

Workshop on Guiding Principles

Final Report



Table of Contents

Introduction	.....	1
Survey	.....	1
Workshop	.....	4
Proposed Principles	.....	5
Implementation	.....	8
Conclusion	.....	9
Contact Information	.....	10
Appendix 1: Survey	.....	11
Appendix 2: Agenda	.....	16



Introduction

In early 2024, Strategic Steps was engaged by the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities (NSFM) to work with their Board of Directors and senior management team to develop a set of guiding principles that would guide the organization's work – both in terms of advocacy and organizational development.

Specifically, Strategic Steps was contracted to deliver a survey of the Board of Directors, design and deliver a half-day workshop with the Board and senior management on guiding principles and prepare a report on same with recommendations for implementation.

The online survey was initially delivered via email to the Board of Directors on April 25, 2024. A reminder email was sent on May 6, 2024. Ten responses of a possible sixteen were received. The workshop was delivered on the morning of Wednesday, May 8, 2024 prior to the start of the NSFM Annual Spring Conference in Baddeck, NS. Fourteen Directors and three senior staff were in attendance.

Survey

The survey addressed the Board's expectations for the session, what they believed NSFM was doing well and what needed some improvement, their role as a Director, how guiding principles should support NSFM, what roadblocks might exist that guiding principles could address, what principles they would choose, and how they would rank the principles identified at a December 2023 Board of Directors meeting. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A to this report.

Expectations were consistent with most addressing a desire for a "path" or "road map" to support Board decision-making. Some responses indicated a desire for a deeper understanding of NSFM and its work. In general, the responses leaned slightly more towards a desire for what might be termed "strategic priorities" as opposed to guiding principles. Strategic priorities are what the organization is trying to achieve, while guiding principles provide direction to how the organization behaves in its efforts to achieve the priorities. This difference was a discussion point in the subsequent workshop.

Table 1 below outlines the answers to the next five survey questions. Directors felt that NSFM is performing well in terms of communications, advocacy, and research. These three are closely linked so it is not surprising they share a ranking as something the organization does well. Operations were also highlighted as something the organization does well, providing internal balance to the external advocacy role. Clearly, Directors see the organization as performing well on key deliverables.

Table 1 - Survey Response Summary

Question	Response	Response	Response	Response
Doing well	Communications	Advocacy	Research	Operations
Improve	Member Engagement	Board Engagement	Momentum	Communications
Your Role	Be informed	Bring my voice	Amplify members	
Guiding Principles Role	Consistency	Foundation	Define "how"	Align with Mission, Vision, Values
Roadblocks	Province	Distractions	Member buy-in	

Areas that were highlighted for improvement included membership and Board engagement. This was driven primarily by a perceived need for member municipalities and Directors to have a deeper understanding of NSFM's work. In particular, there was a desire for members to engage more actively in the organization's advocacy campaigns. This same feeling was described as the need for generating more momentum. Communication came up in this question as well but related directly to the issue of engagement as opposed to the quality of communications tools and efforts.

Directors described their role in NSFM's success in terms that generally meet the expectations of good governance. They felt they need to be informed for Board decisions, to speak up in debate and discussion, and to reflect the concerns and aspirations of members.

When asked how the guiding principles should support NSFM, the themes of consistency and a foundation for decision-making were raised. This is in line with the themes established in their expectations. However, respondents in the question also suggested that guiding principles should define "how" NSFM does its work and that they should align with the organization's Mission, Vision, and Values. The questions of "how" and alignment are important distinctions, as mentioned earlier, and should inform how NSFM implements its guiding principles.

When asked about potential roadblocks the guiding principles could help overcome, respondents highlighted the provincial government becoming a more fulsome and collaborative partner, better focus for the organization, and – again – deeper engagement from municipal units.

The next survey question asked respondents to provide their own thoughts on what three key principles should drive NSFM’s work. Table 2 below summarizes their first, second and third answers.

