



Board members and volunteers of community associations (CAs) and social recreation groups (SRGs) were asked to complete the *2016 External Partner Online Survey* between October 3 and November 1, 2016. This annual survey was intended to collect feedback about the services and support the CAs and SRGs received from Neighbourhood Connections and their neighbourhood partnership coordinator (NPC) in particular in the previous year.

Key findings

- Response rates were fairly high, with five more organizations participating compared to the previous year
- The satisfaction level with NPCs is high, at 80.4%; however, this is a 13.2% decrease from the previous year
- Generally, the NPC is the access point to The City for organizations and NPC support was highly associated with a positive impact on organizations' functioning
- NPC turnover was a frequent complaint among organizations, as were difficulties with communication and bureaucratic processes

Respondents

Overall, there were 135 responses to the survey. In total, 85 organizations responded and, of those, 32 had more than 1 response completed. One organization had a total of 7 responses, but the remainder ranged from one to four respondents (average =1.6). The majority of those completing the survey were volunteers (n=122, 88.4%). Comparisons to 2015's data are shown in table 1, however, it is important to point out that there were 13 fewer groups included in the survey in 2016 due to organizational changes that moved the support for those groups to Recreation. With the exception of total number of responses, the responses in the remaining categories from 2016 are greater than those of 2015, which is particularly interesting given that fewer groups were sent the survey and there were fewer responses in total than there were in 2015.

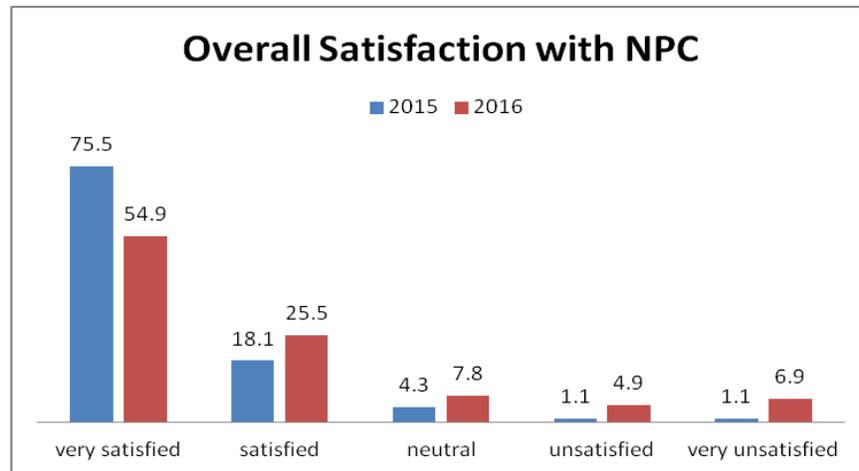
Table 1

	2015	2016
# of organizations responding	80	85
# of organizations with multiple responses	17	32
Total # of responses	186	135
# of completed responses	90	92
# of volunteer responders	71	122

Results

On the whole, respondents were satisfied (80.4%) with the support they received from their NPCs with 54.9% reporting that they are very satisfied. However, this is considerably lower than the 93.6% who were satisfied in 2015 (table 2), and there is a notable increase in the numbers who are reporting that they are very unsatisfied and unsatisfied. Feedback from respondents suggests that this decrease in satisfaction is likely due high NPC turnover rates, communication issues, and red tape/delays. It is likely that if some of these issues were addressed over 2017 there would be an improvement in satisfaction in the 2017 evaluation.

Table 2



Support from an NPC

While organizations reported getting support from an NPC in all areas offered, NPC assistance was most often (81.2%) used to access City of Calgary resources (programs, services, events, etc). The other top categories of support that NPCs were reported to have assisted organizations with were capital construction and facility management (67.9%), board governance (57.1%), and community engagement (56.2%). Several organizations also commented with specific initiatives or projects that their NPC had supported them in completing or working on, such as This is My Neighbourhood, casino applications, general information, collaboration support, bylaws and so on. These results are generally comparable to those of 2015; however, the categories of services were adjusted for 2016 to be more clear, so direct comparisons cannot be made.

Additionally, organizations reported using their NPC most for connecting to City services (77.7%), grant program support (75.7%) and maintenance or construction assistance (68%). Unsurprisingly, these are also the services that they anticipate accessing through their NPC in the next 12 months (grant program, 85%; connecting to resources, 76%; and maintenance assistance, 70%). They also reported using their NPC most often for all services they access through The City. The NPC is the most frequently used method of connecting to City services. However, other City contacts were used most often for accessing special event support (30.1%) and connecting with City services (29.1%). These results are positive in that they suggest that the NPCs are acting as the one window into The City that they are expected to be.

Furthermore, organizations who reported that they had support from the NPC to implement or facilitate a program, project, service or event with either other City staff (71%) or other community groups/stakeholders (55.1%), found that support to be somewhat helpful or very helpful (84.8%). This is a slight improvement from 2015, where 81% saw the assistance as helpful.

