

Council of Parties Report

Winter 2016/17



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About this Report

This public report is issued by the Council of Parties of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children Restorative Inquiry (RI). It is one of many public reporting opportunities that will be part of the work of the RI during its mandate. The Council of Parties is the collaborative commission that leads the Restorative Inquiry, appointed as “commissioners” under the Public Inquiries Act. The council is mandated to include representation from the groups most affected by and involved in the work of the Restorative Inquiry, including former residents, the Home for Colored Children, the African Nova Scotian community, and government.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

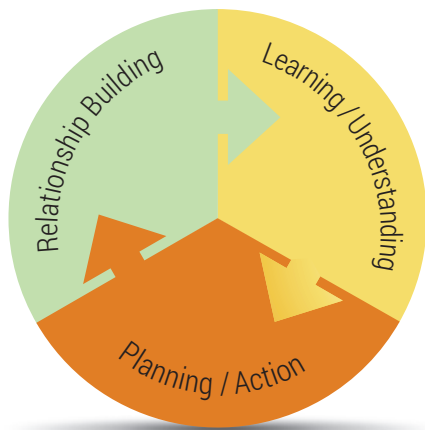
1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT	2
2. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS	4
3. A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH	8
4. WHAT THE RI HAS HEARD	10
5. ENTERING THE NEXT PHASE	14
6. AN AGENDA FOR ACTION	16





1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children Restorative Inquiry (RI) has a mandate to examine the experience of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children (NSHCC) as part of the history and legacy of systemic and institutionalized anti-Black racism, both historic and current, in Nova Scotia. Its mandate is also to inquire into how the history and legacy of the NSHCC has affected not only African Nova Scotian communities but all peoples in Nova Scotia and consider how to address this part of the harmful legacy.



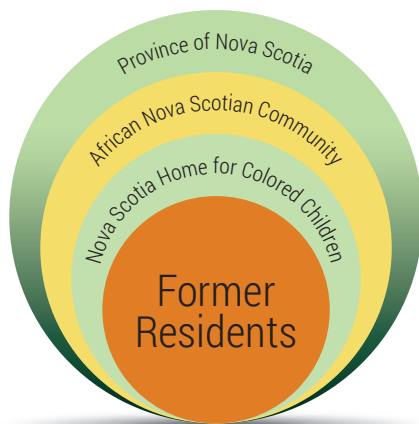
As identified in the Mandate and Terms of Reference, one of the objectives in the RI process is to Build Just and Respectful Relationships. The Restorative Inquiry operates from the principle that working collaboratively to identify issues, learn, and seek solutions together is an effective and sustainable path toward change that will truly make a difference.

To that end, the RI mandate outlines three key phases of the Restorative Inquiry's work: Relationship Building, Learning and Understanding, and Planning and Action. These phases will overlap and continue throughout the RI, but the work begins with building partnerships and relationships that allow the Restorative Inquiry to make meaningful progress toward sustainable social change.

This report outlines the work done to date, primarily in the Relationship Building phase of the Restorative Inquiry, along with some early learnings from that process. It also outlines next steps as the RI moves into the next phase of the work.

2. Building Relationships

The work of the Restorative Inquiry rests on engaging and collaborating with those most affected. This is reflected in how the process was designed to include former residents, community members, and government partners together at the decision-making level on the Council of Parties.



Former residents are at the centre of this process and are represented on the council. The RI also recognizes that the network of affected relationships is complex. This includes how former residents relate to the NSHCC and to the African Nova Scotian community, the role of the NSHCC in the community, and how the community relates to, and is served by, broader public institutions including provincial and municipal governments and agencies. The Restorative Inquiry has begun to build relationships with these groups in various ways:

FORMER RESIDENTS – The RI has worked to develop relationships with former residents who wish to participate in the restorative process. The RI hosted an initial Open House and information session for former residents in January 2016. The RI has held several “Tea and Talk” sessions exclusively for former residents to help them feel comfortable with RI staff, receive the support they need in their day-to-day lives, and prepare them to participate further in the Restorative Inquiry. As mandated, the RI continues to work closely with VOICES, the organization representing former residents, to communicate with residents.

