

A Sense of Belonging:

Advancing Inclusion in Downtown London

April 2026

Executive Summary

A Sense of Belonging: Advancing Inclusion in Downtown London

Inclusion is a practical condition for downtown vitality. A thriving downtown is one where people feel welcomed, represented, safe, and able to participate fully in civic, cultural, and economic life.

For Downtown London, inclusion means creating the conditions where people from all backgrounds can access opportunity, feel reflected in the downtown experience, and contribute meaningfully to its future. When more people feel that downtown is “for them,” they are more likely to visit, invest, work, build businesses, and return.

This working paper positions inclusion as a strategic driver of vibrancy, resilience, and economic participation. It proposes a framework organized around three impacted priorities:

Reduce Barriers, Broaden Representation, and Strengthen Belonging.

These priorities are advanced through five pillars for action:

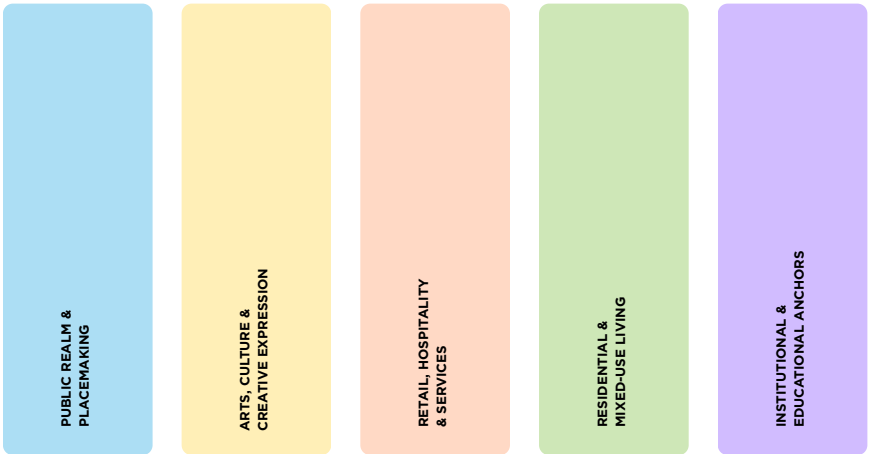
Public Realm & Placemaking; Arts, Culture & Creative Expression; Retail, Hospitality & Services; Residential & Mixed-Use Living; and Institutional & Educational Anchors.

The work is grounded in the principle “**nothing for us without us**” emphasizing co-design and meaningful partnership with equity-deserving communities, while also recognizing the broader downtown ecosystem of residents, workers, students, business owners, service users, and visitors. Inclusion is strongest when **more people can see themselves in the story of downtown.**



INCLUSION

REDUCE BARRIERS
BROADEN REPRESENTATION
STRENGTHEN BELONGING



Downtown Inclusion Model:
A sense of belonging in Downtown London

A Sense of

Advancing Inclusion in Downtown London

A thriving downtown is one where everyone feels welcome, represented, and able to participate fully in the social and economic life of the downtown. Inclusion is defined as equitable access to opportunities, accessible and welcoming public spaces, culturally responsive programming, and meaningful representation in decision-making. It is essential to Downtown London's long-term resilience.

The term "inclusion" is often associated with acronyms like DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) and appears frequently in corporate value statements and strategic plans. While these words signal an awareness of diversity's importance, their true meaning is more profound. As Verna Myers, a diversity and inclusion expert, famously stated:

"Diversity is being invited to the party; Inclusion is being asked to dance."

Inclusion goes beyond acknowledging the presence of diverse individuals and groups. It is about creating an environment where people feel seen, heard, and valued. It holds a place where they can contribute their skills, perspectives, and lived experiences, and where their participation is actively welcomed. It reflects a deeper sense of worth and belonging, grounded in respect for each person's unique identity and contributions.

Belonging:

This work also recognizes that inclusion must be understood broadly and practiced in ways that reflect the full downtown ecosystem. Downtown London is shaped every day by the people who live, work, study, run businesses, own property, access services and visit the core. Building a true sense of belonging requires balancing the needs and experiences of equity-deserving communities with those of the broader community who participate in daily downtown life. Inclusion is strongest when everyone can see themselves in the story of downtown and feel that this place is, in some way, for them.

Economic development doesn't happen on its own. When people feel connected and proud of their community, and have a sense of shared identity, we lay the groundwork for broader revitalization. Often, small-scale community-focused investments can have a lasting impact. Whether that means smaller retail spaces, supporting cultural festivals and events (both funding and in-kind) or micro-grants that help give local entrepreneurs and start-ups a hand up, we know that the impact can be significant and signal intentional inclusion in the local economy.

Inclusion is an important component of downtown vitality and as such, this pillar builds directly on the direction set for us in our Downtown Momentum Report, in which we highlighted belonging, accessibility, cultural connection, and public realm comfort as core components of vitality. It also positions Downtown London for fulfilling our strategic plans by ensuring that inclusive practices are embedded into governance, programs, placemaking, business support, and partnerships. A truly vibrant downtown must be welcoming and accessible to all.

Inclusion, Belonging, and Economic Participation Framework

Downtown London's approach to inclusion is grounded in the understanding that economic vitality and social inclusion are mutually reinforcing. A thriving downtown must be accessible, representative, and welcoming. It creates conditions where individuals, businesses, and communities can fully participate in economic and civic life.

