

FIRST LIGHT

Canadian Race Relations Foundation

PATHWAYS TO DECOLONIZED GOVERNANCE

A TOOLKIT FOR MUNICIPALITIES

Developed by First Light with support from the Canadian Race Relations Foundation

August 2026



Acknowledgements

St. John's is home to a rich, diverse, and vibrant urban Indigenous community. Located on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Beothuk, the lands and waters in and around the City have traditionally served as a gathering place for the Mi'kmaq. The broader region of Newfoundland and Labrador continues to be home to diverse Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. We honour and pay respect to the past, present, and future caretakers of these territories.

This toolkit was developed by **First Light**, with support from the **Canadian Race Relations Foundation** and contributions from municipalities across Canada, including the **City of Halifax**, **City of Saskatoon**, **City of St. John's**, **City of Winnipeg** and a city in British Columbia that chose to remain anonymous. We are grateful for the knowledge, relationships, and trust that made this work possible.

We recognize that acknowledgements alone are not enough. This toolkit reflects our commitment to moving from good intentions into action, learning, listening, and working alongside Indigenous communities to build more just and equitable municipal governance.



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Introduction

This toolkit has been developed by First Light, with support from the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, to guide municipalities in pursuit of pathways toward decolonizing municipal governance, particularly those in the early stages of this work. Grounded in the principles of UNDRIP, it provides a practical and adaptable framework that municipalities can use to reflect on and adapt their policies, procedures, and processes. The toolkit is designed to help municipal staff and elected officials engage with Indigenous rights, knowledge systems, and priorities in a way that is both meaningful and actionable within municipal contexts.

**Knowledge gathering for this report took place in fall 2025.*

Purpose

- Support municipalities in Newfoundland and Labrador in understanding their current position in relation to Indigenous rights and reconciliation
- Provide a shared foundation of knowledge for staff and elected officials
- Identify practical and realistic steps municipalities can take to begin and strengthen this work
- Strengthen relationships between municipalities and Indigenous communities through more consistent, respectful, and structured engagement
- Support the shift from symbolic reconciliation to structural change within municipal systems

This toolkit is not intended to be a final plan. It is a starting point for ongoing learning, reflection, and action. Decolonization is a continuous process that is shaped by relationships, accountability and community leadership.


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OR PAY BY PHONE

Foundations:
What Municipalities Need to Understand

Before a municipality can act, it must understand. This section provides the conceptual grounding and knowledge base that can make procedural steps meaningful rather than performative. Each of the six lessons below draws directly on documented practice from municipalities throughout Canada and foundational policy frameworks including UNDRIP and the TRC Calls to Action.

Lesson 1 Relational Accountability & Trust-Building

Municipal reconciliation requires sustained, relationship-centred engagement with Indigenous communities in both urban centres and on reserves. This means showing up consistently, getting involved early, and designing processes that are culturally safe and specific to Indigenous residents.

Trust is earned by showing up without an agenda, following through on commitments, and acknowledging past harms honestly. It is damaged quickly by missed commitments or tokenistic outreach. When engagement is treated as a project requirement rather than an ongoing relationship, it is not reconciliation. Structural commitment also matters when engagement is delegated entirely to staff, without participation from elected officials and senior administrators, it signals that reconciliation is being approached as a compliance exercise, not a real priority.

What peer municipalities have demonstrated

City	Examples from practice
Winnipeg	Indigenous Relations Division (IRD) team operates in a trauma-informed, culturally safe, non-hierarchical environment
Saskatoon	Adopted approaches that honour Treaty relationships through mutual respect, developing First Nation Community Profiles and urban reserve partnerships as practical tools for municipal collaboration. Building on the longstanding relationship with Muskeg Lake Cree Nation and the creation of Canada's first urban commercial reserve, these efforts support ongoing reconciliation, partnership, and shared prosperity.
Halifax	Has been working to strengthen its approach to Mi'kmaw rights, treaty relationships, and culturally grounded engagement; these efforts have contributed to relationship tables and collaborative mechanisms that continue to be shaped and strengthened, rather than representing a complete model of shared governance.

Lessons from practice

"Create formal structures that embed Indigenous leadership from the beginning. That might look like establishing a dedicated Indigenous division or staff positions with decision-making authority, ensuring Indigenous voices are not just consulted but leading."
— A city in British Columbia

"Find your allies within the organization… not the ones that will 'take a meeting' but not show up to do the work."
— City of Saskatoon Indigenous Initiatives



Lesson 2 Knowledge Systems and Cultural Integration

Integrating Indigenous knowledge means changing how decisions are made, not just how they are communicated. Cultural integration means making Indigenous Peoples visible in the city through place names, public art, ceremonial spaces, and meaningful recognition of significant dates. Renaming is one concrete step. Restoring Indigenous place names requires community leadership and consent, not unilateral municipal decision-making.

Municipalities also have a specific responsibility toward Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2S+). This means reviewing local policing, supporting MMIWG2S+ organizations, and designing public infrastructure that reflects the safety and dignity of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people.

What peer municipalities have demonstrated

City	Examples from practice
Winnipeg	Street and parks renaming led by Elders and Knowledge Keepers; flag raising at City Hall (Treaty One, Dakota, Métis). Ceremony embedded in civic life: smudging protocol, medicine gardens, ceremonial fires for MMIWG, Eagle Staff gifted and called to events, harvesting medicines at City Hall. Assiniboia Residential School land transferred for commemoration and gathering; a medical garden established on site. MMIWG portfolio maintained as a community approach; not led through municipal risk or corporate frameworks. Public safety to become trauma-informed through community-led models; policing made publicly accountable.
Saskatoon	Miyo-wâhkôhtowin[1] Road: John A. Macdonald Road was renamed through engagement with Indigenous leaders and residential school survivors; new road signs installed; support for residents updating documents. Office of the Matriarch directly responds to MMIWG Calls for Justice; Auntie Advocate position established; Phase 2: IWG2S Centre; Phase 3: Officer of Transparency and Accountability.
Halifax	Increased Mi'kmaw language and place recognition; public art; Mi'kmaw History Month; cultural programming for HRM residents, alongside broader, ongoing work on Indigenous relations, engagement, and internal systems change.