NOVA SCOTIA HOME FOR COLORED CHILDREN – The NSHCC continues to operate as the Akoma Family Centre, a short-term centre for siblings in the province’s care. RI staff and council members have met with Akoma staff and board members to share the RI model and give them an opportunity to ask questions about the process. The RI and NSHCC have a research agreement that grants the RI access to NSHCC records dating back to the founding of the home. RI knowledge and research leads have begun to catalogue and examine these records.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS – RI staff and council members held 10 information sessions around the province, from Yarmouth to Cape Breton. These initial sessions were geared toward people who work within community organizations and public agencies that provide services to African Nova Scotian communities. Attendees included regional educators and tutors with the Black Educators Association; principals and school board staff; members of community development associations and other community organizations; church clergy and lay leaders; and others who work or volunteer in their African Nova Scotian communities. Staff presented on the RI model and invited service providers to share how they see the work potentially having an impact on their communities. The RI chose this method of approaching service providers first to gain a sense of potential issues, concerns, and opportunities in each area before engaging with the broader community.



YOUTH AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS –

The RI held two community workshops, one in June in East Preston and one in October in North Preston, to gather feedback from community members on topics relevant to the mandate of the Restorative Inquiry, including child welfare and family support; education, employment, and mentorship; justice and community violence; and mental health and well-being. The RI worked with service providers to identify and invite youth to these events to share their input as well, in line with the forward-focused mandate of the Restorative Inquiry.

PUBLIC AGENCIES – The Restorative Inquiry held three open information sessions for provincial public servants in March and April 2016, as an opportunity to learn about the RI format and ask questions. RI council members have also met with senior leadership of the departments of Education and Early Childhood Development, Community Services, Labour and Advanced Education, and Justice. The deputies of those departments, along with the deputies of Communities, Culture and Heritage and Health and Wellness, serve on the RI Reflection and Action Task Group that help determine next steps of action. The RI has also met with senior leadership in other public bodies including the Nova Scotia Health Authority, RCMP, and Halifax Regional Police. In June, the RI co-hosted a workshop with Community Services called “One Community Learning Together: A Restorative Conversation on Supporting Families.” This day-long event, held in conjunction with an International Restorative Approaches conference in Halifax, brought local government and community practitioners together with experts from around the world in community-focused, culturally appropriate care.

HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS AND PARTNERS – In keeping with the mandate to *do no further harm*, the RI has worked to build relationships with healthcare providers and partners to ensure former residents and other participants in the process have health support as they participate in the Restorative Inquiry. The RI has established a Health Support Advisory Committee that includes members from the Health Association of African Canadians, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the IWK’s Trauma Informed Care Advisory Committee, Family Service of Eastern Nova Scotia, and the provincial Department of Health and Wellness. This committee will advise the Health Support Lead on providing support to former residents and addressing gaps that exist in serving African Nova Scotia communities.

PARTNERSHIPS BEYOND NOVA SCOTIA – RI staff and council members travelled to Ontario in August to meet with former residents there, along with African Canadian community leaders who are interested in adopting the RI model to address child welfare issues in Ontario. Members of Council and VOICES met with representatives from Ontario’s Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth during their visit to Halifax, and met with their staff again during the RI visit to Ontario. A council co-chair presented to the Senate Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs. The RI also hosted a presentation for members of the international restorative approaches community in June, and held meetings with Paul Nixon, chief social worker for New Zealand; Moana Eruera, chief advisor Maori for New Zealand; and Fania Davis, executive director of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth. The RI took part in a civil society presentation to the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (UNWGEPAD) in October. The UNWGEPAD highlighted the RI’s work in its report on its visit to Canada.



3. A Collaborative Approach

The Restorative Inquiry has tried to honour its vision of *A Different Way Forward* by taking a cooperative, collaborative approach in making these connections and engaging with partners.

The RI views building relationships as a mutual collaboration, rather than simply asking people to contribute to the work of the Restorative Inquiry. To that end, the RI has offered support to former residents, partners, and community groups in several ways:

TEA AND TALK SESSIONS – The Restorative Inquiry has offered former residents a series of Tea and Talk activities to help them connect with each other and RI staff, and to give them some tools to help them process their experiences. These sessions have included evenings with a music therapist, a “seeds of hope” activity, a walking club, and open sessions to discuss former residents’ needs. The RI recognizes that residents have much expertise to contribute to the process.

