



COMMUNITY PLAN 2026 - 2029



Welcoming People.
Strengthening Systems.
Building Belonging.



LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The East Kootenay Zonal Immigration Partnership acknowledges that the communities and lands on which we live and work are the unceded, traditional, and current territories of the Ktunaxa Nation and Secwépemc peoples, including the Yaqan Nuʔkiy, ʔaǰam, Yaqit ʔa-knuǰiʔit, ʔakisǰnuk, and Shuswap Band.

These lands are also home to many other Indigenous and Métis peoples.

We are grateful to live, work, and gather on these territories and are committed to meaningful reconciliation in how we plan, partner, and serve our communities.

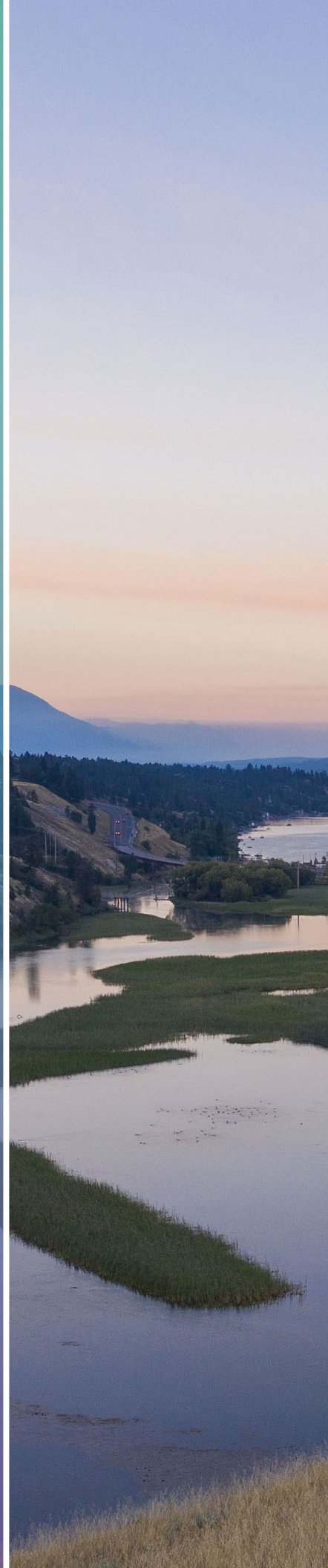


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MESSAGE FROM THE CO-CHAIRS

The East Kootenay is a region shaped by people whose families have lived here since time immemorial and those who chose to make this place home.

Today, newcomers continue that story. They arrive drawn by opportunity and the natural beauty of this region. They contribute as workers, entrepreneurs, parents, volunteers, and leaders. Employers depend on immigrant talent. Schools welcome students from around the world. Communities are enriched by new languages, cultures, and perspectives.

Across the region, we are hearing a consistent message: people want to stay - yet structural barriers make their long-term path to remain in the community uncertain. The complexity of the immigration system, affordability of housing, limited transportation options, and a lack of coordination between services create pressure on individuals, families, employers, and community organizations alike.

The East Kootenay Zonal Immigration Partnership (EKZIP) was formed to bring communities and partners together to support newcomer settlement, integration, and retention.

This Community Plan reflects the collective input of service providers, employers, local governments, and newcomers themselves. Over the next three years, the EKZIP will focus on strengthening coordination, supporting inclusive workplaces, and deepening belonging, while making sure newcomer voices are heard on community issues.

We believe the East Kootenay can be a place where newcomers arrive, belong, contribute - and stay, where diversity is celebrated and we all have the opportunity to thrive.

We look forward to doing this work together.

Kerstin Renner

Community Futures East Kootenay

Ute Juras

Family Dynamix

WHAT IS THE EKZIP?

The East Kootenay Zonal Immigration Partnership (EKZIP) is a regional collaboration funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

The EKZIP is not a direct service provider.

Instead, it serves as a backbone collaborative that strengthens the capacity of community partners to welcome and support newcomers across the East Kootenay region.



The EKZIP:

- Brings partners together across sectors
- Builds shared understanding through research and regional data
- Strengthens service coordination
- Supports employer engagement
- Amplifies newcomer voices
- Mobilizes collective action

The EKZIP is managed by the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL) and serves communities across the East Kootenay, including Cranbrook, Fernie, Sparwood, Elkford, Golden, Invermere, Radium, Canal Flats, and surrounding areas.

