



AHWC Feasibility Study Research Summary Report

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Research involving Indigenous peoples and communities has increasingly highlighted the importance of approaches that are grounded in Indigenous sovereignty and governance, knowledge systems, community priorities, self-determination, and relational accountability. While institutional research ethics boards play an important role within the broader research landscape, there is growing recognition that Indigenous-led ethics processes can address dimensions of community authority, cultural responsibility, reciprocity, and Indigenous data governance that conventional ethics frameworks are not designed to fully address.

Against this backdrop, the Aboriginal Health and Wellness Centre of Winnipeg Inc. (AHWC) has been exploring the potential development of an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB). As AHWC continues to strengthen its role as a leader in Indigenous health and wellness, questions emerged regarding how research involving urban Indigenous peoples could be supported in ways that are culturally grounded, accountable to community, reflective of the realities of diverse urban Indigenous communities, and ethically aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

The feasibility study drew on multiple sources of evidence, including:

- a review of AHWC documents,
- a review of academic and practice-based literature,
- an environmental scan of existing ethics processes,
- 22 survey responses from community organizations, researchers, and institutional partners,
- focus groups with AHWC staff and Peer Advisory Members, and
- interviews with six Elders and Knowledge Holders.

Together, these perspectives provide a broad and community-informed description of the opportunities, challenges, and practical considerations associated with developing a UIRL-EB.

Across all sources of evidence, one finding emerged with remarkable consistency: **there is strong support for the development of an Indigenous-led ethics process**. There was broad agreement that such a model could serve an important role within the research ecosystem and in supporting urban Indigenous communities in Winnipeg. The findings suggest that the feasibility of a UIRL-EB is not primarily a question of need or support, but rather one of thoughtful design, governance, implementation, and long-term sustainability.

PURPOSE OF THE FEASIBILITY STUDY



The purpose of this study was to assess the feasibility of establishing an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB) at AHCWC and to identify key considerations that should inform future development. Particular attention was given to self-determination, community accountability, Indigenous governance and data sovereignty, relationships with existing institutional research ethics boards, and the practical realities of implementing and sustaining an Indigenous-led ethics process.

This work recognizes that urban Indigenous communities occupy a unique space within the research landscape. While existing institutional research ethics boards play an important role in protecting research participants, they are often not designed to address Indigenous realities in urban contexts, including Indigenous governance, collective rights, community accountability, Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous data sovereignty, or the distinctiveness across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit knowledges, worldviews, and values. The feasibility study, therefore, explored whether a complementary Indigenous-led ethics process could help address these gaps.

STUDY FINDINGS

Document Review

The document review demonstrated that AHCWC already possesses a strong and well-developed foundation for ethical practice. Existing organizational frameworks consistently emphasize Indigenous self-determination, relational accountability, community well-being, distinctions-based approaches, and the principle of “nothing about us without us.”

Rather than representing a new direction, the development of a UIRL-EB emerged as a natural extension of AHCWC’s existing values, frameworks, and practices. The creation of the UIRL itself reflects AHCWC’s growing role in Indigenous-led research and a broader progression toward more structured approaches to Indigenous research governance. The organization has already established a strong ethical foundation grounded in Indigenous worldviews and community-centered approaches to care, research, and governance.

The review also highlighted AHCWC’s commitment to Indigenous data governance and stewardship, including recognition of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit approaches to authority, accountability, and knowledge stewardship. These existing commitments provide an important foundation for any future ethics process.

In many respects, the findings suggest that AHCWC is not beginning this work from scratch. Instead, the organization is building upon an established foundation of values, relationships, and ethical commitments that already align closely with the principles underpinning Indigenous-led research ethics.

Literature Review

The literature review revealed that Indigenous research ethics are fundamentally different from conventional institutional research ethics processes. Across First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban Indigenous contexts, ethics are consistently understood as relational, ongoing, and grounded in Indigenous values and knowledge systems. Ethical responsibility is not



viewed as a single approval event occurring before research begins, but as a commitment that extends throughout the entire research lifecycle.

