

# Federal Housing Needs Assessment: Frequently Asked Questions



AMO Webinar Series: HNA Support for Small Municipalities

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# AMO – Frequently Asked Questions

**How to use this document:** Organized by topic so readers can quickly find answers. Tips are framed as "do this instead" to give actionable guidance.

This document will be supplemented after the webinars based on participant input.

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## Section 1 – Understanding Housing Needs Assessments

### **Q: What is a Housing Needs Assessment (HNA)?**

A Housing Needs Assessment, or HNA, is a systematic, data-driven analysis of the housing situation in a community. It brings together demographic trends, economic data, housing supply conditions, and affordability measures to paint a comprehensive picture of where housing gaps exist today and where they are likely to emerge in the future.

### **Q: Why should my municipality undertake a HNA?**

HNAs provide data to support evidence-based decision making at the local and community level. Having this data helps all levels of government make informed decisions about their infrastructure and housing investments, in order to build the most suitable housing for their communities. A HNA helps a community gather critical housing data to guide decisions on the type and location of housing to build, as well as the infrastructure needed to support community growth.

The federal government is taking an integrated approach to housing and infrastructure. Communities will need to complete a HNA to be eligible for federal funding under infrastructure programs<sup>1</sup>. Other municipalities may undertake a HNA to better understand the housing conditions in their community to assist with and plan for the development of housing across the continuum.

### **Q: Are upper-tier municipalities or DSSABs required to complete HNAs?**

Upper-tier municipalities and DSSABs are not required to complete a federal HNA under the allocation-based Community stream of the Build Communities Strong Fund (formally CCBF). However, upper-tier municipalities and DSSABs are encouraged to do so, per section 8 of the funding agreement. Additionally, the completion of a federal HNA will enhance or support any provincial or federal application-based funding.

### **Q: How long does a HNA take to complete?**

Timelines to complete a HNA depend on many factors, including internal staff capacity, amount of available data, depth of consultation, and depth of analysis required. Filling out the Federal HNA template may take anywhere from 2–4 months, while a more comprehensive HNA with in-depth community and stakeholder engagement may range from to 6–12 months. Starting well before your Official Plan update is due is strongly advisable.

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<sup>1</sup> See list of all [Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada funding programs here](#)

### **Q: Do we need to hire an external consultant to complete a HNA?**

Municipalities, even smaller municipalities, do not necessarily need to hire external consultants to complete the Federal HNA template. Some municipalities complete HNAs in-house; others partner with their County/Region or share costs with neighbouring municipalities.

*Tip: Use the HNA Readiness Guide to assess your capacity before deciding on a pathway.*

### **Q: What's the difference between a HNA and a Housing Strategy?**

The HNA is the evidence base that describes current conditions and future need. The Housing Strategy is the action plan that follows from those findings.

In other words, the HNA is a tool to assist with diagnosis; the strategy is a tool to outline what to do about it. A comprehensive HNA is the foundation for a meaningful and actionable strategy.

## **Section 2 – HNA Process and Getting Started**

### **Q: Where do we begin?**

Municipalities are encouraged to start with the *HNA Readiness Guide*, a document developed in coordination with SHS Inc. to assess readiness for developing a Housing Needs Assessment. This document helps you assess staff capacity, data availability, budget, and council buy-in.

Next, municipalities can read through the [Federal HNA Template](#) alongside the *Data Collection Guide* to understand what information you will need.

### **Q: Upon requesting the pre-populated federal HNA template, what is the approximate delivery turnaround time for HICC?**

Municipalities should expect to receive a pre-populated federal HNA template within approximately 5–10 business days of submitting a request to HICC.

### **Q: Our municipality has never done a HNA before. Is the template designed for first-timers?**

The Federal HNA Template is accessible for municipalities at different starting points. All materials in this webinar series are designed to be accessible for smaller, less-resourced municipalities.

### **Q: We have an existing HNA. Do we start from scratch?**

If your municipality has already created a Housing Needs Assessment in the past, this may assist with data collection and consistency within the municipality.