EKZIP'S ROLE

As an IRCC-funded Indirect Services initiative, EKZIP does not deliver settlement services directly to newcomers.

Its mandate is to strengthen the capacity of community organizations including local governments, employers, schools, health providers, libraries, and individuals to better support newcomers.

Improved newcomer outcomes flow from a strengthened, coordinated, and collaborative approach.

HOW CAN THE EKZIP BENEFIT THE REGION?

Immigration is now the primary driver of population growth in Canada.

In the East Kootenay:

- Employers across tourism, hospitality, retail, construction, and resource sectors rely on immigrant talent to sustain and grow their operations.
- The population is aging, and workforce shortages are real.
- Communities are geographically dispersed, making coordination complex.
- Housing affordability and availability are major barriers to retention.
- Immigration policy changes create uncertainty for workers and employers alike.



The defining challenge for the East Kootenay is not newcomer attraction...

it is newcomer retention.

The EKZIP's purpose is to work across the region to nurture this.



WHAT WE HEARD

This Community Plan is grounded in regional engagement conducted in 2025 - 2026.

205 participants across the East Kootenay shared their experiences and insights, including:

- 93** service providers
- 50** employers
- 62** newcomers and residents
- 10** in-depth interviews
- 4** community focus groups attended by
- 40** individuals representing newcomers, community members, and service providers

Across all groups, six consistent themes emerged:

- 1** Housing is the primary barrier to retention.
- 2** Employers rely heavily on immigrant talent to fill critical workforce gaps.
- 3** Most newcomers feel welcome, but uncertain about their ability to remain long-term.
- 4** Service coordination is improving but remains fragmented.
- 5** Immigration policy complexity creates instability.
- 6** Newcomers want to contribute as leaders, not only receive services.

This plan responds directly to these findings.





VISION

An East Kootenay where newcomers arrive, belong, contribute, and stay.



MISSION

The EKZIP strengthens the capacity of employers, service providers, community organizations, and individual citizens to build welcoming, coordinated, and inclusive systems that support newcomer settlement, integration, and long-term retention.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Equity and Inclusion

We commit to fairness, accessibility, and meaningful participation for all.

Collaboration

Integration is everybody's business. Lasting change requires shared responsibility.

Evidence-Informed Action

We use data and lived experience to guide decision-making.

Newcomer Voice

Newcomers are contributors, leaders, and partners.

Rural and Regional Realities

Strategies reflect the geographic and economic realities of the East Kootenay.

Respect for Indigenous Peoples

We acknowledge Indigenous territories and align our work with reconciliation principles.

FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Governance, Evidence & Coordination

The Foundational Framework is not a traditional strategic priority, it is the foundation that makes the work possible.

Strong governance, current evidence, clear communications, and accountable reporting ensure that the EKZIP’s strategic priorities can be sustained over time.

THREE-YEAR GOAL



A stable, representative, and well-functioning partnership structure supports coordinated regional action throughout 2026 - 2029.

GOVERNANCE

Partnership Council

The Council is EKZIP’s decision-making body. It includes representatives from local governments, employers, settlement and social services, education, health, libraries, and other community sectors. The Partnership Council meets quarterly, approved the community plan, reviews progress and provides strategic direction.

Newcomer Advisory

The Advisory ensures lived experience informs planning and evaluation. Members meet at least four times per year, contribute to priority-setting and engagement design.

Time-Limited Task Groups

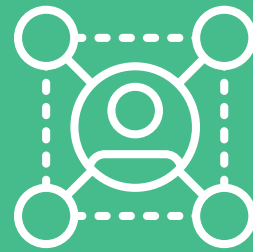
Task groups are formed for specific deliverables and dissolved once complete, enabling focused, partner-led action.





STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2026—2029

The EKZIP's work over the next three years is organized around three strategic priorities, supported by a cross-cutting commitment to education, knowledge sharing, and policy-level influence.



Strengthening Service Coordination & Navigation

Newcomers, and to varying degrees, service providers, experience confusion navigating services across a large and geographically dispersed region.

