TORONTO

# REPORT FOR ACTION

# New Centralized Affordable Housing Access System: Consultation Findings and Concept Design

**Date:** February 1, 2022
**To:** Planning and Housing Committee
**From:** Executive Director, Housing Secretariat; and Chief Planner & Executive Director, City Planning
**Wards:** All

## SUMMARY

In December 2019, City Council adopted the HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan ("HousingTO Plan") which includes a number of actions to address the housing needs of residents across the full housing continuum. A key target in the HousingTO Plan is the approval of 40,000 new affordable rental homes, including 18,000 supportive housing units by 2030.

Recognizing the need to enhance and further streamline the administration of affordable housing as the supply of new homes increases, the HousingTO Plan also includes recommendations to design and implement a centralized access system to improve allocation of the new affordable rental units.

As a first step to implementing the HousingTO Plan recommendations, in April 2021 through Item PH22.10, staff recommended an implementation plan for the development of a new centralized access system for affordable housing. At this meeting, Planning and Housing Committee requested staff to complete the following activities and report back to the Committee:

- Engage stakeholders, including the public, private and non-profit housing providers, community organizations and the development industry;
- Develop a concept design of the new access model, including an allocation methodology and resources required to build the new system;
- Develop an approach to consolidate and streamline the future administration of new affordable housing contracts and agreements; and
- Ensure the system design enables the collection and monitoring of affordable housing performance metrics, as they relate to the targets set in the HousingTO Plan.

This report responds to the Committee's requests and provides details on actions taken to-date by City staff, including findings from the consultations held in 2021, as well as a concept design for the new access system.

A final report will be provided to the Committee in the second quarter of 2022. This future report will outline implementation details related to the proposed new access system including the recommended procurement approach, resource requirements, and the overall financial impact to the City. Subject to Council approval, the new affordable housing access system is anticipated to be launched in 2023.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Director, Housing Secretariat and the Chief Planner & Executive Director, City Planning recommends that:

1. The Planning and Housing Committee receive this report for information.

## FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact resulting from this report.

Anticipated financial impacts resulting from the development and operation of the centralized housing access system will be outlined in the final report presented to the Planning and Housing Committee in the second quarter of 2022, and submitted to City Council for consideration through the 2023 budget process.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial implications.

## EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The HousingTO Plan envisions a city in which all residents have equal opportunity to develop to their full potential. The HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan is also centred on a human rights-based approach to housing which recognizes that housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of a person and to building healthy, inclusive and sustainable communities.

Current population, housing market, employment and residential vacancy trends suggests that demand for affordable housing in Toronto will continue to outpace supply. While the City works to increase the supply of affordable housing to better address the needs of residents, it is important that existing and new affordable units are offered and filled in a way that is fair, equitable and transparent. Through the creation of a centralized housing access system, and based on extensive consultation including with applicants themselves, the City will improve the way it assesses housing needs, collects data, and allocates units.

Creating new affordable and supportive housing, and streamlining the allocation of (and access to) the new homes will increase the opportunity for vulnerable and marginalized people from equity-deserving groups including Indigenous, Black and other racialized people, seniors, women, gender diverse people, youth and 2SLGBTQ+ persons to access safe, healthy and adequate homes.

Safe, secure, affordable housing is an important determinant of health. It improves the social and economic status of individuals, families and communities. Good quality, affordable housing is also the cornerstone of vibrant, healthy neighbourhoods and supports the environmental and economic health of the city, region and country as a whole.

## DECISION HISTORY

On November 9, 2021, City Council adopted Item PH28.4 - Official Plan Amendment on Updating the Definitions of Affordable Rental and Ownership Housing. This report recommended an amendment to the Official Plan to update the definition of affordable housing based on incomes instead of market rents, in an effort to better respond to the housing needs of low and moderate income households.
http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.PH28.4

On April 22, 2021, Planning and Housing Committee referred the report, PH22.10 - Creation of a Fair and Streamlined Access System for Affordable Housing to the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, and the Executive Director, Housing Secretariat with a request to report back to Planning and Housing following additional engagement with stakeholders to inform the design of a new affordable housing access system that leverages the City's current choice-based system.
http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.PH22.10

