



NORTHSIDE rising

EARLY PHASE EVALUATION SUMMARY

DECEMBER 2019



NORTHSIDE RISING

Who are we?

Northside Rising is a collaborative effort to build a vibrant, healthy Northside community. Its purpose is to bring together a wide range of stakeholders – residents, community organizations, business and government – to find new ways of working to address important issues of community concern.

The initiative is funded by eight social development departments of the provincial government and supported by Inspiring Communities, a non-profit organization experimenting with innovative responses to complex social challenges.

Northside Rising Early Phase Evaluation

(January 2017 through March 2019)

The following evaluation report focuses on the early phase of Northside Rising's work: getting started, engaging with the community, exploring issues and opportunities, and developing a shared agenda.

Its purpose is to provide feedback and insights to help those guiding the initiative shape its future development.

Highlights from the report are presented below. The full report is available at www.northsiderising.ca

[Note: Early work to address an initial priority issue – harmful substance use – was taking shape throughout the period of this evaluation and will be the subject of a future report.]

The Northside, Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM)

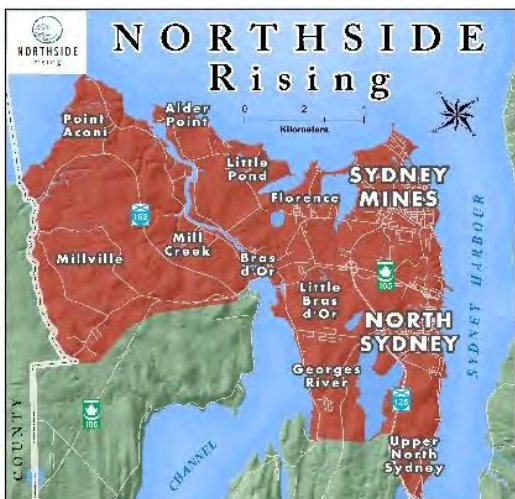
The Northside is a 'community of communities' located on the northern side of Sydney Harbour in the CBRM. It is home to a population of approximately 17,000 people living in the small urban centres of North Sydney and Sydney Mines, the rural towns of Florence and Bras d'Or, and the surrounding rural area.

To appreciate both the potential and the challenge of Northside Rising, it is important to understand the community's history.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Northside grew dramatically, largely due to the industrial development of coal and steel. By the 1950s, however, the region's industrial era reached its peak and a difficult period of decline began. The community came to rely heavily on federal and provincial governments for decisions shaping its future.

By the 1990s, the pattern of life that had defined the Northside for nearly a century began to give way altogether: the North Atlantic fishery collapsed; the region's steel plant and coal mines closed; longstanding municipal governments in North Sydney and Sydney Mines became part of the newly created Cape Breton Regional Municipality; and many community and social services became centralized in Sydney, leaving fewer community structures to deal with challenges on the Northside.

Outmigration, long a reality of local life, accelerated dramatically during this period; businesses closed and food banks opened.

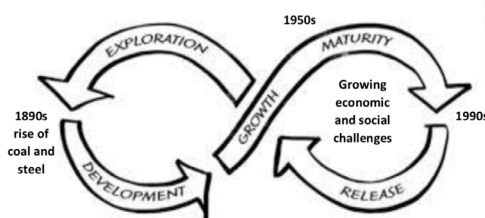


The Northside (Continued...)

While some residents were able to find their way amid these changes, many were not, including a growing number of young people for whom lives of economic and social hardship became the 'new normal,' a generation with little hope for a better life on the Northside.

A critical turning point had been reached – a time to re-build the Northside for a new era.

Current community data reveals the extent of the economic and social challenges emerging from this period (see Figure 1 below).



The 'Ecocycle' depicts a pattern of growth, decline and renewal experienced by many communities.

Figure 1- Community Data, Northside and Nova Scotia

	Northside	Nova Scotia
Incidence of Low Income (After Tax LIM) (2015)		
Total Population	27%	17.2%
0-17 year olds	33.2%	22.2%
0-5 year olds	39.9%	25.7%
Unemployment Rate (2015)	18.5%	10%
Lone-Parent Families (2015)	29%	17%
Less Than Grade 12 Education	31%	22%
Living in Unaffordable Housing	25%	12%
Increased Use of Food Banks Since 2016	23%	
Number of Syringes Distributed on the Northside by Ally Centre Needle Exchange (2016)	92,700 (approximately 7 per resident)	

Unless otherwise indicated, all data obtained from Statistics Canada, 2016 Census of Population.

