Public participation is not only a normative ideal but a practical necessity in contemporary planning practice, especially in diverse societies (Sandercock, 2003a; Fung, 2006). Its implementation, however, ranges from tokenistic outreach to transformative co-creation (Rocha, 1997). While public participation in Planning is often framed as the basis of democratic governance, yet the terms "engagement," "consultation," and "participation" are frequently conflated. Drawing from Arnstein's (1969) seminal *Ladder of Citizen Participation*, participation can be understood as a continuum, ranging from non-participation (e.g., manipulation) to tokenism (e.g., consultation) and ultimately to citizen power (e.g., delegated power and citizen control). Arnstein argues that unless power is redistributed, participation remains symbolic and exclusionary. Her critique remains relevant, particularly when evaluating how immigrant communities are often "consulted" without real influence.

Subsequent scholars have built upon, revised, or challenged Arnstein's typology to reflect evolving understandings of participation. Innes & Booher (2010), for example, advocate for a model of *collaborative rationality* as an alternative to both top-down bureaucratic Planning and superficial consultation. They ground their approach in a framework labelled DIAD: Diversity, Interdependence, Authentic Dialogue, essential for generating adaptive, creative outcomes. They argue that inclusive, face-to-face dialogue among diverse participants leads to more adaptive and legitimate decisions, especially in complex policy environments. In this view,

they suggest that planning and policy are “not about finding the best solution — indeed there is no one best solution, though there may be many better ways of proceeding than the status quo” (2010, p. 200). Their framework emphasizes mutual learning, shared power, and the co-production of knowledge, underlining the importance of informal communication and trust-building over formalistic procedures.

3.2 Evolving Role of Planners

Historically, Planners were seen as technical experts producing rational plans for public good. However, a significant paradigm shift has occurred. Davidoff’s (1965, 2016) *advocacy planning* asserts that Planners must take an explicit stance to represent underrepresented groups and challenge systemic inequities. This role is particularly critical in diverse communities where structural barriers inhibit equal participation. Hodge et al. (2014) reinforce this shift by describing Planners as collaborators and catalysts who must engage in ethical practice, support capacity-building, and foster inclusive processes. According to the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP, 2011), enabling competencies such as communication, cultural sensitivity, and ethical decision-making are now central to professional practice.

Healey (1996) similarly advances a communicative planning perspective, highlighting the Planner’s role in fostering relational processes that build shared understanding across cultural differences. Her notion situates Planners as facilitators of dialogue among participants with diverse values and knowledge systems. This model demands active listening, empathy, and shared meaning-making. She contends that Planning should be deliberative, inclusive, and situated in practice that attends to both rational argument and emotional experience. Healey’s contribution is particularly important in shifting the focus from procedures to relationships, stressing that legitimacy in Planning emerges not only from who participates, but “how can we get to share in a process of working out how to coexist in shared spaces? The new wave of ideas focuses on how we get to discuss issues in the public realm” (1996, p. 219). This

highlights Healey's central concern for fostering public dialogue as the means to collective decision-making in complex social environments. Both Healey and Innes & Booher are often critiqued for underestimating the enduring influence of structural inequalities and power imbalances that shape who speaks, who is heard, and who ultimately decides.

In contrast, Fainstein (2010) offers a more outcome-oriented critique in her theory of *The Just City*. While not rejecting participatory planning, Fainstein (2010) is skeptical of process-centric approaches that overlook questions of equity and distributive justice. She argues that even the most inclusive participatory frameworks can fail to produce just outcomes if they are not guided by normative commitments to fairness, diversity, and democracy. She prefers 'equity' over 'equality' as it is a "more broadly accepted value than equality. It has the power to gain wider political support than terms that explicitly target the better-off" (2010, p. 36). For Fainstein (2010), the value of participation lies not simply in inclusion for its own sake, but in its capacity to challenge entrenched inequalities and deliver substantively equitable results.

Purcell (2009) also critiques the limitations of communicative planning under neoliberal governance. He contends that participation has been co-opted as a managerial tool, used to legitimize predetermined outcomes rather than redistribute power. As a result, "participation becomes less a way of empowering the public and more a way of producing consensus for the status quo" (2009, p.145). Drawing on the *right to the city* discourse, Purcell calls for a more radical democratic politics rooted in counter-hegemonic movements that resist commodification, exclusion, and centralized control. He sees meaningful participation not as a bureaucratic exercise, but as a form of collective action that reclaims urban space for those who have been systematically marginalized.

Procedural and methodological critiques further complicate the discussion. Flyvbjerg (1998) introduces a realist perspective grounded in his theory of *phronetic planning*, which emphasizes practical wisdom and ethical judgment in navigating power-laden planning environments. He warns that participatory settings are often distorted by strategic behavior and

political manipulation, particularly by actors with disproportionate influence. Flyvbjerg cautions against naive assumptions about communicative equality, arguing that power asymmetries must be acknowledged and addressed for participation to be genuinely democratic. This underscores Flyvbjerg's argument that, "Power determines what counts as knowledge, what kind of interpretation attains authority as the dominant interpretation..." (1998, p.227) emphasises that Planning is not merely about technical expertise or formal logic. Rather, it is deeply influenced by power, which shapes what is considered rational or legitimate.

Conversely, Forester (1999) maintains a more optimistic stance on the transformative potential of dialogue. He contends that "as Planners work in between interdependent and conflicting parties in the face of inequalities of power and political voice, they have to be not only personally reflective but politically deliberative too" (1999, p.2). This underscores his vision of the Planner as a *deliberative practitioner*, someone who mediates conflict, fosters mutual understanding, and employs dialogue grounded in listening, storytelling, and negotiation even under conditions of disagreement and distrust.

Saegert (2006) contributes a distinct lens through her work on community development and the *co-production of space*. She argues that participation must go beyond procedural input to include material practices that allow residents to shape and manage their environments directly. In this view, Planning is not merely about voice, but about agency and ownership, mainly for marginalized populations who have been historically excluded from formal governance systems.

Radical and critical planning theorists have taken these critiques further, challenging the very structures within which participation is often framed. Sandercock (1998) critiques the rationalist and universalist assumptions underpinning traditional planning paradigms, calling instead for a *multicultural* and *postmodern* approach that embraces emotional, narrative, and experiential knowledge. She advocates for Planning practices that reflect the diversity of urban life and recognizes the legitimacy of alternative ways of knowing. Her work foregrounds the

importance of lived experience, identity, and storytelling, especially for immigrants and racialized communities whose histories and needs are often rendered invisible in mainstream processes.

Miraftab (2009) introduces the concept of *insurgent planning*, which highlights grassroots practices that occur outside formal Planning institutions and often in defiance of them. These informal, self-organized actions by marginalized communities constitute valid forms of participation that challenge dominant norms and expand the boundaries of what Planning can be. Miraftab (2017) emphasises that insurgent planning “views practices of citizens and local communities as a form of planning” and stresses “taking seriously the practices of subordinate groups in shaping ... plans, policies, and spaces” (2017, p.279). Whereas rational-comprehensive planning is focused on the “Planner” as the primary actor and mediator of specialized knowledge, insurgent planning is democratic and action-oriented, focusing on what is being done, rather than who is doing it” (2017, p.278). He further argues that Planners must be attentive to these insurgent practices and work to support them, rather than simply incorporating them into existing institutional frameworks.

Complementing Arnstein’s critique, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) developed a widely adopted *Spectrum of Public Participation*, which identifies five levels of engagement (IAP2, 2018):

- **Inform** (provide information)
- **Consult** (gather feedback)
- **Involve** (work directly throughout the process)
- **Collaborate** (partner in each decision)
- **Empower** (place final decision-making in the hands of the public)

While “inform” and “consult” are often the norm in municipal processes, these stages fall short of empowering participation. The IAP2 model clarifies that empowering communities, particularly underrepresented ones, requires not just informing or involving them but transferring

real influence over decisions. This mirrors Arnstein's argument that participation without redistribution of power is merely tokenism.

Rocha's (1997) *Ladder of Empowerment* provides a complementary perspective, shifting the focus to community and individual empowerment as a continuum. Her model illustrates how participation can move from passive engagement to active, politicized empowerment, making it especially relevant for immigrant communities who often face compounded systemic barriers. As Rockandel (2024) clarifies, "Planners keep setting up public discussions in terms of winners and losers, and what participants in any engagement processes will gain or lose in terms of what they value. It creates an 'us and them' dynamic, which is not helpful."

While theoretical frameworks such as Arnstein's and Rocha's ladders are frequently used, they have been critiqued for oversimplifying complex realities (Fincher et al., 2014). Participatory processes are often constrained by time, resources, institutional inertia, and political will. As noted by Huxley and Yiftachel (2000), the communicative turn in Planning can fall short if it fails to account for power imbalances and structural inequities. Moreover, Planning must be cautious not to treat immigrant communities as monolithic. Intersectional concerns such as economic status, language, race, religion, and immigration history shape how different groups engage with Planning processes.

3.3 Barriers and Gaps for Immigrant Participation in Planning

While public participation is increasingly recognized as central to democratic planning, significant and persistent barriers continue to undermine the engagement of immigrant communities. These are barriers that are often overlooked or minimized by dominant Planning institutions. For new immigrants, participation in Planning processes is not simply about showing up to a meeting or filling out a survey. It is a layered experience, shaped by linguistic, cultural, emotional, and institutional factors that reflect their broader context of resettlement, economic vulnerability, and often, a deeply ingrained mistrust of government systems. Thus,

effective participation requires not just outreach, but deep cultural responsiveness and sustained relational work.

As Grewal (2020b) observes, many traditional public engagement methods are poorly suited for immigrant and racialized communities. These methods often structured around formal consultations, text-heavy planning documents, or English-only materials, assume a degree of civic familiarity and institutional trust that many newcomers simply do not have. Grewal (2020b) highlights how language barriers, lack of access to translated materials, and unfamiliarity with local governance structures all contribute to exclusion, even when participation is nominally open to all. These structural issues are compounded by psychological and cultural ones: many immigrants may come from countries where criticizing the state is dangerous, or where public decision-making is inaccessible or opaque.

This theme was echoed in the professional findings of this research, where several Planners remarked that immigrants often “don’t feel it’s their role to criticize or comment” (Professional 5). This hesitancy reflects what might be called internalized political disengagement, not apathy, but an internalization of one’s perceived marginality in political life. The Planning system, as currently structured, often fails to meet these residents where they are either linguistically, culturally, or psychologically. Without proactive and culturally grounded approaches, immigrant participation remains elusive, and public engagement risks reinforcing rather than disrupting inequity.

Mould (2015) offers a critical lens on these dynamics by arguing that mainstream participation strategies tend to be superficial, bureaucratic, and depoliticized. He critiques public consultation as a performance of democracy, rather than a vehicle for redistributive change. According to Mould (2015), meaningful participation must address not only technical access but also power relations, which often go unexamined in conventional Planning. His call to embrace subversive, creative, and relational modes of engagement is particularly relevant for immigrant

communities, who may be more responsive to informal, community-led, and culturally specific forms of interaction than to formalized public meetings.

The findings from Planners reinforce Mould's (2015) critique. Several professionals shared that informal venues such as community festivals, churches, mosques, and food-based gatherings were significantly more effective than official town halls or council chambers. These spaces allow for trust-building and storytelling, creating emotional safety and cultural familiarity, two key ingredients of genuine participation. As one of the community engagement specialists highlighted through the example of a session for Regent Park, "We use photographs as the tool for people to use. So, people collaged photographs. It was designing a park" (Professional 3).