Table 2 - Suggested Guiding Principles

Response 1	Response 2	Response 3
Transparency	Collaborative	Municipal focused
Integrity	Education	Transparency
EDI	Municipal Autonomy	Advocacy
Focus	Evidence-based Decision Making	Communication
Communication	Distractions	

Finally, respondents were asked to rank the potential guiding principles discussed at the December 2023 Board of Directors meeting. As seen in Table 3, of the seven items, the four highest rated were: Transparency and Accountability; Municipal Autonomy; Planning and Resiliency; and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

Transparency and Accountability features the largest share of respondents who ranked it as the most important principle. The principles of Municipal Autonomy and Planning and Resiliency scored highly from responses giving second and third ranks, with relatively few respondents naming them as unimportant. Also of note is the score for One NS, which also featured a large proportion of responses naming it most important, with an equally large segment naming it least important, implying a degree of polarity in opinions on One NS.

Table 3 - Ranking of Principles from December 2023 Meeting

Item	Overall Rank	Rank Distribution	Score	No. of Rankings
Transparency and Accountability	1		50	10
Municipal Autonomy	2		46	10
Planning and Resiliency	3		45	10
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion	4		40	10
One NS	5		39	10
Sustainability and Climate Action	6		36	10
Truth and Reconciliation	7		24	10

Lowest Rank Highest Rank

Workshop

The Guiding Principles Workshop was held on the morning of May 8, 2024 at the Inverary Resort in Baddeck, NS in conjunction with the NSFMs Spring Conference. The workshop agenda can be found in Appendix 2 of this report. The workshop began with a discussion of participant expectations, the existing tools at their disposal for building guiding principles, and a review of the survey results.

Next the group discussed their “big rocks” – issues or ideas they deemed important enough to name so they don’t get lost in the discussion. These included:

Theme	Specific Issues Associated with the Theme
Acting in the Interests of Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Statements of Municipal Interest • Independence
Relationship with Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and education of members • Financial sustainability of members • Membership engagement (growth and maturity)
Collaborating with External Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships and collaboration • Interdependence
Ongoing Sustainability and Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Succession planning • NSFMs sustainability

Advocacy, Statements of Municipal Interest, and independence all speak to the manner in which NSFMs sees itself acting in the best interests of their members. Support and education of members, the financial sustainability of members, and membership engagement speak to the need for a deep, meaningful relationship with members. Relationships and collaboration, and interdependence address the need to work with other organizations to achieve goals – NSFMs cannot do it all alone. Finally, succession planning and NSFMs sustainability speak to the need to keep a keen eye on ensuring NSFMs is able to continue to work in the best interests of its members into the future.

There is significant crossover between this list and the items raised in the survey and at the December 2023 meeting. Themes of advocacy, autonomy, and sustainability run through all three.

The participants were divided into four smaller group to tackle three key questions designed to lead to a focused set of guiding principles. They were first asked to identify four to eight high-level guiding principles and report back to the workshop. Discussion then focused on which of the principles from each group might be a priority and how they related to one another. Next, the groups were asked to consider just two of their potential guiding principles and provide a more developed description of how they would impact NSFMs day-to-day work. After reporting back, further group discussion highlighted how these guiding principles would show up in practice, specifically:

- How NSFMs’s Board and staff interact with one another;
- How they interact with members; and,
- How they interact with external stakeholders.

The guiding principles included on the “long list” generated through this exercise were grouped in the following way:

- Advocacy
 - Advocacy (x2)
 - Communication (x2)
 - Advocacy for members
 - Focused Communications
- Growth
 - Influence
 - Membership development
- Sustainability
 - Collaboration
 - Data driven
 - Evidenced-based
 - Holistic decision-making
 - Internal planning
 - NSFM sustainability
- Collaboration
- Integrity
 - Integrity (x3)
 - DEI
 - Equity
 - Inclusion
- Responsiveness
 - Agility
 - Managing Distractions

The consultants agreed to take these results and prepare a series of Guiding Principles statements for review by the senior staff for presentation to the Board along with recommendations on implementation.

