

SOUTH OKANAGAN-SIMILKAMEEN LOCAL IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIP Community Plan



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SOUTH OKANAGAN
IMMIGRANT AND
COMMUNITY SERVICES

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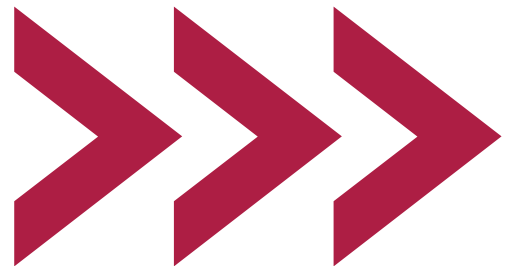
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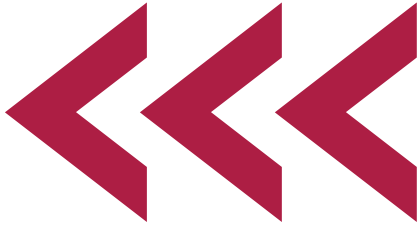


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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



We acknowledge that we live, work, and build community on the ancestral, traditional, and unceded territory of the Syilx People of the Okanagan Nation.

This acknowledgement recognizes both the historic and ongoing responsibilities we hold in advancing reconciliation. It reflects our commitment to ensuring that newcomer integration is grounded in respect, shared learning, and meaningful partnership with Indigenous peoples.

INTRODUCTION

The South Okanagan-Similkameen Local Immigration Partnership (SOSLIP) Community Plan 2026–2030 outlines the collective regional strategy to support the attraction, settlement, integration, and long-term retention of newcomers across the South Okanagan and Similkameen valleys.

The development of this plan was informed by extensive engagement with employers, municipal partners, service providers, and newcomers themselves.

The region’s unique rural–urban mix, combined with labour shortages, population aging, and transportation challenges, requires a tailored approach to newcomer inclusion.



SOUTH OKANAGAN-SIMILKAMEEN LOCAL IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIP

The South Okanagan–Similkameen region welcomes approximately 350–400 newcomers each year.

Newcomers play a distinctive and important role in sustaining community vitality, filling critical workforce gaps, and supporting essential sectors such as healthcare, childcare, agriculture, hospitality, manufacturing, and small business.

With an aging population and persistent labour shortages, immigration is essential to the long-term stability and resilience of local communities. A Local Immigration Partnership provides the structure needed to align regional stakeholders, coordinate accessible services, support employers, and ensure newcomers have a path to thrive.

Given the geographic spread of the region and often limited public transportation, coordinated planning is crucial to reducing barriers to accessing language training, employment supports, community connections, and civic participation.

The South Okanagan –Similkameen Local Immigration Partnership (SOSLIP) was established in 2014 and today includes approximately 50 organizations representing local governments, school boards, businesses, and a wide range of service providers:

- The Ooknakane Friendship Centre
- Local Government: Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen, City of Penticton, Town of Oliver, Town of Osoyoos, Town of Princeton, Village of Keremeos
- Ministry of Jobs and Economic Growth
- Société de développement économique de la C.B.
- Interior Health
- RCMP
- Community Foundation of South Okanagan
- School Districts (67 & 53)

- Okanagan College
- Work BC
- Faith Groups: Baptist Church (Penticton), United Church (Summerland), Bahai community representatives
- Valley First Credit Union
- Penticton Art Council
- Social Service Organizations: South Okanagan Immigrant & Community Services (SOICS), OneSky Community Resources, Foundry Penticton, Neil Squire Society, South Okanagan Women in Need Society, Lower Similkameen Community Services Society, Access Centre, South Okanagan Similkameen Medical Foundation
- Businesses and associations: Total Restoration Services, ProBuilders Supply, Sprouting Shoots, Retirement Concepts, Penticton and Wine Country Chamber of Commerce, Penticton Women in Business, Vision2 Reality Foundation, Penticton Industrial Development Association, BC Construction Association
- Volunteers/residents

SOSLIP's mandate is to coordinate a regional, collaborative approach to newcomer attraction, settlement, integration, and retention. The partnership plays an essential role in a region where communities are geographically dispersed, transportation options are limited, and access to services varies significantly across municipalities.