The literature also demonstrated that there is no single Indigenous model for research ethics review. Indigenous ethics processes vary significantly depending on governance structures, cultural teachings, community priorities, and local contexts. This diversity is not a weakness. Rather, it reflects the importance of grounding ethics processes within the realities of the communities they are intended to serve.

Importantly, the literature consistently identifies Indigenous-led ethics processes as complementary to institutional research ethics boards rather than replacements for them. Indigenous ethics bodies often address dimensions of governance, accountability, reciprocity, collective rights, cultural protocols, and community benefit that institutional review processes are not designed or able to address.

The literature suggests that successful Indigenous ethics processes depend less on replicating existing models and more on intentional design choices related to Indigenous governance and authority, scope, accountability, data sovereignty, resourcing, and sustainability.

Environmental Scan

The environmental scan examined existing Indigenous and non-Indigenous ethics review models across Canada and beyond.

Findings revealed substantial differences between Indigenous-led ethics processes and conventional institutional research ethics boards. Indigenous ethics processes were far more likely to emphasize relationship-building, collective accountability, community benefit, Indigenous governance, data sovereignty, cultural protocols, and ongoing engagement throughout the research process.

The scan also highlighted the relative scarcity of formal Indigenous-led ethics review bodies, particularly within urban Indigenous contexts where few established models currently exist. While examples do exist, many Indigenous communities and organizations continue to face gaps in access to ethics processes that adequately reflect Indigenous governance systems and urban Indigenous realities.

These findings reinforce both the uniqueness and potential significance of a future UIRL-EB. They also demonstrate that while useful examples exist, there is no single blueprint to follow. Any future model will need to reflect AHWC's specific context, relationships, and community priorities.

Survey of Key Partners and Stakeholders

Survey findings demonstrated strong support for the creation of a UIRL-EB among community organizations, academic researchers, institutional partners, and other stakeholders.

Participants consistently identified shortcomings within existing ethics review systems when applied to urban Indigenous contexts. Many described current processes as being



overly procedural, insufficiently responsive to Indigenous knowledge systems, and poorly equipped to navigate the complexities of urban Indigenous communities where multiple Nations, identities, governance relationships, and lived experiences intersect. More broadly, respondents expressed limited confidence that existing research ethics systems adequately address the realities and priorities of urban Indigenous communities.

Respondents emphasized that Indigenous governance and community authority should be central to research ethics decision-making. There was widespread agreement that ethical research involving Indigenous peoples requires more than institutional compliance; it requires meaningful relationships, community accountability, reciprocity, and tangible benefits for community.

Participants identified numerous potential benefits of a UIRL-EB, including:

- Stronger accountability in research involving Indigenous communities
- Greater ownership and control over research processes
- Improved transparency and trust
- Stronger research relationships
- More meaningful community benefits
- Increased support and mentorship for Indigenous researchers
- Greater alignment between research practices and Indigenous values

At the same time, respondents emphasized the importance of clear mandates, strong partnerships, adequate resources, and thoughtful integration with existing research systems.

Focus Groups

Focus group participants reinforced many of the themes identified elsewhere in the study while providing important perspectives grounded in day-to-day organizational and community realities.

Participants consistently described ethics as relational, practical, and deeply connected to trust. They emphasized that ethical research cannot be reduced to forms, approvals, or procedural requirements. Instead, ethical practice requires ongoing accountability, respectful relationships, reciprocity, and responsiveness to community priorities.

Participants also highlighted the importance of ensuring that any future ethics process remains practical, accessible, culturally grounded, and responsive to the realities of urban Indigenous communities. Discussions frequently emphasized the need to balance structure with flexibility and accountability with relationship.

The focus groups underscored the importance of ensuring that any future UIRL-EB remains connected to community while maintaining sufficient clarity and consistency to support researchers, partners, and participating organizations.