1 Miyo-wâhkôhtowin is a Cree term meaning "good relationships" or "good way of relating to one another." The name was chosen to reflect the values of mutual respect and kinship central to Treaty relationships.

Lessons from practice

""Indigenous visibility has expanded in multiple ways, and pushed towards not just symbols but about voice, presence, and influence in decision-making."
— Halifax Regional Municipality

"There are still very few examples of the City actively inviting Indigenous knowledge into land use planning or policymaking from the outset."
— A city in British Columbia

"MMIWG portfolio maintains integrity of community approaches, not led with municipal risk lens or corporate frameworks."
— City of Winnipeg Indigenous Relations

"Underrepresentation of lived experience: Indigenous women's lived experiences are consistently underrepresented in decision-making spaces. When policy is shaped without these voices, systems risk reinforcing harm rather than reducing it."
— City of Winnipeg Indigenous Relations



Lesson 3 Indigenous Leadership & Power-Sharing

Municipalities must shift decision-making authority to Indigenous Peoples, not just consult them. True power-sharing embeds Indigenous leadership from the outset not as advisors brought in after decisions are already framed. The question is not "are we consulting?" but "are we shifting power?"

The difference between consultation and power-sharing is not administrative – it is a question of who holds authority when a direction is set. An Indigenous facilitator leading a visioning process is fundamentally different from an Indigenous consultant writing a plan that City departments then implement on their own terms. Having one Indigenous person at the table is not power-sharing, but rather the appearance of inclusion without the substance.

What peer municipalities have demonstrated

City	Examples from practice
Winnipeg	Ongoing co-development of major policy initiatives (Greenspace Plan and Biodiversity Policy) with First Nations, Inuit, and Red River Métis representatives demonstrates movement toward meaningful inclusion of Indigenous priorities and values into municipal planning and land stewardship. Youth grant fund eligibility was changed to Indigenous-led organizations only.
Saskatoon	Established the Indigenous Technical Advisory Group (ITAG) in 2019 to provide First Nations and Métis perspectives to City staff, guiding projects, informing policy changes, and supporting the integration of Indigenous knowledge across municipal systems.
Halifax	Mi'kmaq rights-holders are recognized as governments, not stakeholders. Shared advisory tables continue to be shaped and strengthened in co-shaping municipal initiatives, though they do not yet represent a complete model of shared governance. Cornwallis Task force included balanced Indigenous and non-Indigenous membership.

Lessons from practice

"Create formal structures that embed Indigenous leadership from the beginning. That might look like establishing a dedicated Indigenous division or staff positions with decision-making authority, ensuring Indigenous voices are not just consulted but leading."
— A city in British Columbia

“A major systems-level focus has been municipal readiness for a Red Dress Alert system. IRD participated in community engagement, hosted City-focused consultation with WFPS, WPS, 911, and other frontline partners, and identified the need for clear protocols, cross-departmental coordination, training, trust-building, and continued leadership from families, survivors, and advocates.."
— City of Winnipeg Indigenous Relations

Municipal consideration

Every municipality can examine its existing Indigenous advisory structure and ask honestly: do they shift power, or manage consultation?

The difference lies in whether Indigenous input shapes decisions from the outset or is sought after decisions are already in motion.



Lesson 4 Structural readiness, legitimacy & institutionalization

Meaningful decolonization requires that municipalities put symbolic commitments into action, through policies, procedures, and practices. Formal adoption of UNDRIP and TRC Calls to Action signals intent, but meaningful institutionalization requires structural commitments, such as dedicated offices; salaried roles at the CAO level; policy processes that embed free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC); and long-term budget provisions. Without these actioned commitments, reconciliation remains merely aspirational.

Clear accountability mechanisms, resourcing, and procedural changes make a municipality's commitment operational, rather than purely symbolic. Municipalities should therefore be cautious about endorsing UNDRIP without the institutional infrastructure to support it. A municipality's organizational structure, budget allocations, and policy frameworks reveal the distinction between endorsement and practice.

What peer municipalities have demonstrated

City	Examples from practice
Winnipeg	Indigenous Relations Division (IRD) was established in 2013 at CAO level. Staffed with Manager, Coordinators, Community Development Workers. IRD mandate:supporting the city's commitments to reconciliation.
Saskatoon	City Council adopted UNDRIP in September of 2022. A TRC Action Plan is being developed, informed by a municipal scan of Truth and Reconciliation action plans and leading practices from municipalities across Canada.
Halifax	Working to integrate reconciliation into anti-racism and inclusion strategic frameworks, and to move beyond symbolic land acknowledgements toward action-based commitments is an ongoing effort. Removal of Cornwallis statue and establishment of Peace and Friendship Park as a catalytic moment in that process.

Lessons from practice

"Indigenous rights, jurisdiction, and self-determination need to be understood and recognized as foundational to municipal reconciliation. A comprehensive examination of UNDRIP (TRC Call to Action 43) and a review of municipal laws, policies, and practices influenced by the Doctrine of Discovery (TRC Call to Action 47), is essential to establish the legal, policy, and governance framework required to advance and sustain reconciliation."

— City of Winnipeg Indigenous Relations

"UNDRIP implementation is a shift in governance, accountability, and relationship. It starts by recognizing whose land you're on and acting accordingly."

— A city in B.C

Municipal consideration

Every municipality operates within a specific legislative context. Before designing structural reforms, legal counsel and senior administration should assess what is possible within existing enabling legislation, and where advocacy to provincial or federal governments is required. This is especially important for municipalities operating under narrow or restrictive enabling Acts.



Lesson 5 Operations & Institutional Practice

Reconciliation strategies only matter if they change how a municipality actually operates day to day. Operational change comes slowly and in understated ways. It requires persistent internal advocacy, clear accountability, and a willingness to revisit long-standing practices. Indigenous employment targets, cultural safety training, and dedicated budget lines are not optional extras – they are what make operational change possible.

Tangible outcomes matter more than activities. Training sessions held, committees struck, and plans adopted are not the same as meaningful change in Indigenous Peoples' experiences of municipal services. Accountability frameworks should measure results that benefit Indigenous people, not processes that benefit the municipality's public image.

