EKZIP Community Plan

Priority Areas and Evidence Summary for Workshop Participants

Purpose of This Document

This document is intended to support discussion during EKZIP Community Plan workshops. It provides a shared, evidence-based foundation for participants to review and reflect on five priority areas that emerged from extensive engagement across the East Kootenay region.

The priorities outlined here are grounded in findings from:

- Surveys with service providers, employers, and newcomers/residents, and
- In-depth interviews capturing lived experience.

Together, these inputs highlight system-level challenges and opportunities affecting newcomer attraction, settlement, integration, and long-term retention. This summary is designed to give participants who do not have access to the full report a clear and comprehensive understanding of why these priorities were identified and how they connect to regional realities.

The Five Priority Areas

Priority 1: Housing as Foundational Infrastructure

What we heard

Housing emerged as the most consistent and urgent issue across all engagement streams.

- **Service providers** ranked housing as the top need facing newcomers, far exceeding other areas such as employment, transportation, or language supports. Providers described overcrowded living conditions, reliance on temporary housing, and growing affordability pressures affecting individuals and families.
- **Employers** identified housing availability and cost as the leading barrier to hiring and retaining immigrant talent. Many employers noted that otherwise strong employees were forced to leave the region solely because they could not secure stable housing.
- **Newcomers and residents** consistently reported that housing insecurity was the primary factor influencing whether they could remain in the region long-term.
- **Interviews** reinforced housing as a "deal-breaker" issue, with participants describing impacts on mental health, family stability, children's education, and the ability to plan for the future.

Why this matters

Housing functions as foundational infrastructure. Without stable and affordable housing:

- Workforce opportunities cannot translate into retention

- Access to services becomes fragmented
- Community connection and belonging are undermined
- Long-term settlement is unlikely

This priority recognizes housing as a workforce, economic, and community sustainability issue—not solely a social concern.

Priority 2: From Collaboration to Coordination

What we heard

The region demonstrates strong goodwill and local effort, but participants consistently described a fragmented system.

- **Service providers** most often rated collaboration as "fair" or "good," with few describing it as "very good." Collaboration was commonly described as informal and relationship-based rather than structured.
- Providers identified challenges related to:
    - Navigating who does what across communities
    - Making effective referrals
    - Accessing up-to-date information
    - Coordinating services regionally
- **Employers**, particularly small businesses, echoed these concerns when supporting workers with settlement, housing, or immigration processes.
- **Newcomers** described confusion about where to go for help and how different services connect.
- **Interviews** highlighted that coordination often depends on individual relationships rather than sustainable systems, resulting in uneven experiences across the region.

Why this matters

The challenge is not a lack of services or commitment, but a lack of intentional coordination.

This priority reflects the need to:

- Move beyond ad-hoc collaboration
- Strengthen regional alignment while respecting local delivery
- Improve navigation for newcomers, employers, and service providers

EKZIP is widely viewed as well positioned to play a regional connector and backbone role, supporting shared tools, clearer pathways, and system coherence.

Priority 3: Workforce Stability and Immigration Pathways

What we heard

Immigrant talent is essential to the regional workforce, but retention is increasingly fragile due to system-level barriers.

- **Employers** identified immigration policy complexity, work permit limitations, credential recognition challenges, and lack of pathways to permanent residency as the most significant barriers to workforce stability.
- Many employers described losing trained, committed workers due to policy changes or processing delays beyond their control.
- **Service providers** highlighted the emotional, financial, and family stress experienced by newcomers facing immigration uncertainty.
- **Newcomers** described anxiety, disrupted life planning, and fear of losing the ability to remain in the region despite being employed and integrated.
- **Interviews** emphasized that immigration instability undermines long-term attachment to communities and creates ongoing turnover for employers.

Why this matters

Workforce challenges cannot be separated from immigration systems.

This priority recognizes that:

- Retention depends on predictability and long-term pathways
- Immigration uncertainty affects employers, families, and communities alike
- Workforce sustainability requires alignment between labour-market needs and immigration frameworks

Addressing workforce stability is central to economic resilience and community viability across the region.