Interviews with Elders and Knowledge Holders

The interviews with Elders and Knowledge Holders provided some of the most profound insights within the study.

Across interviews, research was consistently described as a relational and ethical responsibility, rather than simply a technical or academic activity. Elders emphasized that ethical research must be accountable to Indigenous communities, grounded in Indigenous teachings, and guided by principles of respect, reciprocity, humility, and relationship.

While there was strong alignment across interviews, each Elder brought distinct perspectives regarding governance, ceremony, accountability, community protection, decision-making, and cultural responsibility. Collectively, these perspectives reinforced the need for an ethics process that is Indigenous-led, culturally grounded, and accountable to community.

Elders also emphasized the importance of balancing structure with flexibility. While governance, policies, and processes are important, participants repeatedly stressed that ethical practice ultimately depends on relationships, integrity, and accountability in action.

The interviews strongly reinforced the view that Indigenous ethics processes must reflect Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating, while remaining responsive to the diversity of urban Indigenous communities.

CROSS-CUTTING FINDINGS

While each line of evidence contributed unique insights, several themes emerged consistently across all sources.

Governance and Authority

There is broad agreement that a future UIRL-EB should be Indigenous-led and grounded in community authority. Participants consistently emphasized that Indigenous governance should occupy a central role in ethical decision-making, rather than functioning as an advisory component to institutional systems. Governance structures should include meaningful participation from Elders, Knowledge Holders, community members, and individuals with lived experience. At the same time, there is a need for clarity regarding mandate, authority, roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes.

Representation and Inclusion

A key and consistent theme throughout the data collection emphasized that representation must be substantive rather than symbolic. Participants emphasized that urban Indigenous communities are diverse and include First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and individuals with varied cultural, geographic, and lived experiences. A future ethics process must be capable of recognizing and respecting this complexity. The study also highlighted the importance of ensuring meaningful involvement for individuals with lived and living experience in governance and decision-making processes.

Ethics Processes and Ways of Knowing



One of the strongest findings across the study was that ethics should be understood as an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time approval process. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of relational accountability, reciprocity, trust, and community benefit. Indigenous ethics processes were viewed as extending across the entire research lifecycle and incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural teachings, and wholistic understandings of wellness. There was widespread recognition that conventional checklist-based ethics review processes are insufficient for addressing Indigenous realities and priorities.

Accountability, Data Governance, and Community Benefit

The study identified strong support for Indigenous data sovereignty and Indigenous authority over research data and knowledge. Participants emphasized that communities must have meaningful authority regarding how information is collected, interpreted, stored, shared, and used. Ethical research should contribute tangible benefits to Indigenous communities and should include mechanisms that prevent extractive or exploitative research practices. Trust also emerged as both a prerequisite for ethical research and one of its most important outcomes.

Partnerships, Integration, and Sustainability

Participants consistently recognized that a UIRL-EB would operate within a broader research ecosystem. Strong relationships with academic institutions, existing research ethics boards, community organizations, and other partners will be essential. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration, coordination, and potentially developing pathways for mutual recognition between ethics processes. Long-term sustainability emerged as a critical consideration. Dedicated resources, staffing, infrastructure, capacity-building, and sustainable funding will all be necessary to support successful implementation.

CONCLUSION

This feasibility study provides a clear foundation for moving forward with the development of an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board. Across all lines of evidence, there was strong support for the creation of an Indigenous-led ethics process grounded in community authority, Indigenous knowledge systems, relational accountability, and Indigenous self-determination. No source of evidence suggested that such a model should not proceed; instead, participants consistently identified both the need and the opportunity for a research ethics process that better reflects the realities of urban Indigenous communities.

The findings also demonstrate that AHCW is uniquely positioned to advance this work. Existing organizational values, ethical frameworks, relationships, and commitments to Indigenous governance provide a strong foundation upon which future development can build. In this sense, the UIRL-EB would not represent a departure from AHCW's work but a continuation and strengthening of its long-standing commitment to community-centered,

culturally grounded, and wholistic approaches to health, wellness, research, and accountability.