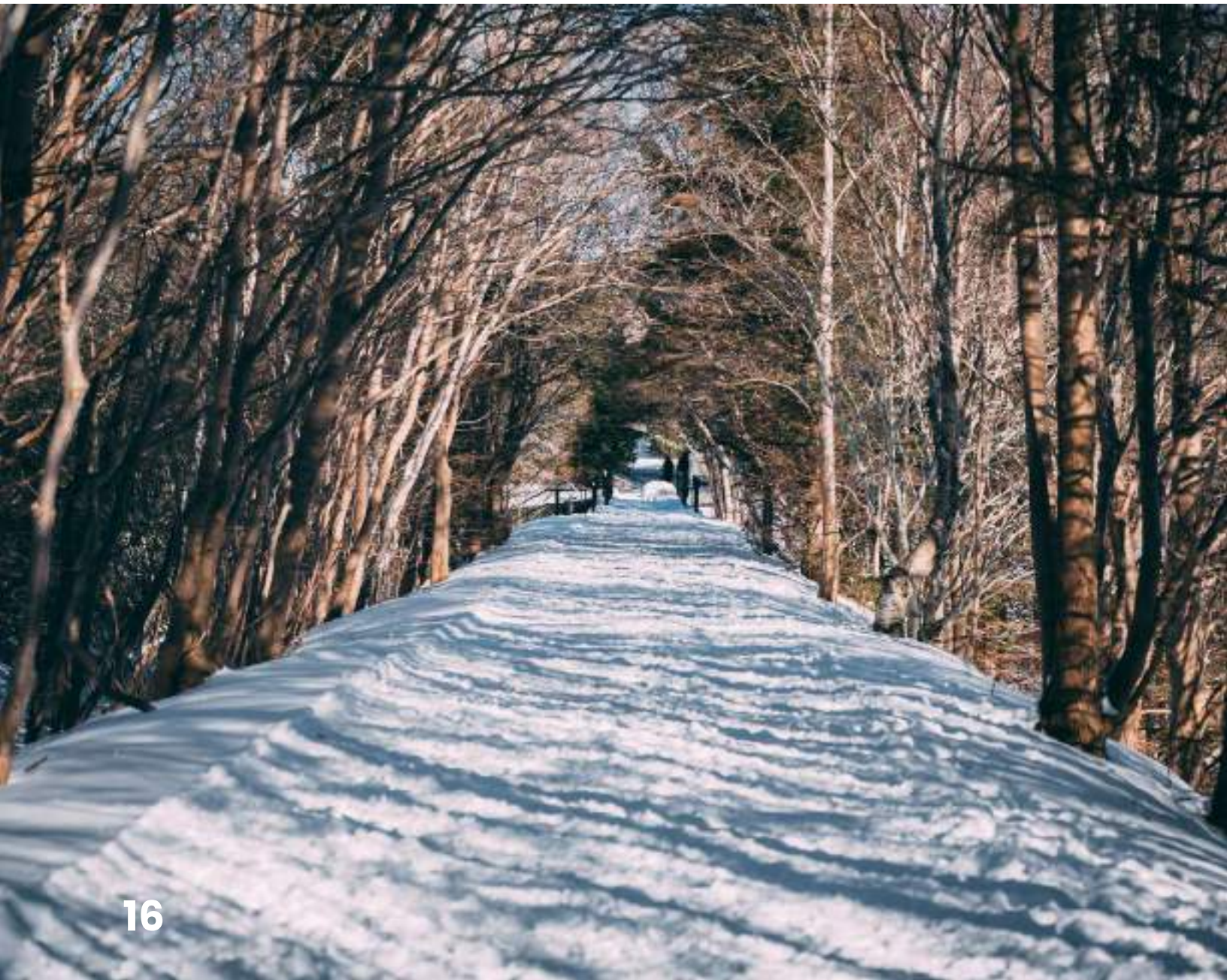
What peer municipalities have demonstrated

City	Examples from practice
Halifax	Embedding Indigenous perspectives in policy reviews, internal training, land acknowledgement protocols, and strategic plans. Co-developing policies and engagement approaches rather than imposing them; integrating reconciliation into anti-racism and inclusion plans.
Saskatoon	Urban Reserve creation involves Planning & Development, Servicing, Transportation, and Solicitors a cross-departmental process. Ayisiyiniwak communications guide developed with SICC and OTC; educational resource for all staff responding to TRC Call to Action 57.
Winnipeg	Each department begins its own reconciliation journey within its mandate, land development, parks, public transportation, HR, police; IRD provides guidance but cannot hold all departmental knowledge. Future goal: City becomes employer of choice for Indigenous people; increasing Indigenous representation in management and senior public service. Budget for Indigenous consultants for co-development, salaries and operations, and procurement target of 20% Indigenous spend.

Lessons from practice

"Your Indigenous Relations team can't be expected to know all things Indigenous; each department has to begin their own journey of reconciliation within the context of their department mandate (land development; asset management; parks; public transportation; human resources; police; all of them)."
— City of Winnipeg Indigenous Relations

"Moving beyond symbolic land acknowledgements and towards action-based commitments... co-developing policies and engagement approaches rather than imposing them."
— Halifax Regional Municipality



Lesson 6 Challenges & Constraints

Municipalities doing this work face real and persistent barriers, structural, political, financial, and human. Many of these constraints are features of the same colonial systems that reconciliation is trying to change. Naming them honestly is not defeatism: it is a precondition for addressing them.

The following barriers emerged consistently across the municipalities whose experiences informed this toolkit. They are not presented as reasons to avoid the work, but as common pressure points that municipalities should anticipate and plan for.

The Governance Gap

Municipal governments in Canada have limited jurisdiction over many matters that directly affect Indigenous Peoples, land, resource management, housing, and health. This creates a structural gap between what municipalities can commit to and what Indigenous communities need. Municipalities should be honest about this gap, work within it where they can, and advocate actively to provincial and federal governments where they cannot.

Proceeding without a Plan

Many municipalities make public reconciliation commitments without a clear plan, adequate resourcing, or internal capacity to implement them. Well-intentioned announcements that are not backed by structure can damage trust and make subsequent engagement harder. It is better to do less, and do it well, than to promise broadly and deliver inconsistently.