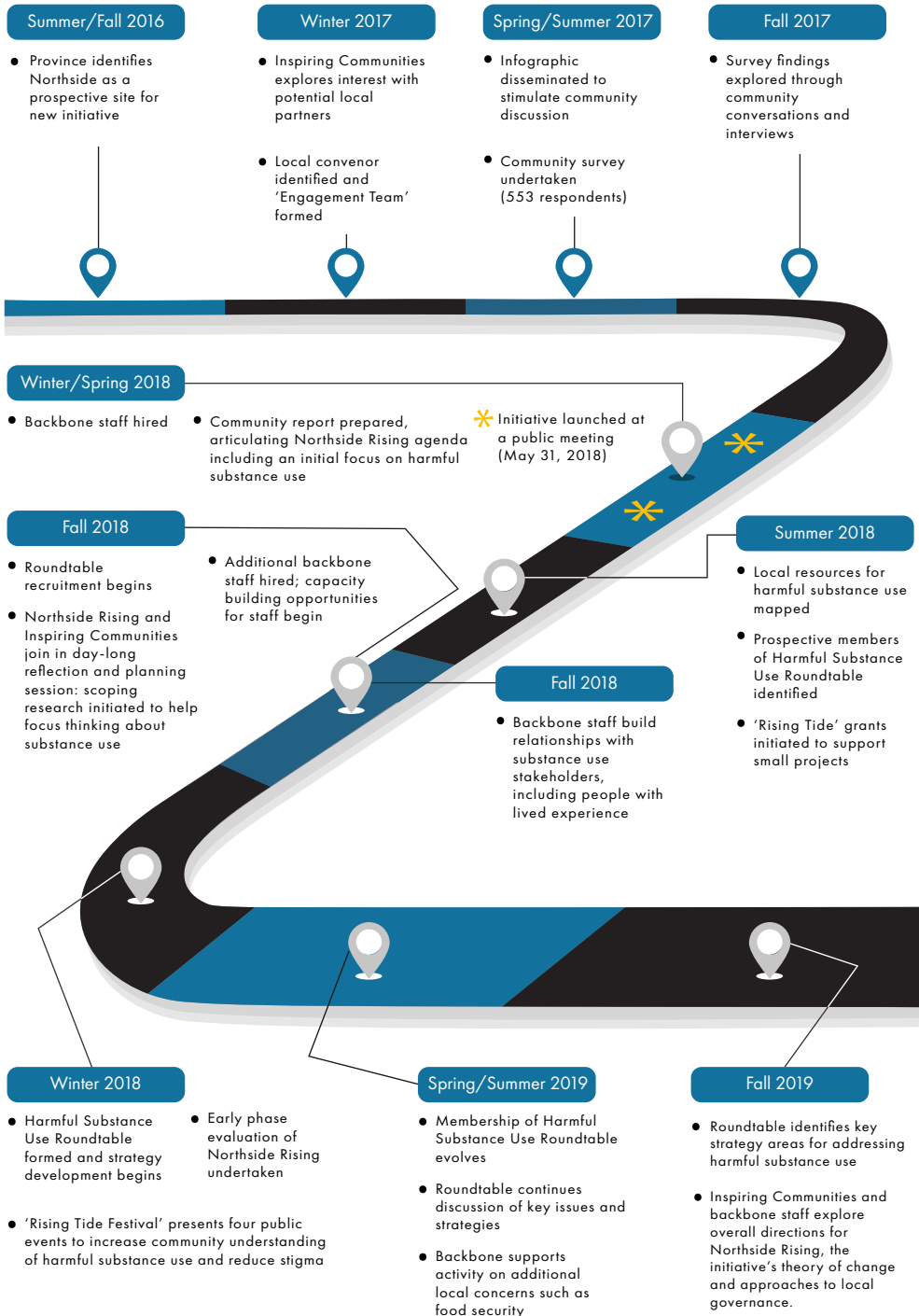
*Data provided by Sydney Mines Food Bank and North Sydney Community Food Bank, 2016.

**Data provided by the Ally Centre, 2016.

Development of Northside Rising

It was compelling data such as this that led to the development of Northside Rising. Having supported promising efforts using 'Collective Impact' to address complex issues in Dartmouth North, the social deputy ministers asked Inspiring Communities to identify other communities facing similar challenges. In January 2017, Inspiring Communities began meeting with potential partners on the Northside to explore their interest in a collaborative community initiative. The following timeline outlines early steps in what became Northside Rising.