Since its inception, SOSLIP has supported planning work that has strengthened regional newcomer supports, increased employer engagement, improved coordination among service providers, and advanced community awareness of the importance of immigration in sustaining the region's demographic and economic future.

COMMUNITY PLAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH



Context for 2026-2030

The 2026–2030 planning period comes at a time of significant shifts in federal and provincial immigration policy, labour-market pressures, and demographic change. Canada’s 2026 Immigration Levels Plan stabilizes permanent resident admissions while reducing temporary resident intake, with direct implications for smaller urban and rural communities.

The Express Entry system will be changed significantly in 2026 with the aim to replace the Federal Skilled Worker (FSWC), Canadian Experience Class (CEC), and Federal Skilled Trades Class (FSTC) with a single unified system, which will focus on labour market needs. The new system will continue to favour candidates with Canadian experience in specific fields, including: medical doctors, researchers, senior managers, transport occupations, military recruits, as well as STEM, agriculture and trades professionals.

BC’s Provincial Nominee Program (BC PNP) continues to prioritize healthcare, construction, early childhood education, hospitality, and technology—sectors central to the South Okanagan–Similkameen economy. The region faces persistent labour shortages, compounded by an aging population and limited housing availability. The region must strengthen its ability to both attract and retain newcomers to sustain local services, support employers, and keep communities vibrant.

This updated Community Plan builds on the foundation of all the achievements and challenges since the establishment of the SOSLIP in 2014, and responds to today’s realities by focusing on the essential components of newcomer economic inclusion, retention, social and civic participation, and equitable access to employment opportunities. A very important part of this plan is a meaningful engagement of the Syilx people of the Okanagan Nation and representatives of other Indigenous communities residing in the region in creating a plan for welcoming newcomers to the area.



Approach & Methodology

In developing this Community Plan we used various approaches, such as literature review, newcomer and employer survey (design, collection, analysis), mapping of local services to identify current gaps and opportunities for addressing barriers to service accessibility for newcomers, community consultations (focus groups) offering anecdotal evidence to support the data and concrete activity ideas.

Co-discovery

We identified three major groups that we needed to consult with to ensure that our partnership continues to be on track – newcomers, Indigenous Community representatives and employers. We used surveys and conversation circles to collect the data. We have also consulted with the settlement service providers to get a better understanding of the current challenges and opportunities in the sector.

The knowledge that we gained through the process of discovery and analysis of hard data and anecdotal evidence helped us identify current priorities.

Co-creation

Once the information was collected and analyzed, the working group developed a list of challenges and identified key strategies in addressing them through consultations with newcomers and settlement service providers.

Using the Project Canvas Model, the partnership will develop an Action Plan that would include key activities, implementation methods/mechanisms, milestones, performance measurement processes and tools, and member responsibilities.

The Action Plan will be used to develop annual work plans.

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION POLICY



Immigration remains a cornerstone not only of Canada's demographic growth, but of its economic vitality, social renewal, and global-positioning.

Immigration continues to be the principal driver of Canada's population and labour-force growth.

Analysis

- In 2024, newcomers accounted for 98% of national population growth, pushing Canada's population beyond 41 million (Statistics Canada, 2024). Nearly one in four Canadians is foreign-born, and two-thirds of newcomers are between 25 and 54 years of age. Research by McKinsey (2023) and Boston Consulting Group (2022) demonstrates that organizations with diverse leadership teams outperform peers by 19–35% in innovation and profitability.
- Canada's 2026–2028 Immigration Levels Plan stabilizes permanent resident admissions while significantly reducing temporary resident inflows to relieve pressure on services and housing. Temporary resident admissions will drop sharply between 2025 and 2027–28, affecting international students and some categories of temporary workers. Permanent resident admissions will remain stable at approximately 380,000 in 2026, and 365,000 in 2027.

Newcomers account for

98%

of Canada's population growth (2024)

Organizations with diverse leadership outperform peers by

19-35%

in innovation and profitability

There will be an increased focus on transitioning temporary workers and students already in Canada, skilled workers with experience in Canada, and applicants who speak French. Economic immigration will become a larger share of total admissions, while reduced workforce availability negatively affects such sectors, as agriculture, childcare and early learning, construction, healthcare, hospitality and tourism.