An update involves reviewing what has changed: new Census data, market shifts, demographic changes, and new provincial policy context. You can carry forward much of the prior analysis while refreshing data and projections. However, the Federal HNA is a new template that asks for specific data points and unique responses that may not be included in previous HNAs. Ensure the Federal HNA Template is followed when updating a HNA.

**Q: Who should be involved?**

At minimum, someone with planning and/or housing knowledge and someone who can work with data should lead the process. This may be the same person. Looping in your CAO and Council early is also important for buy-in. Your County, Region or DSSAB may also have data or support to offer.

**Q: How do we build council support for the HNA process?**

It is important to keep Council informed and supportive of the efforts to complete a Housing Needs Assessment. Municipalities are encouraged to brief Council early in the process to explain why the HNA is required, what the process involves, and how findings will be used. A short report to Council at project launch sets expectations and builds support for downstream policy actions.

## Section 3 – Data Sources, Gaps, and Pitfalls

**Q: What are the primary data sources?**

Key sources for Ontario HNAs include:

- Statistics Canada Census of Population
- CMHC *Rental Market Survey*, *Market Absorption Survey*, and *Housing Starts and Completions Survey*
- County/Regional/DSSAB housing waitlists and service data
- Municipal building permit and planning approval data

*Tip: The Data Collection Guide provides a section-by-section breakdown of required data and where this data can be found.*

**Q: Will the prepopulated federal template be updated after the release of the 2026 census results?**

Yes, the federal template will be updated upon the release of the 2026 data. However, the precise timeline of this update has yet to be confirmed.

### **Q: What if Census data is suppressed for our municipality?**

Instead of omitting the analysis due to suppressed data, municipalities are encouraged to use County, Region, or DSSAB data as a proxy, note the limitations clearly, and supplement with local knowledge (e.g., waitlist data, service provider input). Transparency about data gaps is always preferable to leaving a section blank.

### **Q: How do we do population projections if we are not demographers?**

If municipalities are not comfortable moving forward with custom population and household projections, they are encouraged to use projections the County, Region, or DSSAB has already prepared, reference provincial growth forecasts, or use CMHC/Statistics Canada tools. If your municipality decides to pursue an external consultant to develop custom projections, ensure the methodology is documented so that it can be explained in the template. The explanation of the methodology in the template should make it clear to the reader how the projections were determined.

### **Q: Is community consultation required?**

While the extent and depth of community consultation is not explicitly outlined in the template, consultations with the community and stakeholders are strongly recommended to develop a full understanding of the housing needs of the community. Consultation with priority populations is specifically requested within the Federal HNA Template.

Particularly in smaller communities, qualitative data assists in developing perspective on housing conditions in a community when data gaps tend to exist. Even a brief survey or stakeholder roundtable adds credibility and can fill data gaps that are not covered by administrative sources.

Section 7.0 – *Use of Housing Needs Assessments in Long-term Planning* – requires consultation and coordination between municipal staff departments and other partners, such as regional bodies responsible for infrastructure allocation and planning.

## **Section 4 – Completing the HNA Template**

### **Q: What are the key sections?**

The Federal HNA Template contains seven sections:

1. *Methodology*
2. *Community Profile and Trends*
3. *Household Profiles and Economic Characteristics*
4. *Priority Groups*
5. *Housing Profile*

6. *Projected Housing Needs and Next Steps*
7. *Use of Housing Needs Assessments in Long-Term Planning*

Each section contains questions for the municipality to address, including speaking to quantitative and qualitative methodologies, explaining how data has impacted housing and demand, and outlining local considerations that may expand on, illustrate, or contextualize the data provided.

**Q: Does HICC require strict adherence to the template format?**

Yes, HICC requires all municipalities completing a Federal HNA to use the provided template and format. However, municipalities may make minor stylistic changes to the document, such as designing a cover page and updating the document colours, font, and font size.

**Q: How many housing gaps should a municipality identify in their HNA?**

Municipalities should aim to have 3–6 housing gaps in their HNAs. This is to ensure that there is a balance between the number of housing needs in the community that are adequately identified and connected to housing strategies, policies, and infrastructure planning, without overwhelming municipalities with targets or goals that municipalities may be unable to meet.