This insight aligns strongly with the work of Sandercock (2003b), who champions storytelling, oral traditions, and narrative-based planning as tools for bridging the emotional, linguistic, and cultural divides that often prevent marginalized voices from being heard. Sandercock's emphasis on the emotional dimension of Planning challenges the profession's tendency to privilege rational-technical discourse and invites a richer, more humane approach to engagement. In this view, Planning is not merely a logistical exercise; it is a space of identity, belonging, memory, and hope. For immigrants, whose displacement and resettlement carry profound emotional weight, engagement strategies that incorporate food, culture, language, and storytelling are not supplementary, they are essential.

Additionally, the complexity of immigrant experiences demands a reconsideration of how knowledge is valued in Planning. Umemoto (2001) calls on Planners to adopt epistemological humility, urging them to "walk in another's shoes" and recognize the plurality of knowledge systems that immigrants bring. This is particularly vital in contexts like Simcoe, where demographic shifts are introducing new worldviews, Planning expectations, and civic norms into the local governance landscape. Rather than seeing these differences as barriers to engagement, Umemoto (2001) encourages Planners to de-center their own assumptions and

learn from the ways that different cultural communities understand and experience space, authority, and community.

The findings of this research reflect that few Planning processes create space for these plural knowledges to surface. One Planner asserted, “And so it's not... kind of one size fits all. It should vary for every single project... targeting engagement to the very specific attributes of the communities we're trying to connect with” (Professional 3). This reinforces the need for Planning systems to become adaptive, reflexive, and responsive to community context, particularly when working with groups whose civic identities and expectations differ significantly from dominant norms.

Importantly, these barriers are not only cultural or informational, but they are also structural and economic. Many immigrants work multiple jobs, care for children or elders, lack transportation, or face financial insecurity. Participating in a Planning process often entails sacrifices of time and income that are untenable without support. Professionals repeatedly noted that offering honoraria, food, childcare, and interpretation services were not luxuries, but ethical necessities, practical acknowledgements of the social conditions that shape participation.

The barriers to immigrant participation in Planning are not rooted in disinterest or disengagement, but in institutional misalignment, systemic exclusion, and cultural distance. As this research argues, overcoming these barriers requires a shift from outreach to relationship, from information-sharing to co-creation, and from symbolic inclusion to transformational empowerment. It requires Planners to not only invite immigrant residents into civic spaces but to fundamentally rethink how those spaces operate, who they serve, and whose knowledge counts. Culturally responsive, relational, and justice-driven planning is not just better for immigrants; it is essential for the health and legitimacy of democratic governance in an increasingly diverse society.

3.4 Planning Through a Justice Lens of Spatial Equity and Citizenship

Spatial justice, as theorized by Edward Soja (2010), links urban planning to broader struggles over equity, access, and the right to shape one's environment. His notion of "unjust geographies" highlights how Planning decisions, though often presented as neutral or technocratic, can reinforce systemic inequalities by marginalizing specific communities, particularly immigrants, low-income residents, and racialized groups. Soja's work builds upon Henri Lefebvre's foundational concept of the *Right to the City* (1996), which reframes urban space as a collective social product. He contends that all residents, not just landowners or institutional stakeholders, have the right to participate in producing, using, and transforming urban spaces.

In this view, Lefebvre's (2009) concept of autogestion or self-management, presents a radical response to centralized power in urban governance. Autogestion calls for communities, especially those historically excluded from formal decision-making, to organize autonomously and exert collective control over their spatial environments. Within Planning, this concept urges a shift away from top-down consultation and toward a horizontal model of co-production, where immigrant communities are not simply consulted but are actively empowered to shape the outcomes of development processes. In immigrant-dense municipalities like Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth, such practices could support a more democratic and place-based approach to local governance.

These ideas are closely linked to the broader framework of radical democracy, as theorized by Mouffe (2000) and Laclau & Mouffe (1985). Radical democracy emphasizes contestation, difference, and the politicization of Planning. Rather than smoothing over disagreements for consensus, it calls for making visible the conflicts and power dynamics that shape urban life. For Planners, embracing radical democracy means recognizing immigrant residents not as passive beneficiaries of policy but as political actors with agency, interests, and alternative ways of knowing the city. Fincher et al. (2014) warn that celebrating diversity without

addressing structural exclusion can further marginalize immigrant voices. Their critique aligns with professional feedback on the inadequacy of one-off consultation efforts.

This study's findings underscore how Planning processes in the County of Simcoe often operate at odds with these ideals. Immigrants remain on the periphery of decision-making structures, and their contributions, when invited, are often filtered through rigid procedural mechanisms that diminish their transformative potential. Without structural mechanisms that enable immigrant communities to influence outcomes, planning remains a closed system, reinforcing what Holston (1998) calls *differentiated citizenship*, where some residents have more rights to the city than others.

3.5 Ethical Planning and Professional Responsibility

Ethical engagement in Planning must evolve from a procedural obligation into a transformative commitment grounded in equity, justice, and the redistribution of power. The Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI), in its *Professional Code of Practice* and *Statement of Values*, calls upon Planners to “respect diversity, balance the needs of communities and individuals, and foster public participation in Planning decisions that affect them.” Yet despite these ethical commitments, there remains a persistent gap between aspirational values and real-world practices, especially in relation to new immigrant communities.

In the professional findings, this disconnect was widely acknowledged. Several practitioners voiced frustration with the superficiality of public engagement processes, particularly when they were reduced to checkbox exercises aimed at fulfilling statutory requirements. This sentiment mirrors Fischer's (2016) critique of participatory governance, which argues that institutions often perform inclusivity while preserving elite-driven structures. Without systemic change, participatory spaces can function as façades, offering the illusion of empowerment while maintaining top-down control.

In this context, ethical responsibility extends far beyond hosting open houses or posting surveys. It involves actively interrogating the structures, assumptions, and norms that shape Planning decisions and challenging those that produce or reinforce exclusion. As Young (2000) argues, justice in democratic institutions depends not just on the inclusion of diverse voices, but on the recognition of power differentials and the intentional creation of spaces that center marginalized perspectives.

Ethical Planning must therefore be deeply reflexive. Planners must confront their own professional biases, understand the lived realities of the communities they serve, and operate from a position of cultural humility. As Umemoto (2001) and Sandercock (2003b) emphasize, ethical engagement requires more than good intentions; it requires Planners to “unlearn” dominant paradigms and embrace forms of knowledge and expression that may challenge the status quo. This includes valuing storytelling, collective memory, and emotional expression, modes often dismissed as non-rational within traditional Planning frameworks.

Moreover, ethics must be institutionalized, not simply practiced on an individual level. Professionals in this study repeatedly called for capacity-building and institutional accountability. This includes equity audits, mandatory cultural competency and unconscious bias training, transparent follow-up processes, and internal culture shifts that reward inclusive practices. As one Planning Manager noted, “I’ve had some cultural awareness and sensitivity training regarding indigenous communities. And I think those practices are transferable to basically anybody. It’s about going to meet where they are” (Professional 10).

An ethical approach also demands that Planners recognize participation as labour: emotional, cognitive, and temporal. Several professionals advocated for compensating participants, offering food, translation, childcare, and transportation, not as perks, but as equity measures. These are not merely logistical supports; they are concrete manifestations of respect and reciprocity. They acknowledge, as Fainstein (2010) suggests, that just planning requires redistribution, not only of resources but of decision-making power.

Ethical Planning is thus not a neutral or apolitical act. It is inherently tied to questions of who has the right to shape space, whose voices are prioritized, and how Planners choose to engage with difference and inequality. The Planner's role, then, is not only to facilitate, but to advocate, to question, and, at times, to disrupt exclusionary systems from within.

In the context of immigrant participation in the County, this means moving beyond conventional engagement to create transformative relationships with communities. It means elevating lived experiences to the level of legitimate Planning knowledge and designing Planning processes that are as diverse and pluralistic as the communities they aim to serve. Only then can Planning fulfill its ethical promise, not just as a profession, but as a democratic practice.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This research adopted a multi-method qualitative approach to explore the role of Planners in fostering immigrant participation in local Planning processes. The study involved a comprehensive literature review, content analysis of key policy documents, and semi-structured interviews with professionals and residents across the three municipalities in South Simcoe: Bradford West Gwillimbury, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth.

Document selection was strategic and guided by keywords such as ‘public participation’, ‘immigration’, and ‘planning policy’. Two key documents were reviewed from each municipality: their Official Plan and communication strategies or toolkits (see Table 2). In addition, relevant County- and Provincial-level documents were included, such as the *Planning Act*, Provincial Policy Statement (2024), and the Simcoe County Official Plan. These were the most current and publicly accessible versions available as of January 2025.

Content analysis of these documents followed the qualitative approach outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), focusing on patterns and themes rather than simple word counts. The analysis sought to understand how municipalities embed participatory practices within policy and how these practices accommodate immigrant communities. Coding was inductive and guided by the research objectives, ensuring that emerging themes were grounded in context. Creswell and Poth’s (2018) recommendations on organizing and segmenting data into relevant themes were used to link findings back to the central research questions.

Table 2: Documents Reviewed at the Municipal Level

Municipality	Official Plans	Communication Strategies / Toolkits
Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury	<u>Official Plan 2021</u>	<u>Planning to 2051 – Consultation and Engagement Plan</u>
Town of Innisfil	<u>Official Plan 2018</u>	<u>Innisfil Strategic Plan</u>

		<u>Community Engagement Toolkit</u>
Town of New Tecumseth	<u>Official Plan 2019</u>	<u>New Tecumseth Strategic Plan</u> <u>2022-2026</u>

To complement the document analysis, the study involved interviews with fifteen (15) professionals, including municipal Planners, engagement consultants, and community service providers, and eight (8) residents from New Tecumseth. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. Criteria for professional participants included relevant Planning experience in the County or in public participation roles. Some professionals were identified through the researcher's network, while others were contacted via LinkedIn.

Residents were selected from the communities of Alliston, Beeton, and Tottenham, based on their lived experiences within New Tecumseth. Each of the three Simcoe municipalities was represented in the professional sample, with participants including Directors, Managers and Senior Planners, community engagement specialists who have been consulted by different municipalities on special projects requiring meaningful public input, and community service providers such as Community Living Association for South Simcoe (CLASS) and the Beeton Tottenham Business Improvement Association (BTBIA) offering local community services.

Interview questions were tailored to each group (see Table below). Professionals were asked about barriers to participation, cultural inclusivity, and the evolving role of Planners. Residents were asked about their personal experiences with Planning processes, access to information, and motivations or barriers to engagement.

Table 3: Interview Guide for Professionals and Residents

Questions for Professionals	Questions for Residents
Q1. What are the current barriers that prevent new immigrants in the County of Simcoe from actively participating in Planning processes?	Q1. How long have you been a part of this community/Town?
Q2. In your experience, how do language, cultural differences, or other socio-economic factors impact the participation of new immigrants in community planning initiatives?	Q2. What is your primary source of information about new developments in the community?
Q3. How can planning processes be adapted to be more culturally sensitive and inclusive for new immigrant communities?	Q3. How often have you been invited or notified to participate in the Town's Planning processes?
Q4. What strategies have you found most effective in fostering trust and communication with new immigrant communities when engaging them in Planning?	Q4. When you receive notices about developments, do you usually read them? Why or why not?
Q5. What do you consider the key elements of a successful public participation process, particularly when engaging underrepresented groups such as new immigrants?	Q5. Can you share your participatory experience relating to a specific Planning application process?

