

Community Futures Fraser-Fort George

COVID-19 Outreach Program:

Supporting businesses and organizations to flourish in a changing context

SUMMARY REPORT

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Community Futures Development Corporation of Fraser Fort George acknowledges the traditional land stewards and the ancestral and unceded territories of the Simpcw First Nation, the Lheidli T'enneh, and the McLeod Lake Indian Band from which we are learning, playing and working today. We believe that it is important to consider the land-keepers who were here before us and who still work to protect and preserve their traditional territories and ways of life from coast to coast to coast and continue to pursue opportunities for greater collaboration and relationship-building.

Funders

- Western Economic Diversification Canada
- Northern Development Initiative Trust

Project Partners

- District of Mackenzie
- Mackenzie Chamber of Commerce
- Regional District of Fraser Fort-George
- City of Prince George
- Prince George Chamber of Commerce
- Aboriginal Business Development Center
- Village of McBride
- McBride Chamber of Commerce
- Village of Valemount
- Northern Development Initiative Trust

Special thanks to the 161 different businesses and organizations who offered their valuable time and thoughts to this project. All quotes, data, and insights in the final report came from interviews with our sample of businesses and organizations in the region, letting them speak for themselves. We hope they feel heard as their businesses and organizations enrich our communities and our lives.

“If you are going to build programs moving forward, **make sure you listen to people's ideas**. The people here all have ideas on how to make the town better, ask them.”

Fraser Fort George business owner.

Methodology

Between September 2020 and June 2021, Community Futures Development Corporation of Fraser-Fort George conducted an outreach program to better understand the impacts of businesses on the Fraser Fort George. This data will be used to inform Community Futures and community partners in determining what kinds and level of support small businesses and communities may require during post pandemic recovery. 161 businesses and non-profit organizations from Mackenzie, Prince George, the Robson Valley, and the outlying communities participated in in-depth qualitative interviews.

The interviews were completed by a team of Regional Business Liaisons who met one-to-one with small business owners and not-for-profit administrators. The interviews were completed over an hour, covered a series of questions of approximately 70 questions. The interview was conducted in a conversational style to ensure the interview was comfortable to share their experience, stories, and feelings. Afterwards, the interviewee was provided with a list of 3-5 resources that would assist them in their identified needs.

Regional Breakdown of Interviews	Total
Mackenzie	55
Prince George	53
Robson Valley	53
	161

Findings

The project unearthed a wealth of information. 12 ‘wicked’ or complex problems emerged from common themes heard across all regions, sectors and demographics and are explored more fully in the final report, [RBL Final Report.docx \(sharepoint.com\)](#).

Following public and partner input and consultation, the 12 wicked problems were honed to the top five areas of focus for future project consideration. The final interviews were structured to focus on the five top themes identified as priorities and are summarised below.

Top 5 Wicked Problems

1. The voices of rural and northern businesses are not heard by decision-makers.
2. Microbusinesses (businesses with less than 5 staff) keep our communities alive but they are struggling and not eligible for COVID-19 funding; they are agile but at full capacity and without time, resources, safety-net, to adapt, pivot, and grow if they want to.
3. New businesses are struggling to emerge during COVID-19. They are not eligible for funding.
4. The online world is changes how businesses do work, and they do not have the time/training to adapt.
5. There is so much information out there but it is hard to find something that helps me.



The voices of rural and northern businesses are not heard by decision-makers.

Businesses and not-for-profits talked about decision makers making decisions without considering the population, climatic, demographic, and economic differences northern and rural communities face. This occurred prior to COVID-19 and was exacerbated by the pandemic which has overarching implications for business and organizations.

- 41% of business/nonprofits reported that they felt disassociated from the decisions of the governments (all three levels) handling of COVID-19 as it did not reflect any use for their reality.
- As the pandemic continued on, many small businesses that were interviewed were beginning to show increased frustration and hostility towards the provincial powers to be because they felt that the health measures put in place unfairly impacted businesses in rural and northern regions.

“We're really getting ignored. On the bottom of the list of everything that's northern British Columbia. We are in the north and that is bad enough, but we are rural north which makes it even worse.”

Opportunity for Future Action

Support the development of a regional economic development coordinator that can strategically align, organize, and provide capacity to regional partners to strengthen the collective voices of the communities, find opportunities for collaboration, and develop regional support for business and economic development.

Microbusinesses are vital to local economies but they are struggling and are ineligible for COVID-19 funding.

A majority of the region's businesses fell through the cracks because they are microbusiness, defined in this project as a small business with up to 5 employees. The Fraser Fort George region relies heavily on solo entrepreneurs, family run businesses and businesses with 1 or 2 staff and many of the programs had criteria that micro-businesses simply could not meet, whether it was revenues, payroll, or business bank accounts that many sole proprietors do not have.

- As of December 2020, only 13% of microbusinesses accessed CEBA, whereas 44% of larger businesses (>6 staff) were able to get CEBA. 23% of microbusinesses said they searched for funding but were ineligible.