ECONOMIC GROWTH & LABOUR SUSTAINABILITY

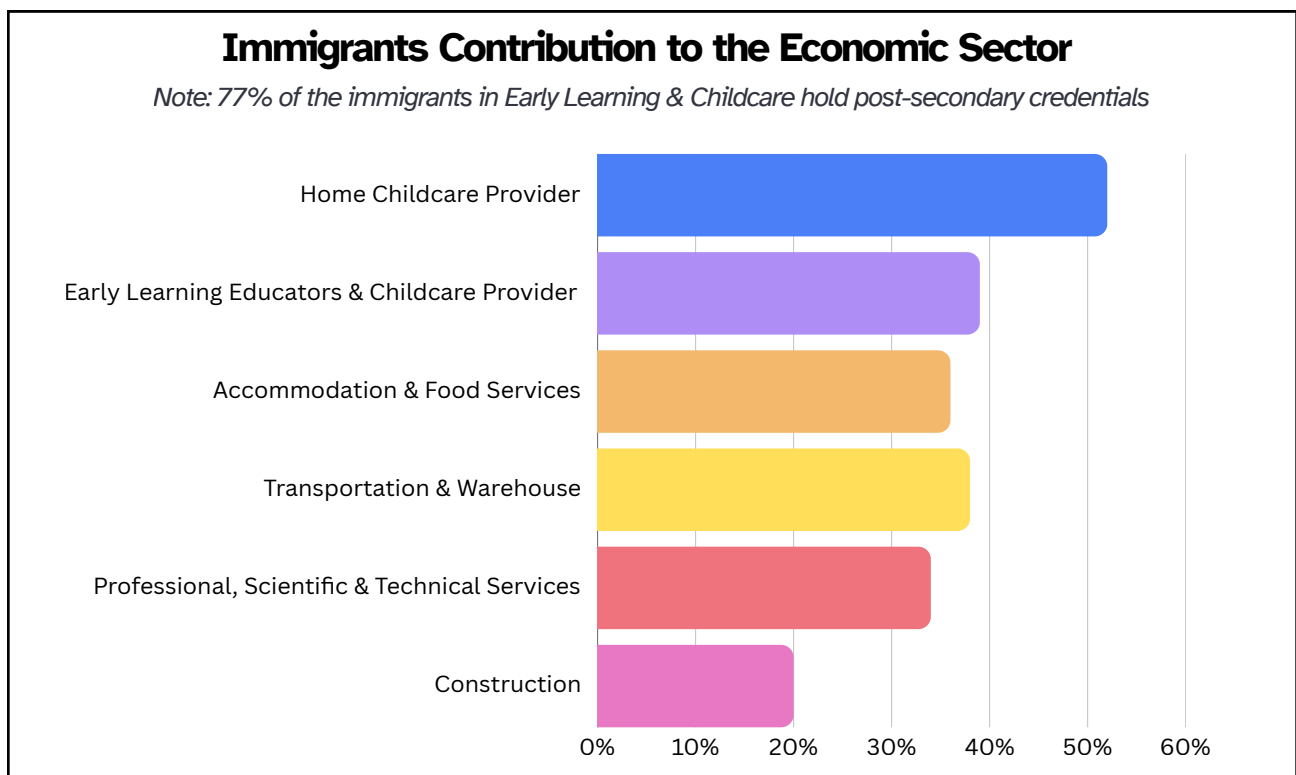
The Conference Board of Canada (2024) estimates that immigration contributes over one-third of national GDP growth. According to the BC Labour Market Outlook 2024–2034, the province will see over one million job openings, with 80% requiring post-secondary education or training.

Immigrants play vital roles in agri-food processing, tourism, healthcare, and skilled trades –industries central to the South Okanagan–Similkameen economy. Over 180,000 Temporary Foreign Workers were employed in BC in 2023 (ESDC 2024), and international students contributed nearly \$22 billion to the national economy (IRCC 2024).

Immigrants contribute across virtually every economic sector. For example, as of May 2021 immigrants comprise over 36% of people working in accommodation and food services, nearly 38% of those in transportation and warehouse jobs, over 34% of those in professional, scientific and technical services, and more than 20% of those working in construction.

Immigrants also take on roles in early learning and childcare. They account for 39% of all early learning educators and childcare providers and 52% of all home childcare providers are immigrants; and 77% of them hold post-secondary credentials.