On October 27, 2020, City Council adopted Item PH17.3 - Taking Action to Increase Affordable and Supportive Housing Opportunities. This report summarized the actions taken by staff in preparation for impending federal funding through the national Rapid Housing Initiative, as well as details on the City's plans to pivot from emergency responses to permanent housing solutions. Through this item, City Council requested that staff report back with an implementation plan that establishes transparent access plans for new affordable housing units and a process to ensure compliance. City Council also requested that staff review compliance of existing agreements that secure rental replacements to ensure that owners are advertising and filling units in a fair and open process.
http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2020.PH17.3

On December 17, 2019, City Council adopted Item PH11.5 - HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan. The HousingTO 2020-2030 Action Plan provides the strategic framework to guide the City's efforts on housing and homelessness needs over the next ten years. Action 22 of this Plan is for the City to modernize and simplify access to social and affordable housing by developing and implementing a transparent access system for new affordable housing opportunities.
http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.PH11.5

On July 16, 2019, City Council adopted Item AU3.14 - Opening Doors to Stable Housing: An Effective Waiting List and Reduced Vacancy Rates Will Help More People Access Housing, from the Auditor General. This report included recommendations for the City can improve the administration of its centralized waiting list for subsidized housing. One of these recommendations included reviewing the City's local priority rules

for selecting households from the waiting list for rent-geared-to-income, and recommending any additional priority rules that should be adopted to support selection of households based on an applicant's level of need.
http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.AU3.14

## COMMENTS

### Council Direction to Develop a Centralized Access System

The HousingTO Plan establishes a target of approving 40,000 new affordable rental homes, including 18,000 supportive housing units by 2030. While the City works to increase the supply of affordable and supportive homes to meet this target, it is pivotal that these new homes are filled in a way that is fair, transparent, efficient, and equitable. To that end, the HousingTO Plan includes a recommendation to develop and implement a transparent access system for new affordable rental and supportive housing opportunities and housing benefits which strategically aligns new housing opportunities with population-specific needs and targets.

In April 2021, through Item PH22.10, the Planning and Housing Committee requested staff to create an implementation plan for the development of a new centralized access system with the following key priorities/functionalities:

- Central application and access system for the public to search and apply for affordable housing;
- Allocation system for housing providers to post and fill available units; and
- Oversight system/function for City staff to monitor the overall affordable housing system.

At this meeting, the Planning and Housing Committee also directed staff to:

- Engage stakeholders in designing a model for a new affordable housing centralized access system, which would leverage the City's choice-based system;
- Develop a concept design of the new access model, including allocation methodology and resource requirements to build the new system;
- Develop an approach to consolidate and streamline the future administration of new affordable housing contracts and agreements; and
- Ensure key performance indicators are included in the implementation of the system that will align with the Housing Secretariat's Data Strategy.

Included below are findings from the consultations held in 2021 and the resulting concept design for a new affordable housing access system. These consultations were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders including previous applicants; and non-profit, co-operative and private sector developers and operators.

A final report will be presented to the Planning and Housing Committee in the second quarter of 2022. This report will include the procurement plan; capital and operating costs to develop the system, others resource requirements; an approach to consolidate the future administration of affordable housing developed under City Planning policies; and recommendations on priority groups for both affordable and subsidized housing.

## 2021 Consultation and Engagement Summary

### Consultation and Engagement Approach

The City recognizes the importance of engaging with residents and other key stakeholders in the early stages of system design to understand the context, issues and potential impacts on the future administration of the City's housing projects and programs. The City's Customer Experience Transformation and Innovation team, in collaboration with Shelter, Support and Housing Administration and the Housing Secretariat, designed and implemented a stakeholder consultation plan using a human-centered approach, where system features were co-created with former applicants, housing providers and City staff.

The consultation process was implemented in three phases:

- **Phase 1 (January 2021)**: To understand the existing processes and program administration of the City's affordable housing program with subject matter experts including City staff; housing developers and providers (non-profit, co-op and private sector); non-profit advocacy groups; representatives from the Province of Ontario and academic sector partners.

- **Phase 2 (February 2021 to September 2021)**: To gather feedback on the user experience of the centralized access system using online surveys and virtual semi-structured interviews with people with lived experience who have previously applied for social housing and affordable housing programs, affordable housing developers and operators (non-profit, co-op and private sector); Toronto Community Housing Corporation; land trusts; charities and tenant groups.

