

City of Vancouver

Renter Services Centre Feasibility Study

What We Heard | Engagement Summary
April – December 2021

CITY OF VANCOUVER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The City of Vancouver is located on the unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations who have lived in their territories since time immemorial and are Rights-holders and stewards of these lands and waters.

Thank you to the many individuals and organizations who contributed to this report:

- Thank you to the many people who currently rent in Vancouver who shared their voices, struggles and ideas with us.
- Thank you to the members of non-profit organizations and the City's Advisory Committees who took the time to participate in workshops and interviews, including those who partnered with us to hold focus groups for renters.
- Thank you to the members of the Project Advisory Committee who provided insightful advice and expertise on the development of the Renter Services Centre.

Website: Vancouver.ca/renteroffice
Email: renteroffice@vancouver.ca



Overview

A home is the foundation for Vancouverites to work, learn, thrive, and form a sense of belonging and community in our city. Most households in Vancouver rent their homes. Every renter needs a secure, affordable home that meets their needs. Yet, many renters in Vancouver face challenges finding and keeping a home.

Many renters rely on community organizations for resources and services to help them stay in safe, suitable and affordable housing. The City of Vancouver (the "City") is exploring the idea of bringing organizations together under one roof through the creation of a 'Renter Services Centre' (the "Centre") to help renters better access the services they need.

The proposed Centre would provide space to existing service providers to co-locate services in downtown Vancouver. The Centre would help better serve renters. It would not duplicate existing non-profit services.

The City is undertaking a feasibility study to help decide whether and how to move forward with developing the Centre. Between April and December 2021, the City collected feedback from a range of renters and service providers to find out more about:

- Challenges that renters are experiencing with their rental housing;
- Renter service needs and gaps;
- Experiences of renters in accessing existing services, including barriers;
- What types of services are needed at the proposed Renter Services Centre, including how those services should be delivered;
- The potential value that a Renter Services Centre could add for service providers and renters; and
- Interest from service providers in participating in the Renter Services Centre.
- This document summarizes the key takeaways from the engagement process. A full summary of feedback can be found in the appendix.

Engagement Activities

A variety of engagement activities were used to collect feedback, including focus groups with renters, an online survey, workshops with City Advisory Committees and organizations serving renters, and interviews.

We prioritized hearing from renters who are disproportionately impacted by systemic inequities in renting and accessing services and who are typically under-represented in engagement methods like surveys. Better understanding their experiences in renting and accessing services is critical for designing a Renter Services Centre that can be accessed by a wide range of renters. Focus groups, held in partnership with community organizations, were the primary method to hear from renters impacted by systemic inequities.



RENTER FOCUS GROUPS

Ninety-six renters participated in focus groups. Participants included people experiencing poverty or struggling to make ends meet,; urban Indigenous peoples; people of colour and racialized peoples; newcomers, including immigrants, refugees, those with and without citizenship or permanent residence status such as temporary workers; LGBTQIA2S+ peoples and gender diverse peoples; people who use drugs and substances; people living with mental health challenges; neurodiverse persons; persons with disabilities; people with first languages other than English; parents and caregivers; seniors; youth, including youth 'aging out' of government care; and women, including victims of gender-based violence.

There is diversity within these groups, and many face barriers as a result of multiple intersecting characteristics and lived experiences.

Additionally, participants had a range of living situations, including those living alone, with roommates, and with family members; living in rented apartments, basement suites, houses, and laneway homes; and living in housing operated by non-profit organizations, and private landlords; living in Single Room Occupancy hotels, transitional housing, and housing co-operatives. Some participants had experienced homelessness, either in the past or currently.

A full list of focus groups is included in the appendix.

RENTER SURVEY

A total of 587 respondents completed the survey, including 484 who are currently renting in Vancouver and 85 who had previously rented in Vancouver. Respondents represented a wide range of ages, neighbourhoods, and income groups. The survey was primarily shared through the City's online engagement platform and targeted social media and was presented in translated form in Traditional and Simplified Chinese, Punjabi, Vietnamese, and Tagalog. Print ads were included in Chinese and Punjabi language media, and the West End Seniors' Network newsletter. The survey was also distributed through non-profit organizations that provide services to renters.