To guide this work, three interconnected impact priorities shape our approach.

Three Impact Priorities

1. Reduce Barriers:

Identify and remove systemic, physical, economic, and perceptual barriers that limit participation in downtown life. This includes barriers related to:

- Affordability and access to space
- Mobility and accessibility
- Safety and perceptions of safety
- Regulatory and business entry constraints

Many of the barriers to inclusion remain invisible to those who do not experience them. Structural, social, economic, and physical obstacles prevent some members of our community from fully engaging in the opportunities and spaces within our commercial districts. These barriers include:

- **Physical and Economic Accessibility** - Aging infrastructure, inconsistent accessibility standards, limited wayfinding, and cost barriers to participating in pop-ups, parking, housing or events restrict who can comfortably access downtown spaces and opportunities.

- **Representation in Leadership and Programming** - Board and committee composition may not yet fully reflect the diversity of the people who work, live, study, and visit the downtown, limiting the breadth of perspectives informing programming and policy.
- **Communication and Engagement Gaps** - Language barriers, digital access issues, and marketing that does not consistently reflect the cultural diversity of London can reduce awareness and engagement among equity-seeking communities.
- **Safety, Comfort, and Belonging** - Perceptions of safety, comfort, and belonging shape how people experience downtown. Some office staff feel uncomfortable coming downtown, affecting weekday activity and the vitality of businesses and public spaces. Addressing both physical conditions and social experiences for all, including discrimination, microaggressions, concerns about general safety and limited culturally safe spaces, ensures everyone feels welcome, valued, and able to participate fully in downtown life.
- **Structural and Policy Constraints** - The geographic BIA boundary excludes many downtown users from formal representation, and past program designs may not have adequately considered broad community input.

2. Broaden Representation (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion)

Ensure that downtown reflects the diversity of the entire community across:

- Business ownership
- Cultural expression
- Leadership and decision-making
- Public space narratives and identity

This includes advancing opportunities for equity-deserving groups.

3. Strengthen Belonging & Economies of Belonging

Foster a downtown where people feel welcomed, valued, and connected. A consistent daytime workforce also contributes to economic participation and overall activity levels, supporting the businesses and public life that help people feel connected to the downtown. That sense of belonging translates into:

- increased participation
- local investment and business growth
- cultural vibrancy
- community pride and attachment

Belonging is both a social outcome and an economic driver.

Pillars for Action: Inclusion and Belonging

INCLUSION

REDUCE BARRIERS
BROADEN REPRESENTATION
STRENGTHEN BELONGING

PUBLIC REALM &
PLACEMAKING

ARTS, CULTURE &
CREATIVE EXPRESSION

RETAIL, HOSPITALITY
& SERVICES

RESIDENTIAL &
MIXED-USE LIVING

INSTITUTIONAL &
EDUCATIONAL ANCHORS

Downtown Inclusion Model:

A sense of belonging in Downtown London

Pillars for Action: Inclusion	Actions we can take
1. Public Realm & Placemaking	Design and manage inclusive, safe, and welcoming public spaces that reflect the diversity of the community and support shared use.
2. Arts, Culture & Creative Expression	Elevate diverse cultural voices and support creative industries as a driver of inclusion and economic vitality.
3. Retail, Hospitality & Services	Support a diverse and inclusive business ecosystem that reflects and serves the broader community.
4. Residential & Mixed-Use Living	Encourage a diverse and inclusive downtown population through a range of housing options and amenities.
5. Institutional & Educational Anchors	Leverage major institutions as drivers of inclusion, talent attraction, and economic participation.

Key Focus

- Accessibility and universal design
 - Inclusive programming and animation
 - Safety, comfort, and dignity in shared spaces
 - Indigenous placekeeping and storytelling
 - Design spaces that are inclusive for both equity-deserving populations and everyday users (residents, workers, visitors)
 - Programming appeals across age, cultural, and ability groups
- Representation of diverse artists and cultural groups
 - Support for festivals, performances, and installations
 - Creative entrepreneurship and cultural tourism
 - Storytelling that reflects the full community
- Inclusive business ownership and entrepreneurship
 - Accessible and welcoming customer experiences
 - Support for small, independent, and equity-deserving businesses
 - Balanced commercial mix
- Housing diversity and affordability that also crosses all socioeconomic groups
 - Livability and access to services
 - Integration of residential and commercial uses
 - Support for complete communities
- Pathways to employment and skills development
 - Partnerships with post-secondary institutions
 - Inclusive workforce development for all downtown participants
 - Student and newcomer integration into downtown life

Inclusion & Scorecard

(Baseline Framework)

To translate strategy into action, Downtown London can implement a measurable scorecard aligned with the three impact priorities. This scorecard will establish a baseline assessment of current conditions and track progress over time.

