



NSCCM
National Small Centre
Coordination Meeting

NATIONAL SMALL CENTRE

SUMMARY REPORT

MARCH 2026



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Introduction

The National Small Centre Coordination Meeting was held from February 2nd to 3rd, 2026, in Abbotsford, BC, bringing together 192 in-person attendees and 57 online attendees, with the theme "Deeply Rooted, Widely Felt: Community Impact in Small and Rural Settings."

Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) in Small Centres are anchor organizations that provide necessary supports for newcomers to succeed in their communities. Their small size allows for settlement supports to be provided through an integrated approach across programs, the development of deep personal connections with newcomers, and the capacity to innovate and collaborate with other organizations.

At the same time, Smaller Centres experience unique challenges related to their geographical distance from broader social, health and public sector supports. Their jurisdictional settings make them distinct from larger, urban centres that policy is normally designed around. This national in-person meeting provided the opportunity for Smaller Centres to discuss key priorities, common challenges, and best practices. Participants learned from models across the country, sought clarification about how upcoming changes will impact Smaller Centres, and connected to find areas for cooperation. The agenda was developed with invaluable feedback from an Advisory Committee of Smaller Centre representatives.

Spaces for Wellness and Spiritual Care

This meeting, the third national event to bring together the expertise of Smaller Centres, builds on a long history of work that speaks to the how Smaller Centres form a key pillar of immigration and settlement supports.

One of the key features of the event was the inclusion of a wellness room and prayer space, with a registered clinical counsellor, sensory regulation tools, and artistic expression activities. Participants shared their appreciation for having this space to provide a sense of calm during the impactful two days.

Why Meeting In-Person Matters

Through post-meeting evaluations, participants spoke at length about the value that meeting in-person provided in helping them to strengthen their professional capacity and therefore improve the quality of services they can provide to newcomers in their communities.

Discussions held during the meeting about common challenges, best practices, and action areas are organized below by theme.

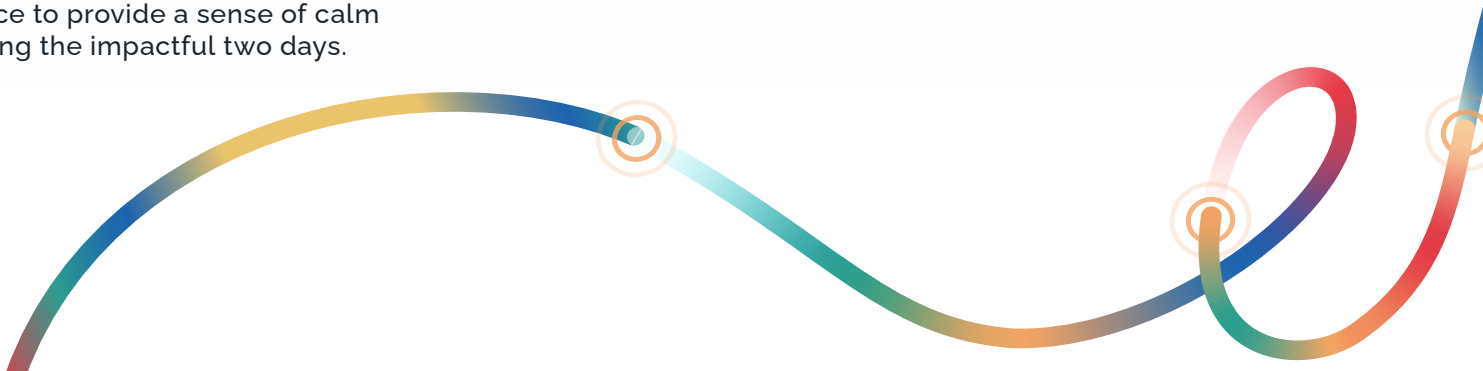


192

in-person attendees

57

online attendees



SMALLER vs. LARGER CENTRE DISPARITY

IRCC policy was noted as often being designed in a way that centres the experiences of Larger Centres, which does not translate to the needs and experiences of Smaller Centres. This was particularly identified for:

- Metrics (e.g., LINC class sizes)
- Assumptions about capacity (e.g., limited staff capacity to support with CFP proposal writing, IT, HR and management; additional staff gets devoted to help clients navigate rural communities/service gaps)
- Reporting (e.g., GBA+ reporting is expected to be presented in a quantitative way, yet because of how Smaller Centres are situated, they often serve clients in deeper ways that are better captured through qualitative knowledge)

Action items

Direct Service Providers: • Ensure information is accurately entered and reported in iCARE as this is used to inform many IRCC decisions (Short Term: 1-2 years; ongoing)

Funders:

- Co-develop more robust guidelines around waitlists and attendance, as service providers all approach this differently (Medium Term: 2-5 years)
- Revise cost-per-client model to address higher costs in Smaller Centres and Francophone communities (Medium Term: 2-5 years)
- Increase opportunities for Smaller Centres to share qualitative feedback that is considered alongside quantitative data (Medium Term: 2-5 years; ongoing)
- Support capacity within Smaller Centres to read and interpret IRCC data (e.g., trainings, ensuring the data is presented clearly with explanations) (Medium Term; 2-5 years; ongoing)
- Make Case Management more accessible for SPOs in Smaller Communities (Ongoing)
- Adjust NAARS template based on ongoing feedback from service providers (Ongoing)
- Adjust iCARE system so that ineligible clients cannot be entered (Ongoing)

FUNDING

In many cases, structural and persistent challenges arise under traditional funding models which exacerbate existing capacity limitations unique to Smaller Centres.

Challenges

- Funding is program-specific, rather than organizational, which limits the resources that Smaller Centres can dedicate towards stabilizing or even expanding organizational capacity
- GBA+ training is often inaccessible and expensive. There should be more GBA+ professional development opportunities delivered free through IRCC funding
- Some important capacity-building resources are membership-specific and/or come with associated fees
- Funding applications have compressed timelines and application platforms are complex while lacking multi-user access or offline collaboration. High staff turnover erodes institutional memory and poses key challenges related to CFP writing
- Absence of dedicated grant writers, HR departments, or specialized finance and compliance staff makes standard CFP expectations disproportionately burdensome as the task of writing removes staff capacity from serving clients
- Concerns that larger centres will be funded to go into smaller communities to deliver services without having connection to the local community

Best Practices

- Funding models should better account for the realities of scale, infrastructure, and community capacity in Smaller Centres as well as the more limited staff capacity
- Coordinated, multi-level funding (e.g. Ontario CLARS) can reduce siloed streams and duplicative reporting
- Lessons can be learned from Indigenous funding models which reinforce the importance of trust-based, relationship-centered and community-defined approaches
- Collective advocacy is critical for Smaller Centres; networks, coalitions, sector tables, and supports through umbrellas can produce stability and move models away from metrics towards models that value long-term impact for newcomers
- Engaging with external funding opportunities and partnerships with other sectors

Action items

Umbrellas/ indirect service providers:

- Work with Smaller Centres to ensure capacity-building resources and trainings are as financially accessible as possible (Medium Term: 2-5 years; ongoing)
- Work with funders to increase access to free GBA+ training and capacity building resources (Short Term: 1-2 years; ongoing)

Funders:

- Ensure next CFP incorporates structures to account for the nuances of Smaller Centre experiences, such as reflecting the realities of scale, infrastructure, community capacity, and existing community needs (Medium Term: 2-5 years; ongoing)
- Ensure client eligibility criteria and outcome measures are responsive to local contexts, clearly stated, and reflective of high secondary migration and Smaller Centre contexts (Medium Term: 2-5 years; ongoing)
- Increase accessibility of CFP application platforms by including multi-user access and offline collaboration, and ensuring deadlines avoid times when staff are more likely to be away (i.e., Holiday seasons) (Medium Term: 2-5 years; ongoing)
- Ensure funding supports organizational sustainability rather than being program specific. Core operating funding and investment in organizational capacity shift focus from designing programs to fit funder requirements toward funding designed around true and deep community needs (Long Term: 5+ years; ongoing)
- Offer multi-year contribution agreements, such as five-year cycles, to provide stability while reducing administrative burdens (Medium Term: 2-5 years)
- Provide additional funding to support free GBA+ training and capacity building for SPOs (Medium Term: 2-5 years)

FRANCOPHONE SERVICE PROVISION

Due to their unique position in bilingual and especially predominately Anglophone communities, Francophone Smaller Centre SPOs raised specific challenges, best practices, and actions related to Francophone newcomer integration:

Challenges

- Access to bilingual public services is uneven across provincial and local governments. For example, provinces like New Brunswick provide many bilingual services but others like British Columbia prioritize English services. SPOs in these areas have difficulties ensuring their clients can make the best use of community resources and services
- Francophone newcomers gain the expectation from pre-departure services that they can conduct their daily life fully in French, but this is not the reality in many Smaller Centres

Best Practices

- Closer community and inter-organizational ties in Smaller Centres make it faster and easier to refer francophone clients to other organizations
- Mobilizing and organizing local Francophone communities to build a better network for clients (e.g., centering Francophone resources in commercial areas to improve access)
- In-person services are better suited for forming trust with Francophone newcomers

Action items

Direct Service Providers and Umbrellas/ Indirect Service Providers:

- Strengthen collaboration between local Francophone organizations in Smaller Centres to share resources for a better integration of Francophone newcomers in local economies (Ongoing)
- Strengthen collaborations between Anglophone and Francophone SPOs in order to improve Francophone referral pathways for newcomers settling in smaller and rural centres (Ongoing)

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Participants emphasized the importance of using digital tools to *extend* and *enhance* client engagement without eroding the relationship-building that is foundational to Smaller Centres. The following issues, risks, and best practices were identified:

Challenges

- While digital services can provide flexibility for some clients, an over-reliance on online models risks weakening the peer connection, informal support, and community engagement that are central to successful settlement outcomes. Having in-person community connections is particularly important for women, caregivers, and socially isolated or marginalized clients in smaller communities
- Equity concerns: the most vulnerable newcomers, especially those living in rural/remote areas, risk being excluded from digital services due to limited internet connectivity
- Language and cultural barriers can hinder digital participation for some users
- Clients and staff face online fraud, privacy, and security risks
- Lack of funding and staff time to create digital strategies and adopt new technology

Best Practices

- Digital services must complement, not replace relationships
- Ensure relationships with newcomers begin in-person where possible; consider implementing digital tools and programs when trust and relationships are already built
- When starting with digital transformation, begin with exploring possibilities within existing infrastructure (e.g., tools like Microsoft Elevate, Power Apps, Power Automate) and that reduce staff administrative burden in order to protect staff time for direct engagement
- Avoid putting client data and sensitive information into Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms
- Remember that digital tools should fit real habits not ideal ones, that processes should not feel like speedbumps in workflow, and the importance of digital protection tools
- Consider how digital access may not be the same for all newcomers (e.g., agricultural workers in rural areas who may only have flip phones); consider providing technology loans (through corporate donations or other funding) to support these clients
- When hiring consultants for digital transformation, it is useful to hire people with an operational background in addition to the technical expertise

Action items

Umbrellas/indirect service providers:

- Develop more trainings that are platform-specific (e.g., Microsoft Suite, iCARE) (Short Term: 1-2 years, provided on ongoing basis)
- Provide trainings on artificial intelligence, privacy, confidentiality, and engaging with clients online (Short Term: 1-2 years, provided on ongoing basis)
- Create a repository which catalogues technologies that SPOs use and endorse (Medium Term: 2-5 years, provided on ongoing basis)