- **Phase 3 (October 2021 to December 2021):** To conduct interactive design user-experience workshops with tenants, housing providers and members from the City's Tenant Advisory Committee to refine the concept design and co-design system features that will leverage elements of the City's choice-based technology.

### Consultation Findings

1,642 people were invited to participate in consultations, over 300 of which provided feedback to-date. This includes 226 former applicants and 20 housing providers. To help understand the customer journey and use data effectively to improve service and measure outcomes, survey and interview findings were analyzed to develop 14 user personas (eight applicants and six housing providers). These user personas captured how different people would interact with the new system at every stage of applying for affordable housing, including their goals, challenges, features that would best serve their needs, and experience indicators.

Attachment 1 provides an overview of what stakeholders indicated they want to see included in the centralized access system. Staff will continue to engage with stakeholders (including residents and a range of housing developers and operators)

during the system design, implementation and launch to ensure features and functionalities meet differing needs and interests.

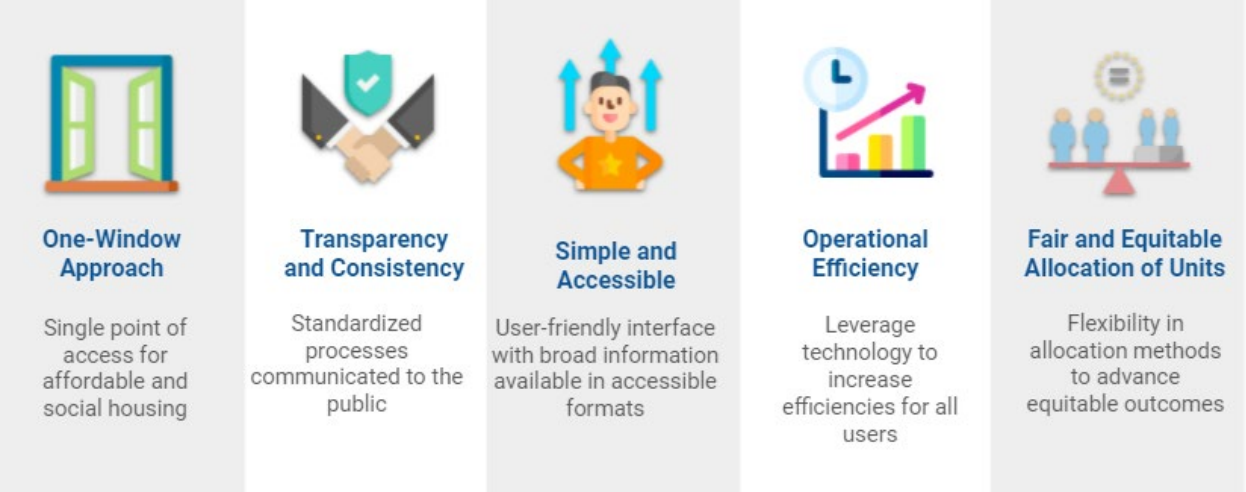
Consideration will also be given to ensure that residents without access to a computer can fully participate in this process, and that they have equal access to housing opportunities. Furthermore, the City's Equity, Inclusion and Human Rights Office will also be consulted as part of the system design process.

## Concept Design

The consultation findings informed the development of the concept design, which demonstrates the connection between proposed system features and the improved user experience. Strategic system design is also instrumental to advancing related City objectives such as removing barriers to accessing affordable housing, streamlining the administration of affordable housing and measuring program success.

A design concept is the foundational idea or an initial framework that establishes what a product's design is supposed to achieve and how the user is intended to interact with it. Leveraging our consultation findings, the design concept will showcase how the proposed features for the system bring value to those seeking affordable housing. This design concept sets expectations for a technology solution to meet the desired experience, usability and value, including what features and content will be included; what value the features and content will provide to applicants; and how applicants will interact with the features. Below is an outline of the concept design framework.

*Figure 1: Concept Design Framework*




### 1. One-Window Approach

Housing providers currently advertise available affordable units through their own mediums (i.e., websites, housing application portals, in-person, community outreach and partnerships), with varying application processes. By centralizing the administration of all City-administered affordable housing into one system, residents will have access to a broader range of housing options through one single entry point.