<p>Q6. Could you share examples of public participation initiatives that you believe have successfully integrated new immigrants in the County of Simcoe? What factors contributed to their success?</p>	<p>Q6. What aspects of your participation were positive, and what areas could be improved?</p>
<p>Q7. What is your opinion on the use of arts-based methods (e.g., storytelling, visual arts, theatre) to engage new immigrant communities in Planning processes? Have you seen these methods used effectively and/or does your Town implement such methods of engagement?</p>	<p>Q7. What motivated you to participate? If you don't participate in the Town's Planning processes, what are the reasons? (e.g., lack of time, inconvenient location, perceived irrelevance, or trust that others will represent your views).</p>
<p>Q8. In Planning circles, we tend to use the words consultation, engagement and participation quite interchangeably. Do you think there's a difference? If yes, what is the difference?</p>	<p>Q8. What are your thoughts on the recent changes happening in the community?</p>
<p>Q9. How do you see the role of municipal Planners evolving to ensure more inclusive participatory processes for new immigrant communities? What additional training or tools might they need?</p>	<p>Q9. Would you like to receive more information about developments in the Town? If so, what would be your preferred method of communication?</p>

Interviews were conducted between January and March 2025, mostly online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and a few in-person. Sessions lasted 45 to 60 minutes. Informed consent was obtained, and ethical protocols were strictly followed, including anonymity, voluntary

participation, and secure data storage on an encrypted external hard drive. Participants were informed that anonymized findings could be used in future presentations or publications, and results would be shared with them.

Interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combined with principles from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Initial codes were drawn from the interview transcripts based on recurring patterns and ideas. These codes were then grouped into broader themes linked to the research questions. Irrelevant content was excluded. A cyclical process of refining codes and themes ensured internal consistency and interpretive depth (Nowell et al., 2017).

To illustrate the analytical process, one key theme, “Relational Practice in Planning”, was developed from responses to a question about the evolving role of Planners. Based on the interviews, a process of reviewing and open coding was adopted to first read through all the responses to this question to gain an overall understanding. Then the data was coded inductively, highlighting recurring concepts, key terms, and competencies mentioned across multiple interviews. Words and phrases like “empathy,” “facilitation,” “build trust,” “cultural competency,” “listening,” “relationship-building,” and “adaptability” emerged repeatedly. This helped to group the data into conceptually similar units.

Coded responses were further grouped into clusters or potential themes based on their conceptual similarity. For example:

- “Listening,” “trust,” and “being present in the community” were grouped into a theme around “Empathy and Relationship Building”.
- “Understanding cultural differences,” “working with interpreters,” and “language access” were clustered into “Cultural Competency”.
- “Art-based methods,” “storytelling,” and “changing formats” fell under “Flexibility and Creativity”.

This iterative process led to the emergence of seven clear, recurring competencies: “Active Listening”, “Cultural Competency”, “Relationship Building”, “Facilitation and Communication”, “Data Literacy”, “Flexibility”, and “Continuous Learning”. These competencies fall within the umbrella code of “Relational Practice in Planning”, which encapsulates the shift from technical expertise to a human-centered, and community-rooted practice. It reflects a Planning approach where process matters as much as outcomes, and where Planners engage not just as facilitators of projects, but as relational agents of place and people.

Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings of the research, drawn from in-depth interviews with professionals working in Planning and community engagement roles across South Simcoe. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how municipal Planners understand, experience, and respond to the challenges and opportunities involved in engaging new immigrant communities in public Planning processes. Table 4 provides a summary of the skills required by Planners to support inclusive participation going forward. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, several core themes emerged across the participants' responses. These themes reflect both systemic barriers to immigrant participation and the evolving practices Planners are adopting to create more inclusive, culturally responsive, and equitable planning environments. The findings also highlight how language, cultural norms, socio-economic status, and historical mistrust of government institutions shape how immigrants perceive and engage with Planning processes.

The analysis is organized around key areas that align with the research questions: current barriers to participation, the impact of social and cultural factors, strategies for adapting Planning processes, approaches to building trust, examples of successful participation, the evolving skillset of Planners, and the potential of creative and arts-based methods. Where relevant, insights from the interviews are supplemented by direct quotations to amplify practitioner voices and illustrate real-world practices.

Together, these findings provide a nuanced understanding of how Planners are navigating the complex task of engaging increasingly diverse populations, and how their roles, tools, and values are changing in response to that challenge. The themes presented here form the foundation for the development of a practitioner-oriented Public Participation Toolkit and offer critical insight into how inclusive Planning can be advanced in policy and practice.

Table 4: Top 7 Skills for Planners to Support Inclusive Participation

Skills Required	Planners' Role	Why It Matters	Evidence / Example
Active Listening & Empathy	Being fully present with community members, validating their experiences, and not rushing to respond.	Builds trust and ensures that immigrant voices are genuinely heard and respected.	Professional 11 emphasized the importance of “speaking last” to allow residents space to share their truths.
Cultural Competency	Understanding and respecting different cultural norms, trauma histories, and styles of communication.	Prevents alienation, increases comfort in participation, and ensures culturally safe engagement.	Professionals 1, 12, and 14 stressed working with cultural liaisons and adapting formats to match community norms.
Relationship Building	Investing time to build trust through sustained presence, not just during projects.	Encourages repeat engagement and strengthens community-municipality relationships.	One Planner described how long-term relationships with cultural organizations led to more meaningful collaboration.
Facilitation & Plain Communication	Designing and leading inclusive conversations while reducing	Improves accessibility for non-native English speakers and low-literacy participants.	Professionals recommended plain-language training and using visuals or

	Planning jargon and complexity.		interpreters during workshops and consultations.
Data Literacy	Using demographic and spatial data to identify community needs and tailor outreach strategies.	Ensures that engagement efforts reach underrepresented or hard-to-reach immigrant populations.	Respondents discussed using census and GIS data to determine top languages and cultural groups in specific areas.
Flexibility & Creativity	Adapting engagement methods and using creative formats like art, food, and storytelling.	Increases relevance and participation, especially for those unfamiliar with conventional formats.	Professionals cited success with murals, “Taste & Talk” events, and school-based storytelling workshops.
Continuous Learning	Ongoing training, reflection, and openness to feedback and evolving practices.	Help Planners stay current on equity issues and adapt to changing community dynamics.	Several respondents called for institutionalized training and peer learning around bias, trauma, and cultural humility.

5.2 Participatory Planning Framework in the Three Municipalities

The *Planning Act* has statutory requirements for municipalities to conduct open houses and public meetings for various types of applications. The *Act*, however, does not specify any provision that mandates municipalities to consider a DEI perspective as part of engagement. While the PPS 2024 does encourage Planning authorities to include “equity-deserving groups”, while implementing the policies of the PPS, it isn’t mandatory. Considering this framework, one may infer that municipalities are also not necessarily “required” to target diverse and inclusive audiences as part of conducting public engagement for Official Plan Reviews or settlement area boundary expansions. BWG, Innisfil and New Tecumseth are planning for population and employment growth until 2051. As part of Simcoe’s MCR process, each municipality recently conducted a Growth Management Study to inform long-range Planning decisions. These processes provided a key opportunity to test the alignment between policy and practice in public participation. Before reviewing how these municipalities gathered public input during this process, understanding their policy context is crucial.

Official Plans: BWG’s Official Plan (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury, 2021) adopted by Council in 2021, follows the Town’s “Planning to 2051 Consultation and Engagement Plan,” which is explicitly referenced in the staff report on the Growth Management Study as the guiding document for public engagement strategy. While the publicly available Official Plan (OP) itself does not list discrete section numbers on community engagement or participation, the Town’s Growth Management Work Plan and associated Staff reports repeatedly cite the importance of aligning with the 2051 Consultation and Engagement Plan. This establishes early and iterative engagement through workshops, open houses, council sessions, and drop-in formats.

Innisfil’s Official Plan, titled *Our Place*, was “drafted with help from community input and external consultants,” (Town of Innisfil, 2018) embedding participation into its overall vision, though section numbering around engagement is not published online. Engagement policies are

supported by a separate Community Engagement Toolkit that emphasizes inclusive, accessible methods such as digital platforms, surveys, and participant outreach, but these sit outside the OP text.

New Tecumseth's Official Plan (approved June 25, 2019) frames policies for growth and land use but does not itself contain explicit section headings or references to public participation. The Experimental link with Simcoe County's MCR and integrated planning is emphasized, setting the context for engagement protocols leading into settlement area expansions and the Town's own OP Amendment process (Town of New Tecumseth, 2019).

5.3 Implementation in Growth Management Planning



Figure 22: BWG Official Plan Review Visioning Workshop (Masoudi, 2024)

BWG held a series of engagement events aligned with its OP. A visioning workshop in October 2024 launched the consultation phase, followed by a Special Council Meeting in June 2024 and a public open house in January 2025. The engagement strategy does not explicitly mention equity or inclusion principles, and the participant groups prioritized in their public meetings (e.g., landowners and developers) suggest a conventional planning orientation that may sideline marginalized voices. The formats ranged from formal meetings to informal drop-ins, reflecting a

layered strategy to involve different audiences. There is no indication that the Town adapted its engagement approach to reach immigrant residents or considered culturally responsive practices.



Figure 23: *Innisfil Open House for the Community Planning Permit System Project*
(Town of Innisfil, May 2025)

Innisfil employed engagement practices consistent with its digital-first strategy. The Town recently conducted a combined open house for its Official Plan Review and Community Planning Permit System (CPPS) projects. This involved conducting virtual surveys and in-person sessions. The Town offers all project information through the *Get Involved* portal.

These tools can enhance convenience but may inadvertently exclude those with limited digital access or low technology literacy, such as newcomers unfamiliar with municipal platforms.

Without detailed demographic reporting, it is unclear whether Innisfil's methods successfully reached underrepresented populations. For

example, it's unclear if engagement efforts during the Growth Management Study included outreach to newcomer organizations, cultural associations, or interpretation services.



Figure 24: *Public Engagement for the Town's Official Plan Review* (Town of Innisfil, March 2025)

New Tecumseth conducted their Growth Management Study in partnership with Hemson Consulting, which was done in three (3) phases. Detailed and updated information on the process, spanning over a two-year period, including Staff reports, project timelines, and recommended growth scenarios were made available through the Town's dedicated '*Official Plan Review*' page. Public input was gathered from residents, developers, and other community members in the Town. Engagement sessions included pop-up events throughout 2024 at



Figure 25: Instagram Story Highlight for the Town's Growth Management Study (Town of New Tecumseth, March 2025)

various festivals such as Earth Fest, Beeton Honey and Garden Festival, and the Tottenham Home Show, online surveys, and other open house community-styled sessions at the Town Hall. It concluded with a joint open house and formal public meeting held with the County on April 9, 2025. These sessions were linked to the policy direction of the Strategic Plan and designed to be accessible in timing and location. Compared to the other municipalities, New Tecumseth demonstrated a more visible effort to meet people where they are. There is, however, no clear evidence that these sessions were tailored to diverse communities or supported multilingual or culturally responsive engagement strategies.

5.4 A Critical Lens: Diversity, Inclusion, and Immigrant Participation

All three municipalities have formalized their commitments through strategic documents that outline their vision for transparent, participatory governance. While they formally acknowledge the importance of engagement, few provide concrete mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of diverse communities, particularly immigrants.

Bradford West Gwillimbury's Planning to 2051 Consultation and Engagement Plan

The "Planning to 2051 Consultation and Engagement Plan" articulates a structured approach to engagement that includes early outreach, workshops, open houses, and drop-in events designed to involve both residents and other community participants. The plan emphasizes iterative consultation tied to key decision points in the Planning process. While it acknowledges the importance of inclusive outreach but lacks clear strategies to target immigrant populations.

Though some projects (e.g., the Growth Management Study) successfully used multilingual outreach and small-group settings, these practices are not standardized across all municipal efforts. As one of the Planning Directors noted about this initiative, “I think it's the more personal approach and not the large format...when we have our colleagues at table talks where you've got smaller groups with the facilitator, it's more inviting because everyone's sitting together” (Professional 1). This approach resonates with Sandercock’s (2003a) assertion that Planning must operate within the cultural and emotional contexts of participants.