Development of Northside Rising (Cont...)





Reflecting on the Early Work of Northside Rising

The early phase evaluation created an opportunity for participants to reflect on the strengths, limitations and possible areas for adjustment from Northside Rising's early work (January 2017 to March 2019).

Evaluation Goals

- Look at the relevant Collective Impact components (below), and explore how they can be strengthened or further developed
- Identify any adaptations that may be required
- Learn how relationships are developing among partners
- Identify key learnings and achievements

Methods

- Document review
- Interviews with: initial local convenors (2); local Engagement Team members (7); backbone staff (2); Inspiring Communities provincial team (2); provincial government partners (1)
- Focus group with Core Team members (4)
- Participant observation

Key Principles of Collective Impact

Collective Impact is a structured approach to addressing complex issues. It brings together residents, governments, community organizations, and businesses in a way that honours their unique perspectives and valuable contributions.



Shared Agenda: All participants have a shared vision for change, a common understanding of the problem, and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions



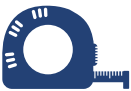
Continuous Communication: Consistent and open communication across the many players is needed to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation



Backbone Function: Dedicated, skilled staff are needed to coordinate participating organizations and agencies, and design and support good process and a learning culture



Mutually Reinforcing Activities: Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action



Shared Measurement System: Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures that efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable



Trust and Relationship Building: Participants need to take the time to build trusting relationships so that they can work together differently and productively on a shared agenda



Learning and Evaluation: Dedicated resources are put in place to guide the process, capture and communicate what's working, to inform decision making



Equity, Diversity and Inclusion: The community's voice is the core of the work; ongoing efforts are made to ensure that all voices are heard



Early Phase Evaluation: Key Findings

An overview of key findings from the early phase evaluation are presented below:



MOST IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION TO DATE...

Participants from all groups identified the way of working to address the Northside's challenges and opportunities as the initiative's most important contribution to date:

A process of community-driven change in which residents have the opportunity to reflect on their community, identify priorities to be addressed and work together to generate solutions.

This finding reflects the recognition by local participants that a sustained process of community renewal is needed to effectively address the issues of concern to local people.

Specific contributions noted by participants included:



Community Voice

"It is the use of community members from the very beginning in the engagement phase; going out to the community and getting their voice and their input."



Changing the Narrative

"I think it has re-created an identity of the Northside that it is a functioning unit that can do stuff. I think that got lost over the years."

"The most important contribution to date is the feeling of hope that comes in when they speak about it; the changing of a mindset. It is hope and knowing there is support for the community coming together, and that we can fix our communities ourselves; that understanding and mentality is wonderful."

Community Data and Community Survey



"...seeing the statistics and diagrams...Issues aren't hidden when you have those statistics in front of you."

"I think it would be the contribution of the surveys leading to the report. I was impressed by the overall number of the completed surveys, and the people out there doing the leg work actually getting the community to complete or participate in a focus group or a survey. It laid the groundwork for where we are right now."

Greatest Potential

Similarly, evaluation participants saw the greatest potential of the initiative in terms of building the community's capacity to shape its future.



Creating a New Narrative

"The greatest opportunity is to change an old narrative that has existed in the community for a long time: 'It's only getting worse, it is not getting better, nobody is coming, and nobody is doing anything.'"

We do have a chance to change the narrative of things getting worse. We are acknowledging that, we are acknowledging crisis, and we are the people that are going to start doing something about it..."

Tangible Impact



"[The greatest potential is that] it establishes a way of working that actually generates some impacts. People can realize the potential of working together and having a say and in fact, being able to make a difference. That'll do a lot to build confidence and establish an effective way of the community addressing its issues and its opportunities."

Strengths and Challenges

Reflecting on the principles of Collective Impact, evaluation participants identified both strengths and challenges in the work to date:



Common Agenda

Strength

The Northside Rising Community Report (May 2018) articulated a strong three-pronged agenda for the initiative:

1. Create a community movement committed to building a vibrant, healthy Northside for the long term
2. Use the principles of Collective Impact to address the complex issue of harmful substance use in the mid-term
3. Provide small 'Rising Tide' grants to make tangible improvements to community life in the near term

Challenges

- Defining action-able focus areas with respect to harmful substance use

"...folks that haven't been around addiction as much might not realize how large a scope it is. If we don't narrow down what we are doing we continue to be in this big wide universe and it is very hard to make a system change."