Scorecard Structure

Each pillar is evaluated across the three impact priorities:

Reduce Barriers

- % of accessible storefronts and public spaces benefiting all users, including residents, workers, visitors, and equity-seeking groups
- Ease of permitting for small businesses and pop-ups
- Transit accessibility and connectivity
- Ease of participation in programs and events for all community members
- Perception of safety and comfort across different user groups; employees are returning to offices, but some won't venture far from their buildings due to safety or comfort concerns, which affects restaurants, services and overall activity levels even when office space is occupied

Belonging

Broaden Representation

- Diversity of business ownership and business ecosystem representation (ensuring a mix of equity-deserving and broader downtown participants; where data is available)
- Participation of diverse groups in festivals, programming, and public art, while reflecting the interests of the wider community
- Participation of equity-deserving groups in downtown initiatives
- Indigenous-led and cultural visibility in placemaking
- Diversity of business ownership
- Diverse mix of uses; office-to-residential conversions will bring more people downtown, but may not fully replace the activity generated by a strong, engaged daytime workforce
- Indigenous and cultural visibility in placemaking, highlighting shared experiences and narratives

Strengthen Belonging

- Sense of belonging survey results across all downtown populations (residents, workers, visitors, students, entrepreneurs)
- Repeat visitation and engagement across diverse demographic groups
- Participation in events and programming by a mix of equity-seeking groups and broader downtown community
- Business sentiment and confidence

Key Questions to Ask Ourselves

- *Do people from diverse communities feel this place is “for me”?*
- *Can everyone participate fully and independently?*
- *Who gets to benefit economically from downtown activity?*
- *Do people feel safe being themselves here, day and night?*
- *Whose voices shape downtown, and how?*

Downtown Inclusion S

Measuring Progress Across the Five Pillar and

Legend: 1 - Significant Gaps 2 - Emerging

Pillar	Reduce Barriers
Public Realm & Placemaking	3 Improving sidewalks & lighting
Arts, Culture & Creative Expression	3 Improving venue access
Retail, Hospitality & Services	2 High business cost
Residential & Mixed-Use Living	2 Limited affordable housing
Institutional & Educational Anchors	3 Improving training access

London corecard

Three Impact Areas

3 - Moderate 4 - Strong 5 - Leading

	Broaden Representation	Strengthen Belonging
	2 Limited cultural placemaking	3 Active & welcoming spaces
	4 Increasing diverse programming	4 High engagement at events
	2 Limited ownership diversity	3 Moderate customer experience
	2 Lacking residential diversity	2 Weak community connections
	3 Emerging student diversity	3 Active student presence

Strengths

Public Realm & Placemaking

- Active, welcoming spaces at key downtown nodes; sidewalks, lighting, public art and accessibility is improving.
- *Opportunity:*
Well-positioned to serve as a foundation for inclusion, particularly if representation gaps are addressed.

Arts, Culture & Creative Expression

- Programming is diverse and inclusive, with high engagement in festivals, performances, and cultural events. Physical access is improving, and public participation is strong.
- *Opportunity:*
Leverage this as a hub for inclusion messaging and to connect other pillars.

Gaps

Retail, Hospitality & Services

- Ownership diversity is limited; business start-up costs and licensing create barriers; customer experience moderately welcoming but inconsistent.
- *Actionable Strategies:*
 - Incentivize minority-owned businesses and socially inclusive operators.
 - Offer targeted mentorship or funding programs to reduce entry barriers.
 - Train staff on inclusive service and customer experiences.
 - Assess opportunities for multi-use spaces to fill underutilized/vacant properties and address affordability concerns

Residential & Mixed-Use Living

- Limited affordable housing, low diversity in resident composition, weak community connections.
- *Actionable Strategies:*
 - Partner with developers to prioritize affordable, inclusive housing units; increase awareness of accessible spaces.
 - Encourage mixed-use developments that integrate cultural and social programming.
 - Invest in public amenities that promote neighbourly interaction and community-building.

Institutional & Educational Anchors

- Student diversity emerging, access to training programs improving but still inconsistent.
- *Actionable Strategies:*
 - Strengthen pipelines for local talent with and led by underrepresented groups.
 - Partner with post-secondary institutions and cultural organizations to embed inclusion principles into programming.

Guiding Principles

The following 8 principles anchor Downtown London's approach to inclusion and ensure alignment across initiatives, advocacy, and partnerships:

1. **Downtown Is for Everyone:** Downtown must be welcoming, accessible, and barrier-free for people of all ages, abilities, cultures, and identities.
2. **"Nothing for Us Without Us":** Programs and decisions are most effective when shaped directly by the communities they affect.
3. **Representation Matters:** Leadership, programming, and promotion should reflect the diversity of people who contribute to downtown daily.
4. **Accessibility First:** Universal access must guide public realm investments, program design, and communication practices.
5. **Equity Over Equality:** Support and opportunities are tailored to meet differing needs and remove systemic barriers.
6. **Transparency and Accountability:** Inclusion goals should be clear, measurable, and publicly communicated.
7. **Commitment to Continuous Learning:** Inclusion is an evolving practice requiring ongoing reflection, training, and adaptation.
8. **Belonging Is Shared:** Inclusion is most effective when it balances the needs of all downtown participants. While equity-deserving communities require intentional support, downtown must also be welcoming and meaningful for residents, workers, business owners, students, visitors, and all who engage in daily life.

Everyone should be able to see themselves reflected in the spaces, stories, and opportunities of downtown, fostering a sense of shared identity, pride, and participation.

Inclusion as a Driver of Vitality

Inclusion is a driver of downtown vitality. When more people feel welcome, represented, and able to participate, downtown gains:

- A stronger workforce and visitor base
- A broader and more resilient business ecosystem
- Greater community trust and civic pride
- More vibrant public spaces and cultural life

By embedding inclusion into future planning, governance, programs, placemaking, and partnerships, we strengthen our capacity to attract new businesses, support existing members, and cultivate a thriving, resilient core for everyone.