With Canada’s working-age population shrinking without immigration, newcomers are essential to keeping the labour force stable, especially in the regions with aging populations, such as South Okanagan-Similkameen.





Community Vitality & Demographic Balance

Immigrants strengthen communities by supporting local services (schools, healthcare, transit) and by contributing to civic life. Canada's high naturalization rate (around 80% of eligible immigrants became citizens as of 2021) demonstrates the long-term commitment and investment of newcomers. For smaller regions, respondent to labour shortages and demographic decline, immigration is not just optional, it is strategic. Without newcomers, many rural and small-urban areas risk declining population, school closures, reduced services and business closures.

Global Reputation & Soft Power

Canada's approach to immigration is a part of its international brand: openness, multiculturalism, and global connectivity.

In a world where talent is mobile and global competition for skilled people is intense, Canada's immigration system gives it a competitive edge, and positions regions (including BC's interior region) to engage in global value chains.

Integration Challenges

Research on immigrant settlement across Canada consistently shows that integration is a long-term, multi-stage process. National studies indicate that it can take newcomers up to 15 years to reach the same levels of earnings, civic participation, and sense of belonging as Canadian-born residents.

This trajectory reflects the time required to build social networks, navigate complex systems, understand local workplace norms, and secure stable employment that matches prior experience.

Although Canada selects immigrants with strong educational backgrounds, work experience, language ability, and a clean security and health record, many still encounter barriers, especially in smaller and mid-sized regions.

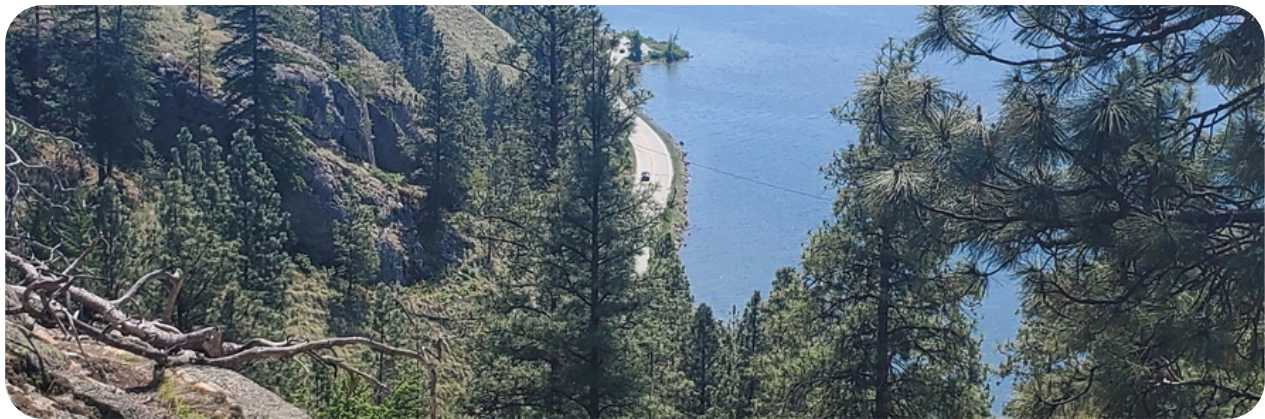
These include the need to rebuild professional networks, challenges in achieving credential recognition, and navigating unfamiliar social and institutional systems.

REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

Topographic and Demographic Information

The South Okanagan–Similkameen is a mixed urban/rural region located in the southern Okanagan Valley, characterized by a diverse landscape that includes seven Indigenous communities in the surrounding areas, these also include agricultural lands, small towns, tourism hubs, and rapidly growing urban centres. This geography creates strong opportunities for economic development, particularly in agriculture, agri-food processing, tourism, hospitality, construction, and small business growth, while simultaneously presenting challenges typical of smaller and mid-sized communities. These include limited public transportation, lower wage levels compared to major metropolitan areas, persistent labour shortages, and constrained rental housing availability.

According to the most recent population estimates, the region's population has grown from 83,022 in 2016 to approximately 96,000–97,000 residents in 2024–2025, reflecting steady growth driven largely by interprovincial and international migration. The region continues to have one of the oldest demographic profiles in British Columbia, with approximately 29–31 percent of residents aged 65 or older. This creates ongoing demand for healthcare, home support, long-term care, and other social services, while also heightening the importance of attracting and retaining younger workers and families.