Additionally, many applicants are eligible and interested in applying for both affordable and social housing. Consultation findings show that residents favoured an integrated application process that provides clear information about different housing options, and avoids them having to duplicate application processes such as entering personal information and uploading required income documents. The One-Window will also include tenant support resources, education and programs.

A one-window approach will involve applicants creating one profile or account that can be used for both the social housing waitlist and affordable housing applications. The average wait time for social housing through the centralized waiting list for social housing is 7 to 12 years, depending on unit size. By integrating both affordable and social housing access systems, people on the centralized waiting list will have easier access to other housing options as they will be able self-manage multiple housing applications to self-manage multiple housing applications using one profile. It will help simplify the process for caseworkers and other support staff to assist clients with their housing applications.

To create a single entry point, the access system for affordable housing will leverage the City's existing choice-based technology launched in 2021 (known as MyAccesstoHousingTO), which supports the centralized waiting list for social housing. The online, cloud-based technology provides a Waitlist Management System, with an application system for residents and back-end interfaces for City staff, community partner agencies and housing providers.

### 2. Transparency and Consistency

By centralizing affordable housing projects into one system, the City will be able to standardize processes across different programs and housing providers. This includes the type of information shared in vacancy postings and documentation requirements. Standardized information sharing will enable clear, two-way communication between applicants and housing providers, as well as clarify eligibility expectations and listing information. Further, the system will include automated communication features, where applicants will be notified when a unit they have applied for is filled, regardless if they were selected for the unit or not.

Having all City-administered affordable housing in one system will increase fairness, transparency and consistency. It will also allow the City to better monitor and track whether units are being filled by operators in accordance with City rules, ensuring increased accountability for public investments.

### 3. Simple and Accessible

Using a human-centered design methodology, the system will be co-designed with users to support a design that is intuitive and easy to navigate. Features that will make the application process simpler for users include the ability to: search and filter units with criteria and key words; apply for multiple units using one profile; understand the eligibility requirements through an ‘eligibility calculator’; upload required documents to a profile using the camera feature on mobile devices; and have the option to receive notifications by email, phone or text message. The system will be designed to be highly

compatible with smaller-screened mobile devices and tablets, as well as desktops that will allow users to access the system using multiple web platforms.

The system will enable clear and adequate information to empower people to make informed choices that meet their housing needs, including:

- Outlining the differences between affordable and social housing;
- Eligibility and income criteria so people do not waste time applying for units they are not qualified for;
- Detailed vacancy postings that include information such as unit size, number of bedrooms, unit features, building amenities, modified/accessible features, and photos; and
- Support available to assist with application completion, if needed.

System features will ensure accessibility for people with a range of abilities and will be fully compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians and Disabilities Act. Applicants will have options as to how they receive notifications, including email, phone or text message. Additionally, the system will be compatible with translation programs, with key information available in multiple languages in adherence with the City's Multi-Lingual Services Provision Policy.

As noted above, consideration will also be given to ensure that residents without access to a computer can fully participate in this process, and that they have improved and equal access to available housing opportunities.

Furthermore, the City's Equity, Inclusion and Human Rights Office will also be consulted as part of this process.

### 4. Operational Efficiencies

A centralized access system is anticipated to create administration improvements and operational efficiencies for the City and housing providers. The new access system will help to streamline City administration of affordable housing delivered across different divisions, promoting consistency, alignment of system-level and strategic objectives, and resource efficiencies.

It will also help to automate the tenant selection processes that many housing providers do manually. This includes collecting supporting documentation, verifying eligibility, randomizing applicants, and notifying households of results. These improvements will result in operational efficiencies, enabling housing providers to house people faster and reduce vacancy loss.

### 5. Fair and Equitable Allocation of Units

The system will have the capacity to assign different allocation methods to units based on the housing provider's approved Access Plan. This could include selecting tenants using a randomized draw process, referral agreements, or prioritization.

While random draw and referral agreement processes are currently in place, the City is working towards establishing priority groups and targets to support more equitable outcomes for affordable housing. A preliminary analysis of current policies in New York, Boston and San Francisco identified increased efforts to reshape the City's housing policy around racial and social equity.

Additional stakeholder consultation was held in 2022 with the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD). The City will be undertaking further stakeholder consultation in the first quarter of 2022 on additional priority groups for affordable housing; as well as a review of existing priority groups for social housing as recommended in the 2019 Auditor General's report, "Opening Doors to Stable Housing".