The use of plain-language materials, personalized invitations, and multilingual staff for the Growth Management Study also reflects the communicative planning ethos advocated by Healey (1992), where mutual understanding is prioritized over technical dissemination. However, without institutional mechanisms to embed these practices into routine policymaking, their impact remains inconsistent. Professionals warned that these one-off successes risk becoming performative if not sustained. Rocha’s (1997) Ladder of Empowerment further underscores the need to move from isolated, individual efforts toward collective, systemic change. To that end, Planners must advocate for policies that require culturally and linguistically appropriate engagement as a norm, not an exception. The Plan’s silence on targeting immigrant populations suggests a gap between principle and practice, one that future policy updates must address if the municipality hopes to transition from tokenistic engagement to meaningful empowerment.



Figure 26: BWG *Planning to 2051 Consultation and Engagement Plan* (Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury et al., 2024)

Innisfil's Strategic Plan 2030 and Community Engagement Toolkit

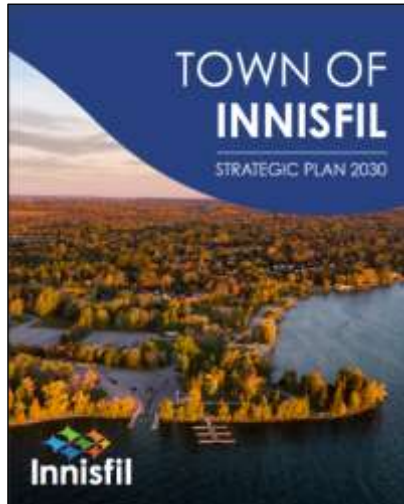


Figure 27: Strategic Plan 2023
(Town of Innisfil, November, 2023)

Innisfil does make more progressive commitments in its Community Engagement Toolkit, which includes references to “inclusive design” and removing barriers to participation. The Town also hosts a dedicated Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) webpage that signals an institutional awareness of these values. The Toolkit demonstrates more robust inclusion practices and encourages varied formats and cultural awareness, aligning with professional findings on the importance of meeting people “where they are.” For example, the Toolkit acknowledges that engagement must occur across

multiple platforms and in community-based locations, a sentiment echoed by Professional 2, who shared, “To truly engage with people, you have to go to them, make yourself available in places where they also feel comfortable and not dictate terms of that.” This aligns strongly with Sandercock’s (2003a) emphasis on meeting people in their own spaces and valuing place-based knowledge.

Professionals, however, suggested that even these efforts could go further by embedding DEI checklists into everyday Planning practices and applying a cultural perspective to all reports. As Professional 15 noted, “We’re all guilty of just staying in our little ivory towers and kind of thinking in our little silos... somebody has got to look at the work that you’re doing with a cultural lens.” This comment reflects Umemoto’s (2001) critique of Planning systems that operate without consideration of differing worldviews and lived experiences.



Figure 28: Innisfil Community Engagement Toolkit (Town of Innisfil, n.d.-)

Despite its strengths, the Innisfil Toolkit appears to focus more on procedural inclusivity than on addressing systemic inequities that prevent deeper participation. Rocha’s (1997) Ladder of Empowerment reminds us of surface-level participation that often fails to lead to collective empowerment unless it is supported by systemic institutional change. Innisfil’s efforts would benefit from formalizing the roles of cultural ambassadors, allocating resources for compensation and translation services, and requiring impact evaluations that assess inclusion outcomes, thus moving from responsive outreach to proactive empowerment.

In essence, while the Toolkit offers a valuable foundation, the next step is integration: normalizing equity-minded practices not as exceptions but as embedded features of every Planning process. This requires a commitment to continuous learning and training on cultural differences from Planners. This means recognizing that inclusive planning is not a checkbox, it requires ongoing growth, humility, and exposure to new perspectives. One of the Senior Planners suggested regular engagement training, like municipalities do with cybersecurity: “Every two years, do another course” (Professional 9).



Figure 29: *Strategic Plan 2022-2026*
(Town of New Tecumseth, 2025)

New Tecumseth’s Strategic Plan (2022–2026) outlines goals related to community inclusion and engagement, but like other municipalities, it requires a clearer operational roadmap to reach immigrant residents. While the Strategic Plan

includes a solid operational roadmap for improving engagement and transparency, it does not robustly apply a DEI lens to its public participation goals. The 2024 Plan update (Town of New Tecumseth, 2025) shows that current initiatives prioritize convenience, visibility, and digital communication but lack depth in addressing language accessibility, cultural responsiveness, equity in decision-making spaces, and specific

newcomer or immigrant focused strategies. The public sessions were offered in person across multiple communities, which can improve geographic accessibility, but there is no mention of accommodations for language, childcare, or other supports that often influence newcomer participation. In this regard, the Town maintained a traditional engagement model without specific interventions to include immigrant communities. However, promising initiatives like Placemaking Week demonstrate the potential for experiential and informal engagement. As Professional 9 observed, "Our placemaking week is really a non-threatening way for us to connect with community and to understand what their values are and how they experience the urban context".



Figure 31: Facebook Post on Placemaking Week

This mirrors Forester's (1999) argument that Planners must actively listen and use deliberative practices to understand people's concerns in real time. Rather than relying on formal mechanisms, *Placemaking Week* represents an example of what Forester terms

'deliberative improvisation', where Planners adapt based on community feedback and the social rhythms of everyday life. These formats also connect to Innes and Booher's (2004) model of collaborative rationality, where Planning knowledge is co-created in inclusive and non-hierarchical spaces. A collaborative Planning professional underscored that informal public events are more accessible: "Some people would rather get around food and have dinner and kind of an informal gathering. They don't want to go to



Figure 30: Placemaking Activities in New Tecumseth (Gibson, 2023)

a basement of a community center for three hours on a Thursday night” (Professional 5). This supports Grewal’s (2020b) call for place-based approaches that honor how immigrant communities navigate and experience public space.

To elevate initiatives like Placemaking Week from symbolic inclusion to transformative engagement, New Tecumseth must commit to regularizing these methods. This includes evaluating their impact, investing in multilingual and culturally attuned staff, and embedding them in Planning cycles. As one of the Planning Directors from another municipality stated, “Some of our planning staff can speak different languages... Farsi, Arabic as well as I think Mandarin or Cantonese. This cultural diversity within the community planning group is more welcoming for different newcomers” (Professional 1).

While the three municipalities of BWG, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth have each established policies supporting public engagement, their practices during the Growth Management Study period suggest uneven application of these principles, particularly when viewed through the lens of diversity and inclusion. Innisfil shows the most potential for inclusive planning through its digital tools and EDI framework, but there is little evidence that this translated into differentiated engagement for immigrants. BWG and New Tecumseth followed through on procedural engagement milestones but did not adapt their methods to meaningfully reach diverse populations.

The analysis underscores a gap between aspirational engagement policies and the realities of participatory planning on the ground. Without deliberate strategies to engage immigrant communities, such as targeted outreach, multilingual materials, and partnerships with local cultural organizations, participation risks remaining narrow and unrepresentative, reinforcing Planning outcomes that may not reflect the needs of all residents.

5.5 Findings – Key Themes

By synthesizing insights from the literature review and professional findings and situating them within the context of Planning policies and municipal strategies from Bradford West Gwillimbury, Town of New Tecumseth, and the Town of Innisfil, we can better understand the existing gaps, opportunities, and actionable pathways for inclusive planning practices.

Resident experiences with planning participation in New Tecumseth reveal a wide spectrum, from meaningful and empowering engagement to complete disengagement, often shaped by access, awareness, and personal circumstances. Some residents reported positive involvement. For instance, one attended a town growth management session and reflected, “It was engaging... there were a lot of different mechanisms to disseminate information... and it was well staffed.” Others described attending public meetings out of concern for direct impacts on their property or community. One resident recalled speaking in support of a neighbour’s Zoning amendment, noting, “I went in and I supported him... luckily Council passed it and he went ahead with his workshop.” These instances show that when participation is facilitated through accessible events or driven by direct relevance, it can foster a sense of inclusion and civic agency (Manzo & Perkins, 2006).

However, the experiences were not universally positive. Some residents noted barriers stemming from intimidation by the formality of public meetings: “It is very intimidating, like a legal process... if they're shy or not prepared, they won't speak.” Others had attended but felt the format limited dialogue: “The engineers were ready... but nobody asked them questions. Maybe the public didn't want to or didn't know how.” This reflects Sandercock’s (2003a) observation that public meetings, even when open, can be culturally or structurally exclusionary if not intentionally inclusive or clarified for residents.

5.5.1 Understanding Participation Beyond Engagement and Consultation

The literature (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006; Innes & Booher, 2004) clarifies the distinctions between consultation, engagement, and participation. While consultation often implies minimal influence and engagement suggests two-way communication, participation demands active involvement and shared decision-making. Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Citizen Participation" clearly identifies this hierarchy, categorizing participation that lacks power redistribution as tokenism. Fung (2006) extends this view by conceptualizing participation in terms of its scope, intensity, and authority by introducing the participatory cube framework, suggesting that the most effective forms allow citizens to co-govern. His work underscores that high-quality participation must be deliberative and influential. Innes and Booher (2004) further advocate for inclusive, dialogic spaces that go beyond procedural obligations.

This conceptual differentiation is mirrored in professional findings, where Planners expressed that traditional town halls and consultations often fail to include immigrants meaningfully. One of the municipal Planning Managers noted that "consultation... informing you would be like issuing a notice of decision... but there's no real dialogue" (Professional 10), which supports Arnstein's critique. Another Planner highlighted that immigrant engagement often remains on the lower rungs of participation, characterized by informing or placation rather than true involvement.

Rocha's (1997) Ladder of Empowerment offers an additional lens to understand this limitation, emphasizing that empowerment is both individual and collective, and moves through stages from atomistic individual empowerment to politicized collective empowerment. According to Rocha, genuine participation should cultivate a sense of agency within individuals while also enabling communities to challenge structural conditions. The findings revealed that many current practices stop short of this, failing to provide the continuity, recognition, or resources required to foster collective capacity among immigrants.

The responses to whether residents had been invited or notified to participate in the Town's Planning processes reveal significant gaps in outreach and communication, particularly for those not actively seeking out information. While one or two residents recalled attending town halls or receiving invitations ("through the communication whenever they do a public invite"), the majority either had no recollection of being invited or expressed dissatisfaction with how outreach was conducted. One resident noted, "No, not really," while another stated bluntly, "Never." A particularly telling insight came from a newer resident who described the process as "one-sided... you have to go to them rather than them coming to you." This highlights a critical shortfall in proactive engagement and suggests that current methods may not be reaching less connected or newly arrived residents, groups often most in need of inclusive participation opportunities.

From a Planning perspective, this reflects a broader issue identified by Albrecht (2021), who notes that municipalities often rely on traditional or passive forms of communication, expecting residents to navigate bureaucratic systems rather than meeting them where they are. Furthermore, Innes and Booher (2004) argue that authentic participation requires Planners to go beyond formal invitations and cultivate ongoing, dialogic relationships with the public. This is echoed by one respondent who noted that even social media content from the Town is limited compared to other municipalities, suggesting a missed opportunity to leverage digital platforms more effectively.

There were, however, also examples of more proactive engagement efforts. A Council member shared that the Planning Department had been present at "community events... in the treetops community and different festivals," and spoke positively about "multiple opportunities to interact" at public information sessions. This indicates that while engagement efforts do exist, they may not be widely known or equitably distributed. The lack of consistent visibility across diverse resident groups points to the need for more targeted, accessible, and culturally sensitive outreach strategies. As Sandercock (2003a) and Qadeer (1997) emphasize, inclusive planning

must address not just who is invited, but how, when, and through which channels, especially in multicultural and evolving communities. Based on professional insights, the following table highlights choosing the right approach based on the trigger or primary objective for a Planning process and thereby differentiates between engagement, consultation, and participation.