Taken together, the findings suggest that a UIRL-EB is feasible and that there is strong support for further development. The task ahead is one of thoughtful design and implementation: developing a model that is grounded in Indigenous values, responsive to community realities, accountable to those it serves, integrated within broader research systems, and sustainable over time. This will require clear decisions about governance, representation, authority, process design, institutional relationships, resourcing, and sequencing.

Achieving this will require continued engagement, careful planning, and an iterative approach that honours the diversity, strengths, and aspirations of urban Indigenous communities. With appropriate structures, relationships, and resources in place, a UIRL-EB has the potential to become more than an ethics review process. It can serve as a meaningful expression of Indigenous governance, community accountability, and ethical research practice in an urban Indigenous context.



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Background

Aboriginal Health and Wellness Centre of Winnipeg (AHWC) is an Indigenous-led community health agency that has been providing culturally grounded and wholistic health and wellness services since its establishment in 1994. Rooted in Indigenous worldviews, AHWC approaches wellness as interconnected, recognizing that an individual's wellbeing reflects the wellbeing of the community, and that health is shaped by relationships to people, places, and systems. Through this lens, AHWC delivers a continuum of programs and services designed to support First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals and families in urban Winnipeg.

In recent years, AHWC has expended its role in research through the establishment of the Urban Indigenous Research Lodge (UIRL) in 2022. The Lodge reflects the growing commitment to strengthening Indigenous-led research and ensuring that research conducted with and within urban Indigenous communities is grounded in Indigenous values, knowledge systems, and priorities. As AHWC continues to engage in research partnerships and support research activities, there is increasing recognition of the need for stronger governance mechanisms to guide this work.

AHWC reached out to Bison Research and Development to support the exploration of an ethics review process through a feasibility study about whether such a process was possible and what it would involve.



This Feasibility Study was initiated to explore the potential development of an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB), and work commenced in October 2025.

The purpose of this work is to:

- Explore whether creating a research ethics board at AHCW is needed and feasible;
- Understand how research is currently conducted by similar Indigenous and non-Indigenous research ethics boards;
- Hear from community members, staff, and partners on what ethical, community-centered research should look like;
- Identify what would be required to develop and support a research ethics process at AHCW;
- Highlight potential benefits and challenges of creating a new ethics review process; and
- To ensure future research at AHCW is done in a good way.

The findings presented in this report are grounded in the voices of AHCW's community, including community members, staff, Peer Advisory Groups, key partners, and Elders and Knowledge Keepers. This approach reflects AHCW's commitment to community-informed decision-making and ensures that the resulting Feasibility Study is grounded in the perspectives of community, staff, and Elders, and rooted in the lived experience of AHCW's community members and relatives.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a mixed-methods, community-engaged approach. In conversation with Monica Cyr, Chief Executive Officer, and Charlene Hallett, Director of Research, Bison Research and Development developed a plan to identify key people and perspectives to include in the Feasibility Study and to set out a plan to engage in appropriate, respectful, and robust consultations.

AHCW identified key contacts, partners, community members, and individuals for the consultation process regarding research ethics at AHCW; these contacts guided Bison's consultation efforts and informed Bison's data collection efforts. Additionally, where possible, additional individuals or organizations were identified through the research and data collection, prompting iterative recruitment and outreach efforts.

Alongside the identification of *who* to speak with, AHCW and Bison developed strategies for *how* to best engage with these folks. Plans for data collection—including the development of research instruments, such as semi-structured interview and focus group guides and drafting an online questionnaire ("survey")—were established. These plans include a timeline for review of study's data collection tools, sequencing the data collection activities (e.g., conducting a review of AHCW's documents, a literature review, and environmental

scan prior to engaging in primary data collection activities of focus groups and interviews), and scheduling of focus groups, interviews, and recruitment for the online survey questionnaire of key partners, community organizations, and academic researchers.