LUNCH AND LEARN SERIES – The RI has hosted a monthly Lunch and Learn series where community members are invited to hear from speakers on topics such as an overview of provincial child welfare; Nova Scotia’s sexual violence strategy; what does trauma look like; strong partnerships as a path to sustainability; and African Nova Scotians as a distinct people. These events are an opportunity to share information and ideas and build connections between individuals and organizations who are engaged in similar work.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING – As the RI team has engaged with health partners for training, services, and support, RI staff have also shared knowledge to help health providers deliver culturally aware and competent care. This mutual support will have a lasting benefit in helping the health sector to meet the needs of people of African descent.

Why This Approach?

The Restorative Inquiry works to place those most affected—former residents, their communities, and the services and agencies that had and continue to have an impact on them—at the centre of the process, recognizing they have perspectives to share and solutions to offer.

The RI also recognizes that its limited mandate and timeline fit within the much broader context of the province’s historical relationship with African Nova Scotians. Many of the systemic issues that affected former NSHCC residents are still affecting African Nova Scotians in different ways, and many community groups and other agencies are at work on these issues. The Restorative Inquiry offers a window to take steps toward meaningful, sustainable change—work that must continue long after the RI is finished. The RI must build relationships and capacity for government, community, and all affected partners to continue to work together.





4. What the RI Has Heard

In the process of building relationships, participants have shared with the Restorative Inquiry some of their hopes for the process, their areas of concern, and what they feel the RI must do to be successful in its work. Several common themes emerged:

FORMER RESIDENTS WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR THE FUTURE.

Former residents who have met with the RI to date have expressed that they are interested in participating in the process if it will have an impact on current policies and practices, especially in the areas of justice and child welfare. They want to feel heard, and they want to see meaningful changes that will support children in care.

“ I’ve told my story. I don’t want to tell it again just to tell it. I want to tell it if it will make a difference for a child who’s in care today. ”

– Former NSHCC resident

SYSTEMIC RACISM CONTINUES TO HAVE A MAJOR IMPACT ON AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES.

In information sessions around the province, participants identified institutional racism and discrimination as an ongoing concern. They noted that African Nova Scotians continue to be over-represented in the child welfare system and the correctional system, and that African Nova Scotian students are suspended and placed on Individual Program Plans at disproportionate rates. Parents, caregivers, service providers, and community members expressed concern that African Nova Scotian students continue to have a difficult experience in schools. People in rural areas, in particular, spoke of being reluctant to interact with many public agencies and services because they felt they were treated as second-class citizens. Many people stressed that these issues are not new: “It feels like we’re talking about the same things we were talking about 40 years ago,” one participant noted, a sentiment echoed in several sessions around the province.

“ For me to succeed, I need the people around me to want to see me win. ”

– African Nova Scotian youth



AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN YOUTH NEED STRONG ROLE MODELS, AND TO SEE THEIR CULTURE BETTER REFLECTED IN THEIR ENVIRONMENTS.

Former residents who share positive memories from their youth almost always identify at least one adult who provided them with guidance and treated them with kindness. In the RI's two youth-focused Going Together events, both youth and adult participants identified the need to provide African Nova Scotian youth with more opportunities to be mentored. Youth shared that they still rarely see their culture and history reflected in the school curriculum or the broader school environment. A majority said they did not feel like they had someone they could go to in school if they were having a problem or needed help. Youth expressed a positive desire to know more about the history and culture of their communities, and to have the support of people who can help them with practical things—for example, applying for scholarships or compiling a resume. Participants in the youth events and community information sessions also stressed that youth need more opportunities to take leadership roles in positive situations—too often, African Nova Scotian youth become the focus only in the context of “problems,” while their successes go unrecognized.

AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN COMMUNITIES FACE A CONTINUAL STRUGGLE TO MAINTAIN INFRASTRUCTURE AND RESOURCES.

The Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children began as a community initiative to care for children in need. For much of its history, it struggled for adequate funding and support. Community members see a similar struggle in contemporary efforts to maintain programs, funding, and resources for African Nova Scotian communities. Community members highlighted the recent closure of Black Employment Resource Centres and the loss of the Skills Up! employment program as examples, along with the dissolution of community organizations like the Black United Front and the Cultural Awareness Youth Group. Many communities have had well-documented struggles to maintain land ownership or to keep landmarks such as community centres and churches functioning at operational capacity.

AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN COMMUNITIES DESIRE A BETTER PARTNERSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AGENCIES.