Table 5: Choosing Consultation vs. Engagement vs. Participation

Trigger	Approach	Why It Works
Feedback required by law	Consultation	Informing + collecting input without real-time change
Shaping a direction together	Engagement	Builds trust, allows for real influence
Shared power or co-creation	Participation	Empowers marginalized voices, deepens legitimacy
Trust is low or historic harm exists	Participation or Engagement	Rebuilds relationships, signals shared ownership
Time or resource limits	Honest Consultation or Light Engagement	Still valid—if transparent and respectful

Professionals emphasized that successful public participation should move beyond statutory compliance toward shared power, co-design, and participatory governance. This aligns with Davidoff's (1965, 2016) vision of advocacy planning, in which Planners actively amplify marginalized voices to correct structural inequalities in urban development. They felt that while participation is often idealised, it is resource intensive. The Director for one of the community service providers advocated for full participation as a model for co-design and equity, while a Senior Planner supported participation when communities are directly affected or marginalized. One public engagement coordinator differentiated stating that, "...anything that involves collaboration with people includes engagement and participation. Consultation is not a part of

the conversation unless your intention is only to communicate out to the public and it's just a one-way communication" (Professional 7).

5.5.2 Barriers to Participation

Language, awareness, and cultural disconnect. The literature emphasizes how systemic and structural barriers marginalize immigrant voices (Grewal, 2020b; Sandercock, 2003a). These findings are echoed by professionals who noted that language barriers, lack of civic knowledge, and mistrust of government are among the chief impediments to participation. Planning jargon and unilingual communications alienate newcomers, even those fluent in conversational English. This finding aligns with Mould's (2015) and Healey's (1992) emphasis on the importance of communicative planning and culturally responsive engagement.

Professionals shared that immigrants often lacked access to resources explaining Planning systems in Canada, and many municipalities failed to maintain multilingual websites or outreach channels. For example, one public engagement coordinator noted the absence of multilingual public information, stating, "There's no web page on the City's website that shares with folks how they can be engaged" (Professional 7). Another emphasized the intimidation factor of formal events, suggesting that being sensitive and using simpler language might work better: "By having that sensitivity worked into it like plain language or the meeting format. You've got 50 people in a crowd and having to stick your hand up, that's pretty intimidating" (Professional 1). One of the residents resonated with language being a barrier as they insightfully pointed out, "For new immigrants... English as a second language is intimidating. Some come from places where it's difficult to participate. They're scared." This fear reflects Qadeer's (1997) findings on immigrant disengagement and mistrust in institutions due to cultural and linguistic alienation.

Residents also pointed to challenges in accessing documents or meetings: "Reports are long... highlights and meeting times should be clearly displayed," and others suggested

translating key points into multiple languages to promote inclusion. Some residents also acknowledged that there is a lack of awareness underscored by communication gaps. They were unaware of opportunities to participate. One said, “I don’t want to have to seek it out... if they reached out to me, I’d be happy to participate.” This highlights a significant communication breakdown and supports the findings of Albrecht (2021), who stresses the need for proactive and inclusive communication strategies.

Sandercock’s (2003b) notion that storytelling and oral traditions serve as bridges across cultural and linguistic divides finds support here. One Planner noted the value of dialogue circles and informal settings, such as booths at community festivals, to break down language and trust barriers. Another example echoed the need for familiar formats: “...trying to ensure that materials are multifaceted visuals written in simple language, language that can be accessible, converted to be clear in other languages, easily translatable, if possible” (Professional 8), reinforcing that Planning communication must prioritize clarity, trust-building, and accessibility.

Professionals recommended multilingual supports, plain-language materials, and the use of interpreters where most impactful. For instance, visual signage, culturally resonant imagery, and hybrid engagement options (e.g., virtual breakout rooms with interpretation) were suggested as scalable yet inclusive tactics. These strategies exemplify communicative planning as outlined by Healey and reflect the ethical imperative to meet residents where they are: linguistically, culturally, and emotionally.

The responses to the question “How long have you been a part of this community?” revealed a wide range of residency lengths, from as few as 3 years to as many as 25 years, with an average of approximately 14.8 years. Notably, half of the participants were long-term residents (over 15 years), while only two were relatively new to the community (under 5 years). This distribution indicates that most respondents have had substantial time to establish roots and become familiar with local governance structures. As the literature suggests, long-term residency is often associated with stronger place attachment, community investment, and a

higher likelihood of participating in civic processes (Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Lewicka, 2011). These residents may have deeper historical knowledge of Planning issues and greater confidence in engaging with local institutions. In contrast, newer residents may face barriers such as limited awareness of Planning processes or a lack of perceived belonging, which aligns with findings from Qadeer (1997) and Sandercock (2003a), who emphasize that immigrants often experience exclusion due to unfamiliarity with local systems or perceived institutional distance.

Understanding this divide is crucial for Planners. It highlights the need to develop differentiated engagement strategies that both sustain the involvement of long-standing community members and actively welcome and integrate newer immigrants, who may require more targeted outreach and culturally relevant communication approaches (Albrecht, 2021). These findings reinforce the importance of inclusive planning practices that are responsive to varying levels of familiarity and connection to the community, ultimately supporting a more equitable participatory process.

Time, trust, and economic constraints. Professionals repeatedly highlighted that many newcomers, overwhelmed by basic needs such as housing, work, and childcare, perceive participation as a luxury. Several professionals articulated that immigrants often prioritize survival and have neither the time nor emotional bandwidth for engagement. "Participation is labour," noted one engagement coordinator (Professional 7), advocating for compensation through honoraria and logistical supports such as food, transportation, and childcare. Others added that offering meals, scheduling flexibility, and holding meetings at accessible locations were not just practical considerations but necessary equity measures. This echoes with residents' point of view who mentioned that lack of time and competing priorities are a significant barrier to participation, especially for parents and working individuals. As one resident related, "When I was a single mom... there was no time to go to City Hall. You just prioritize."

Others noted, “Trivia night, daycare, hockey, all come before the Planning Act.” Some felt that decisions were already made: “It’s a courtesy to inform, but they already know what they want to do.” This sense of futility can erode civic engagement over time if not actively addressed by Planners.

This reality challenges normative planning assumptions and underscores the importance of adaptive, context-sensitive strategies. Umemoto (2001) emphasizes the necessity of Planners stepping into the epistemological “shoes” of others to better understand differing lived realities, an approach that aligns with these findings. Similarly, Sandercock (2003b) advocates for an appreciation of the emotional and cultural dimensions of engagement, which are often invisible in traditional formats.

Furthermore, professionals described participation fatigue and emphasized that the labor of storytelling and representing one’s community, particularly in unfamiliar or formal spaces, can be emotionally taxing and economically unrewarded. These reflections echo Rocha’s (1997) framework of empowerment, suggesting that unless participation supports the shift from atomistic to politicized collective empowerment, it risks becoming exploitative. As Fincher et al. (2014) caution, celebrating diversity without accounting for social divisions can reinforce exclusion. Thus, Planners must go beyond performative inclusion to foster real trust and flexibility in their engagement practices, recognizing that equitable participation requires tangible investments that respect the time, voice, and labor of marginalized communities.

Trust-building and representation. Relational engagement is key to building trust, especially in communities with historical or ongoing mistrust of government. This theme, central in the findings, resonates with Umemoto’s (2001) call for empathy in Planning and Davidoff’s (2016) advocacy for Planners to act as social justice agents. Professionals repeatedly emphasized that building trust requires Planners to go beyond formal consultation and show up consistently in community spaces. One Senior Planner also stated that “there is a

disenfranchisement and apathy towards government organizations, and there's a real attitude out there that my voice doesn't matter, so I'm not going to engage" (Professional 6). They further explain that in order to conduct meaning engagement effectively, there's a need to identify the reason for distrust to deal with it accordingly. This underscores the importance of long-term relational work over episodic engagement.

Strategies such as using cultural liaisons, holding meetings in familiar environments like mosques, churches, and grocery stores, and presenting Planners as human and relatable ("not just a bureaucrat") were seen as essential. As Professional 12 asserted that it's important for people to know, "I'm not just some bureaucrat... I'm a human being just like them and we can actually make that physical connection. I think just being present is important." This humanizing approach aligns with Davidoff's (2016) vision of advocacy planning, where Planners are not detached experts but empathetic partners in community change.

Additionally, the presence of multilingual and culturally reflective staff was repeatedly cited as a key enabler of inclusive spaces. Professional 1 highlighted how "bringing over different staff, people with different language abilities... makes the environment more comfortable." This complements Umemoto's (2001) argument that cultural empathy and linguistic inclusion are essential to breaking down power asymmetries in Planning processes. One illustrative example is the use of "community animators" described by Professional 3. These individuals, drawn from the communities themselves, facilitated small group conversations and acted as cultural bridges. This method is reflective of Sandercock's (2003a) call for Planners to recognize diverse forms of knowledge and to embrace practices that decentralize authority. In this model, animators not only collected feedback but created safer, more familiar conditions for newcomers to voice concerns.

Professionals also emphasized face-to-face interactions, small group dialogues, and the value of informal formats. "If you're one-on-one with someone, you're going to connect more intimately," explained Professional 11, reinforcing the idea that trust is built through dialogue,

not documentation. Such intimate formats provide the emotional safety needed for participation, particularly among those with traumatic past experiences with government or civic institutions. These approaches reveal how relational and culturally competent practices, rooted in empathy and inclusion, are not peripheral but foundational to authentic public participation.

Closing the feedback loop. The professional insight that “there was no closing the loop” reinforces the importance of responsiveness and transparency in Planning, as suggested in literature on collaborative governance (Innes & Booher, 2018). Innes and Booher (2018) advocate for ongoing, reciprocal dialogue as the cornerstone of legitimacy in Planning processes. Without this feedback loop, community members, especially those already marginalized, may feel tokenized and excluded from meaningful influence.

This critique surfaced frequently in the findings. Professional 4 shared an experience with a recent newcomer who asked for specific information at an open house, “And then never heard about it again. He never got what he asked for... And there was no reporting back... no closing the loop”. This sentiment underscores a key tension between engagement as process and engagement as relationship. Professionals stressed that meaningful public participation demands clear communication about how public input is used—or why it isn't. Such reflections also align with Fung's (2006) argument that transparency in participatory mechanisms is crucial to maintaining public trust and ensuring future engagement. Without consistent follow-up, participation risks being perceived as symbolic rather than substantive.

To strengthen trust and legitimacy, professionals recommended standardizing the publication of "What We Heard" and "What We Did" reports, using visual and accessible formats, and issuing public updates through culturally relevant communication channels. These actions reflect not just procedural accountability but ethical responsiveness, reinforcing the Planner's role as a steward of democratic engagement.

5.5.3 Cultural Competence and Adaptive Methodologies

Arts-based methods (storytelling, visual mapping, food-based events) surfaced in both findings and literature (Sandercock, 2003b; Forester, 1999) as powerful tools for engaging immigrant communities. These practices enable emotional connection, simplify complex Planning ideas, and overcome language barriers. As Professional 7 noted, “I find that it’s important to translate that material into storytelling or other creative methods that people can at least engage with,” illustrating how Planners are beginning to adopt alternative modes of communication to foster inclusivity.

