

FINAL

2025 Resident Satisfaction Focus Group Report

2025.04.03

Prepared for:

ST. JOHN'S



mco
RESEARCH

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BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

In Fall 2024, MQO conducted the 2024 City of St. John's Resident Satisfaction Survey. As a follow-up designed to dive into several key topics from that survey, MQO hosted a value-add Focus Group with City residents in early 2025, gathering deeper insights into various aspects of life in the City of St. John's.

Methodology

The focus group discussion guide was designed by MQO in collaboration with the City of St. John's. Key subject areas included overall perceptions of the City of St. John's, City programs and services, City online services and the City's strategic direction.

The group was conducted virtually using the Zoom platform on February 11th, 2025. A total of 8 St. John's residents attended. Participants shared a mix of demographic characteristics (e.g., age, income, gender) with at least one participant from each ward. There was also a couple of participants who were public transit users.



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Overall Perceptions

- Residents generally rated St. John's well as a place to live (around 7–8 out of 10). They appreciate the city's cultural assets and natural landscape but note that everyday life is affected by infrastructure issues.
- Common concerns include inconsistent sidewalks, inadequate bike paths, challenging winter conditions (especially with snow clearing), and limited parking in the downtown area was mentioned by a couple of participants.

Online Services

- Most participants had engaged with the City in form over the past year. The majority of interactions with City services occur in person or by telephone; only a minority of residents have engaged with online platforms.
- Traditional resources (printed City Guide, word of mouth, local radio) remain key information sources, highlighting the need for a more integrated and user-friendly online service environment.
- Some frustration was expressed about certain digital tools—for example, the pay-by-phone parking app—with users noting technical glitches and complex processes that exclude less tech-savvy individuals.



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Strategic Plan

- Opinions on the City's long-term vision are mixed. Residents acknowledge positive initiatives (such as improved bike paths, new community facilities, and the farmers market) but stress that longstanding issues remain unresolved.
- Key areas for improvement include housing affordability, preserving built heritage, and modernizing aging infrastructure. There is concern that planned goals are lofty and under-communicated, with an overall lack of awareness as to where progress is being made.
- Once the detailed strategic plan was shown, participants were pleased with the general direction the city was taking but were unaware of many of the initiatives.
- Many call for clearer, measurable milestones and better communication on how ambitious targets—like enhanced public transit or novel urban planning strategies—are translating into real improvements.



OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

OVERALL PERCEPTIONS: CITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Overall perceptions of life in the City of St. John's were positive. When asked to describe St. John's as a place to live, residents mentioned the city's friendly ambience, vibrant cultural experiences, and accessible outdoor spaces. Participants spoke of a well-integrated community and the benefit of having both urban amenities and proximity to nature.

A major theme was the discussion around the city's physical infrastructure. Many participants voiced frustrations over the lack of adequate sidewalks, problematic crosswalks, and insufficient bike paths. Specific examples included difficulties navigating areas like Logy Bay Road and Torbay Road, where inconsistent sidewalk availability required residents to “go back and forth” between sides. The absence of safe, accessible routes for pedestrians, families, and aging residents was repeatedly noted as a critical area in need of improvement. For some, the harsh winter weather—characterized by heavy, wet snow—exacerbated these issues, posing extra challenges for maintenance and safety.



Parking was also raised as an issue. One participant noted that construction projects can bypass parking requirements by paying a fee, while others highlighted the limited availability of accessible parking downtown and the fact that many garages are closed on evenings or weekends.

Closely linked with infrastructure, safety and walkability emerged as central concerns. Some participants noted that although green spaces and a trail system (especially in neighbourhoods like Cowan Heights) add to the city's charm, insufficient sidewalks and poorly maintained streets make navigating the city dangerous or inconvenient, particularly after dark or during winter months. A couple of participants mentioned that the city is trying, but the current infrastructure is very old, which adds to the issue.



OVERALL PERCEPTIONS: CITY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES



Although overall ratings for city programs and services were slightly lower than for livability, some participants acknowledged that certain initiatives—like the farmers market, family and senior programs, and responsive fixes were positive aspects.

However, a couple of participants criticized issues such as slow or combative customer service at City Hall, excessive bureaucratic red tape in construction permits, and fragmented communications (especially with regard to the City Guide and digital updates). There was also a desire among some participants to see composting as a service. One participant praised initiatives like the loop at Bannerman Park and the holiday lights at Bowring Park and said they would like to see similar things happening more often.

Residents expressed that while some services work well, there is a disconnect in reaching all age groups and ensuring that all citizens benefit from programs meant to build community. Specifically, a couple of participants mentioned a lack of programs for middle-aged residents. One of the participants identified that the city should put more effort into making the public aware of consultation and feedback opportunities.



ONLINE SERVICES

ONLINE SERVICES

While conventional methods like the City Guide and 311 system are effective, the city's digital communication could be improved. Participants expressed a strong desire for a more integrated, user-friendly online platform that consolidates all necessary information and services into one central, easy-to-access resource.

When asked about recent interactions, most participants reported engaging with the city in person or by telephone. Examples included visits to City Hall for issues like property tax inquiries and calling to address urgent concerns such as missing bus shelters. Although some used online channels (e.g., checking garbage schedules via the Curb It or browsing the city website), the default for many remained direct, face-to-face or telephone contact.

Residents mentioned relying on multiple channels for city updates, including quarterly printed City Guide, word of mouth, the 311 service, and the city website. While a consolidated social media presence now provides centralized information, past experiences with fragmented accounts had created confusion. Additionally, although City Council meetings are streamed and archived online, many participants admitted they seldom watch them due to time constraints or lack of direct relevance. Many were also not aware they could watch the meeting afterwards.