Due to the voluntary nature of the survey, the results cannot be generalized to all renters in Vancouver. This is because only those interested in the topic would have completed the survey. In addition, online surveys tend to underrepresent some demographics. This survey received a lower response rate from young adults, men, people of colour, renters who do not speak English at home, and immigrants who came to Canada less than 20 years ago.

CITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE WORKSHOPS

City staff conducted four workshops with City Advisory Committees, including the Renters Advisory Committee, Persons with Disabilities Advisory Committee and two workshops open broadly to Advisory Committee members. Twenty-four Committee members participated in total.

INTERVIEWS & WORKSHOPS WITH NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

City of Vancouver staff conducted 21 interviews and two sector-based workshops with local housing and social service organizations on the topic of the proposed Renter Services Centre. One of the sector-based workshops was with renter-serving non-profit organizations and the other was with member organizations of the Vancouver Immigration Partnership (a collaboration of organizations working to improve access to services for newcomers). A total of 38 organizations participated in either an interview or workshop, with some attending both.

A full list of participants can be found in the appendix.



Renters told us that they sometimes have to choose between housing and other basic needs.

What We Heard
Key Takeaways

Engagement participants generally expressed support for the proposed Renter Services Centre and offered many ideas for how to make it a success, as well as some concerns and considerations. They also shared their experiences renting in Vancouver.

CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY RENTERS

Renters experience a range of challenges due to the high cost and limited supply of rental housing in Vancouver. Challenges include:

- **Lack of affordable housing options for a range of renters**, such as larger units for families with children, people living alone, accessible units, and units affordable to people receiving Income Assistance or Persons with Disabilities (PWD) are barriers to finding appropriate housing. Households also struggle to afford housing suitable for their families or circumstances, while managing other expenses.
- **High cost of rental housing and low availability means renters feel a power imbalance with landlords**. Renters may fear repercussions including eviction or harassment from landlords if they ask for repairs or stand up for tenant rights.
- **Insecure tenancies**, including fear of being evicted due to landlord's use of property, renoviction, or other reasons; and having to move frequently.
- **Poorly maintained and unsafe buildings**, including landlords not taking care of repairs.

- **Racism and discrimination** in finding and maintaining housing, especially anti-Indigenous racism, discrimination based on age which disproportionally impacts youth and seniors, as well as reluctance to rent to families, people receiving income assistance and PWD, and households with pets.
- **Barriers to securing housing**, including racism and discrimination as described above, long waitlists for non-market housing, and being excluded from market rentals due to insufficient credit history or a lack of landlord references.
- **Poor treatment and conflict between landlords and renters, renters and roommates**, including renters being taken advantage of through illegal rental contracts, harassment from landlords and building managers, and conflict with roommates.
- **Low incomes**, due to the low level of support from Income Assistance and Persons with Disabilities, low wages, and people with educational barriers to employment.

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES IN DELIVERING RENTER SERVICES

Systemic challenges are impacting the ability of non-profit organizations to deliver services, which in turn affects renters' experiences in accessing services.

- Service providers are increasingly stretched thin and the demand for services is growing. There are often not enough resources to help everyone who needs support or prioritize urgent cases.
- Service providers may also be constrained by eligibility requirements required by funders, or by a need to restrict service to those most in need, such as restricting services to those under a certain income threshold.
- Many of the challenges renters identified were related to capacity and resource shortfalls that service providers are facing.
- Some expressed concern that the Renter Services Centre wouldn't address the underlying need for affordable housing and would place even more demands on service provider.



BARRIERS TO ACCESSING RENTER SERVICES

Many renters have had positive experiences getting support from various service providers when facing rental challenges. However, some renters experience barriers when they try to access provincial government or non-profit services. We heard about the following barriers to services:

- **Lack of individualized supports to address the specific circumstances and needs of those seeking services**, such as translation or services provided in first languages, cultural safety, mental health supports, trauma-informed practice, and accessibility requirements.
- **Information that is hard to understand making the system complicated to navigate.** Accessing services is difficult when there is limited guidance on where to look for help or what questions to ask.
- **Eligibility requirements for services exclude some renters seeking help.** Free or low-cost services may be offered only to those under a certain income threshold, based on immigration status, or other criteria.
- **Free legal services are not available to all those who need them.** Many renters who need financial assistance with legal services report that they are ineligible because free services are often limited to those under a certain income threshold.
- **Unwelcoming staff and environments** that make people feel intimidated. This includes long wait times and complicated processes to access services and supports, including getting shuffled between service providers.
- **Locations and hours that are difficult to access.** Lack of free parking and distance from transit can create barriers to services. Many services are provided only during regular business hours when many renters work and are unavailable to access them.