Assumptions about Indigenous Knowledge

Municipal staff frequently assume that because they have worked in a community for years, they understand its Indigenous residents' needs, priorities, and governance structures. This assumption is often wrong, and it prevents genuine listening. Expertise about a community does not substitute for a relationship with it.

Internal vs. External Roles

There is a persistent tendency to manage Indigenous engagement through external consultants rather than building internal capacity. While external expertise has value, over-reliance on consultants can prevent municipalities from developing the sustained institutional knowledge and relationships that meaningful reconciliation requires.

Budget Limitations
Reconciliation work requires resources. Municipalities that treat it as an add-on to existing budgets, or that rely on short-term project funding, will struggle to sustain progress. Dedicated, recurring budget lines are a structural necessity, not a luxury.

What peer municipalities have demonstrated

City	Examples from practice
Winnipeg	Elected officials challenged the decision to give up decision-making power for renaming parks and civic assets. Under-resourcing of reconciliation commitments or resistant to re-configuring resources; each department siloed; IRD cannot hold knowledge across all municipal systems.
Halifax	Mi'kmaw capacity constraints: multiple municipal, federal, provincial, and community files managed simultaneously. Colonial administrative structures rigid, deadline-driven, and compliance-focused; misaligned with Indigenous governance systems and ways of knowing. Internal knowledge gaps: staff unfamiliar with treaty relationships, Mi'kmaw governance structures, and historical context.

Lessons from practice

"This work is exhausting; you will be constantly running into walls and barriers for the simplest things. You need support and self-care, otherwise burnout will happen. Find your allies within the organization, and I mean the ones who would protest with you, not the ones that will 'take a meeting' but not show up to do the work."
— City of Saskatoon Indigenous Initiatives

"Racism is real, and inaction allows it to persist. Meaningful progress requires acknowledging where racism exists, recognizing how privilege and unconscious norms and belief systems can shape behaviours and institutional decisions, and taking deliberate action to identify, address, and eliminate systemic barriers.."
— City of Winnipeg Indigenous Relations

"Be prepared to change your own systems. Decolonization will require adjusting timelines, redistributing decision-making power, and confronting institutional discomfort. If nothing changes internally, the work is solely symbolic."
— Halifax Regional Municipality

What these lessons tell us

These six lessons draw on the documented experience of municipalities across Canada. Together they point to a consistent finding that reconciliation is a relational, political, and institutional transformation that unfolds over years, not months.

The lessons also point to a consistent risk. Municipalities that move too quickly into action adopting resolutions, striking committees, publishing strategies without the relational and knowledge foundations in place tend to produce symbolic gestures rather than structural change. Good intentions are not enough. Capacity, relationship, and honesty about limitations are necessary to translate intentions into real change.

Three themes stand out across all six lessons:

1. **Relationship precedes structure.** No policy framework, advisory committee, or reconciliation strategy will function well without the trust and mutual understanding that comes from sustained, respectful engagement.
2. **Power must shift not just be shared in appearance.** The difference between consultation and genuine co-governance is not administrative; it is a question of who holds authority when a direction is set.
3. **Accountability must be real.** Commitments without mechanisms, budgets, and honest reporting are aspirations. What gets measured and resourced is what gets done.

The municipalities whose experiences inform this toolkit are at different stages. None of them has finished. All of them have made mistakes. What distinguishes the ones making progress is not that they got everything right but that they kept going, stayed honest, and kept Indigenous community members at the centre of the work.


10
New Gower Street
St. John's
City Hall

Actions:
What Municipalities Can Do

The lessons in the previous section describe what municipal reconciliation requires. This section describes what it looks like in practice.

Decolonizing municipal governance is not a project with a start and end date. It is an ongoing process that unfolds differently in every municipality depending on history, relationships, resources, and political will. The steps below are organized into two parts: first, understanding what needs to be done; then, doing it.

These are not stages to graduate from. Many municipalities will spend years in Part One, and that is legitimate, necessary work. Others will be moving through both parts simultaneously. The goal is sustained, honest progress, not speed.

The steps in this section do not need to be followed in strict order. Progress should be made where there is opportunity, and municipalities are encouraged to mobilize change wherever conditions allow. However, there is one important exception: if your municipality is new to this work, the first three steps must come first. These form the foundation for everything else, and moving into action without them risks producing tokenistic gestures rather than meaningful change.

1 Understand Local Community

Municipalities cannot meaningfully engage in decolonization without first understanding the local Indigenous community. This means reviewing census data[2] to build a preliminary understanding of the size and composition of the local Indigenous population, identifying whether there are organized Indigenous groups, nations, or representative bodies in or near the municipality, and reading publicly available materials about local history, cultures, treaties (where applicable), and land.
City staff and elected officials must also build familiarity with key documents relating to Indigenous rights. These include the TRC Calls to Action, all articles within UNDRIP, the Calls for Justice from the MMIWG final report, and, for the St. John's Metro Area, First Light's Calls for Change.

2 Note that census data is not a perfect indicator of the total number of Indigenous persons in any given municipality, but it is the best tool we have to build a preliminary understanding of the Indigenous population in any given municipality in Canada.

2 Build Internal Awareness & Capacity

Municipal staff and elected officials need a baseline understanding of the history, rights frameworks, and context that shape this work before engaging with Indigenous communities. This means training from an Indigenous organization on locally and regionally relevant Indigenous histories, including colonization and residential schools and their ongoing impacts, cultures, and current realities.

This training should not be a one-time event. It should be embedded into staff onboarding, professional development cycles, and Council orientation. Even municipalities with established structures benefit from revisiting this step as staff turn over and political leadership changes.

Municipalities in regions with limited local training capacity can explore alternatives, choosing an appropriate option in collaboration with local Indigenous group(s):

- **Provincial and national Indigenous group(s)**: Bodies such as the Native Women's Association of Canada, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, or provincial Métis federations sometimes offer training or can point to vetted resources.
- **Post-secondary institutions**: Many universities and colleges with Indigenous Studies programs or Indigenous Centres offer workshops or can connect municipalities with qualified facilitators.
- **Online learning developed by Indigenous organizations**: For example, the Indigenous Canada MOOC developed by the University of Alberta, or resources from the First Nations University of Canada. These are not substitutes for locally relevant, relationship-based training, but can still build baseline literacy.
- **Neighbouring municipalities:** Municipalities that have already established relationships may be able to share contacts or co-fund a facilitator to serve multiple communities.
- **Consulting regional Indigenous governance bodies**: Even where a local organization does not offer training, a regional Indigenous governance or rights-holding organization may be able to recommend appropriate facilitators.