Data collection occurred between February and April 2026 and included multiple lines of evidence to ensure a comprehensive understanding of current research practices, community perspectives, and future opportunities related to the development of a research ethics process.

Data Sources

The research draws on the following primary data sources:

- **Document Review:** A review of key organizational documents to understand the overall administrative context of AHCW, core values, and guiding principles situating the UIRL and potential for an AHCW-situated ethics board and research ethics review process.
- **Literature Review:** A structured survey of the scholarly and community literature on the topic of Indigenous research and ethics that pays close attention to key issues, process, best or wise practices, viability, and outcomes for Indigenous research ethics processes.
- **Environmental Scan:** A review of existing or established Indigenous and non-Indigenous research ethics processes and frameworks, including:
 - 14 Indigenous REBs
 - 10 Non-Indigenous Manitoba REBs
- **Survey Questionnaire:** An online questionnaire was developed and distributed to capture in-depth and wide-ranging perspectives on varied aspects of research ethics processes for AHCW and in the context of Indigenous-led research; a total of 22 responses across key partners (i.e., community leaders, academics) were collected.
- **Focus Groups:** A series of structured focus groups with a total of 23 participants were conducted with the following groups:
 - 1 Peer Advisory Group and community members (8 people)
 - 3 focus groups with Indigenous Staff of AHCW (15 people)
- **Interviews:** One-to-one conversational interviews with 6 Elders.

Primary data collection for the online survey questionnaire, the focus groups, and interviews were collected in March and April 2026.

Secondary data collection and analysis of AHCW documents, for the literature review, and for the environmental scan were conducted between November and February 2026.

Approach to Analysis



Analysis focused on identifying patterns across responses, including both widely shared perspectives and more specific or contextually grounded insights.

Data from focus groups and interviews were documented through detailed notetaking and analyzed using a thematic approach that represented both shared themes and unique insights. Data from the online questionnaire were similarly analyzed using a thematic approach to identify common perspectives and insights, while also actively seeking to identify, describe, and honour distinct perspectives and contributions.

This involved:

- Identifying recurring themes and perspectives across community members, staff, and partners;
- Comparing insights across different groups to understand areas of alignment, shared experience, and differing viewpoints;
- Highlighting both common themes and less frequently raised but topically relevant perspectives; and
- Synthesizing findings into key considerations to inform the feasibility of research ethics process for AHCW.

Particular attention was given to ensuring that analysis did not prioritize frequency alone. While widely shared themes provide important insight into collective experience, perspectives expressed by fewer participants were also treated as significant and vital for community-oriented accountability. These contributions often reflected specific experiences, roles, or knowledge that added depth and nuance to the overall findings and ensured that as many perspectives as possible were honoured in the findings.

This approach is consistent with the distinctions-based and relational principles reflected throughout the study. Differences in perspective were not treated as gaps or inconsistencies, but as important components of a more complete understanding. Recognizing the diversity of experiences, relationships, and ways of knowing strengthened the analysis and helped ensure that findings reflect the complexity of urban Indigenous contexts.

Where possible, findings were validated across multiple data sources to support consistency, while still maintaining space for perspectives that may not have been widely shared but remain important for consideration.

Limitations

This research draws on multiple lines of evidence to inform its findings and recommendations. While this approach strengthens the overall analysis, there are several limitations to keep in mind when considering the findings.



First, the environmental scan was based on publicly available information. As a result, the descriptions of existing research ethics processes may not fully reflect the full depth, scope, or internal practices of each organization.

Second, participation in the focus groups, interviews, and survey was voluntary. Survey recruitment was intentionally focused rather than broadly distributed, prioritizing individuals who have an existing relationship with AHCW or familiarity with its work, values, and community context. This approach supported informed and meaningful contributions, but it also means that the findings reflect the perspectives of those who chose to participate and may not represent the full range of perspectives across the broader urban Indigenous community in Winnipeg or beyond, including those who are less connected or who face barriers to participation.