Furthermore, microbusinesses in Fraser-Fort George saw the amount of time to run their businesses increase significantly. Tasks like finding new suppliers and working with delivery fluctuations, enforcing protocols and ensuring social distancing, and sanitizing was added to business owners' already full plates. This distracted them from their core business operations.

- More than 50% of microbusinesses said their costs have increased
- Over 70% of interviewees said their workload increased, most of which saying it was a significant increase.

“I had to **work 90 days without break** because [we’re] open 7 days a week and staff was told to leave job by doctor. I was waiting for my daughter to come home and help fill in hours.”

“Federal programs seemed positive and possible until you read the fine print and **realized small businesses like ours did not qualify**. They implied there was more support available than there was.”

Opportunity for Future Action

Explore opportunities for collective shared services for microbusinesses such as developing a model for a Shared Services organization that can consolidate the business support services to support day-to-day operations and reduce workload of small business owners, which would free up time for business owners to plan for future opportunities, react to immediate challenges, and look for opportunities to be sustainable and innovative.

New businesses struggled to emerge during COVID-19 as they were not eligible for funding.

New businesses faced all the same problems other businesses did as well as taking a risk in entering new markets. However, the support programs that were put in place by different levels of government excluded new business, often explicitly.

- Two-thirds of new businesses are unsure if they will survive 12 months and 33% of new businesses (<1 year) said they searched for funding or support but didn't qualify.

“And so, while other businesses in our industry are getting wage subsidies and rent subsidies, **we've been eligible for nothing**, and **yet having to deal with the exact same restrictions as anyone else**. We have no cash flow, and no prior business sustain us. You know, I only have very bad words to say about that situation.”

Opportunity for Future Action

Consider developing funding programs that specifically support new businesses during economic crisis to ensure that they can remain operational.

The online world is changing how businesses do work, and they do not have the time/training to adapt.

The world was moving into a more digital age before COVID-19, but the pandemic has immersed many businesses in the digital world whether they were ready for it or not. Changes that should take decades were fast forwarded, taking just a matter of months, and businesses were just expected to adapt and work within this new reality. Businesses, particularly in rural areas, met this challenge at vastly different capacity levels: from working in areas without internet to those who had already been using e-commerce and everything in between.

- Prior to COVID-19 less than 10% of businesses were working remote or by teleworking. The number of businesses working remote or by teleworking has doubled over the pandemic.
- 37% of businesses interviewed offered remote sales or secure orders, compared to the provincial average of 46%.
- In Prince George, 72% of the small business owners who identified their business as “flourishing” offered remote sales before the pandemic, compared to 31% who did not prior to the pandemic.

“But training is just as important, to give me a car and you don't tell me how to start it is absolutely useless. Right? If I don't know how to start a car and get it moving, and it's no different than having a web page, **if you give me a web page, and I don't know how to remove and add features and change** and make it a live webpage, **it's gonna get to me.**”

Opportunity for Future Action

Create more hands-on skill development and training opportunities with one-to-one coaching to improve digital literacy and e-commerce for businesses, in addition to funding.

There is so much information out there but it is hard to find something that helps me.

When COVID-19 came it was followed by a firehose of information coming from every source and media out there and every organization seemed to have newsletters and information pages about COVID-19. Businesses were overwhelmed with trying to keep up with it all. However, when too much information was communicated from too many sources it created information overload which contributes to indecisiveness, bad decisions and stress, and 'analysis paralysis'. It becomes confusing to discern good quality information from poor-quality content, making a person vulnerable.

- In addition to looking for support and small funding, small businesses also identified confusion when looking for clarification about health and safety regulations as several trusted sources (i.e WorkSafe BC vs Northern Health) would often be contradictory to each other.

“My problem with information these days in this world of internet is whatever you want to believe you can find the information for it online. Right? So, **you never know what to believe.**”

Opportunity for Future Action

Consider developing a dedicated Information Navigator that can be accessed by small businesses to support them in finding appropriate programming for their unique needs.

Conclusion

As we turn to look to ways to support and enable our businesses, not-for-profits, and communities in the region to flourish, we hope that this report will continue to inform decision makers and future thoughts on programs and funding as the problems mentioned are being felt most profoundly by businesses in the communities of Fraser Fort George. One of the pillars of this project, and the top identified priority for businesses, partners, and public, was to 'Amplify the Voices of the North.' Now we have solid factual data and information with which to do so, and to take this project further in support of our Fraser Fort George communities.

"They gotta get open talk to the people. And I mean, when I say talk to the people, I don't mean going and talking to the municipality down here, talk to the people [that] come into this [non-profit name here] and like you're doing talk **to the people who are, you know, go to the mall and sit there and talk to people get their stories, you know, their takes on stuff.** And then, you know, put it all together. Yeah, I mean, **talk to the business owners and see how they're handling it...."**