Professionals described how food-based gatherings, cultural storytelling, or interactive mapping invited participation from groups often alienated by traditional planning formats. These practices embody what Forester (1999) terms “deliberative improvisation”, where Planners adaptively engage people in spaces of emotional and cultural relevance rather than sterile institutional settings. As Professional 5 emphasized, “I think the first step for me would be finding people, going to them... and often communities can have informal gathering spaces like a restaurant that’s like serves you know culturally relevant food.” These techniques align with MirafTAB’s (2009) notion of insurgent planning, which challenges dominant planning norms and centers the lived experiences of marginalized populations. By introducing non-traditional methods such as visual arts or participatory theater, Planners not only broaden access but also validate diverse knowledge systems. A public engagement specialist narrated his experience for a project in Parkdale through a visual mapping exercise. They “hired a visual mapper to essentially illustrate community feedback and then connect it all through sort of like a stream of ideas” (Professional 7). The results were presented back to the community in real-time, which became an art piece that was framed in their City lobby.

Moreover, these strategies reflect Healey’s (1997) emphasis on collaborative planning as a practice of inclusion that must value multiple forms of expression and interpretation. They also build on Grewal’s (2020b) call for culturally grounded engagement practices that recognize

how immigrant communities express civic identity in nonlinear and collective ways.

Professionals, however, acknowledged that while these methods are effective, they remain underutilized due to institutional risk-aversion and a lack of training. As Professional 12 emphasised, “The unconscious bias training is, you know, just being aware of your blind spots, and I think there's very important formal training all around that piece.” Another Planning Manager conducting a cultural heritage evaluation study went door knocking to connect with the community. “I knocked on people's doors...and people who had sort of their guard up, after five minutes of conversation, they agreed to participate in the study. So, it does require that level of humanity that we need to bring” (Professional 10). Moving forward, embedding these culturally competent and adaptive approaches within official engagement strategies will be essential to shifting from symbolic inclusion to substantive co-creation.

Analysis of residents' primary sources of information about new developments (Question 2) in conjunction with responses to reading notices (Question 4) and their preferred method of communication (Question 9) reveals a consistent pattern: a strong reliance on social media, particularly Facebook, as the most commonly used platform for staying informed. One resident noted, “I think the local community groups on Facebook are probably where I get the majority of my information,” while another added, “Social Media, Facebook mainly, the Town Notice board and Town website as well.” This pattern reflects a shift away from traditional municipal communication methods toward more immediate and peer-driven platforms.

While some residents do consult the Town website or newsletters, they often do so as a secondary source, typically accessed via social media links. For instance, one participant explained that Facebook posts often “link to articles or news sources from the town website.” Others, particularly long-term residents, cited more traditional sources like local newspapers or Council minutes: “I would check simcoe.com or Alliston Herald newspapers,” and “Let's see... Council minutes. Usually newspaper articles,” respectively.

Even though social media and informal channels are frequently cited as primary sources of information (as seen in Q2), there remains a significant gap in formal, direct, and proactive communication from the Town. Many residents report not receiving official notices or only encountering information incidentally. For instance, one participant said, “I haven’t received any notices. Don’t see any mailers. I usually get my information from Facebook” (Question 4), while another emphasized the one-sidedness of the communication process: “I would like them to reach out to me rather than me having to go seek it out”. These perspectives indicate that the current communication strategy may rely too heavily on residents seeking information themselves, rather than on the Town initiating outreach—an issue echoed in Innes and Booher’s (2004) critique of traditional, top-down participation models that fail to engage the public meaningfully.

A unique perspective, however, came from a current member of Council who highlighted a significantly higher level of access to information through direct updates from the Planning and Engineering Departments, stating, “Being on Council afforded me the ability to get the real information... from our Planning department, from our legal department.” This illustrates a knowledge divide between officials or institutionally connected individuals and average residents, aligning with Sandercock’s (2003a) critique of informational hierarchies in Planning.

Furthermore, a newer resident mentioned, “I haven’t really been up to date on new developments... I guess when I do see like signs when I’m driving around town,” pointing to physical signage and informal word-of-mouth as their primary means of information. These findings support literature emphasizing the need for multi-channel, inclusive communication strategies that reach residents across varying levels of digital literacy, tenure, and civic familiarity (Innes & Booher, 2004; Albrecht, 2021). Collectively, the responses underscore the evolving role of Planners in not just informing, but actively engaging communities through trusted, accessible, and diverse platforms.

Additionally, Question 9 responses for residents' most preferred methods of communication underscore both the diverse communication preferences among residents and the opportunity for Planners to broaden their methods. While email was the most preferred method ("Email makes the most sense... I can defer it until I have time to read it properly"), several residents also emphasized the value of social media (Instagram, Facebook), printed mail, and physical signage around town. One participant even suggested, "A new resident kit... with pertinent information... would not be difficult to do," while another recommended using the library, kiosks, or community events to improve access and visibility. These suggestions align with Sandercock's (2003b) advocacy for multimodal and culturally relevant engagement strategies, and Albrecht's (2021) call for diversifying outreach to better include marginalized and immigrant communities.

A key insight also emerges regarding perceived efficacy and trust in the process. Some residents admit to not reading notices because they feel their input won't matter: "It's kind of a courtesy to inform the residents, but they already have in their minds what they need to do... our feedback is kind of like a nice to have." This points to a deeper issue of civic disillusionment, suggesting that improving communication is not just about delivery channels but also about rebuilding public trust. As Qadeer (1997) and Manzo & Perkins (2006) note, fostering a sense of agency and inclusion is essential for meaningful participation, particularly among immigrant and underrepresented populations.

5.5.4 Relational Practice in Planning

Planners' competencies and ethical imperatives. The Canadian Institute of Planners' framework for enabling competencies highlights ethical practice, communication, and cultural sensitivity (Canadian Institute of Planners [CIP], 2011). These competencies are increasingly seen not as aspirational ideals, but as necessary tools to meet the complex realities of today's diverse communities. The findings underscore that Planners must evolve from traditional

technical experts into relational facilitators, cultural interpreters, and community advocates. This evolution reflects broader shifts in Planning theory, particularly Davidoff's (1965, 2016) advocacy planning model and Umemoto's (2001) emphasis on culturally situated knowledge.

In this regard, many professionals voiced the urgent need for Planners to embrace this shift. As one of the Planning Directors explained, "As Planners, we have to be open to constantly learn and be willing to work with new people all the time...listen actively, be willing to change, and reflect upon what we know" (Professional 2). This means questioning dominant epistemologies and adapting Planning approaches to respect the lived experiences of immigrants and other marginalized groups. As the Policy Planning Professional at the County emphasized that Planners must develop active listening skills. She mentioned being a part of *Circle Training*, that provided "an opportunity for us to learn how to facilitate public participation meetings in a circle. We all speak one at a time and it's a lot of listening" (Professional 11), illustrating a reorientation from top-down instruction to humble facilitation.

Some professionals also called for continuous equity and unconscious bias training, citing it as fundamental to inclusive planning. As the Director of a community service organisation noted, "We brought in unconscious bias training... that alone started to shift the culture" (Professional 12). Others emphasized that Planners must learn how to facilitate, not just regulate. A partner at a leading community engagement consulting firm urged, "All Planners should learn how to facilitate," (Professional 13). In this context, the Planner's role becomes inherently ethical and political. The findings show that Planners are increasingly expected to advocate for underrepresented voices, build long-term trust, and serve as bridges between institutions and communities. As a Principal Planner at a consulting firm stressed, "Trust is earned by showing people that you're listening and taking them seriously" (Professional 5).

This role expansion is critical not only to address systemic exclusion but also to fulfill the democratic and participatory promises embedded in the Planning profession. As Planners shift toward roles of facilitators and advocates, they begin to embody the ethos of collaborative

governance promoted by Innes and Booher (2004), who argue that authentic engagement requires mutual learning and power-sharing. Similarly, Healey (1997) underscores that inclusive planning must value multiple knowledge systems and engage with community voices as equal partners, not passive participants.

When Planners act as facilitators of empowerment, as envisioned by Rocha (1997), they help move communities from passive consultation toward active, politicized participation that can challenge inequitable systems. This notion also aligns with Fung's (2006) framework for participatory democracy, which emphasizes that participation mechanisms must be both meaningful and consequential to community outcomes. As echoed in the findings, professionals advocated for "building a trusting relationship" (Professional 5), "carving equity, diversity and inclusion into the organisation" (Professional 12), and "co-design services and programs that make sense to people" (Professional 15) and reflect the needs of the community. These practices collectively represent a shift toward a planning paradigm that is adaptive, ethical, and deeply democratic.

Professionals also called for ongoing equity training, relationship-building beyond projects, and strategic use of honoraria and logistical supports (e.g., transit and childcare). These recommendations are not just administrative enhancements, they are ethical imperatives rooted in justice and equity. Some professionals suggested building long-term relationships through consistent presence in community spaces and involving trusted community intermediaries in co-facilitation roles. Others advocated for an internal culture shift within municipal planning departments to embed inclusive practices at all stages, from policy design to implementation.

5.6 Closing Statements

This chapter has brought together residents' lived experiences, professional insights, and relevant Planning literature to highlight both the structural gaps and promising practices that

shape public participation among immigrant communities in Simcoe County. While Planners often reference participation as a democratic ideal, the findings reveal that in practice, participation is uneven, often shaped by barriers related to language, time, trust, access to information, and a lack of culturally responsive outreach. For many immigrants, especially newer residents, participation remains out of reach—not due to a lack of interest, but because the formats, timing, and modes of communication are not designed with them in mind.

The analysis shows that traditional methods of engagement, such as open houses or statutory public meetings, often fall short in reaching and including immigrants. These spaces can be intimidating, procedurally opaque, and fail to build the trust required for meaningful dialogue. When participation is treated as a one-time event rather than a relational process, residents are left feeling tokenized or unheard, especially when there is no follow-up or visible action resulting from their input. This breakdown in the feedback loop not only undermines trust but discourages future engagement.

Yet, the findings also highlight how Planners are beginning to adapt. Several professionals described successful approaches that included relational engagement, arts-based methods, multilingual outreach, and working with trusted community intermediaries. These are not just nice add-ons, they are necessary shifts in Planning practice that acknowledge the complex realities immigrant communities navigate. Importantly, they demonstrate that inclusive participation is possible when Planners are intentional, flexible, and willing to meet people where they are: culturally, linguistically, and emotionally.

What emerges clearly is that Planners must expand their roles. They are no longer just facilitators of land use regulation, but also bridge-builders, educators, and advocates. Competencies such as cultural humility, ethical listening, and trust-building are not ancillary to the planning profession, they are central to its public-serving mission. This shift also requires systemic support: municipal departments need to allocate time, resources, and training to support this more inclusive model of practice.

In sum, fostering meaningful public participation among immigrant communities is not simply about increasing turnout at meetings. It is about rethinking the structures and assumptions that underpin Planning engagement. It involves embedding equity into everyday processes, valuing multiple ways of knowing, and treating participation as an evolving relationship rather than a single transaction. As Simcoe County continues to grow and diversify, the role of Planners in shaping who gets to belong, influence, and co-create in the civic space becomes increasingly critical.

This analysis makes clear that inclusive participation is both a challenge and an opportunity. When done well, it does not only strengthen democratic planning, it also helps build more connected, responsive, and just communities.

Chapter 6: Recommendations

While much of the discourse on immigrant participation in Planning highlights barriers and systemic exclusions, this section shifts focus on constructive recommendations and successful practices identified through interviews with Planners, engagement consultants, and community members across Ontario and beyond. These examples demonstrate that inclusive participation is possible, but only when engagement is intentionally designed to match both the needs of immigrant communities and the goals of the Planning context.