An inclusive downtown is one where people from all backgrounds feel welcome, safe, represented, and able to participate fully in civic, cultural, and economic life. The Inclusion Pillars framework recognizes that inclusion is achieved through alignment of initiatives that reflect the five pillars.

Supporting a Safe and Welcoming Downtown

Beyond performative statements, we aim to integrate actual [allyship](#) in programs and actions on an ongoing basis. The City of London, in speaking about allyship on their [Stop Tolerhating](#) site, describes inclusion this way:

“Inclusion is all about creating spaces, in your workplace, social, or family circles, where people who have historically been excluded or discriminated against are welcomed and accepted.”

Creating an inclusive downtown requires more than programming and partnerships. A shared commitment to safety, dignity, and belonging in public spaces helps people to feel seen and respected. Downtown London’s inclusion strategy will align with the City of London’s [Stop Tolerhating](#) initiative, which works to address hate, racism, and discrimination through education, reporting tools, and community engagement.

By sharing resources and reinforcing these messages with downtown businesses, employers, and property owners, we can help create an environment where everyone feels safe to visit, work, shop, and invest.

A key driver of change in creating a safe and welcoming downtown is allyship, a way that everyone can take action against hate in our community. The City’s website shares practical advice about how to be a good ally and how to spread the word about this campaign via social channels. This alignment ensures that we do not duplicate efforts, but rather reinforces a coordinated, city-wide approach to combating hate and fostering belonging.

Inclusion is about everyday experiences. When people feel welcomed and respected downtown, they stay longer, return more often, and contribute to a vibrant local economy. A safe and inclusive downtown benefits everyone, strengthening both community well-being and long-term economic resilience.

We recognize that inclusion must also support participation across the lifespan. Youth entrepreneurs, mid-career professionals, families, and older adults each experience downtown differently. Age-related barriers, including access to capital, mobility challenges, digital access gaps, or perceptions about who downtown is “for” can influence both economic participation and sense of belonging. Expanding our success measures to include age diversity in leadership, programming, and public realm design strengthens our commitment to universal inclusion.

Overall, Downtown London is positioned for meaningful advancement. With intentional governance improvements, improved data tracking, strengthened partnerships, and lifecycle-aware design, we have strong potential to move from moderate progress toward a more fully embedded and measurable culture of inclusion.

Local Community and Partners

Within our community, there are a variety of organizations who represent and support equity-seeking individuals. For the purpose of this conversation, we have captured a broad cross-section of the participants who are engaged in this work. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

2SLGBTQIA+ Partners

2SLGBTQIA+ is a commonly used acronym for Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex or Asexual. The + sign is to signify other categories of gender and sexual orientation that aren't accurately described by these terms. A variety of organizations, partners and grassroots queer collectives can help ensure that London's downtown is a visible and welcoming space for queer communities, not only once a year during Pride but also throughout the year and through ongoing community activations and experiences.

Connections Partnerships

We seek to be led by these partners to achieve:

- Culturally relevant events and place-based activations
- Representation in public art and storytelling, including marketing campaigns and visuals
- Inclusive public realm programming (markets, performances, street festivals)
- Connections with queer artists, performers, and small business owners
- Representation in the local economic development system and business community

We have partnered with Ontario's Southwest Tourism Corporation and the Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce to identify downtown businesses that are a fit with the Rainbow Registered program. [The project's](#) goal is to expand their service delivery across Southern Ontario by supporting inclusive tourism through business training, information sessions, and accreditation. The project includes outreach efforts, development of new inclusion training modules, and partnership with key tourism groups to promote Southern Ontario as an inclusive travel destination.

Accessibility Partners

Accessibility is a broad term referring to our ability to ensure that downtown spaces, events, and activations are physically and socially accessible to people with different ability levels.

We seek to be led by these partners to:

- Conduct accessibility audits of activations, streetscapes, and trails; provide wayfinding consulting. Provide accessibility feedback from a caregiver perspective.
- Share input on inclusive event design, wayfinding, and universal signage.
- Review activation plans to meet AODA standards.
- Test downtown experiences for accessibility barriers.
- Co-create sensory-friendly activations and inclusive social events.
- Develop workshop series on accessible participation in downtown spaces.
- Create peer-led tours and feedback sessions for public realm designs.
- Host/support inclusive community events (e.g., “Downtown Around You” discovery walks).
- Promote inclusive participation in performances, pop-ups, and cultural events.
- Promote inclusive family-friendly activations and gatherings.
- Ensure inclusive volunteer programming and public events.
- Advocate for inclusive lighting, tactile indicators, ramps and seating.
- Promote community understanding of disability and inclusion.

For everyone who is engaged in bringing events, businesses and new experiences downtown, consideration of these groups and adopting more inclusive practices is essential to achieve real inclusion in our community.

Black-led, BIPOC and Anti-Racism Organization Partners

BIPOC organizations represent the needs of people of mixed racial or ethnic backgrounds who identify as racialized, broadly described as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour. BIPOC is not a single community, it's a collective term that sometimes can lead to overgeneralization, which is why we are moving towards naming specific communities when designing programs and partnerships (e.g. Black-led, Indigenous-led, newcomer, Middle Eastern/West Asian/Arab, East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Latinx/Hispanic, and so on).