In community information sessions and events, most participants expressed “cautious optimism” about the potential of the Restorative Inquiry. Many people spoke of a desire to see change, but admitted they were wary after past experiences where government departments invited input or promised consultations yet did not take up community feedback in their final strategies or reports. Community members also pointed to the province’s failure to fully implement recommendations from the BLAC Report and the Marshall Inquiry over the past 25 years. Former residents, community service providers, and other participants all said that they wanted to feel included throughout the process, and they want to see commitment to true partnership and accountability from government departments and other public agencies who may be involved in the process.

“ We need to begin to have a new, different relationship with government. ”

– African Nova Scotian community member

GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AGENCIES ALSO DESIRE A BETTER WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH COMMUNITY.

In presentations and information sessions with public partners, many participants acknowledge that they are not serving African Nova Scotian communities as well as they would like. They are open to feedback on how to improve access and service, and they are hopeful that the Restorative Inquiry model will open doors for more collaboration and meaningful change. The provincial government is a partner in the Restorative Inquiry and has representatives on both the Council of Parties and the Reflection and Action Task Group.



5. Entering the Next Phase

While building, maintaining, and strengthening relationships will remain important throughout the Restorative Inquiry, the next phase of the work shifts toward Learning and Understanding Together. Some of this work is already underway and focuses on three main areas:

FORMER RESIDENTS SHARING CIRCLES

Former NSHCC residents will be invited to share about their experiences in several key areas:

- With their caregivers, including social workers, home staff, healthcare workers, and foster parents, if applicable
- In school and the education system
- In the justice system
- With family and community, including with other residents

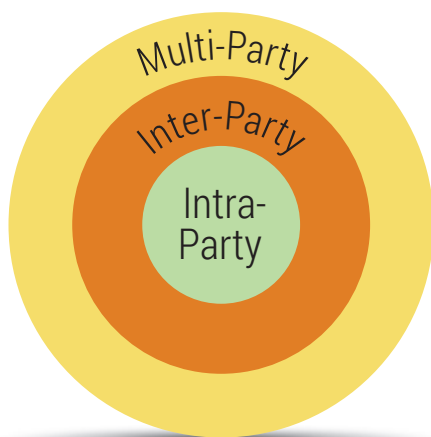
These sessions will be facilitated discussions with health support onsite. They will not be open to the public, in order to maintain a safe space for former residents to share. The RI will provide avenues for former residents located outside of Nova Scotia to share their experiences as well. The findings from these circles will be reported publicly in a way that shares the learnings without identifying former residents, unless they choose to share their stories publicly. These sessions will begin in early 2017.

RESEARCH

The Restorative Inquiry Knowledge Lead and Researcher have begun cataloguing and examining records of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children, dating back to the home's founding in 1921. The research work of the Restorative Inquiry will take several avenues:

- A historical account of the NSHCC, including the context and circumstances in which it operated
- Relevant data, law, policy, and other historical and current information related to the Home
- Specific research on identified issues arising from the work of the RI

The Restorative Inquiry will also draw on existing relevant research, where applicable, that is related to the focus areas and overall themes of the Restorative Inquiry. This work is already underway and will continue for the duration of the RI.



PARTNERS CIRCLES

Circles will also be held with relevant partners on topics related to the work of the Restorative Inquiry. These could include sessions within African Nova Scotian communities, with community service providers, and with government departments and other public agencies to gather and share knowledge.

These sessions will also help prepare partners for broader multi-party work. For example, out

of knowledge gathered from the former residents' circles and the partners' circles, it may make sense to bring a group of former residents together with service providers to discuss possible next steps on an identified issue. The Restorative Inquiry allows for a flexible process that can bring together different groups in different settings as the issues and discussions require. The Partners Circles will begin in early 2017.



6. An Agenda for Action

The third key objective of the Restorative Inquiry is Planning and Acting Together. With strong relationships in place, the Council of Parties will continue to facilitate all partners working together to address issues that arise from the learning phase in a way that leads to meaningful, sustainable change.

As the work progresses, one partnership in place is the Reflection and Action Task Group that meets regularly to ensure government's full and timely support for, and participation in, the Restorative Inquiry. This group includes representatives from council and staff, community representatives, and deputy ministers of relevant government departments, including Community Services; Communities, Culture and Heritage; Education and Early Childhood Development; Health and Wellness; Justice; and Labour and Advanced Education.

The Task Group can begin to identify and make progress on action items that arise from the Restorative Inquiry as the work unfolds, without waiting until the end of the mandate. This is one mechanism for action, and the RI will also work with other partners in the community and public agencies to plan and act. The Task Group will issue a report to the Legislature on its work to date in the spring.

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