Proposed Principles

A guiding principle is a fundamental belief or value that directs and influences behavior and decision-making within an organization. It serves as a compass, providing clarity and consistency in actions and strategies by aligning them with core values.

The key elements of a guiding principle include:

- clarity, which ensures the principle is well-defined and easily understood;
- relevance, meaning it resonates with the organization's goals and context;
- consistency, ensuring it applies universally across different situations; and,
- aspirational value, inspiring positive change and progress.

A strong guiding principle also promotes accountability by setting standards for expected behaviour and decision-making, helping to maintain integrity and coherence in pursuing objectives.

In this case, the guiding principles should also flow from and reinforce the Vision and Mission of NSFM:

NSFM Vision: Effective local government and strong, sustainable communities

NSFM Mission: To enable effective local government for Nova Scotia's communities by facilitating strategic advocacy, education and collaboration.

Each of the following guiding principles were based on the workshop discussion and are designed to assist staff and the Board maintain a tight focus on NSFM's Vision and Mission. Each guiding principle is presented with a title, a description, a primary statement, and several supporting statements. The primary statements are meant to be tight and easy for staff and the Board to remember. The supporting statements are meant to provide more detail when assessing objectives or activities. They serve as a checklist to help staff formulate a recommendation to the Board, where necessary, as to whether a proposed activity is in line with the organization's guiding principles.

Focused Advocacy

Advocacy is the heart of why NSFM exists. In fact, without effective advocacy, members lose faith and all other functions of the organization suffer. It was clear from the discussions that the Board of Directors sees advocacy as a priority, but that they are also concerned that advocacy efforts do not get spread too thin or distracted from prioritized objectives.

We are committed to focused advocacy, passionately championing the causes and issues that align with our core values and mission.

- We strive to be informed and articulate municipal advocates, using our platform and resources to raise awareness, influence policy, and drive meaningful change.
- By concentrating our efforts on specific, impactful initiatives, we maximize our effectiveness and ensure that our advocacy is purposeful and strategic.

Sustainability

Through most of the discussion, the idea of sustainability centred around the financial health and viability of NSFM as an organization. Like many other advocacy and non-profit organizations, NSFM must be creative and intentional in balancing the needs of its membership base and the resources required to deliver effective services. Often, organizations struggle to communicate this balance to their members. However, it is important that members understand that revenue and value-for-money are often deeply interconnected. An advocacy organization without sufficient resources, and without a strong commitment to effective management of those resources, is rarely able to provide the advocacy and program support its members need.

Our commitment to sustainability is rooted in the belief that financial stability is essential to achieving our mission and making a lasting impact.

- We strive to build a resilient financial foundation by diversifying revenue streams, practicing prudent financial management, and fostering a culture of transparency and accountability.
- By balancing innovative revenue generation with responsible stewardship of resources, we aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of our organization, empowering us to serve our members effectively and sustainably for generations to come.
- We know that we must be prudent in our use of all of our resources so that future Boards can still make their own determinations of how best to deploy future resources.

Collaboration

NSFM is one important cog in the machinery of the municipal sector. As with most advocacy-based NGOs, it does not have the capacity to engage in the multitude of policy and program delivery specialties that impact how and how well a municipality meets its goals. Working with other advocacy organizations, the provincial and federal governments, and with members, is an important element to sustained advocacy success. Internal collaboration is also a key to delivering on the organization's strategic goals. While NSFM is growing, it still a relatively small team of professionals whose work needs to be complementary.

[We believe that collaboration is essential for achieving our best outcomes.](#)

- We are committed to fostering a culture of teamwork and open communication, where diverse perspectives are valued.
- By working together with partners, governments and members, we leverage our collective strengths and expertise to innovate and mitigate the risk associated with innovation.
- We strive to create an inclusive environment where mutual respect and shared goals drive our efforts, recognizing that true collaboration leads to stronger relationships, greater creativity, and lasting success.