3 Approach Relationships with Humility

Before establishing formal structures, municipalities should make contact with local Indigenous group(s) simply to introduce themselves, listen, and ask how the municipality might show up as a respectful partner. This is not a consultation on a project. It is not an agenda. It is the beginning of a relationship.

Relationships must involve municipal staff who hold some decision-making power. This supports a genuine and productive working relationship between the municipality and the

Indigenous group(s). Many of the municipalities who contributed to this research identified the importance of having one or more "champions": individuals who holds some decision-making power who will advocate for the work and its importance. This person should ensure that municipal staff and councillors understand the meaning and purpose of decolonizing work. This means representatives of the Indigenous group(s) do not need to defend the work, but can contribute meaningfully to change.

This step requires patience. It may take months or years before there is enough trust to move into more structured engagement. That is appropriate. Relationship precedes structure. For municipalities that already have relationships in place, this step is a reminder to tend to them continuously, not only when the municipality needs something.

4 Establish a Paid Indigenous Liaison Position

Building on the relationship forming with Indigenous group(s), hire a dedicated Indigenous Liaison to help advance the work of decolonizing from an Indigenous perspective. This individual needs the support of other Indigenous community members as coworkers and collaborators in this work. For most municipalities, this will mean hiring an Indigenous Liaison who is a member of, or has deep and established relationships within, local Indigenous communities and groups.

In addition to supporting the Liaison, housing the position at an Indigenous organization or group can help the Liaison engage with multiple Indigenous perspectives. Urban Indigenous people come from a variety of cultures and backgrounds and no single Indigenous person can represent all of them. An Indigenous organization or group can support the Liaison in navigating diverse needs of Indigenous citizens throughout the work of decolonization.

5 Assess Local Priorities & Identify Relevant Calls to Action

Conduct an honest internal assessment of where gaps exist, what Indigenous community members have already indicated they need, and which Calls are most applicable to the local context (e.g. TRC Calls to Action, First Light Calls for Change, MMIWG Calls for Justice, articles of UNDRIP). Not all Calls will apply equally to every municipality, and priorities will differ across regions.

This assessment should inform everything that follows. It should be revisited as circumstances change, as relationships deepen, and as new community priorities emerge.

6 Establish a Dedicated Indigenous Relations Structure

Formalize an Indigenous Relations function at the CAO level, staffed with salaried positions, a clear mandate, and a sustainable operating budget. Establishing this function, with institutional authority over policy, procurement, hiring, and planning, represents a structural change, distinct from a communications or community outreach role.

7 Strengthen Indigenous Advisory Structures

Establish joint advisory or collaboration committees co-designed with the Indigenous groups with whom you are fostering a relationship. These advisory structures should have clear terms of reference and a direct connection to real decision-making processes. These structures work best when they shape directions going forward, not when they are consulted after direction has already been set.

For municipalities at the preliminary stages of this work, this step may begin informally, with regular structured conversations before a formal committee is established. The goal is to build toward structures that give genuine influence for Indigenous voices, not advisory roles that create the appearance of consultation without substance.

8 Tackle Municipal Calls

Based on the work done to assess local priorities and identify relevant Calls, begin to tackle those that fall within municipal jurisdiction. Every circumstance is unique, so Calls may be prioritized based on opportunity for change within the municipal system or the specific priorities that have been identified by the local Indigenous community. All work to tackle municipal Calls must be done with relationships at the centre. That is, municipalities cannot do this work on their own or based on simple consultation. Rather, the work must be done from a strong position of good relations between municipal staff, councillors, and Indigenous groups.

The First Light Metro Reconciliation Partnership has seen Call for Change 20, the recognition of National Indigenous Peoples Day, to be a successful starting point for this step with the City of St. John's and the City of Mount Pearl.

9 Reform the Policy Process

Review municipal policies through an Indigenous rights lens and update them to embed Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) principles, require early Indigenous engagement, and reflect UNDRIP obligations. Policy reform is slow work, but it is where symbolic commitment becomes structural change.

Municipalities can begin with a single policy area such as procurement or public engagement before expanding the review more broadly. Municipalities may also benefit from integrating municipal decolonization processes with other policy reforms, such as an EDI or accessibility reform process. Prioritize policies that have the most direct impact on Indigenous residents' lives, as determined in collaboration with the Indigenous group(s) with whom you are fostering relationships.

10 Establish a Reconciliation Circle with Other Municipalities

Formalize an Indigenous Relations function at the CAO level, staffed with salaried positions, a clear mandate, and a sustainable operating budget. Establishing this function, with institutional authority over policy, procurement, hiring, and planning, represents a structural change, distinct from a communications or community outreach role.

11 Integrate Culture & Improve Visibility

Embed Indigenous place names, cultural markers, meaningful land acknowledgements, and recognition of significant dates into how the municipality presents itself publicly. These steps are not substitutes for structural change, but they signal to Indigenous residents that they are seen and respected.

Cultural integration done well is community-led. It involves ongoing conversation about what visibility means to local Indigenous Peoples, not unilateral decisions about what gestures the municipality believes are appropriate.

12 Support Indigenous Women, Girls & Two-Spirit People

Municipalities have a responsibility to respond to the findings of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. This includes reviewing policing relationships and practices, ensuring safe public infrastructure, and actively supporting organizations that serve Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people in the community.

This work is relevant at every stage and should not wait for formal structures to be in place. It is both a moral obligation and a direct municipal responsibility.