Many participants described challenges with certain digital services. In particular, the pay-by-phone parking app drew significant criticism for lengthy processing times, error messages from minor input mistakes, and billing complications. Concerns were raised about the usability of online tools for older residents or those less comfortable with technology, highlighting the need for a more user-friendly, inclusive digital system.



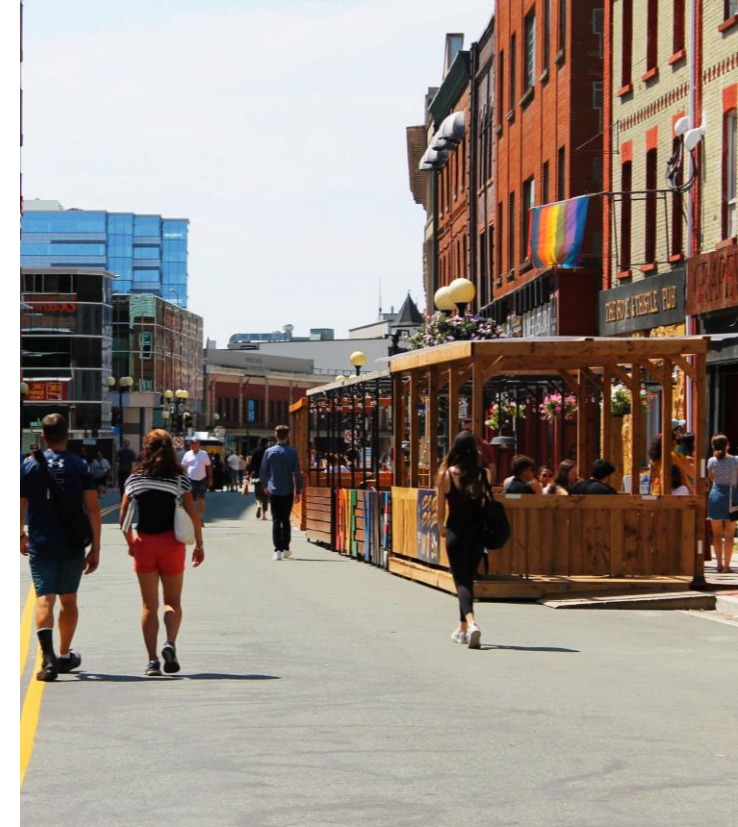
STRATEGIC DIRECTION

STRATEGIC PLAN: IS THE CITY ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

The 2024 City of St. John's Resident Satisfaction Survey revealed that fewer residents now feel the city is on the right track compared to previous years. To explore this trend further, participants were first asked to share their views on whether they believe St. John's is moving in the right direction.

Opinions were mixed. Some participants acknowledged that, given challenges inherited from the COVID-19 era, the city has made progress with new transit improvements, recreational facilities like the Mews Centre and Paul Reynolds Centre, and community activities such as the farmers market and the Loop. One participant, however, mentioned that since COVID-19, it seems businesses in the downtown area are dying out for a variety of reasons.

On the other hand, many stressed that longstanding issues—including housing shortages, inadequate pedestrian infrastructure, and maintaining aging public amenities—remain unresolved. Housing, in particular, was repeatedly identified as an urgent priority. One participant noted that the recently announced construction of an apartment building on the village mall parking lot sparked “not in my neighbourhood” reactions among some residents. Additionally, concerns over preserving built heritage and reinvesting in sustainable infrastructure were highlighted as key challenges needing attention.



STRATEGIC PLAN

Overall, participants called for a more detailed and accountable approach to reporting on the implementation of the plan. They stressed the need for the city to improve communication about what has been achieved and what remains on the agenda, so that citizens can better understand and trust that these broad, long-term goals will eventually translate into meaningful improvements in everyday services and overall quality of life.

Participants reviewed the city’s strategic plan and its long-term vision positively, with some reservations. The plan is built around four broad pillars—a city that moves, a connected city, an effective city, and a sustainable city—which many acknowledged as ambitious and appropriately goal-oriented. However, several participants expressed frustration that there is little detailed communication about how these broad objectives are implemented. A few noted that although the strategic plan is available online, most residents, including themselves, are not familiar with its details and progress updates.

Some speakers described the plan’s goals as “lovely” yet “lofty,” suggesting that while the ideas are inspiring on paper, the reality on the ground does not clearly reflect substantial progress. Some concerns were raised over whether the plan satisfactorily addresses persistent issues such as deteriorating infrastructure and housing affordability. A couple of participants mentioned that without more transparent reporting and concrete follow-up actions, the strategic vision remains largely a set of aspirational statements rather than a roadmap for real change.

Several voices in the group emphasized that the strategic plan should not work in isolation. They urged city leaders to actively collaborate with local community champions and learn from other municipalities. Specific references were made to Mount Pearl’s 25-year City Renewal Plan and innovative European infrastructure strategies as potential models that could inform St. John’s practices.



FINAL COMMENTS

FINAL COMMENTS

In their closing remarks, participants consistently emphasized the need for improved collaboration and communication. They urged the City Council to engage more directly with community leaders, listen carefully to resident feedback, and provide transparent updates on both long-term strategic goals and day-to-day operational issues.

Another recurring theme was ensuring that improvements benefit all segments of the community. Residents stressed the importance of providing accessible outdoor spaces, better pedestrian infrastructure, and programs that include families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities. They called for policies that foster inclusivity and ensure that the benefits of city initiatives are widely shared.

Final comments also highlighted concrete requests, such as rethinking downtown parking, enhancing pedestrian safety, and improving customer service responsiveness. Several participants expressed a desire to see St. John's maintain its unique cultural and natural assets while making the necessary adjustments to keep pace with modern urban challenges. **The overall message was one of cautious optimism: residents want to see their city evolve in a manner that respects its heritage while addressing current practical needs.**



About MQO Research

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