Integrity

Several conversations during the workshop revolved around the idea of integrity. First, there was a determination that NSFM should make – and encourage and expect others to make – policy and program decisions based on verifiable evidence. Second, there was an acknowledgement that it is important to make efforts to proactively improve gender, racial, and cultural representation in all aspects of NSFM's operations and policies. Third, that speaking truth to power should be a thread that runs through all aspects of NSFM – advocacy and operations. That means, always being honest and respectful with one another, no matter the context of the conversation.

[We are committed to honesty, transparency, and ethical behavior in all our interactions and decisions.](#)

- By consistently acting with integrity, we build trust with our colleagues, members, and partners, enhancing key collaborative relationships
- We hold ourselves accountable to the highest standards of professionalism and fairness, ensuring that our actions align with our words and principles.
- Integrity guides us to do what is right, even when it is difficult, and to maintain a culture of respect and responsibility.
- We believe that a foundation of integrity is essential for long-term success and that it fosters a positive, trustworthy environment for all.

Responsiveness

While responsiveness was not identified specifically as a guiding principle, we did note it as a theme in many of the conversations over the course of the session. There was a sense that NSFM needs to be accurate, but flexible in its advocacy while responding quickly to member requests. For example, NSFM recently changed the manner in which they handle member advocacy requests by eliminating of resolutions in favour of a faster vetting-to-action approach through their committees.

[We commit to being responsive in all our interactions and operations.](#)

- We prioritize timely and thoughtful communication, ensuring that we actively listen to, and promptly address, the needs and concerns of our members, colleagues, partners, and stakeholders.
- By being proactive and adaptable, we aim to foster a culture of agility and continuous improvement, recognizing that responsiveness is key to building trust, enhancing collaboration, and achieving excellence.

Implementation

Having guiding principles is important for any advocacy organization. Consistently applying those guiding principles is even more important. The first step is ensuring everyone in and around the organization knows them and understands them. The next step is to ensure systems are in place to integrate them into the day-to-day and strategic work of the organization. The last step is to measure the degree to which the organization is living up to those guiding principles and whether adjustments need to be made in either the principles themselves or the manner in which they are being implemented. The following section addresses these three steps.

Awareness

By the time the final guiding principles are adopted by the Board of Directors, an intentional plan to communicate them to members and staff needs to be ready to roll out. Firstly, NSFM should draft a short introductory document exploring and explaining the guiding principles – what they mean and how they will be used. This document should be shared with the staff and members in advance of face-to-face sessions. Key messages surrounding the guiding principles should be developed as part of the communications plan and shared via social media. Finally, the guiding principles and the introductory document should be added to the NSFM website – highlighted with the NSFM Vision and Mission.

Internally, the guiding principles should be included in the employee handbook and reviewed with new employees as part of their on-boarding. The annual Board orientation process should also include a thorough discussion of the guiding principles and how they are applied to Board decision-making and staff delivery.

Finally, efforts should be made to ensure the primary statements for each guiding principle are displayed in ways that they remain top-of-mind for the Board, staff and members. Some examples you might consider are including them in a preface to the regular Board meeting packages, creating a poster or sign for display within the office areas, and including them in the regular newsletter either as a permanent element of the masthead or through regular articles on how the guiding principles are used in NSFM's day-to-day work.

Integration

Integrating the guiding principles into activities and decision-making is where many organizations fall short. If the guiding principles are to be effective – or if an organization is to really understand whether the guiding principles are working – they need to be used on a regular basis. For most organizations, this means ensuring the guiding principles show up in the process and paperwork that underlies decision-making.

Policy development papers, decision notes for the Board, position papers – all should include an explicit section showing how the guiding principles were considered in the preparation of the recommendations or positions. All decisions of the Board should likewise indicate how the guiding principles were considered in their debate and decision.

A parallel process should be implemented for internal, administrative decisions. Management should be transparent about how they considered and integrated the guiding principles into significant administrative and human resource decisions. In addition, it would be useful for the senior management team to work with staff on a set of administrative guiding principles that flow from the organizational guiding principles discussed here.

Finally, NSFM should undertake a review of administrative and governance policies to ensure they reinforce the guiding principles and adjust or eliminate those that do not.