## Interim Strategies and Actions

The centralized access system is expected to be rolled out in 2023. While the new system will take some time to procure, design, develop and implement, the following interim measures are being taken to make it easier for people to find and apply for affordable housing opportunities across the City.

### 1. Raising awareness of the new list-serve for affordable housing vacancies

In November 2021, the City launched a new email list-serve that people can subscribe to and receive notifications when new affordable housing opportunities become available and information on how to apply. Staff will be working with Strategic Communications to promote this list-serve to the public.

Staff will also work to improve outreach to/communication with people who do not have access to a computer or smartphone. This may include increased advertisement through community newsletters, signage at development projects, etc.

### 2. Updating the City's Finding Housing website

This website serves as a landing page that connects people to the different types of housing supports provided by the City, including rent-geared to income housing, supportive housing, housing for seniors, and long term care homes. The following improvements are being made on this website in the second quarter of 2022:

- Consolidated information on how to view and apply for vacancies posted by different housing providers.
- Map of affordable housing projects across Toronto with vacancies.
- Information about how to join the list-serve to receive updates about upcoming affordable housing vacancies.
- Resources about different housing options and how to apply to each.

### 3. Developing public education materials

During the consultation, former applicants noted confusion about the different housing programs and how to apply for them. Staff are developing communication materials that

explain the differences between affordable and subsidized housing. Accessibility for people with disabilities will also be a key consideration as materials are developed.

## Next Steps

Improving residents' access to affordable housing opportunities, and streamlining the administration of affordable housing are key priorities for the City of Toronto. The City is also committed to improving transparency, fairness, accountability and equity in the way affordable rental units are allocated.

This report provides an update on the significant amount of work undertaken in 2021, including extensive consultation with people with lived experience and other stakeholders, in developing a concept for a new centralized access system.

In addition, staff are actively working on the following key next steps to advance this work:

- Continued consultations with stakeholders, including specific consultation with Indigenous organizations, on the design of the centralized access system;
- Consultation with stakeholders on additional priority groups for affordable housing; as well as a review of existing priority groups for social housing as recommended in the 2019 Auditor General's report, "Opening Doors to Stable Housing; and
- Continued consolidation and streamlining of affordable housing agreements and administrative processes/procedures.

A final report will be presented to the Planning and Housing Committee in the second quarter of 2022 outlining implementation details for the new centralized access system. This includes the proposed procurement approach, resource requirements, and the overall financial impact to the City.

Subject to Council approval, the new affordable housing access system is anticipated to be launched in 2023.

## CONTACT

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## SIGNATURE

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## ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 - Key Themes and Stakeholder Consultation Findings
Attachment 2 - Client Journey in Current and Future State