Newcomers to the South Okanagan–Similkameen are diverse, representing a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. According to our 2024 newcomer survey data, the largest identified groups include individuals who self-identify as Asian (44.6 percent), Hispanic (18.9 percent), and South Asian (8.1 percent). A significant proportion of newcomers identify as visible minorities, contributing to the region's cultural vibrancy and offering language and cultural skills that benefit employers, local businesses, and community organizations. The immigrant population has also grown since the 2016 Census, when 14 percent of residents (11,930 people) were immigrants. It is estimated that approximately 15–17 percent of the region's population is now made up of newcomers, with between 350 and 400 new international arrivals settling in the region each year.

Many of these newcomers arrive with significant educational and professional experience, reflecting Canada's highly selective immigration system and the strong qualifications of those choosing to settle in smaller communities. But despite high newcomer motivation and strong qualifications, local structural factors such as housing shortages, transportation limitations, and a scarcity of public services catered to newcomers can slow the integration process and affect long-term retention. This underscores the importance of coordinated community efforts to support newcomers throughout multiple stages of settlement, not only in the initial months after arrival.

Regional Integration Needs and Challenges

Newcomer integration in the South Okanagan–Similkameen region is shaped by a combination of structural, economic, and social factors that affect how individuals settle, connect, and participate in community life. The 2024–2025 newcomer and employer engagement process revealed a set of persistent, interrelated challenges that continue to influence long-term retention and belonging.

Newcomers are regularly reporting difficulty aligning their education and experience with local employment opportunities, and the frustration that comes from this barrier. Despite arriving with strong skills, many are facing obstacles such as credential recognition, lack of local experience, or limited pathways into higher-skilled roles. Employers continue to struggle to fill technical, supervisory and managerial positions, which are critical to regional growth.

Access to culturally responsive services remains limited, particularly in healthcare, mental health supports, government services, childcare, and cultural community networks. The lack of diverse social infrastructure makes it harder for newcomers to establish roots. There is also a lack of diverse faith community representation in the region. For example, there are 68 churches in the region, one Hindu temple, two Sikh temples and no physical structure for a mosque, and no synagogue.

Many newcomers still face barriers to full integration, particularly in rural or small urban communities. Key challenges include limited affordable housing, childcare and transit gaps, and fewer cultural networks. Environics Institute (2024) research shows newcomers in smaller centres report high safety and quality of life but lower access to mentorship and civic participation. Inclusive systems such as language training, community engagement, local Indigenous education and participation with proper approaches and employer inclusion policies are essential to translating population growth into genuine belonging. Taken together, these integration challenges demonstrate the need for coordinated, system-wide solutions across employment, housing, language, transportation, and inclusion. These findings directly informed the strategic goals and community actions for 2026–2030.

Implications of National Immigration Policies for South Okanagan-Similkameen

The region faces many of the same pressures seen across the province, including an aging population, high replacement demand, and long-standing workforce gaps in healthcare, agriculture, hospitality, small business, and social services. Reduced national immigration flows heighten the importance of newcomer attraction and retention for sustaining local services and business operations.

Competition for skilled workers will intensify as larger centres draw talent with higher wages, transit access, and broader amenities. To remain competitive, the South Okanagan–Similkameen must leverage its quality of life, community connections, and accessible settlement supports. Strengthening pathways that link newcomer skills to local opportunities (including sector-specific language training, workplace orientation, and simplified credential recognition) will be increasingly important.

Regional workforce needs will require coordinated action among municipalities, employers, Indigenous partners, educational institutions, WorkBC, chambers of commerce, and settlement agencies. SOSLIP is well positioned to support this alignment by improving employer capacity, fostering inclusive workplaces, and strengthening retention-focused strategies.

Our region will also need to leverage, advocate for, and invest into culturally responsive social services and healthcare to ensure newcomers are able to have equal access to the Canadian social security net, and retain newcomers into Canada. Our region must advocate to all levels of government for easier access to these essential services.

Finally, as competition increases across B.C., the region has an opportunity to position itself as a “right-sized” destination where newcomers can build careers and family life within a connected, community-oriented environment. Aligning attraction efforts with labour-market insights and employer needs will be essential to long-term economic stability and population vitality.