13 Allocate Sustainable Funding

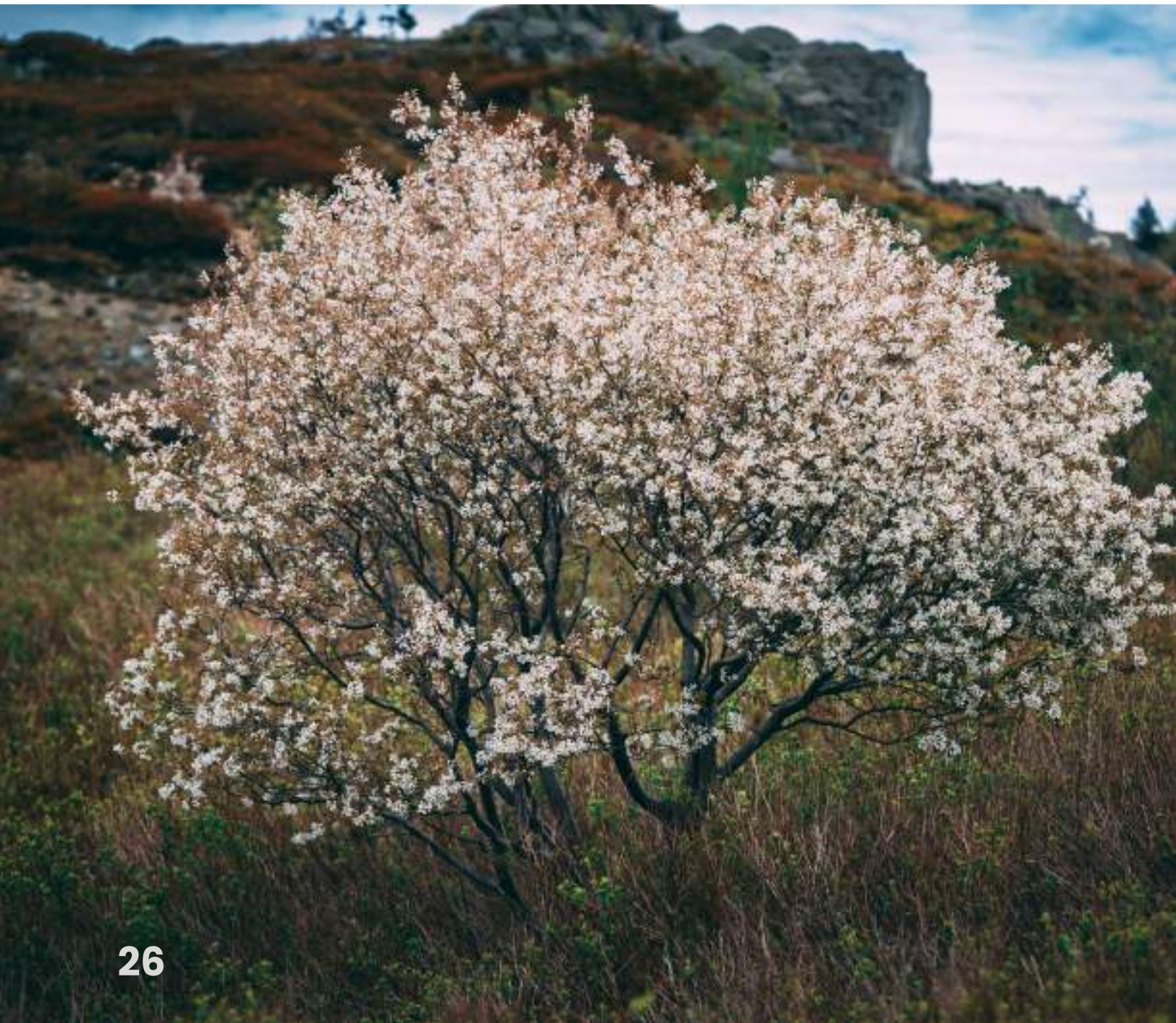
Reconciliation work requires ongoing, dedicated funding rather than project-by-project grants. Municipalities should establish a recurring budget line for Indigenous relations, support Indigenous-led organizations through multi-year funding rather than annual applications, and explore co-funding opportunities with provincial and federal partners.

Municipalities at the foundational stage should begin advocating internally for dedicated funding even before structures are formalized. Without appropriate resourcing, the work cannot be sustained, and there is a risk of breaking trust with Indigenous Peoples.

14 Track Progress & Be Accountable

Commitments without accountability mechanisms are aspirations. Municipalities should establish clear indicators, reporting cycles, and public accountability mechanisms. These should include regular reporting to both Council and Indigenous communities on progress, setbacks, and next steps.

For municipalities earlier in this work, accountability might begin simply with a public commitment to report annually on what steps have been taken, even before formal metrics are established. What matters is that the commitment is real, the reporting is honest, and the communities most affected have a meaningful role in assessing progress.



Self-Assessment Checklist

This checklist is a starting point for honest internal reflection. Its goal is to help you identify where you are, so you can decide where to go next.

For each statement, mark one of the following:

- Work underway
- Early steps taken
- Not yet started
- Unsure
- Not applicable

Relational Accountability & Trust-Building	Work underway	Early steps taken	Not yet started	Unsure	N/A
We engage with Indigenous communities before projects are framed, not after.					
Our engagement processes are trauma-informed and culturally safe.					
We use independent facilitators for public meetings where appropriate.					
Elected officials participate meaningfully in Indigenous engagement, not only staff.					
We follow through consistently on commitments made to Indigenous communities.					
We acknowledge past harms honestly and publicly.					
Knowledge Systems & Cultural Integration	Work underway	Early steps taken	Not yet started	Unsure	N/A
Indigenous knowledge informs land-use planning and policy development					
Indigenous place names are recognized or restored where appropriate.					

Significant days such as National Indigenous Peoples Day (NIPD) are observed meaningfully.					
Ceremony and cultural practice are welcomed in civic spaces.					
We have reviewed public infrastructure for the safety and dignity of Indigenous women and gender-diverse people.					
We support the organizations in our community that serve Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people affected by gender-based violence.					
Indigenous Leadership & Power Sharing	Work underway	Early steps taken	Not yet started	Unsure	N/A
Indigenous Peoples lead processes, not only advise on them.					
Indigenous input is sought before directions are set, not after.					
We have an Indigenous advisory structure with genuine influence over decisions.					
Indigenous group(s) are recognized partners in municipal funding and grant programs.					
Indigenous group(s), businesses, and individuals are actively encouraged and supported to participate in municipal procurement and funding processes, and the municipality works to remove barriers to their eligibility and access.					
More than one Indigenous person participates in key decision-making processes.					
Each department has begun its own reconciliation journey, not only the Indigenous Relations office.					