- Finding the right balance between taking the time to building relationships and shared understanding, and moving to action

"...you have to go slow to go far, but the learning is if you go too slow, you don't go anywhere at all."

- Not becoming narrowly identified with a single issue

"If your area was children and early childhood development, when [Northside Rising] stated the priorities [harmful substance use] you could see people drift off and not see themselves in that."

Strengths and Challenges (Continued...)



Backbone Infrastructure

Strength

Backbone staff is playing a crucial organizing and facilitation role in support of the initiative

"...Backbone team is the glue. Full-time support with boots-on-the-ground, helping to hold all the pieces together."

Challenges

Increased capacity is needed for building cohesion and focus in response to complex issues

"In this phase it is about trying to find some cohesion as a group and directions of the work because there are so many pieces... The Backbone team has a really important and delicate job to do supporting the group to do that."



Continuous Communication

Strengths

- The Backbone team is maintaining contact with the wider community through a number of mechanisms: networking, newsletters, event announcements, social media
- Members of the Harmful Substance Use Roundtable are meeting regularly
- Many initiative participants have consistent contact with one another simply due to the nature of working in a small community

Challenges

- Keeping interested community members in the loop
- Managing the many dimensions and levels of the work so that participants feel in touch with all that is happening
- Creating a safe space for difficult conversations
- Strengthening links with government and other institutional stakeholders



Strengths and Challenges (Continued...)



Culture of Trust and Relationship Building

Strengths

Factors encouraging trust and collaboration:

- Early involvement of trusted local leadership
- Belief in the basic concept of the initiative
- Branding that inspires hope
- Attention to norms of mutual respect

"There is a sense that people have to work together...The basic rationale of Inspiring Communities makes sense in terms of collaboration among a wide group of people."

Challenges

Factors reducing trust:

- At times, unclear communication about the purpose of the initiative and how it is being pursued
- Slow pace of progress
- Uncertainty about where the decision-making power of the initiative resides

"Overall the trust amongst partners is middle of the road...There is an issue with general community trust in the process; an uncertainty about if this way of working will produce results soon enough. There is hesitancy to trust in the process or the commitment from the government; if expectations will be filled."

Strengths and Challenges (Continued...)



Diversity, Inclusion and Equity

Strengths

- Openness to diverse perspectives
- Active inclusion of people with firsthand experience of issues, e.g., harmful substance use

"I think there has been a good effort to have the many different voices heard. I found with our meetings as the Core Team and now as the Roundtable, a sense of openness and caring for people to weigh in and to share their perspectives."

Challenges

- Further work to expand and deepen involvement from people with firsthand experience of issues
- Expanded involvement of some sectors, particularly business

"I think there is still a ways to go when it comes to first voice perspective. Right now, we have some really strong first voices in certain perspectives of addictions, but because it is a diverse issue there are a lot of first voices that belong to that group."



Learning and Evaluation

Strength

Learning and evaluation is valued as a key ingredient in the initiative's work

"I believe in ongoing learning, the ability to make decisions in intelligent, informed evidence-based ways... This is one of the strengths of Northside Rising and this initiative in general; the attention to ongoing learning in research and evaluation."

Challenges

- Developing more formalized reflection processes
- Cultivating an openness to explore what isn't working and how these things can be addressed
- Continuing to exchange learnings with the other Inspiring Communities sites

Key Lessons

Evaluation participants regarded Northside Rising as an important opportunity for developing new ways of working together to renew the community for the long term. Three key lessons from the early work are important for supporting that effort:

1. Effective Practices

In the work to date, several elements have stood out as being particularly important not only to the early phase of Northside Rising but to its ongoing work:

A) *Ensure there is a strong backbone in place* – Backbone support represents a type of social infrastructure that communities often lack. For the Northside, backbone support brings a new kind of ‘boots on the ground’ - geared towards facilitating collaboration among a wide range of partners.

B) *Devote time to building strong relationships* – In many ways, relationships are the lifeblood of community change initiatives. Building relationships takes time and patience, both of which can be in short supply in communities struggling to meet many needs with too few resources. For Northside Rising, devoting time to build strong relationships has proven to be very effective.

C) *Involve people with lived experience of the issues* – The active participation of people with lived experience of the issues has proven invaluable throughout the initiative. People who have direct experience of the issues concerned bring an intimate knowledge of what those issues look like on the ground as well as a deep stake in how they are addressed.