Direct service providers:

- Implement capacity-building efforts such as client training and culturally and linguistically appropriate tools (including French access) to reduce barriers to digital tools (Short Term: 1-2 years, provided on ongoing basis)
- Look beyond the sector for infrastructure supports such as device loan programs or partnerships with libraries (Ongoing)
- Ensure a sustainable approach to digital adoption: this will depend on staff training, organizational support, and encouraging a culture of flexibility and experimentation (Long term: 5+ years)
- Organizations may consider engaging trained volunteers to assist with client tech onboarding (Medium Term: 2-5 years)

Funders:

- Ensure Smaller Centres have appropriate funding to build their organization's digital capacity. This includes funding for adequate IT infrastructure, professional development, and capacity to test and evaluate digital approaches (Long Term: 5+ years, ongoing)
- Funding a dedicated digital support role may reduce pressure on frontline staff by assisting clients with setup and troubleshooting (Medium Term: 2-5 years)
- Provide funding for IT and digital supports as part of program budgets instead of admin (Medium Term: 2-5 years)

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Organizations based in Smaller Centres are uniquely positioned to create strong, community-based partnerships which will enhance capacity, collaboration, and support for newcomers.

Best Practices

- Develop partnerships with employers, governments and community organizations to respond to local need (e.g., working with employers to get funding for physical workplace accommodations; a program with local regional district for women to work as lifeguards; inter-generational programming; Youth Expo Program that connects teenagers with industries essential to the area; cooking classes with food bank)
- Small community sizes can facilitate easier access to decision-makers
- Community tables are important spaces where partnerships can emerge
- With rising anti-immigrant sentiment and racism, Smaller Centres have been helping to promote education that challenges myths and preconceived notions
- To manage capacity when applying for external funding, it is important to draw from internal strengths of the team and to be intentional about what to apply for
- Important to connect with Indigenous Nations through presentations, nature walks, social gatherings, workshops, summer camps
- Collaborating with Indigenous communities can be structurally challenging when IRCC is very funding, metric, and timeline based rather than relational

Action items

Umbrellas and indirect service providers:

- Continue to help convene Smaller Centres and local agencies and to help communicate the value of partnerships for newcomer outcomes (Ongoing)

Direct service providers:

- Engage with external funding opportunities and partnerships with other sectors to better address needs and strengthening collaboration (Medium Term: 2-5 years)
- Have clear criteria for what collaborations align with organizational priorities (e.g., a partnership related to an extension of funding that already exists) to avoid overextending staff capacity (Ongoing)

Funders:

- Implement multi-tiered collaboration between provinces and territories and the federal government to enhance service accessibility for newcomers (Ongoing)
- Allow for flexibility around outcomes and timelines within funded programs when it comes to working with Indigenous communities (Ongoing)
- Develop a directory for Smaller Centres that lists both federally and provincially funded organizations (Short Term: 1-2 years, provided on ongoing basis)

MENTAL HEALTH

Another core area of discussion was around supporting the mental health of staff within Smaller Centres, acknowledging how over 62% of frontline workers are women, many of whom are racialized and immigrants themselves. The following best practices were shared to support staff:

Best Practices

- Giving staff a structured place to reflect and name their challenges: What am I holding that isn't mine to hold? Where am I overextending because I care? What part of this is emotional labor, cultural translation, or informal mentorship?
- Shifting from individual care to community care; build in debriefs and check-ins, normalize people talking about having a difficult day; openly name emotional labour
- Create structures that allow for boundaries and gentle refusal; ensure leadership acknowledges constraints
- Address invisible labour and structural burnout to create more equitable work environments. Staff are often immigrants themselves and precarious funding, inconsistent policy and scarce resources can create challenging work environments

Action items

Umbrellas and indirect service providers:

- Convene additional spaces for SPOs to debrief, share mental health resources and best practices, and develop mentorship models (Medium Term; 2-5 years; ongoing)