Key activities include:

- ▶ Supporting “no wrong door” referral practices
- ▶ Equipping first points of contact with tools and information
- ▶ Facilitating cross-sector coordination and learning

Goals

1. Newcomers access services more quickly and with fewer barriers.
2. Service providers are connected and informed.
3. Referral pathways are clearer and more consistent.
4. First points of contact — including organizations and community members — feel confident supporting newcomers.



Advancing Workforce & Employer Inclusion

Immigrant talent is essential to sustaining and growing the East Kootenay economy.

Key activities include:

- ▶ Developing practical employer onboarding and inclusion tools
- ▶ Providing immigration policy navigation updates
- ▶ Elevating employer perspectives in policy conversations

Goals

1. Employers understand and value immigrant contributions.
2. Employers have tools to recruit, onboard, and retain newcomers.
3. Workplaces become more inclusive and culturally responsive.
4. Newcomers are better connected to employment opportunities and advancement pathways.



Deepening Welcoming, Belonging & Equity

Welcoming is important. Belonging is transformative. Equity is essential to both.

Key activities include:

- ▶ Developing a shared regional welcoming and inclusion agenda
- ▶ Coordinating cross-cultural and anti-racism learning
- ▶ Amplifying newcomer stories and contributions while supporting their civic participation and leadership

Goals

1. Communities deepen their shared understanding of inclusion.
2. Newcomer voices influence planning and decision-making.
3. Organizations adopt inclusive policies and practices.
4. Newcomers experience stronger social connection, inclusion, and belonging.

CROSS-CUTTING COMMITMENT

Housing & Structural Advancement

Housing emerged as the single most significant barrier to newcomer retention.

While EKZIP does not build housing or deliver direct services, it will contribute by:

- Participating in relevant working groups related to housing and newcomer retention
- Sharing regional housing evidence with local governments and planning bodies
- Raising awareness of transportation and immigration barriers among decision-makers
- Contributing to provincial and federal policy conversations



Goal

Newcomer housing and retention challenges are recognized and addressed in regional planning and policy conversations.

OUR APPROACH

The EKZIP operates through a one-coordinator model. This plan is deliberately designed to be partner-led and coordinator-enabled. Success depends on:

- The EKZIP providing backbone coordination, facilitation, and tools.
- Partners implementing actions within their own organizations.
- Progress being a shared responsibility across all partners.

This model ensures sustainability while maximizing regional collaboration.

EKZIP recognizes the realities of rural geography, evolving immigration policy, housing pressures, and the realities of a single-coordinator model. The partnership will review progress annually and adapt strategies as conditions change.

MEASURING IMPACT

The EKZIP will track progress across three levels:



Partnership Functioning

- Active community partner participation
- Council and Advisory engagement
- Regional convenings, resource and knowledge sharing



Systems Change

- Adoption of inclusive practices by community organizations, businesses, and individuals at large
- Employer participation and evidence of workplace improvements
- Improved referral and navigation pathways



Community Outcome Signals

- Increased newcomer civic participation
- Evidence of strengthened belonging
- Improved service coordination



WORKING TOGETHER

The EKZIP operates through partnership.

Municipalities, local governments, employers, service providers, libraries, schools, health organizations, community groups and individuals all have roles to play.

This plan is not a standalone document - it is a shared regional commitment.



JOIN THE WORK

If you are interested in participating in the work of the East Kootenay Zonal Immigration Partnership, please follow us on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, visit our website and contact us at:



ekzip.ca



ekzip@cbal.org

Together, we can make the East Kootenay not just a place to arrive, but a place to stay and thrive.

PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS



Thank you to all who contribute to advancing cultural inclusion.

Acknowledgments

We would like to extend our gratitude towards Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada for the generous support that makes the East Kootenay Zonal Immigration Partnership a reality.

Building a truly welcoming region requires more than just a plan; it requires the collective wisdom of our partners and neighbours. Thank you to our many agency leaders and individuals who have stepped forward to share their expertise and passion to this partnership. Your commitment to sharing the unique needs and insights of our region ensures that our work is effective and deeply rooted in community. We are honoured to have your guidance in shaping our work and growing this initiative over the next three years and beyond.

Photos Acknowledgements

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ekzip@cbal.org



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