**Q: What level of detail is expected?**

Clear, plain-language, well-sourced findings are more valuable than overly technical write-ups. The HNA should contain a level of detail that can easily narrate the prevailing housing trends in the community while being approachable for the average reader. These reports should be accessible for a councilor or new staff member to read and understand what it means for the community.

**Q: Some sections don't seem relevant to our municipality. Can we skip them?**

Instead of skipping sections that seem less relevant, municipalities are encouraged to include a brief note explaining the limited applicability (e.g., "Our municipality has no purpose-built rental stock; this section identifies that absence as a gap"). This shows the issue was considered, not missed.

**Q: What happens if our data differs from that of the pre-populated template?**

If your municipality has data that differs from the pre-populated federal template and opts to include it instead, you need to include an explanation as to why. Communities may provide more recent data than requested, where available, if values are still provided for the specific data and information requested in the template and the applicable year and data source are also clearly provided.

### **Q: Where can we get help?**

To gain all necessary support and information to complete the Housing Needs Assessment, municipalities are encouraged to coordinate with their County/Region/DSSAB planning department, AMO housing resources and webinar materials, and contacts from the Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada.

If additional help is required, municipalities may seek an external consultant to complete the Housing Needs Assessment.

## **Section 5 – Approval and Next Steps**

### **Q: Once the HNA is complete, what happens?**

To complete the process of the Federal HNA Template, the report is posted to the municipality's website with a public-facing link. The HNA may be received and/or endorsed by Council prior to posting. Following the HNA link being made public, Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada (HICC) must be notified for their review. HICC will review the HNA for compliance and let the municipality know if it meets the requirements. Examples of completed [Federal HNA Templates can be found here](#).

Moving forward, the HNA may then be used to inform Official Plan updates, zoning by-law reviews, and funding applications.

*Tip: Webinar 2 covers how to operationalize findings across planning documents.*

### **Q: Does it need provincial or County/Region/DSSAB approval?**

The Federal HNA Template itself does not require provincial approval in Ontario. Check with your County/Region/DSSAB planning department on their specific content expectations.

### **Q: At what stage should Council be informed of the HNA, housing gaps, and recommendations?**

Council should be informed of the HNA throughout its development to ensure council buy-in. This can be achieved through formal consultation with councilors. The HNA should be presented alongside the housing gaps and recommendations at a council meeting, ensuring the HNA is received with a formal resolution and council endorsement, providing a mandate to act on key findings.

## Section 6 – Embedding HNAs in Long-Term Planning

### **Q: What planning documents should HNA findings be integrated into?**

HNA findings should be integrated into long-term municipal planning. This process will differ for each municipality depending on where the municipality is in their planning cycle. The documents that municipalities should look at incorporating HNA data and housing gaps into or ensuring alignment with include:

- Housing strategies
- Official plans and official plan reviews
- Zoning by-laws
- Community improvement plans (CIPs)
- Asset management plans
- Infrastructure management plans
- Land needs assessments
- Parks and Recreation Master Plans
- Economic development strategies

Municipalities may assess on a case-by-case basis the relevant and appropriate documents for HNA integration.

### **Q: What are best practices for aligning housing, infrastructure, and planning data, practices, and programs between departments and levels of government?**

Completing and operationalizing an HNA is not a one-time event. There are many practices that municipalities can implement over time to contribute to a collaborative and coordinated environment for housing and infrastructure delivery. Some of these include:

- Identify the person responsible for collecting and tracking each indicator in the Federal HNA, and maintain a list of the appropriate departments and contacts for elements that require coordination between departments/levels of government.
- Identify existing housing and infrastructure planning documents within your municipality that present an opportunity for coordination with the federal HNA. Map the timelines for updating and reviewing documents to ensure incorporation of insights from the Federal HNA. Compare existing sections, policies, and data with the Federal HNA to identify opportunities and update for alignment.