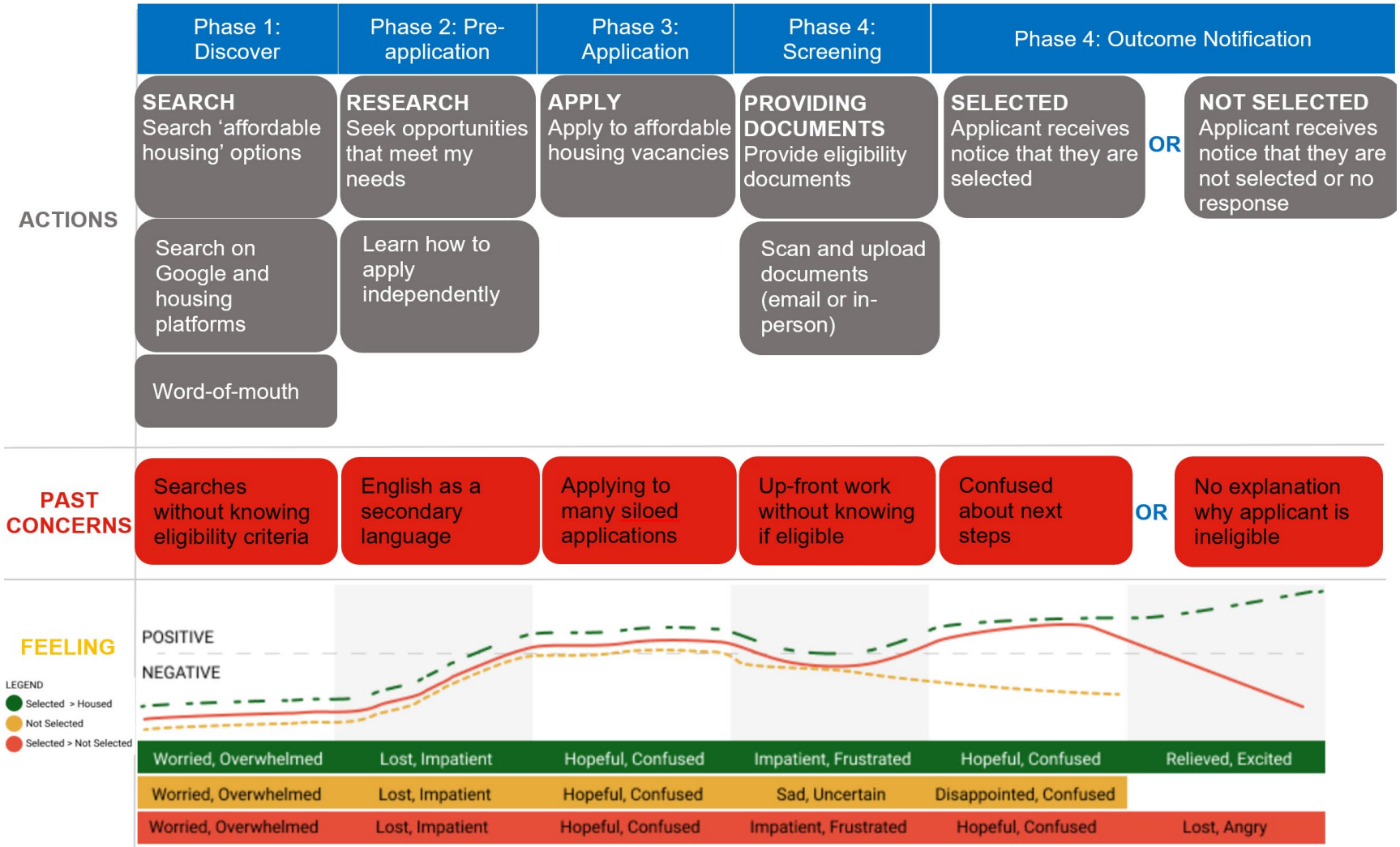
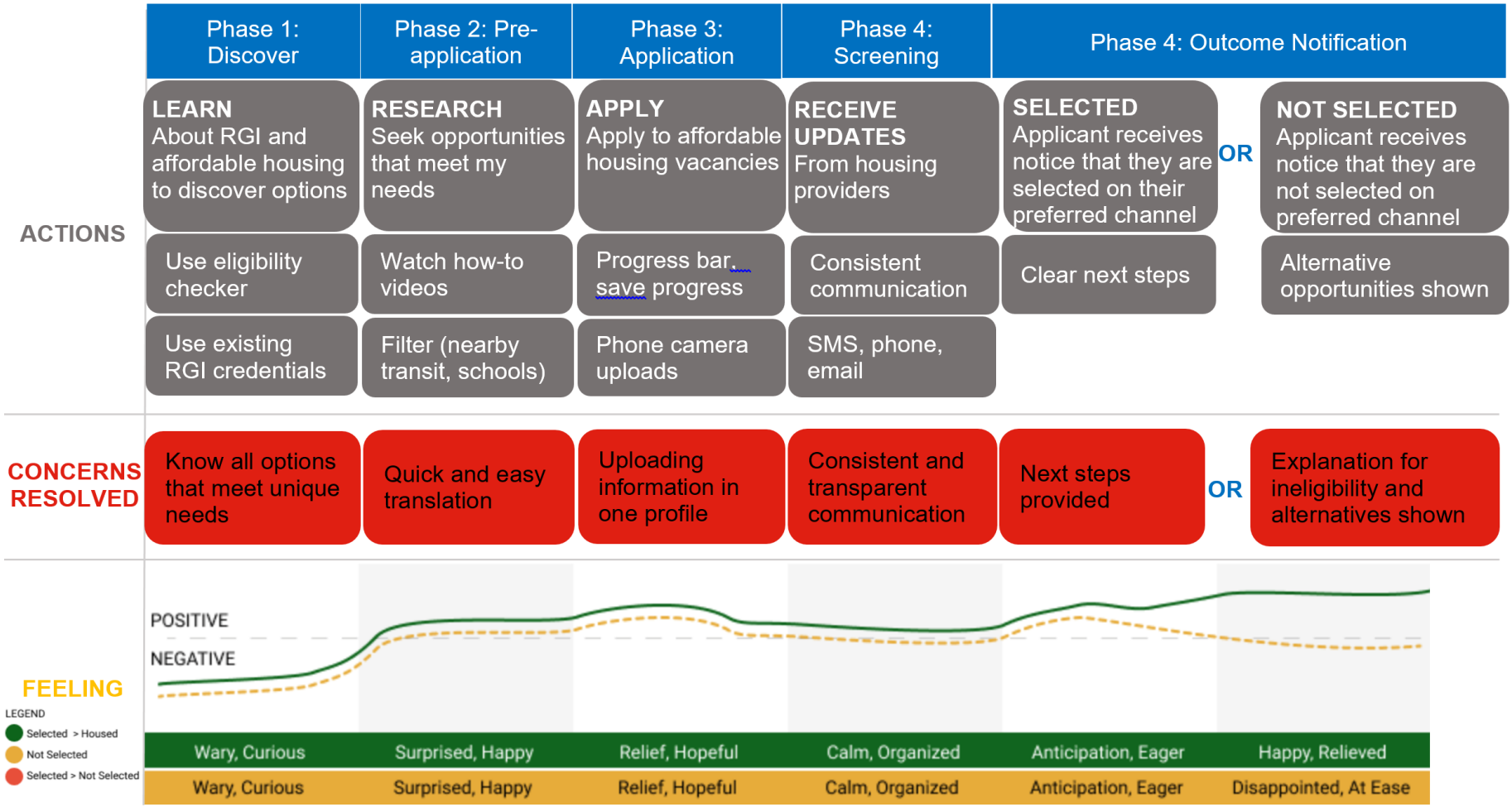
## ATTACTHMENT 1 - KEY THEMES AND STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION FINDINGS