> **"People don't understand the nature of my disability and make assumptions about my abilities regarding accessing services, while putting more pressure on me to self-advocate for my unique needs."**
> **– Source: Participant, Renter Survey**

RENTER SERVICES CENTRE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

We heard that a Renter Services Centre would be made more accessible with:

- Warm, friendly staff.
- A welcoming, non-bureaucratic environment; suggestions included featuring artwork by featuring artwork by xʷməθkʷəy̓ mm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) artists, as well as aesthetically pleasing design, plants, visuals and signage that are inclusive of LGBTQIA2s+ peoples, free coffee and more.
- Cultural diversity and sensitivity, including training for staff.
- Trauma-informed training for staff.
- Accessible environment that takes into consideration access for individuals with mobility challenges, as well as reducing other barriers for persons with disabilities.
- Staff who are knowledgeable about service networks and can refer as needed.
- A point person to provide information on available services and help navigate the service landscape.
- Individualized supports that meet people where they are at and address their particular circumstances.
- Longer and more flexible hours, including evening and weekend hours.
- Access to information in multiple forms, including in person, by phone, and online – some spoke to a need for access at multiple locations.
- Multilingual programming and translation.
- Protection of privacy, including protecting sensitive information and having private spaces to speak to service providers.
- Location that is convenient to access by car and transit, with adequate parking and close proximity to transit stops. There was mixed feedback regarding proposed location at 900 Howe St. with concerns about the proximity to the law courts, accessibility by transit, and distance from other Vancouver neighbourhoods.
- Designing the facility and services with the intent of reducing barriers, such as including child-friendly spaces, offering refreshments, and offering bus tickets.

Non-profit organizations told us that it takes time to build relationships and trust with those seeking support so a point of contact would be helpful to help renters navigate services.
– Source: Non-Profit Interviews



One of the biggest challenges reported by both renters and non-profits is that many are unaware of renter services. Overwhelmingly, we heard that renters don't know what is available or where to go to find information. Many renters are also not aware of their rights under the Residential Tenancy Act.

RENTER SERVICES CENTRE: RECOMMENDED SERVICES

We heard that the following services would be valuable at the Renter Services Centre:

- **Coordinated services,** including referrals between organizations at the Centre and connections to a range of service providers in Vancouver. Referrals, where possible, should streamlined and provide support through the entire renter experience (from accessing a subsidy to finding housing to advocacy). Renters and service providers told us that renters are struggling to figure out who can help them, and often get shuffled between organizations. However, service providers also face funding and staff limitations that impact renters.
- **Connections to a referral network beyond the Centre,** including to other renter services, as well as others such as employment, health, mental health, food banks, cultural services, and others.
- **Advocacy and legal support on renter issues,** in particular, legal education, workshops, advice, and free legal aid.
- **Dispute resolution and mediation** to help address conflicts with landlords.
- **Financial supports,** including help applying for Income Assistance, Persons with Disabilities, and rent subsidies. This could include staff from BC Housing and the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction on-site.
- **Peer support and/or support workers** to provide more direct support for those at risk of losing housing, including things like attending unit viewings, advice on how to handle conflict with landlords or roommates, or providing orientation about renting a unit and tenant responsibilities.
- **Help with housing searches**, including assistance with finding available housing, applying for non-profit housing, and connecting with friendly landlords.
- **Amenities**, such as access to computers, printers, and showers.



Next Steps

Results from engagement activities will be used to help assess the feasibility and value of the proposed Renter Services Centre. In the spring of 2022, staff will report to Vancouver City Council with the outcomes of the Renter Services Centre Feasibility Study.

The City will continue to engage community to provide advice on the development of the Centre through a Project Advisory Committee, with membership from renter-serving organizations and renters with a diversity of lived experiences (a full list of PAC members is included in the appendix).

CITY OF VANCOUVER

urban matters