We seek to be led by these partners to:

- Identify barriers to starting and growing businesses downtown
- Build relationships with potential tenants and partners
- Co-design policy and programs
- Use an equity lens for data-informed mapping, identify spatial inequities, and develop indicators that reflect representation, retention, and diversity.
- Collaborate on culturally reflective programming and placemaking
- Connect entrepreneurs to revenue opportunities
- Provide guidance on protocols and handling discriminatory incidents; offer training for member businesses on bias and inclusive customer service
- Offer leadership pipeline development for future governance opportunities
- Work to seek to understand what factors lead to long-term stability of businesses
- Contribute to campaigns that highlight diverse business stories and frame inclusion as downtown competitiveness
- Co-develop reciprocal exchanges of data insights

Building authentic partnerships with Black-led, BIPOC and anti-racism organizations strengthens downtown’s economic resilience. These organizations bring lived expertise, community trust, and insight into systemic barriers that influence entrepreneurship, customer experience, and access to opportunity. By moving beyond consultation toward co-design, data-informed equity strategies, cultural activation, and accountability, we can ensure downtown London is welcoming and also structurally inclusive, economically accessible, and representative of the full diversity of our community.

Indigenous Community Partners

Downtown London exists within the traditional territories of the **Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak,** and **Attawandaron** Peoples. Today, the region remains home to vibrant Indigenous communities including **Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Oneida Nation of the Thames,** and **Munsee-Delaware Nation,** along with many urban Indigenous residents, artists, and entrepreneurs whose presence continues to shape the cultural and economic life of the city.

Inclusion and reconciliation are closely connected. The full participation of Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) peoples in the economy strengthens community well-being, cultural vitality, and long-term prosperity. For Downtown London, economic reconciliation means moving beyond symbolic acknowledgement toward sustained relationship-building, shared opportunity, and greater cultural visibility in the downtown environment.

National frameworks reinforce this responsibility. **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action** encourages the business community to advance reconciliation through employment, procurement, education, and partnerships, while the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** affirms Indigenous peoples' rights to economic development, cultural expression, and participation in decision-making. Together, these frameworks position reconciliation not only as a social responsibility but also as an opportunity to strengthen Canada's economic future.

For the downtown business community, this translates into practical actions such as:

- Supporting Indigenous entrepreneurs, artists, and cultural businesses
- Creating opportunities for Indigenous participation in downtown events, markets, and placemaking
- Ensuring Indigenous voices are included in planning and storytelling about the downtown
- Building partnerships that support cultural tourism, entrepreneurship, and creative industries

Indigenous businesses, knowledge keepers, and community leaders contribute innovation, cultural richness, workforce participation, and economic diversification. These contributions are essential ingredients of a vibrant and resilient downtown. By embedding reconciliation into our economic development strategy, Downtown London affirms that inclusion is both a community responsibility and a pathway to shared prosperity. Reconciliation is a component of modern, inclusive economic growth.

We seek to be led by these partners to:

- Elevate Indigenous culture through ceremonies, art installations, and public education
- Co-create Indigenous-led activations (performances, storytelling, workshops, cultural wellness activations like Indigenous medicine walks, wellness hubs) and wayfinding
- Strengthen reconciliation-focused placemaking and economic development activities
- Support inclusive and Two-Spirit-affirming programming
- Include Indigenous representation and community needs in visual and placemaking narratives
- Engage with Indigenous entrepreneurs and artists - business recruitment and activation pilots, vendor hubs in pop-up marketplaces, art clusters and creative industries
- Create Nation-to-City partnership pathways for cultural tourism and interpretation
- Support Indigenous arts and place-based storytelling downtown
- Explore joint economic development initiatives (markets, heritage tours)
- Self engage in protocol learning for respectful collaborative events
- Co-create Indigenous business support programs at local economic development organizations
- Develop partnership on interactive exhibits or installations that elevate Indigenous voices
- Embed Indigenous voices in decision-making, aesthetics, programming, and public space design

Including Indigenous partners in inclusion strategies is both a **reconciliation imperative** and an **economic opportunity**, aligning ethical commitments with measurable community impact.

Intergenerational Inclusion and Age-Friendly Partners

An inclusive downtown is one that supports participation across the lifespan. Age is often overlooked in inclusion conversations, yet age-related barriers significantly shape how individuals experience public spaces, economic opportunity, and community life. Youth, mid-career professionals, families, and older adults all engage with downtown differently, and each group brings unique strengths, needs, and economic potential.

Younger entrepreneurs and students may face barriers such as limited access to capital, short credit histories, regulatory complexity, and fewer professional networks. At the same time, older adults may encounter physical accessibility challenges, changing mobility needs, digital navigation barriers, or perceptions that downtown programming is not designed with them in mind. Ageism can operate subtly, and assumptions about experience, innovation, independence, or relevance influence who feels welcome to participate in governance, entrepreneurship, employment, and public life.

Intergenerational partnerships strengthen downtown vibrancy by recognizing that:

- Youth bring energy, creativity, cultural influence, and emerging entrepreneurial ideas.
- Working-age professionals contribute economic stability and workforce vitality.
- Older adults bring mentorship, lived expertise, volunteer capacity, and strong local spending power.