Structural Readiness, Legitimacy & Institutionalization	Work underway	Early steps taken	Not yet started	Unsure	N/A
We have formally adopted UNDRIP and/or the TRC Calls to Action.					
A dedicated Indigenous Relations function exists at the CAO level.					
Salaried positions are dedicated to this work with a sustainable operating budget.					
FPIC principles are embedded in our policy processes.					
Councillors and leadership at the manager level and above have reviewed UNDRIP and are continuing to learn through relationships with local Indigenous groups.					
We have assessed what is possible under our enabling legislation.					
Operations & Institutional Practice	Work underway	Early steps taken	Not yet started	Unsure	N/A
Reconciliation commitments are reflected in procurement decisions.					
Cultural safety training is embedded in staff onboarding and professional development.					
Reconciliation is integrated into planning, HR, and asset management not only a standalone office.					
We use our influence to advance accountability and cultural safety in policing.					
We report publicly on outcomes, not only activities.					

Accountability frameworks measure change in Indigenous Peoples' experiences, not only municipal outputs.					
Challenges & Constraints	Work underway	Early steps taken	Not yet started	Unsure	N/A
We have identified the limits of our jurisdiction honestly and communicated them to Indigenous partners.					
We have a clear plan before making public reconciliation commitments.					
We are building internal capacity rather than relying primarily on external consultants.					
Reconciliation has a dedicated, recurring budget line.					
Staff have access to wellbeing and peer support for this work, including cultural supports for Indigenous employees.					
We advocate actively to provincial and federal governments where municipal jurisdiction is limited.					
We report publicly on outcomes, not only activities.					
Accountability frameworks measure change in Indigenous Peoples' experiences, not only municipal outputs.					

Quick Reference for Elected Officials

Why this matters to you in your role

Reconciliation is not only a staff responsibility. When engagement is entirely delegated to staff, it signals that the work is not a political priority. Elected officials set direction, approve budgets, and are accountable to the public. That makes your role in this work absolutely critical.

Six things that matter wherever you start

1. Symbolic commitments without structure do not constitute reconciliation. Resolutions and land acknowledgements matter only if they are backed by budget, staff, and policy change.

2. Consultation is not power-sharing. The question is not whether Indigenous Peoples are at the table. It is whether they hold authority to set directions.

3. Relationships come before projects. Reaching out to Indigenous communities only when a project requires consultation is not relationship-building: it is extraction.

4. Your jurisdiction is limited, but that is not an excuse for inaction. Where municipal authority ends, the obligation to advocate to provincial and federal governments begins.

5. One Indigenous person at the table is not enough. Tokenism damages trust and does not constitute meaningful engagement.

6. Doing less and doing it well is better than promising broadly and delivering inconsistently. Commitments that are not backed by capacity damage trust and make future engagement harder.

Your responsibilities as an elected official

- Show up to Indigenous engagement personally, not only through staff
- Approve dedicated, recurring budget lines for Indigenous relations
- Support structural changes like dedicated offices, salaried roles, and policy reform – not only symbolic gestures
- Be honest publicly about what your municipality can and cannot do under its enabling legislation
- Advocate to provincial and federal governments where municipal jurisdiction is limited
- Ask regularly: are we shifting power, or only managing consultation?

Questions to ask at Council

- Does our budget reflect our reconciliation commitments?
- Are Indigenous Peoples leading this process, or only advising on it?
- What outcomes have changed for Indigenous residents as a result of our work?
- Have we made commitments we do not have the capacity to keep?
- Are our Indigenous partners telling us our engagement is meaningful?

Engaging in this work is challenging, but it is also one of the most significant contributions a municipality can make to the well-being of its community. Every step taken toward decolonizing municipal policies, practices, and procedures supports Indigenous well-being, strengthens relationships, and moves us closer to a more just and equitable society.



Glossary

Calls to Action (TRC): The 94 recommendations issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in 2015, directed at governments, institutions, and Canadians broadly, to address the legacy of the residential school system and advance reconciliation. While all 94 Calls are significant, four carry particular relevance for municipal governments: Call 43, which names municipal governments explicitly in the obligation to adopt and implement UNDRIP; Call 47, which calls on governments to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius as the basis for claiming land; Call 57, which requires municipal governments to provide education to public servants on Indigenous peoples, history, and rights; and Call 92, which speaks to institutional obligations around procurement, consultation, and Indigenous capacity-building.

Colonialism: A system of domination in which one group asserts power over another through political control, land dispossession, cultural erasure, and economic exploitation. In the Canadian context, colonialism is not a historical event but an ongoing structure that continues to shape the conditions of Indigenous Peoples' lives and the institutions that govern them.

Decolonization: The active process of dismantling colonial structures, policies, and ways of thinking, and restoring Indigenous sovereignty, knowledge systems, and self-determination. Decolonization is not a metaphor for diversity or inclusion; it involves concrete redistribution of land, power, and authority. In municipal contexts, it requires examining and reforming the systems, procedures, and assumptions that reproduce colonial governance.

First Nations: One of three constitutionally recognized Indigenous Peoples in Canada, encompassing hundreds of distinct nations, languages, and governance traditions across the country. First Nations peoples may be status or non-status, and may or may not have signed treaties with the Crown. Where treaties do not exist, First Nations may hold rights to unceded territory. Municipalities should recognize the specific nation or nations on whose territory they operate, rather than using generic or interchangeable language across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC): A principle enshrined in UNDRIP that recognizes the right of Indigenous Peoples to give or withhold consent before any project, policy, or decision that may affect their lands, territories, or rights proceeds. "Free" means without coercion or pressure. "Prior" means before decisions are made, not after. "Informed" means with full access to relevant information in a culturally appropriate form. FPIC is distinct from consultation.

It is not simply a step in an approval process; it is a recognition that Indigenous Peoples have the right to shape, influence, and where necessary, decline to support decisions that affect them.