Priority 4: Transportation as an Enabler of Inclusion

What we heard

Transportation consistently emerged as a barrier across surveys and interviews, particularly in rural and small-community contexts.

- **Service providers** identified transportation as limiting access to employment, language training, childcare, healthcare, and social programs.
- **Employers** noted that transportation barriers restrict workforce participation and reduce recruitment pools.
- **Newcomers** described isolation and reduced independence due to limited transportation options.

- **Interviews** emphasized that transportation challenges compound other barriers, even when jobs or services technically exist.

Why this matters

Transportation is an enabling condition, not a standalone issue.

Without reliable transportation:

- Employment opportunities are inaccessible
- Service coordination breaks down
- Social isolation increases
- Rural inequities are reinforced

Addressing transportation can unlock progress across multiple priority areas.

Priority 5: From Welcome to Belonging

What we heard

Many newcomers reported feeling welcomed, but welcome alone does not guarantee long-term settlement.

- **Newcomers and residents** described positive social interactions alongside ongoing isolation, thin social networks, and uncertainty about staying in the region.
- **Service providers** noted limited "landing pads," particularly for families, seniors, and individuals without strong informal supports.
- **Employers** observed that workers who cannot build stable lives locally are less likely to remain, even when employment is positive.
- **Interviews** emphasized that belonging develops over time and is shaped by housing stability, family wellbeing, social connection, and long-term prospects.

Why this matters

Belonging is about long-term attachment, not just initial welcome.

This priority recognizes that:

- Retention depends on stability and inclusion over time
- Social connection, family supports, and permanence shape community attachment
- Communities benefit when newcomers are able to build full lives locally

Cross-Cutting Considerations

The following themes appeared repeatedly in the data and should be considered within all five priority areas, rather than as separate priorities:

Information, Navigation, and One-Stop Access

Participants identified a strong need for clearer, centralized information and easier system navigation for newcomers, employers, and service providers.

Language, Interpretation, and Communication Access

Language barriers affect employment, service access, education, and community participation, particularly in smaller communities.

Health, Mental Health, and Family Supports

These needs are often under-reported but significantly influence settlement success, stability, and long-term wellbeing.

Concluding Guidance for Workshop Discussion

Purpose of the Discussion

The purpose of the workshop is not to revisit whether these challenges exist, but to:

- Test how well these priorities align with lived and professional experience
- Explore where emphasis or sequencing may differ across communities
- Identify practical actions EKZIP can take to support progress

Discussion Focus – Alignment

Participants are invited to discuss:

- Do these five priorities reflect what you are seeing in your community or sector?
- Are some priorities more urgent locally than others?
- Are there aspects of these priorities that need clarification or refinement?
- Where do you see strong connections between priorities?

Discussion Focus – Action and Implementation

Participants are then invited to consider:

EKZIP's Role

- Where can EKZIP add the most value?
- What roles make the most sense for EKZIP (e.g., connector, convener, advocate, coordinator)?
- Where should EKZIP focus its efforts rather than trying to address everything?

Practical Actions

- What concrete actions could EKZIP support under each priority?
- What achievable steps could make a meaningful difference?
- Where can existing efforts be strengthened or better coordinated?

Partnerships

- Who needs to be involved to make progress?
- Where do partnerships already exist?
- Where are new or stronger connections needed?

A Note on Scope and Realism

Not all challenges identified can be solved by EKZIP alone. Some issues—such as housing supply and immigration policy—require action across multiple levels of government and sectors.

The focus of this discussion is therefore on:

- What EKZIP can influence directly
- How EKZIP can strengthen coordination and reduce fragmentation
- Where EKZIP can act as a catalyst for longer-term change

Closing

The evidence gathered through this process points to a region with strong commitment, deep local knowledge, and a shared desire to improve outcomes for newcomers and communities alike. The work ahead is about turning that commitment into clear priorities, coordinated action, and sustained progress.

This workshop is a key step in shaping a Community Plan that reflects regional realities, builds on what is already working, and supports newcomers to build stable, fulfilling lives in the East Kootenay region.