By collaborating with youth organizations, post-secondary institutions, senior-serving agencies, workforce development groups, and intergenerational community initiatives, we seek to be led by these partners to:

- Support youth entrepreneurship pipelines and mentorship opportunities.
- Create age-friendly public realm design and accessible programming.
- Encourage intergenerational business mentorship and advisory participation.
- Develop programming that appeals across age groups and time of day.
- Strengthen return-to-office strategies that consider multi-generational workforce needs.
- Build bridges between student integration efforts and long-term downtown residency.

We need to reinforce downtown as a place where people can live, work, build businesses, and engage in community throughout all stages of life. A truly vibrant downtown evolves with people over time.

Newcomer & Multicultural Partners

Newcomers and multicultural communities are essential to downtown London's economic and cultural vitality. They bring high rates of entrepreneurship, creating diverse small businesses that expand retail, hospitality, and service offerings while attracting new customers and investment. Their cultural traditions, festivals, and creative contributions enrich public spaces, strengthen tourism, and foster a vibrant, inclusive identity for the downtown. By supporting newcomer-led businesses and removing barriers to participation, we not only broaden representation and economic opportunity but also cultivate stronger community connections, social cohesion, and long-term resilience.

We seek to be led by these partners to:

- Curate culturally diverse festivals, markets, and food experiences
- Co-design public art, storytelling, and heritage walks
- Inform inclusive placemaking and safety strategies
- Share opportunities for the broader community to become employment partners, mentor job seekers
- Support newcomer job seekers with mock interviews, mentoring, and becoming an employer partner (recruit, hire, and retain international talent).

Women Partners

National and provincial data related to the gender of entrepreneurs provides important context. Across Canada, approximately 15–20% of small and medium-sized enterprises are majority owned by women, with additional businesses co-owned equally by men and women. This means women are indeed underrepresented in majority ownership positions within the small business sector. Research also shows that women entrepreneurs are more likely to operate smaller firms.

Systemic barriers continue to shape their experiences, limiting access to capital, affordable and flexible commercial space, professional networks, and mentorship opportunities. For example, lending institutions and landlords often perceive first-time women founders as higher-risk tenants, while care responsibilities or uneven access to professional networks can further constrain growth.

Recognizing women as equity-seeking entrepreneurs means acknowledging that these systemic, structural barriers are not individual shortcomings, but obstacles embedded in policies, practices, and perceptions. By addressing these inequities, we can strengthen economic participation, create pathways for leadership, and diversify the local business ecosystem.

We seek to be led by these partners to:

- Co-design programming that connects lived experience to public policy and economic outcomes
- Collaborate on research, policy recommendations and barrier analysis
- Integrate their networks into business recruitment and diversity supplier lists
- Co-create business bootcamps, mentoring and coaching programs targeted to these audiences

We recognize the progress that is being made with this group of entrepreneurs via programs like the London Chamber of Commerce [Women's Mentorship Program](#) which focuses on targeted skill development, leadership growth and career advancement.

If women represent roughly half of the broader population and workforce, yet account for a significantly smaller share of majority business ownership, there is opportunity to:

- Increase participation in entrepreneurship and leadership
- Strengthen mentorship and peer networks
- Improve access to flexible, affordable commercial space
- Support capital-readiness and growth pathways
- Elevate visibility of women-owned businesses through marketing and placemaking

Addressing gender equity in business ownership is about more than fairness; it is an economic development strategy. Increasing women's participation in ownership, innovation, and governance strengthens the resilience and diversity of our downtown business ecosystem.

Unhoused Individuals - Balancing Supports for Businesses and Our Vulnerable Population

An inclusive downtown must acknowledge that unhoused people are part of the community and interact daily with public spaces, businesses, and services. Creating a downtown that is both welcoming and vibrant requires a balanced, coordinated approach that supports individuals experiencing vulnerability while also addressing the needs of businesses, workers, residents, and visitors.