Overall, organizations see the support they received from the NPC as having a positive impact on their overall functioning. In total, 78.9% of organizations rated their NPC as having a positive or very positive impact on their organization. This is reflected in the overall positive ratings for each area of support as well. In particular, organizations rated the support they received in accessing other City of Calgary resources as having a somewhat positive (21.1%) or very positive (56.1%) impact on their organization. This item was the most positively rated of all the services provided by the NPC. Interestingly, given the responses to which services were most accessed by organizations, capital construction and facility maintenance had the highest negative ratings, with 4.4% rating the impact of the support very negative, and 6.1% rating it somewhat negative. That said, 49.1% rated the support in this area as having a very positive impact. These results suggest that the reason for the decrease in NPC satisfaction overall is not related to their performance when they are called upon by the organizations.

It is clear that many organizations form a strong connection with their NPC, seeing them as an advocate for the interests of the association and the community at large. Several respondents reported that their NPC was “on their side” advocating on their behalf to other City departments (e.g., an NPC helped their CA overcome issues with Planning). One respondent articulated this issue, stating, “NPCs try to help us make things happen; City bureaucrats try the opposite and tell us why things can’t happen.” This suggests that when the relationship between an organization and an NPC is supportive and has time to develop, the NPC can be an essential advocate for the organization’s interests within The City. In addition, the NPC appears to play an important role in increasing the health and sustainability of the organization.

Predictably, one of the biggest challenges organizations reported in working with The City has been NPC turnover. Many respondents noted this as one of the top three challenges they have when working with The City, citing “consistency in NPC” or “the changing of NPCs” and “turnover of staff.” The turnover rate is so high for some groups that they report having had two or even three NPCs come through their groups within the past year (e.g., “[w]hich of the 3 NPCs in the past 12 months are we rating?”). The constant turnover of NPCs makes it more difficult for the NPCs to develop a good understanding of the issues facing the organization. As a result, it also reduces the ability of the NPC to advocate for the organization and support its relationship with The City, something clearly identified above as one of the primary benefits of the NPC to the organizations. This is easy to see in comments such as this:

It really is too late. We have had to find our way through everything on our own or via help from the Federation of Calgary Communities since our original NPC left. It takes time to build up a relationship with a new NPC and for them to get to understand your organization. Having 3 different NPCs in less than 6 months has been seriously rough, and we are not convinced this new NPC, as lovely a person as she is, will stay either. We have no idea what her skills or experience is, as we have only met her twice since she

came on, but she has been very busy and unavailable, which does not bode well for a CA undergoing such huge issues and changes.

This breakdown in communication and trust between The City and organizations also seems to be connected to reduced feelings of being “heard” by The City which may contribute to organizations “feeling a lack of respect” and feeling left out of decision making in their community.

Support from The City and meeting community needs

Respondents were asked whether they felt that The City was meeting the needs of their organization in terms of support on several items. For all seven items, over 50% of the respondents agreed that they had the support they needed. Endorsement was highest for board governance and functions support (69%), programs and services support (68.9%), and facility lifecycle and maintenance support (62.2%). The items with the highest negative responses (i.e., that the group does not have the support they need) were new capital construction projects support (18.4%), and matters related to community planning and development (18%). The negative ratings for new capital construction may be due to the fact that The City does not provide funding for this.

Generally, respondents from community associations (n=83) felt that their organization had everything they needed to be successful in most areas. Most groups felt that they were able to meet their needs in terms of: collaboration with other community organizations (74.7%); funding operational costs (69.9%); promoting their programs and services (65.1%); prioritizing their programs and services (63.9%); and funding their programs and services (61.4%). Far fewer groups felt they could meet the needs of their organization in terms of funding capital growth (33.7%), funding life cycle costs (44.6%), recruiting volunteers (44.6%), involving their neighbours in identifying gaps (45.8%), and retaining and expanding their membership (47%).

Community associations were also asked to assess how confident they were that they would be able to meet their community’s programming needs through the next ten years. Generally, respondents rated their organization quite highly, with 23.2% stating they had 81-90% confidence, and 21.1% saying 91-100% confidence. However, 18% rated themselves with a 50% or less confidence rating, which is a sizable minority. This suggests that generally, groups feel they have the support they require from The City.

However, when asked what things The City or their NPC could provide that are not currently offered, respondents most often mentioned financial support particularly in terms of their facilities and support in recruiting volunteers and staff.

The financial support needs relate to skills and funding. Some respondents indicated that they had little financial knowledge or skill within their board members that made it difficult to access and use funding opportunities well. Comments suggested that organizations would benefit from “more people with financial ability” as well as training opportunities to develop expertise with financial matters, including how to solicit sponsorship and donors outside of existing City grants. The funding issues are particularly notable for those organizations with facilities where lifecycle and maintenance costs are often high. Though some manage their infrastructure well, others need much more support. Several respondents

stated that they need assistance with managing their building, that they feel The City should “actually help us with our facility lifecycle maintenance,” or need assistance requesting more funding. One respondent highlighted that their organization is “...rich in volunteer skills, abilities, and knowledge. Where we struggle, is financial support. Our organization struggles to fund its operational costs, lifecycle costs, and capital growth.” Accounts from respondents asking for direct funding to keep their organization and the “burden” of maintaining a building as well as respondents struggling with the CCG and its “bureaucratic nightmare” suggest that there are issues with the funding model and process as well as differing expectations of responsibility between the organizations and The City.