Immigration Data of the South Okanagan-Similkameen

Community	Estimated Population 2024–25	Estimated Immigrants	Estimated Recent Immigrants (2019–2024)	Estimated Non-Permanent Residents	% Immigrant & Non-PR
Summerland	12,300	1,650	120	80	14.0%
Penticton	46,500	6,800	600	220	15.1%
Oliver	5,200	950	110	60	21.0%
Osoyoos	5,400	1,050	90	55	20.4%
Keremeos	1,600	230	20	25	16.0%
Princeton	3,100	260	20	0–10	8.7%
Okanagan Falls	2,350	240	20	0–10	10.7%
Naramata	1,750	360	25	0–10	21.7%

OUR RESEARCH FINDINGS



Our 2024 surveys of newcomers (85 respondents) and employers (18 respondents) in our region gave us the following snapshot of needs/challenges in integration and belonging:

Economic Integration Challenges

- Nearly 40% of newcomer survey respondents strive to work in the same field they trained in, but underemployment remains common.
- All surveyed employers noted difficulty hiring for technical/mid-skilled roles, and 83% of them indicated difficulty hiring for managerial positions.
- Credential recognition and foreign experience validation continue to limit newcomer access to skilled positions.
- Wage progression and career advancement opportunities are cited as major gaps for newcomers seeking long-term stability.

Language and Communication

Language remains one of the most significant challenges affecting multiple dimensions of integration—from social connection to employment and civic participation. Both newcomers and employers consistently identify English language proficiency as a critical factor.

- 74.5% of newcomers say that improved English ability is one of the top contributors to them having a sense of belonging.
- Employers report language challenges across nearly all areas of work: everyday English, workplace technical language, and written communication.
- Demand for sector-specific, workplace-focused, and advancement-level language training is substantial.

Housing and Affordability

Housing scarcity further undermines integration, affecting not only affordability but also stability. Many newcomers struggle to secure long-term housing due to low rental housing availability, reference requirements, and limited availability of family-sized units. Newcomer participants of a focus group discussion also reported racist incident related to accessing rental housing.

- 42.9% of employers report that newcomers left positions because they could not secure adequate housing.
- Extremely low vacancy rates and age-restricted or pet-restricted units reduce options for newcomer families.
- Rising rental costs create barriers for those entering the workforce or supporting extended families.

Transportation Barriers

Limited transportation options also restrict access to employment, services, and community participation.

Without reliable inter-community transit or ride-share services, newcomers without vehicles face daily challenges.

- Limited public transit between communities affects job access.
- No ride-share or car-share options exist in the region.
- Long travel times restrict access to childcare, healthcare, and education.

Social Isolation and Community Participation

Social integration continues to present difficulties for many newcomers. Even those who feel welcome report challenges forming friendships, accessing social networks, or finding culturally meaningful spaces.

- 75.9% of newcomers reported no civic participation in the last year.
- 43.6% never discuss political or civic matters with Canadian born residents.
- Many newcomers express difficulty forming friendships or finding recreational, cultural, or faith-based groups aligned with their background.

Discrimination and Safety

Experiences of racial discrimination remain a significant barrier affecting mental health and belonging. They have a substantial negative impact on sense of safety, confidence, and willingness to participate in community life.

- 44.1% of surveyed newcomers have experienced discrimination.
- Only 11.1% reported the incident, and 80% could not find available resources to support them.
- 33.3% of surveyed newcomers have experienced racial discrimination in public spaces, and 25.9% at their workplace.

Anecdotal Evidence

We conducted three focus group discussions – two with newcomers and one with the Indigenous community representatives.

The newcomer groups identified a number of challenges they experienced, including lack of affordable housing and childcare, lack and unreliability of public transportation, difficulty finding employment commensurate with previous education and experience (credential recognition), language barrier, difficulty getting a driver's license (high cost driving courses). There was an overwhelmingly positive feedback on the services offered by the local settlement organization (SOICS), but more supports are needed at the federal, provincial and local levels to address systemic barriers.