Indigenous Peoples: A collective term referring to the original inhabitants of a territory and their descendants, who maintain distinct cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and governance traditions. In Canada, Indigenous Peoples include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, three constitutionally recognized groups with separate histories, rights, and governance structures. While the term is useful as a broad reference, it should not be used in ways that obscure these distinctions. Municipalities should identify which specific nations and communities are present in their region and engage with each accordingly.

Indian Act: Federal legislation first enacted in 1876 that has governed many aspects of the lives of First Nations people in Canada, including band governance, land use, and identity. The Act has been widely criticized as a tool of assimilation and control. Its legacy continues to shape the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and all levels of government, including municipalities.

Institutional Racism: The ways in which policies, procedures, norms, and practices within organizations including municipal governments produce racial disparities, even when no individual actor intends harm. Addressing institutional racism requires examining systems and structures, not only individual attitudes or behaviours.

Inuit: One of three constitutionally recognized Indigenous Peoples in Canada, with distinct cultural heritage, language, and governance traditions rooted in the Arctic and subarctic regions of Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, northern Québec (Nunavik), and Labrador (Nunatsiavut). Inuit peoples have never been regulated under the Indian Act and maintain distinct rights, land claims agreements, and self-government structures. Municipalities should not conflate Inuit peoples with First Nations or Métis, nor assume that land acknowledgement practices developed for one group apply universally.

Land Acknowledgement: A formal statement recognizing the Indigenous Peoples on whose traditional, ancestral, or unceded territory an event or institution is located. Land acknowledgements are a starting point, not a substitute for action. They carry meaning when they are specific, historically informed, developed in relationship with local nations, and paired with meaningful commitments.

Métis: One of three constitutionally recognized Indigenous Peoples in Canada, with distinct cultural heritage, ancestry, and governance traditions rooted in the historic Red River Settlement and surrounding regions. Métis rights and governance structures differ from those of First Nations and Inuit peoples, and municipalities should not conflate them.

Nation-to-Nation Relationship: A framework for understanding the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the Canadian state as one between distinct political entities, each with their own sovereignty, laws, and governance authority. This framework, affirmed in treaties and in UNDRIP, challenges models in which Indigenous Peoples are treated as stakeholders within a system rather than as governments alongside it.

Reconciliation: In the Canadian policy context, reconciliation refers to the ongoing process of rebuilding the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples and governments, acknowledging historical and ongoing harms, and working toward a shared future grounded in respect and justice. The TRC distinguished between symbolic reconciliation (gestures and words) and structural reconciliation (changes to laws, institutions, and power relationships). Municipalities should examine which form their commitments take.

Residential Schools: A system of government-funded, church-operated schools established to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture by removing them from their families, communities, and languages. Over 150,000 children passed through this system. The last federally funded residential school closed in 1997. The harms caused – cultural, psychological, physical, and intergenerational – are ongoing. The TRC's 2015 findings characterized the system as "cultural genocide".

Self-Determination: The right of peoples to determine their own political status and to pursue their own economic, social, and cultural development. Recognized in international law and affirmed in UNDRIP (Articles 3 and 4), self-determination as it applies to Indigenous Peoples includes the right to maintain distinct governance systems and to exercise control over decisions that affect their communities.

Settler Colonialism: A specific form of colonialism in which the colonizing group seeks to permanently replace Indigenous populations on the land, rather than simply extract resources and leave. Settler colonialism is structural and ongoing; it is reproduced through land ownership regimes, legal systems, municipal boundaries, and governance institutions. Understanding this distinction is important for municipalities, because it clarifies that decolonization requires more than improved relations – it requires a reckoning with land and jurisdiction.

Trauma-Informed Practice: An approach to service delivery, engagement, and organizational culture that recognizes the widespread impact of trauma including intergenerational and colonial trauma and actively works to avoid re-traumatization. In municipal contexts, trauma-informed practice applies to how staff engage with Indigenous residents, how services are designed, and how internal workplace culture is managed.

Treaties: Legal agreements between Indigenous nations and the Crown that define ongoing rights, responsibilities, and relationships with respect to land, resources, and governance. Treaties are living documents, not historical artifacts. Many municipalities operate on treaty territories, and understanding the specific treaty context of a region is a prerequisite for meaningful reconciliation work.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC): A commission established under the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement that ran from 2008 to 2015. The TRC collected testimony from residential school Survivors across Canada and produced a final report documenting the history and ongoing legacy of the residential school system. Its 94 Calls to Action remain the primary national framework for reconciliation commitments at all levels of government.

Two-Spirit: An umbrella term used by some Indigenous Peoples to describe individuals who fulfill a traditional third-gender or other gender-variant role in their culture. Two-Spirit identities are distinct from Western LGBTQ+ categories and are rooted in specific Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions. The term should not be adopted outside of Indigenous contexts. Municipalities have specific obligations to Two-Spirit people as part of their response to the MMIWG National Inquiry.

Unceded: Territory Land that was never legally ceded, or given up to the Crown, through a treaty or other agreement. The term acknowledges the dispossession of the land and the inherent rights that Indigenous Peoples hold to the territory, serving as a reminder that they have never left their territories and will always retain their rights and relationships with it.

UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples): An international human rights instrument adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 and endorsed by Canada in 2016. It affirms the collective and individual rights of Indigenous Peoples, including rights to self-determination, land, culture, and free, prior, and informed consent. Canada's 2021 UNDRIP Act committed the federal government to align federal laws with the Declaration. Municipalities are not directly bound by federal UNDRIP legislation, but the Declaration's principles carry direct relevance to local governance and engagement.

Urban Indigenous Peoples: Indigenous Peoples living in urban centres, often away from their home communities or reserves. Urban Indigenous communities have distinct needs and priorities that differ from reserve-based communities, and municipalities bear direct responsibility for their wellbeing. Urban Indigenous Peoples are not a homogeneous group; they include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals from diverse nations and regions.



First Light's mission is to deliver transformative programs and services that empower, uplift, and support Indigenous communities and nations in ways that promote good relations between all.

Through advocacy, research, and social entrepreneurship, we foster inclusive environments that unite Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, promote social well-being, and drive sustainable change.

Guided by principles of trust, respect, and friendship, we aim to build a brighter future where Indigenous Peoples thrive and flourish, leaving a profound and lasting legacy for generations to come.

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