Organizations also frequently reported that they needed support in developing their volunteers and staff. In particular, organizations stated they needed more volunteers, especially those with specific skill sets, but that volunteers are difficult to recruit. Some respondents also noted difficulties with paid staff recruitment, with some linking their financial instability to difficulties with compensation. Other respondents suggested that dedicated support from The City in volunteer recruitment would be beneficial.

Demands on time

Organizations were asked to rate five areas in terms of how much time they spent working on each. By a fairly wide margin, programs and services was the top choice with 39.4% saying they spent the most time on this area. The second most frequently selected area for most time spent was capital construction and facility lifecycle/maintenance with 22.3%. The area selected most frequently as the area with the least amount of time spent on it was community engagement (28.8%), followed closely by board governance and functions (26.9%). These rankings are in line with the comments about where groups need the most support given the time they spend on each area, particularly around their facilities and financial management.

Table 3

Amount of time spent	Most frequent response	Second most frequent response
Most time spent	programs and services (39.4%)	capital construction and facility lifecycle/maintenance (22.3%)
2nd most time spent	financial management (26%)	community engagement (25%)
3rd most time spent	financial management (26%)	programs and services (20.2%)
4th most time spent	financial management (27.9%)	board governance and functions (26.9%)
Least time spent	community engagement (28.8%)	board governance and functions (26.9)

Communication with The City

Organizations connect with The City primarily through their NPC, with 32.7% saying they always use their NPC, and 42.3% saying they use the NPC often. In addition, 64.4% said they could always connect with their NPC, and an additional 23.1% said they usually can connect with their NPC. However, a high number reported also connecting through their direct contacts in City departments or business units, with 30.8% who reported using this method often, and 41.3% who said sometimes. The other City departments do not appear to be as easily accessed as NPCs, as only 13.5% said they could always connect with other City staff and, 46.2% said they could connect often, and 36.5% reported being able

to connect only sometimes. Respondents rated 311 (78.9%), Calgary Police (63.8%), and Calgary Fire (54.3%) as being easy to connect with, but gave Roads (13.7%), Calgary Parks (11.6%), and Transportation Planning (10.5%) the highest ratings of being difficult to connect with.

Despite the relative ease of contacting The City, comments by respondents suggest that there are significant communication issues. This has also been raised in other work being done by The City with these organizations, such as the engagement done regarding infrastructure needs and how The City can best support CAs in particular. The challenges in communications are found in all aspects of the work with CAs and SRGs, from project specific issues to broader difficulties with the Corporation as a whole. This problem, almost more than any other, is found throughout survey responses. This suggests not only that this problem is endemic, but is related to the very core of the relationship between organizations and The City.

Facility operations coordinators and Capital Conservation Grant

Respondents were generally satisfied with the facility operations coordinators (FOCs) and the Capital Conservation Grant (CCG) program, with 51.5% reporting they were satisfied or very satisfied. Very few respondents said they were unsatisfied (6% reported unsatisfied or very unsatisfied). Comments about the FOCs suggested that most organizations are not aware of the position or if they are, they have not accessed FOC services because they don't require them.

For the CCG program, most comments were positive, with many saying that they had accessed the funds without issue and that their NPC had been extremely helpful in the process. However, many others were frustrated with not understanding the process, or feeling it was too much "red tape" and not enough money to assist with the building issues they were experiencing. This concern was reflected throughout the comments to the survey, with respondents reporting that there is "too much red tape with grants etc.," that they had trouble "finding our way through the bureaucracy," and even that "The City of Calgary doesn't act like a partner but more like a dictator." While it is unclear what the surrounding context is or was for these situations, it is important to recognize that there a great deal of frustration among organizations related to "red tape" and the impact on access to services/supports and the speed of service delivery.

In the 2015 survey, the question asked about "other community partnership staff." This difference in the question means that the results for the two years are not directly comparable. However, it generally referred to the same staff group and in 2015, 69% reported being satisfied. Given the comments, it is likely that the addition of the CCG program into this question is the main reason for the decrease (17.5%) in overall satisfaction in this area of support.

Business planning

Overall, 63% of respondents said their organization had a business plan that had been completed within the last five years. The primary reason for not having one was a lack of time or volunteers to complete it (47%). Other reasons given were related to a lack of knowledge, or the respondent wasn't sure if there was one or not. A few groups commented that they were working on one now.

Of those who reported having a business plan, respondents agreed that they had assessed the needs of their residents in its development (79.4%), and that it had a positive impact on their goals and direction (74.6%). However, the majority of those with a business plan were neutral in their assessment of the plan's impact on participation by residents in programs and services (49.2%).

Summary

Overall, organizations are satisfied with the services they are receiving from The City and feel that the NPCs' services positively impact their organizations' functioning. However, the satisfaction level has decreased over the previous year which is likely a result of high NPC turnover, communication issues and difficulties with bureaucratic processes.