The Indigenous group complemented the local settlement service providers for continuously creating opportunities for newcomers and service providers to learn from the Syilx community. A number of the participants acknowledged that the history of colonization is shared by the Indigenous Communities and many newcomers. These shared experiences come with inter-generational trauma, the impact of which is still affecting the communities. The group showed an interest in continuing to collaborate to provide guidance, share knowledge and collectively organize social events for newcomers and Indigenous people.

Key Takeaways

Newcomers are facing growing pressure and systemic barriers to building stable lives and supporting their families, while also seeking to contribute to safe, inclusive, and sustainable communities.

These realities highlight the need for a coordinated, community-led approach that recognizes mutual care and support, and social infrastructure as essential to newcomer success, and furthering economic vitality in the South Okanagan-Similkameen.

Investing in coordinated supports and collective care enables newcomers not only to participate in the economy, but to strengthen community resilience, belonging, and long-term well-being for all.



Strategic Goals & Community Actions 2026 - 2030

The combined newcomer and employer data revealed four dominant regional needs.

**Refer to Page 20 for goal details.*

Language & Communication

Both groups placed language as the top barrier

74.5%

of newcomers say language is essential to belonging

- Employers consistently rate English language skills and effective workplace communication as "often" or "always" a concern

→ Directly informed Goal 1

Retention & Belonging

Nearly a third of newcomers do not feel they belong.

42.9%

of employers say newcomers leave due to housing challenges

- Nearly a third of newcomers do not feel that they belong

→ Directly informed Goal 2

Social & Civic Inclusion

Civic participation is extremely low

76%

report no civic engagement

→ Directly informed Goal 3

Credential Recognition & Employment Barriers

Credential validation issues in professional fields

27%

of employers cite credential validation issues

37.8%

of newcomers want to work in their professional fields

→ Directly informed Goal 4

The following goals represent the shared priorities identified through newcomer and employer engagement across the South Okanagan–Similkameen region. They focus on the areas with the greatest potential to improve economic inclusion, belonging, and long-term regional retention. Each goal is supported by clear objectives that guide coordinated action over the 2026–2030 period.

Goal 1

Advance newcomers' economic inclusion by supporting existing and creating new opportunities to acquire and enhance their language skills to effectively apply their knowledge, skills, and experiences in the workplace and through business development.

Objective: Partner with existing ESL providers (e.g. SOICS) to develop and deliver sector-specific and occupation-specific language courses in hospitality, healthcare, agriculture, and other priority sectors.

Goal 2

Increase long-term retention for newcomers by enhancing their workplace orientation, soft skills, and community connections.

Objective: Design and facilitate short boot camps for employers and newcomers focusing on soft skills, cultural expectations, and workplace communication.

Goal 3

Advance newcomers' social and civic inclusion by supporting existing and creating new opportunities for social interaction and civic engagement.

Objective:

- Create a newcomer group to guide community engagement initiatives and inform the implementation of the Community Plan.
- Lead anti-discrimination and equity-building initiatives that strengthen community awareness, safety, and inclusion.

Goal 4

Improve newcomer employment and labour-market outcomes by decreasing barriers related to credential recognition.

Objective:

- Create a South Okanagan Credential Recognition Roundtable (for non-regulated professions) with employers, educational institutions, credential assessors, and newcomers to streamline validation processes and develop practical tools.
- Develop a Newcomer Internship Fund supported by municipalities and chambers of commerce to expand Canadian work experience opportunities for internationally trained individuals.

Next Steps

The Strategic Goals and Community Actions outlined in this plan establish the shared priorities for strengthening newcomer attraction, settlement, inclusion, and retention across the South Okanagan–Similkameen region. Building upon the commitments, the next phase of work will focus on translating these goals into actionable, measurable steps through a dedicated implementation and monitoring framework.

Over the coming months, SOSLIP will develop a comprehensive Community Action Plan, which will outline key activities, tasks, partner responsibilities, timelines, outcomes and indicators. This document will serve as the operational guide for coordinated implementation across sectors, ensuring that progress is tracked, resources are aligned, and the plan remains responsive to emerging community needs.

The Community Action Plan will be updated annually to reflect evolving labour-market conditions, newcomer feedback, and partner input. Through ongoing monitoring, shared accountability, and continuous communication across the LIP Council and community partners, SOSLIP will support a collaborative approach to achieving long-term outcomes in economic inclusion, social participation, and community belonging.



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