| Key Themes | Applicants want the system to... | Housing Providers want the system to… |
|---|---|---|
| Clear and Comprehensive Information | Clarify the differences between the City's social and affordable housing programs in terms of program eligibility requirements to ensure applicants understand what program(s) they are eligible for.<br><br>Include detailed vacancy postings that will empower people to make informed housing decisions and to not waste time applying for units they are not eligible for. | Screen applicants based on program eligibility and match the applicant to the housing options that meet their housing needs and income.<br><br>Incorporate standardized information and clear instructions on how to advertise and market vacant units. |
| Integrated Vacancy Management System with Social and Affordable Housing | Allow applicants to sign onto the system using one single log-in to manage housing applications for both social and affordable housing programs. | Enable housing providers to post vacancies and review/manage applications for their social and affordable housing units in one integrated system. |
| Streamlined communications on application outcomes | Include built-in communication channels between the applicant and housing provider, so the applicant is notified of a change in their application status, outcome of the expression of interest and/or any outstanding requirements that the applicant will need to complete. | Automate communication responses to applicants to ensure standardized responses that can be tracked and monitored, and reduce time consuming manual processes. |

| Key Themes | Applicants want the system to... | Housing Providers want the system to… |
|---|---|---|
| Transparency, Modernized and Efficient Processes | Increase transparency of units and the program to help build understanding and trust within the program.<br><br>Allow for a quick application process that is easy to understand and navigate with resources and support provided if needed.<br><br>Include system features to submit application documents easily and auto-populate previously entered information. | Include functionalities that will automate housing provider reporting to the City, where reporting can be submitted efficiently through the system. |
| Simple and Accessible Interface | Be simple and easy to navigate, using plain language and has easy-to-use translation capabilities.<br><br>Be designed in a way that is compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians and Disabilities Act with information available in multiple languages.<br><br>Provide options for receiving information or notifications about their application (e.g., email, phone, SMS, integration with existing calendar reminders). | Ensure applicants without access to technology have alternate options to search and apply for affordable housing. |

## ATTACTHMENT 2 - CLIENT JOURNEY IN CURRENT AND FUTURE STATE

### Current State Map



## Future State Map