D) *Make intentional use of data throughout all phases of the work* – Data made available during the community engagement phase stimulated conversation and reflection among residents, and deepened awareness of the scale and scope of the issues facing the community. Similarly, the results of the community survey allowed residents to see how others in their community viewed the opportunities and challenges facing the Northside. Both reports were key to forming a broadly shared agenda for the current phase of the initiative’s work.

E) *Foster a strong culture of learning and adaptation* – Underlying the work in Northside Rising is a commitment to learning and change. Complex challenges do not come with ready-made solutions; they require ongoing learning, testing and adaptation. Having an openness to learning is a key part of the civic culture needed to support the ongoing work on the Northside.

Key Lessons (Continued...)

2. Managing Complex Change – A Balancing Act

One of the key tools that communities like the Northside require for their future well-being is the ability to manage complex change processes. The success of such initiatives relies heavily on the ability of its leaders to continuously balance a variety of important tensions:

- Long term vision with near-term goals
- Commitment to outcomes with a commitment to process
- Big picture thinking with targeted action
- Desire for consensus with an openness to diversity and debate
- Opportunity-driven change with strategic analysis and direction
- Local knowledge and leadership with non-local perspectives and expertise
- Bias for action with a bias for learning

Navigating these tensions requires an endless series of judgments about how best to apply general principles to specific circumstances. Backbone staff and others involved in the leadership of Northside Rising are learning the dynamics of such complex processes and the art of navigating its pushes and pulls.

3. Articulating the Shared Agenda – Finding the ‘Sweet Spot’

Defining a common agenda can be difficult in communities like the Northside that face a variety of significant challenges. Picking one or two issues to address runs the risk of losing the support and interest of residents who don’t identify specifically with those concerns. On the other hand, working on a wide range of issues can spread energy and resources too thin. Another option is to focus on building community capacity as an end-in-itself. However, capacity-building does not occur in a vacuum; it develops from working on real issues and learning as you go.

Northside Rising has recognized these challenges and sought to address them. However, it has struggled to find language that captures the multiple strands and time frames of its work. As a result, it has been challenging to articulate a cohesive agenda that aligns the energy and interests of all involved.

Increasingly, there is a recognition that Northside Rising is pursuing what others have called the ‘sweet spot’ of community development: taking tangible action on specific issues of community concern in a way that builds the underlying capacities needed for long-term well-being. This way of thinking may be helpful for framing the work of the initiative as it moves forward.

Considerations Moving Ahead

[Northside Rising's Community Report](#) (May 2018) presented a strong three-point agenda for the initiative's work. Since then, much of the focus of the initiative has been on addressing the complex issue of harmful substance use. While it is clear that Northside Rising needs to continue to concentrate attention on this difficult issue, it may be time for the initiative to bring back into focus two other aspects of its overall agenda: the broader goal of building a vibrant, healthy Northside and the more immediate one of using Rising Tide grants to support resident-led community projects. Both could complement and extend the work on harmful substance use.

1. *Building a vibrant, healthy Northside*

To round out Northside Rising's overall agenda, it may be helpful to convene a group whose specific focus would be on ways to build the underlying civic capacity needed to create a vibrant, healthy Northside for the long term. The mandate of the group would be to consider patterns that currently hinder community efforts to achieve desirable change and identify ways to alter these. Areas for attention could be the narrative through which the community understands itself, styles of leadership impacting the community, social infrastructure that enables citizen engagement and collaboration, and capacity to work with larger institutions such as government. Such a group could give renewed focus to what evaluation participants identified as the greatest potential of Northside Rising: new ways of working to achieve community well-being for the long term.

2. *Rising Tide grants*

Rising Tide grants were called for in the Community Report to encourage resident involvement in developing projects that generate tangible improvements in the community in the near term. They were seen as a way to foster hope and confidence and strengthen citizen participation in the work of community renewal. Valuable projects were undertaken through the Rising Tide initiative. However, the links to a concerted community agenda could be strengthened. It may be time to revisit the way these grants are used so they most effectively support the process of community renewal.



NORTHSIDE rising

JOIN THE RISING.

Thanks to all those who generously participated in the interviews and focus groups on which this report is based and to the local team who provided input on the evaluation process and draft report: Megan MacLeod, Dan Bunbury, Christina MacNeil, Ethan Fenton, and Dorothy Halliday.

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