As Fung (2006) argues, participation should not be treated as a universal good. Its value depends on the governance objectives at hand. Planning decisions differ in stakes, complexity, and the degree to which public input can shape outcomes. For example, high-impact, equity-sensitive issues such as housing access, service delivery, and long-range land use planning demand deeper and more deliberative engagement, particularly with immigrant and racialized communities who have historically been marginalized in decision-making. In contrast, technical or procedural matters, like minor zoning amendments or routine infrastructure maintenance, may require lighter or consultative forms of input, especially when the potential for influence is limited. This distinction was reflected in multiple interviews (see Table 6).

In Simcoe County, where immigrant populations are smaller but steadily growing, participation may be especially crucial in areas like affordable housing, transit planning, and climate resilience, where long-term investments shape future equity outcomes. These are Planning moments where public input, especially from underrepresented communities, can and should shift priorities.

Rather than relying on conventional public meetings or one-size-fits-all consultation formats, these cases demonstrate creative, community-rooted approaches such as knowledge cafés, small group dialogues, community storytelling, translated workshops, and informal dialogue in trusted community spaces. They also show how municipalities can build trust, close the feedback loop, and incorporate diverse perspectives into decision-making.

Table 6: Findings-based Context and Methods Used to Engage Communities

Term	Context	Methods Used	Influence Level	Professional Examples
Consultation	Statutory requirements, later stages	Notices, comment forms, open houses	Low – Inform or extract feedback	“Consultation has a bit of more of a one-way connotation to it... we're obligated to notify you of whatever's happening.” (Professional 2)
Engagement	Visioning, strategy, early design	Workshops, storytelling, pop-ups	Medium – Influence content or direction	“Engagement feels a bit more... when you want to connect with the community and you care about connecting with the community.” (Professional 7)
Participation	Community co-design, equity work	Advisory groups, participatory planning, co-creation	High – Shared power	“Full participation means full citizenship... having a co-design element.” (Professional 12)

Crucially, these examples reflect a shift in the role of Planners from technical experts to relational facilitators and cultural connectors thereby reinforcing the theme of relational practice in Planning. In each case, success was enabled by Planners who were willing to adapt, partner with community leaders, embed equity early in the process, and embrace formats that were welcoming, culturally relevant, and accessible. Together, these stories offer tangible inspiration

for what inclusive engagement can look like in practice and serve as valuable reference points for designing future Planning processes that are more equitable, representative, and community-informed.

The following recommendations build on this understanding. They focus not just on how to engage, but when, why, and to what degree. They reflect the idea that participation must be culturally responsive, relational, and purpose-driven, carefully aligned with both the needs of immigrant residents and the nature of the Planning decision being made (Fung, 2006).

6.1 Planning Examples of Successful Public Participation

6.1.1 Bradford Growth Management Study and Visioning Workshop (Knowledge Café)

This initiative aimed to engage residents in long-term land use and infrastructure planning. A key success was recognizing that traditional town hall formats were ineffective, especially for newcomers. The team adopted a personalized outreach strategy using mail-outs, which were surprisingly effective in driving attendance. Materials were provided in plain language, and staff prioritized one-on-one interactions during sessions. Small group discussions were encouraged, and the presence of staff with different language abilities and cultural backgrounds helped foster comfort and inclusion. Importantly, staff internally discussed and integrated inclusive engagement methods, though this wasn't always explicitly documented.

As part of Bradford's Planning process, a visioning workshop was conducted using a "knowledge café" format, structured around small roundtable discussions on key Planning themes. This replaced the traditional format of staff presentations followed by an open Q&A. By creating space for small, informal conversations, the team fostered more honest and detailed input from people around the table. Participants felt more comfortable contributing, especially those who might have been intimidated in a large group setting.

“Having staff at the sides and stuff if you want to have a one-on-one or a two-on-one conversation... bringing over different staff, people with the different language abilities. We do have folks of visible minorities, and from their perspective, contributing to what they think would be successful in a good consultation session.” (Professional 1)

“People aren’t comfortable speaking into a mic... but around a table, they share more.”
(Professional 4)

6.1.2 New Tecumseth Placemaking Week

This initiative sought to improve public understanding of community-building and urban design. Through informal outreach in schools, parks, and festivals, Planners connected with youth, families, and residents who might not normally attend Planning meetings. The event was used to teach basic urban design concepts in accessible ways. This model also aimed to build public literacy in younger generations, who would take these ideas home to their families. It served as a non-threatening, creative space to start conversations about Planning.

“Getting out into public schools and high schools, we see success with this kind of campaign... kids are learning about it in schools and then they’re telling their parents” (Professional 9). The next step would be to apply a DEI perspective to future events and conduct outreach to target diverse communities prior to hosting it and build trusting relationships.

6.1.3 Toronto Island Park Master Plan

While not focused on immigrants specifically, this project demonstrated meaningful responsiveness to community concerns. During Planning for Toronto Island Park, the city proposed formalizing an event space near Hanlan’s Point Beach, historically significant to the 2SLGBTQ+ community. After significant outcry from the community, concerned about increased

traffic and safety, the city removed the proposal. This was seen as a success because the feedback directly influenced the outcome, affirming that input was taken seriously, even if it didn't immediately rebuild trust.

“They [the City] had floated the idea. People didn't like it. They changed it.” (Professional 5)

6.1.4 York Region Family Forums

In York Region, community engagement was conducted by holding family forums within cultural institutions like mosques, churches, and community centers serving Cantonese and Mandarin speakers. These sessions used interpreters and were often co-hosted with cultural leaders. The strategy prioritized face-to-face connection and trust-building by showing up in spaces familiar to residents. The goal wasn't just to share information but to establish presence and humanity, helping community members see Planners as allies, not bureaucrats.

6.1.5 Toronto Community Meetings

In Toronto, some recent projects have incorporated practical supports such as honoraria, childcare, food, and translated materials. These sessions were held in accessible, familiar spaces, with efforts to remove formality and make engagement feel communal. Planners moved away from evening meetings in municipal buildings, recognizing that format and setting matter. Door-knocking and attending cultural community events replaced passive “open house” invitations. This approach prioritized comfort, hospitality, and respect.

“Even when we hold meetings or workshops like bringing food at certain sessions, we've started offering honorariums.” (Professional 13)

6.1.6 Yellowknife Community Planning

In a project based in Yellowknife, the engagement strategy initially relied on traditional public open houses, but the team noticed they were not reaching diverse or marginalized communities. They pivoted by organizing small group meetings and recruiting community animators, who are local individuals trusted within their own networks, to engage residents in conversation, gather input, and report back. These animators received training and workbooks and were supported through ongoing check-ins. The success of this approach highlighted the importance of being nimble and willing to change strategies mid-process when engagement isn't working.

"I think a key to successful engagement is being able to pivot on a dime if things aren't working... it's really important in all engagement to be very nimble." (Professional 3)

6.1.7 Lake District National Park (UK)

This award-winning engagement strategy focused on reaching historically underrepresented groups including young families, farmers, racialized groups, and low-income residents. The team developed a dual approach: one holistic public strategy and another targeted to these groups. They adjusted session times, worked with social service agencies, and engaged via events and locations familiar to each demographic. Materials were placed in local gathering points, and all communication was tailored for accessibility and relevance. A Senior Planner mentioned, "We changed our public information session times to accommodate, for example, families with younger children" (Professional 6).

The following table helps summarise key enabling themes from the above examples:

Table 7: Key Enabling Themes from Examples of Successful Public Participation

Theme/Success Factor	What It Looked Like in Practice
1. Personalized, Culturally Aware Engagement	Events in mosques, grocery stores, parks, schools; food and childcare offered
2. Small Group or One-on-One Interactions	“Knowledge cafés,” table talks, door-knocking, mail-outs, interpreters
3. Representation and Trust Building	Inclusion of facilitators from the community; consistent presence, not one-off
4. Responsiveness and Flexibility	Pivoted from open houses to community meetings; dropped unpopular proposals
5. Clarity and Accessibility	Plain-language materials, translated documents, visuals instead of dense text
6. Collaboration with Community Leaders/Organizations	Partnered with ethno-cultural groups, schools, religious leaders
7. Compensation and Practical Supports	Honoraria, meals, transit, and childcare to remove participation barriers
8. Foundational Education / Awareness Raising	Events focused on explaining Planning concepts in everyday language
9. Feedback Loop	Showed how input changed decisions; documented and shared outcomes
10. Targeted Outreach for Underrepresented Groups	Identified “harder-to-reach” communities and built specific plans around them

6.2 Resident Recommendations for Improving Public Participation in Planning Processes

6.2.1 Diversify and Layer Communication Channels

Findings from Questions 2 and 9 indicate that residents receive information through a variety of platforms such as Facebook, email, local news websites, word-of-mouth, and physical signage. Preferences, however, differ based on age, familiarity with technology, and daily routines. To ensure broader reach and accessibility, municipalities should implement a multi-channel communication strategy. This includes sending regular email updates, using targeted and engaging social media posts (especially on Instagram and Facebook), distributing physical mailers, and placing signage in high-traffic public areas like libraries, recreation centres, and community hubs. Such an approach, grounded in inclusive planning practices, supports Albrecht's (2021) recommendation for culturally relevant, technologically diverse outreach to immigrant and underrepresented communities.

6.2.2 Shift from Passive Notification to Proactive Outreach

As evident from Questions 3 and 4, many residents have either never been formally invited to participate in Planning activities or only become aware through informal channels. Others reported that Town notices were difficult to locate or non-existent. This signals a reactive model of outreach that leaves engagement to chance. Municipalities should instead adopt a proactive approach, ensuring that all residents are systematically informed about development proposals, public meetings, and consultations. This can be achieved through personalized notices (both digital and print), geo-targeted social media ads, and opt-in mailing lists. These efforts are supported by Sandercock (2003a) and Qadeer (1997), who advocate for active municipal outreach, particularly in diverse and growing communities. Public meetings where residents saw others prepared and involved were seen as inspirational: "It was so nice to see that they actually care... and came to discuss it."

6.2.3 Rebuild Trust by Demonstrating the Impact of Public Input

A major barrier to participation, particularly highlighted in Question 4, is the belief that community feedback holds little influence in actual Planning decisions. Residents expressed skepticism, with one stating, “Our feedback is kind of like a nice to have, but not necessarily what they’re going to use.” But some residents also appreciated when information was shared openly. One stated, “I think it was very much a full disclosure... I don’t think anything was held back from the public.” To overcome this trust gap, Planners must prioritize transparent and accountable engagement practices. One effective strategy is to share “You said, we did” summaries, clearly showing how public input shaped outcomes. This approach aligns with Innes and Booher’s (2004) model of collaborative planning, where legitimacy and trust are built through responsiveness and openness.

6.2.4 Design Participation Around Residents’ Lived Realities

Resident responses make it clear that life stage and personal circumstances significantly impact one's ability to participate in Planning. For example, working parents and caregivers noted a lack of time, while others felt uninformed due to their newcomer status. To foster broader inclusion, Planners should offer flexible and accessible formats for participation, such as virtual town halls, online surveys, and recorded presentations that can be accessed on demand. In addition, the creation of newcomer welcome kits including guides to Planning processes, contact information, and upcoming initiatives, which can help build early familiarity and confidence. Sandercock (2003a) and Albrecht (2021) stress the importance of meeting people where they are, culturally and socially, especially when engaging marginalized or newly arrived residents.

6.2.5 Improve the Accessibility and Visibility of Planning Information

Question 9 responses suggested practical, low-barrier improvements to how Planning information is shared and accessed. These include installing self-serve kiosks at libraries and Town Hall, improving signage and wayfinding systems, and using community-based platforms like local associations or service clubs to host Planners for short presentations. By decentralizing access and embedding Planning conversations in everyday community life, the Town can reach residents who may otherwise remain disengaged. These actions support Qadeer's (1997) and Manzo & Perkins' (2006) arguments that spatial accessibility and public familiarity are foundational to effective public participation. Additionally, in response to Question 6, residents praised events that provided multiple ways to interact (e.g., visual displays, well-staffed Q&A stations) as informative and user-friendly.