Measurement

Measuring and reporting how – and how well – NSFM practices its guiding principles is critical to maintaining accountability. Measurements will help to determine where, when, and how NSFM's activities or the principles themselves should be adjusted. We recommend an annual review with staff and the Board. This will require some administrative resources to collect and present the necessary metrics. However, regularly recording when decisions or actions deviate from the guiding principles will make this process much simpler.

Conclusion

Over the course of a year, the Board of Directors and Senior Staff were engaged in two sessions focused on the idea of guiding principles. The second session, held in May 2024, was facilitated by Strategic Steps Inc. This workshop was based on themes that had emerged from the previous session and a pre-workshop survey conducted by Strategic Steps. The early discussion in the May workshop made it clear that the NSFM Board of Directors believe the organization is delivering on operational and advocacy mandate. There was an equally clear message that thought three items were lacking: clearly defined strategic priorities (a path), Board engagement, and member engagement. Engaging Directors and, in particular members, who have demanding lives outside of their association life is a perennial challenge for advocacy organizations. That said, the recommended guiding principles can play a role in deeper, more effective engagement on the part of Directors and members.

Through the May workshop the Board provided the consultants with the direction and themes required to draft the following high level Guiding Principles:

Focused Advocacy: We are committed to focused advocacy, passionately championing the causes and issues that align with our core values and mission.

Sustainability: Our commitment to sustainability is rooted in the belief that financial stability is essential to achieving our mission and making a lasting impact.

Collaboration: We believe that collaboration is essential for achieving our best outcomes.

Integrity: We are committed to honesty, transparency, and ethical behavior in all our interactions and decisions.

Responsiveness: We commit to being responsive in all our interactions and operations.

The report includes additional explanatory text for each Guiding Principle.

In addition, the report includes recommendations for:

- raising awareness of these Guiding Principles with the Board, staff, and membership;
- integrating the Guiding Principles into NSFM's working and policy processes; and,
- ensuring metrics are developed for how NSFM acts on the Guiding Principles for reflection by the Board of Directors.



Contact Us



Website

www.strategicsteps.ca



Phone

709-728-0065



E-mail

craig@strategicsteps.ca



HQ address

#235, 450 Ordze Road, Sherwood Park, AB, T8B 0C5

Appendix 1: Survey



NSFM: Guiding Principles Pre-Session Survey

About you:

1. Your Name: (*This will not be published anywhere*) *

2. Will you be participating in the Guiding Principles Workshop Session in May? *

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

3. What do you hope to gain or learn from the Guiding Principles session?*

Vision and Mission

4. What is NSFAM doing well as an organization?

*

5. How can NSFAM improve as an organization?

*

6. What is your role in NSFAM's success?

*

What's Important to you?

7. In your opinion, how should a new set of Guiding Principles support the NSFM? *

8. What are some roadblocks that you hope a comprehensive set of Guiding Principles will help address? *

9. In your own words, please describe the principles you feel should guide NSFM in its advocacy on behalf of Nova Scotia municipalities and in furthering the organizational growth we're seeing today. *

Principle 1

Principle 2

Principle 3

10. Below, you will find a list of sample principles discussed at the December 2021 meeting in Truro. Please drag and drop the sample principles on this list in order of importance to you from top to bottom. These principles are a sample used to determine a baseline of values ahead of the workshop, and are not the final list of guiding principles for NSF. *

Drag items from the left-hand list into the right-hand list to order them.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion →	
Transparency and Accountability →	
Municipal Autonomy →	
Truth and Reconciliation →	
Planning and Resiliency →	
Sustainability and Climate Action →	
One NS →	

Appendix 2: Agenda





- 1 **Introductory Comments**
- 2 **Purpose and Expectations**
- 3 **Current Situation**
- 4 **identifying Your Guiding Principles** *Break Out Discussion*
- 5 **Defining Your Guiding Principles** *Break Out Discussion*
- 5 **Guiding Principles in Action** *Break Out Discussion*
- 6 **Impact on Planning**
- 8 **Next Steps and Summary**
- 9 **Final Comments**