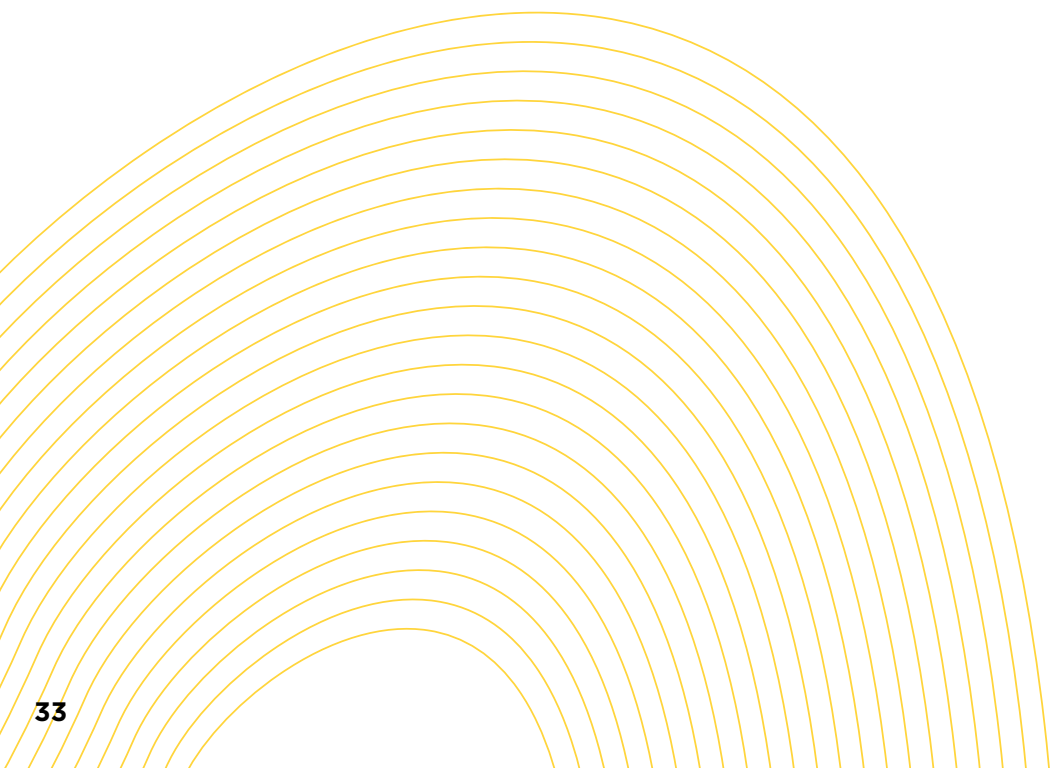
An inclusive downtown does not ignore complexity; it responds to it with coordination, compassion, and clarity. By working collaboratively with service providers and businesses, Downtown London can help create an environment where:

- vulnerable individuals are treated with dignity,
- businesses feel supported, and
- public spaces work for everyone.

Downtown London is not a direct service provider, but it plays a critical role as a **connector, convener, and place manager**, helping to align partners, shape the public realm, and influence how inclusion is experienced on the ground. We have a direct impact on the cleanliness of our public and private spaces, with our **Goodbye Graffiti Clean Team** providing cleaning and power washing services in addition to what the City provides. We work closely with the [Coordinated Informed Response](#) team from the City, and their Downtown Response team who together provide support to both businesses and unhoused people throughout the downtown. We educate members about the [Trespass Agreement Program](#) (TAP) and connect businesses with CIR through the City's [Service Portal](#), which also alerts the City to respond to vulnerable individuals who need support.

Perceptions of safety are often influenced not just by actual incidents, but by individual comfort levels when sharing space with people experiencing vulnerability. These perceptions are valid and real, and they shape how residents, workers, and visitors interact with the downtown environment. Addressing these concerns requires an approach that recognizes **both experiences**: people need to feel comfortable in shared spaces, and unhoused individuals deserve dignity, respect, and equitable access to services. Their lived experience influences how they interact and respond to others in our community and as a result, the specialized expertise of our community partners is needed to affect real change in our neighbourhood.

Downtown London can advance inclusivity by partnering closely with organizations in health, housing, outreach, social service and municipal enforcement that provide services to unhoused persons while also balancing the needs of our businesses, residents and visitors to our community.



These partnerships can:

- **Coordinate support and outreach** so that unhoused people experiencing vulnerability are connected with housing, health, outreach and social services in ways that reduce public tension while providing real help and support to these clients.
- **Educate the public and local businesses** about the realities of being unhoused, breaking down stigma and fostering understanding while sharing not only the hard truths but also the personal triumphs of people.
- **Activate public spaces thoughtfully** with programming, lighting, seating, and wayfinding that encourage resident interactions while maintaining comfort for all.
- **Implement clear protocols for businesses** to address incidents respectfully and safely, reinforcing shared responsibility and community trust.
- **Provide support to businesses** who are unsure of how to handle concerns for wellbeing of unhoused individuals, along with strengthening their ability to handle challenging interactions and incidents related to vulnerable people in the neighbourhood.
- **Focus our advocacy efforts** at the right level with the right balance of support for both unhoused persons and businesses.
- **Manage the mix of uses** in the downtown to avoid over concentration.

Downtown London supports a **distributed approach to health, housing, outreach and social services across the city**, rather than the concentration of services within a single corridor or district. We also advocate for better ways to address these complex community issues through our industry associations, business support agencies, and with all levels of government to address the factors that contribute to individuals becoming unhoused, and the related impact on our businesses and community members.

By combining compassionate service delivery, inclusive design, coordinated outreach, thoughtful placemaking and education, Downtown London can help ensure that public spaces are welcoming, safe, and vibrant for everyone. Inclusion, in this context, strengthens not only social cohesion but also economic resilience. When more people feel comfortable participating downtown, businesses thrive, cultural life flourishes, and the community benefits as a whole.