Together, these recommendations outline a clear, evidence-based roadmap for creating a more inclusive, responsive, and participatory planning process, one that reflects the realities and needs of Simcoe County's increasingly diverse communities.

6.3 Use of Public Participation Toolkit

In Simcoe County, Planners have identified a range of systemic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic barriers that hinder newcomers from contributing to decisions that shape their environments. One strategic approach to enhancing engagement among new immigrant communities is the use of Public Participation Toolkits. These toolkits are particularly valuable in offering culturally sensitive engagement strategies. Immigrant communities often come from sociopolitical contexts where government participation may be unfamiliar or distrusted. Consequently, Planners must adopt methods that resonate with these lived experiences. The *Community Engagement Toolkit* developed by the National Resource Center for Refugees, Immigrants, and Migrants (NRC-RIM) emphasizes culturally appropriate, respectful, and safe approaches to community engagement. It recommends using trusted messengers, culturally

relevant events, and tailored messaging to build connections with immigrant residents (NRC-RIM, 2023).

A central component of inclusive engagement is the removal of language barriers. Toolkits often advise the use of multilingual outreach materials and interpretation services to ensure new immigrants can understand Planning processes and share their perspectives. The *Immigrant Integration Toolkit* developed by the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus underscores the necessity of translating meeting materials and providing interpretation at public consultations to make civic participation accessible to all residents (Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, 2014).

Beyond tools for communication, these toolkits promote relationship-building and long-term trust between municipalities and immigrant communities. The *Toolkit for Evidence-Informed Policymaking in Migrant Integration*, developed by the Migration Policy Institute, recommends sustained, two-way dialogue over one-time consultations. It emphasizes the role of community-based organizations and ethnic leaders as intermediaries who can bridge gaps in trust and facilitate more genuine engagement (Slootjes & Zanzuchi, 2023).

Toolkits also support Planners in aligning public engagement outcomes with the real needs and priorities of immigrant communities. As Tasan-Kok et al. (2020) argue, participatory planning must go beyond traditional consultation and embrace co-creation and shared power. They suggest that toolkits which promote inclusive governance can support Planners in engaging with marginalized populations, including immigrants, more meaningfully. These tools can foster an environment where new immigrant residents are seen not just as participants, but as co-producers of urban futures.

In the local context, the Town of Innisfil has developed its own *Community Engagement Toolkit* as part of its broader engagement strategy. This toolkit outlines the Town's commitment to proactive and effective engagement, aiming to improve interactions, share ideas, build relationships, and work collaboratively with the community. The strategy emphasizes the

importance of making Innisfil a place where all opinions and expertise are welcomed and reflected in decision-making processes (Town of Innisfil, 2022).

Drawing from local professional insights and successful examples, the objective of developing a future toolkit as part of this research is to serve as an essential instrument for Planners across Simcoe County seeking to engage new immigrant communities effectively. By addressing cultural, linguistic, and relational barriers, this resource can help create Planning processes that are not only more inclusive, but also more reflective of the diverse populations that now shape Canadian communities. The toolkit would offer Planning professionals with a structured, practical, and culturally responsive guide to foster more inclusive, accessible, and trust-based participation and equitable Planning processes.

6.4 Policy Recommendations

Based on the research findings and analysis of Planning practices across Bradford West Gwillimbury, New Tecumseth, and Innisfil, several key recommendations emerge to advance inclusive public participation among immigrant communities. These recommendations are aligned with the legislative requirements of Ontario's *Planning Act*, the *Provincial Planning Statement (PPS) 2024*, and current Planning scholarship.

- 1. Develop Multilingual and Visual Communication Strategies:** Municipalities must invest in multilingual platforms and plain-language materials to ensure immigrants can access and understand Planning information. Introducing translation services on local municipality websites would be a good starting point.
- 2. Institutionalize Community Liaison Roles:** Hiring cultural liaisons or community animators from immigrant communities can help bridge trust and communication gaps, especially in underrepresented neighbourhoods.
- 3. Mandate Participatory Impact Statements:** Require departments to document and publish how public input, particularly from immigrant residents, influenced decisions.

- 4. Provide Honoraria and Supportive Infrastructure:** To address barriers related to time, cost, and care responsibilities, municipalities should offer stipends, childcare, meals, and transport for engagement events.
- 5. Engage Beyond Council Chambers:** Planners should conduct outreach in informal, accessible spaces, such as community centers, religious institutions, schools, and festivals, where immigrant residents already feel comfortable. Engagement should not be limited to special project requirements. Planners need to build community relationships and connect with community members all year-round, which would help foster trust and open channels for honest communication.
- 6. Embed Participatory Practices into Planning Policy Cycles:** Municipalities should formally integrate participatory workshops and creative tools like story-mapping into Official Plan reviews and development processes.
- 7. Create Local Immigrant Advisory Committees:** Establishing Local Immigrant Advisory Committees (LIACs) will ensure that new residents have a formalized voice in Planning and development decisions.
- 8. Implement Cultural Equity Audits in Development Review:** Equity assessments should become standard in evaluating new developments, to ensure they reflect the social and cultural needs of diverse communities.
- 9. Expand Arts-Based and Visual Engagement Methods:** Planning departments should explore methods like storytelling, participatory theatre, and use art spaces to engage immigrant residents in more meaningful and expressive ways.
- 10. Close the Loop with Public Feedback:** Municipalities must commit to publishing accessible summaries of community input (“What We Heard / What We Did”) and use diverse communication channels to report back.

In municipalities like BWG, Innisfil, and New Tecumseth, which are experiencing significant growth and increasing diversity, the integration of various legislative and policy frameworks is crucial. Planners must move beyond mere compliance with statutory requirements and actively seek to empower immigrant communities by adopting the above recommendations, which could potentially impact and influence successful public participation outcomes through:

- **Policy and Legislation:** Aligning municipal practices with the *Planning Act* and *PPS 2024*.
- **Capacity Building:** Providing resources and support to help new immigrants understand and navigate the Planning process.
- **Culturally Sensitive Engagement:** Developing outreach strategies that respect and reflect the cultural contexts of diverse communities.
- **Collaborative Decision-Making:** Creating platforms where immigrant voices are not only heard but also have a tangible impact on Planning outcomes.
- **Building Trust:** Improving trust and participation among immigrant communities.
- **Participation based on Lived Realities** - Ensure municipal decisions reflect the lived experiences of all residents.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Toward a Participatory Planning Future in Simcoe County

The findings and literature converge on several critical insights - participation must be redefined through the lens of equity; Planners must adopt culturally responsive, multilingual, and accessible strategies; and municipalities must institutionalize inclusive practices rather than treat them as project-specific anomalies. Moving forward, Planners in Simcoe County will need to embed inclusion as a core operating principle, not just in public participation, but throughout the lifecycle of policymaking and project delivery. This means operationalizing the theoretical frameworks highlighted in the literature, Arnstein's (1969) and Rocha's (1997) ladders, Davidoff's advocacy planning, and Umemoto's (2001) call for epistemological humility into daily Planning practice. As the findings suggest, this will require intentional actions: shifting power dynamics, building long-term relationships, investing in cultural competency training, and acknowledging the emotional and economic labor of participation.

Planners must also advocate for institutional reforms that ensure equity is not treated as a discretionary add-on. This could include setting language accessibility standards, formalizing partnerships with cultural organizations, and allocating dedicated resources for honoraria, childcare, and transportation. In doing so, they begin to dismantle the systemic barriers that currently exclude many immigrants from civic life. Ultimately, success will depend not just on technical skill, but on relational capacity, cultural humility, and the political will to redistribute power. As the professionals consistently emphasized, trust, empathy, and visible follow-through will define the future of inclusive planning in Simcoe County. To foster meaningful participation, Planners must view immigrant communities not as consultation subjects, but as co-authors of place, policy, and possibility.

Simcoe County's demographic changes require Planners to adapt both structurally and culturally. By embedding inclusive engagement in Official Plans, leveraging partnerships with community organizations, and building trust through consistent, representative, and responsive

practices, Planners can shift from mere facilitators of consultation to co-creators of community futures. This analysis offers a blueprint for reimagining participatory planning in a diversifying region, one that not only includes new immigrants but is shaped by them.

7.2 Future Research Directions

While this research offers valuable insights into the barriers, opportunities, and evolving role of Planners in facilitating inclusive public participation among new immigrant communities, it also opens pathways for further research. As with any qualitative research, however, there were limitations to what could be captured within the available time, geographic scope, and resources. The following future research directions are grounded in both these limitations and the practical needs of Planners seeking to apply these findings more broadly:

1. Integrating the Perspectives of Newcomers

This research primarily reflects the voices of Planners and engagement professionals. A natural next step would be to conduct Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) involving immigrants themselves, especially those who are disengaged or underrepresented in communities. Future research could explore questions such as, 'What are newcomer residents' own perceptions of Planning and public participation?' 'What has made them feel excluded or welcomed in past engagement efforts?' 'What formats or language make Planning feel approachable, meaningful, or relevant?' A comparative analysis between assumptions made by Planners and the lived experiences of newcomers would help identify disconnects and opportunities for better alignment.

2. Testing and Evaluating the Toolkit in Practice

This study proposes a Public Participation Toolkit based on practitioner insights. However, it has not been piloted in real-time engagement efforts. Future applied

research could involve the following that would help refine the toolkit into a tested, adaptable model for others to adopt:

- Collaborating with municipalities to implement the toolkit during a Planning process (e.g., Zoning By-law update, Official Plan review, Secondary Plan update etc.).
- Observing how the strategies perform in different contexts.
- Collecting feedback from both staff and immigrant participants on what worked, what didn't, and why.

3. Investigating Youth and Intergenerational Engagement Pathways

While the interviewees did not speak to the role of youth in immigrant families, based on research and my own experience, children and youth often act as bridges in immigrant families. Future research could explore the following to inform more family-centered engagement models:

- How can Planning departments engage newcomer youth meaningfully (e.g., through schools, after-school programs, digital tools)?
- What is the impact of intergenerational engagement formats that involve both parents and children in Planning processes?

4. Building Evidence Around Arts-Based and Creative Methods

While storytelling, visual mapping, and cultural engagement were widely endorsed to break down barriers to participation, their outcomes are still largely subjective. Future research could use potential case studies or collaborate with communities through CBPR methodology to systematically assess:

- How do creative methods impact participation among immigrants with limited English or Planning literacy?

- Do these methods result in deeper engagement, better retention of information, or more actionable feedback?
- How do arts-based methods affect trust and relationships over time?

5. Expanding Geographic and Demographic Scope

This study focuses on smaller-sized municipalities within South Simcoe. With the availability and allocation of dedicated resources (time, budget, staffing capacity), further research could extend to:

- Urban centers (e.g., Peel, Toronto, York) to compare strategies in larger, more established immigrant communities.
- Rural or northern regions where immigrant populations are smaller and less organized, to assess if different engagement strategies are needed.
- Specific subgroups (e.g., recent refugees, international students, non-English speaking seniors) to tailor engagement practices for varied immigrant experiences.

6. Rethinking Metrics of Success in Participation

Based on the interview responses, current evaluation practices often rely on turnout numbers or comment counts. Future research could address questions such as, 'What does success look like from the perspective of immigrant participants?' 'How can we measure outcomes like comfort, trust, sense of belonging, empowerment, or policy impact?' 'Can we develop new metrics that reflect the quality, and not just quantity of participation? Developing inclusive, community-informed evaluation frameworks would help reshape how engagement is understood and valued.

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