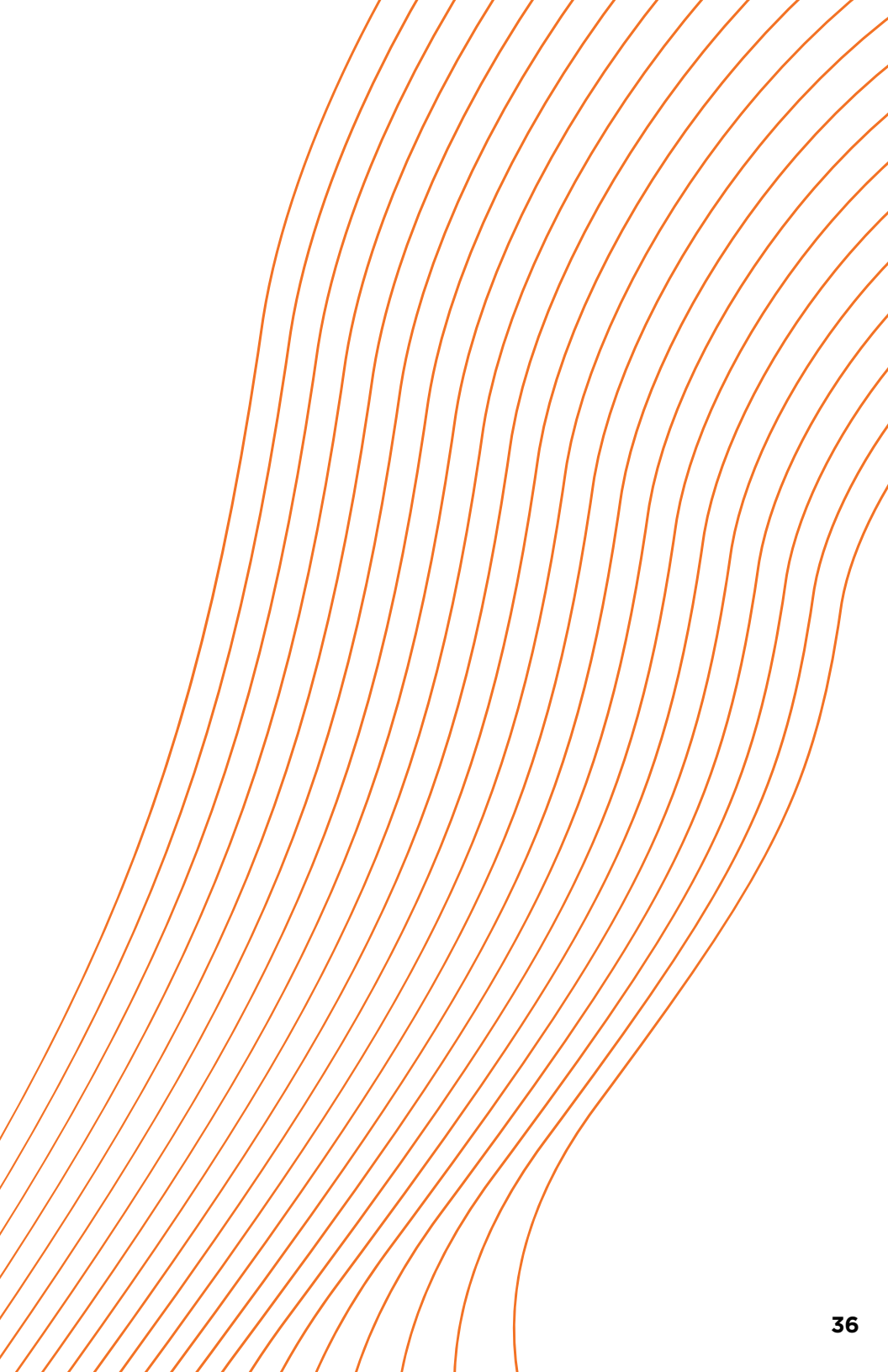
An inclusive downtown approach recognizes that:

- Public space must be designed with dignity and accessibility in mind.
- Partnerships with health, housing, and social service providers are essential.
- Business and community perspectives must be balanced with compassionate responses.
- Vibrancy and inclusion are not competing goals, but mutually reinforcing.

A truly inclusive downtown creates conditions where many different people can see themselves reflected, welcomed, and able to participate. Inclusion should strengthen belonging across the full downtown community while intentionally addressing barriers faced by equity-deserving groups.

In this way, we recognize these two fundamental truths:

- **Not everyone starts from the same place**, and
- **Everyone needs to feel they belong.**



Next Steps Engagement

Moving forward towards a more inclusive downtown can be achieved with partners from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, in stages, and over time.

A suggested approach would include:

Phase 1: Relationship Building

- Host a **listening session** with equity-seeking community members to co-define what downtown “vibrancy” means from their perspectives.
- Invite feedback on downtown priorities and barriers.

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Phase 2: Co-Design Vision

- Partner on an Inclusive framework for downtown that is woven across all pillars of vibrancy
 - Public realm and placemaking
 - Retail and services; offices
 - Arts and Culture
 - Tourism
 - Residential and mixed use
- Identify early activations (e.g., cultural nights, markets, exhibits).

Phase 3: Partnership Agreements

- Establish Memoranda of Understanding or partnership guidelines with key organizations.
- Align strategies with the City's commitments and protocols, including the City's [ReconciliAction Plan](#).

Call for Collaborat

Ideally we can develop a coordinated approach to ensure downtown vibrancy initiatives reflect, include, and benefit people across diverse identities, including racialized communities, people of all ages, women, Indigenous Peoples, 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, multicultural groups, unhoused people and people with disabilities.

We are encouraged that our partners at [The City of London](#), London Chamber of Commerce, [The Grand Theatre](#) and [London Police Service](#), among others, are embracing opportunities to advance inclusion within their organizations and our community as well.

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Our emphasis should be on *co-creation, visibility, and creating economic opportunity*, which aligns well with downtown vibrancy outcomes.

These actions help us move from just inviting people to the party to instead, asking them to dance.



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