In addition, while two community focus groups were initially planned, they were ultimately cancelled due to low uptake despite active recruitment efforts. At the time, it was recognized that this feasibility study is an early step in exploring the potential for this work, and that there will be further opportunities to engage more broadly with community as AHCW moves forward with the development of the UIRL-EB.

Third, while the engagement approach was designed to include a range of perspectives—and the analysis intentionally makes space for both widely shared themes and more specific or contextually grounded insights—some voices may still be underrepresented. In particular, the findings primarily reflect the experiences of individuals who are currently connected to AHCW through employment, partnerships, collaborations, or service access. As a result, they may not fully capture the perspectives of those who are disengaged, not currently accessing supports, or who did not have the opportunity or interest to participate.

Fourth, the different methods used in this study provide different types of insight. Survey data offer a broader view across respondents, while focus groups and interviews provide deeper, more contextual perspectives. While these approaches complement one another, they can also result in differences in how themes are expressed or emphasized across data sources.

Fifth, qualitative analysis is interpretive by nature. While care was taken to ground the analysis in participant contributions and to reflect patterns across the data, the findings represent themes and shared understandings rather than statistically generalizable results. Where possible, insights were considered across multiple data sources to support a more grounded and balanced interpretation.

Finally, this research reflects a specific moment in time. AHCW is operating within a dynamic and evolving context, shaped by changing community needs and shifting funding environments. As such, priorities and considerations related to a UIRL-EB may continue to evolve as planning and implementation move forward.

Despite these limitations, there is strong alignment across the literature, environmental scan, and engagement findings from surveys, focus groups, and interviews. This consistency across different sources and perspectives provides confidence that the themes identified



reflect meaningful and useful insights to support AHCW in considering the feasibility of a UIRL-EB.

Results

This section presents the findings from multiple lines of evidence, including document review, literature review, environmental scan, survey results, focus groups, and interview data. Together, these data sources provide a comprehensive understanding of AHWC's current context, existing strengths and gaps, and key considerations related to the need for feasibility of research ethics process.

The results are organized into the following components:

- **Document Review**
- **Literature Review**
- **Environmental Scan**
- **Survey Results (Key partners & stakeholders)**
- **Focus Groups (Staff groups and Peer Advisory Group)**
- **Interviews (Elders and Knowledge Holders)**

Each component contributes a distinct perspective. The document review provides insight into AHWC's organizational context, values, guiding frameworks, and existing approaches to research, ethics, and Indigenous data governance. The environmental scan and literature review provide insight into emerging practices, community expertise, and real-world models of Indigenous and non-Indigenous research ethics processes, helping identify approaches and considerations relevant to AHWC's context and feasibility. The survey of community organizations and academic researchers provides detailed responses and a wealth of insight from folks situated within and alongside community, while the focus groups and interviews offer lived experiences and perspectives from community, staff, and Elders.

Together, these findings inform the assessment of need, opportunities, and key considerations related to the feasibility of a research ethics process at AHWC.

Following a detailed section on each area of data, we provide a relatively brief **Synthesis of Findings**, which is organized into thematic domains that reflect key areas of insights across all data sources.

Document Review

Key Findings
AHWC already has a strong, well-articulated ethical foundation grounded in Indigenous values, relational accountability, and community-centered practice.
The development of the UIRL reflects a natural progression toward more structured Indigenous-led research governance that sets the stage for an Ethics Board review process.
Core principles such as self-determination, “nothing about us without us,” and distinctions-based approaches provide clear grounding in values for an ethics process.
Existing frameworks and practices at AHWC emphasize that organizational ethics are relational, ongoing, and grounded in practical realities.

The document review included analysis of the following materials:

- AHWC’s Culture of Care Framework
- AHWC’s UIRL Journey
- AHWC’s Ethical Framework and Guides
- AHWC’s Shared Philosophy
- AHWC’s Tolerance Policy
- Vision, Mission, and Values statements
- Indigenous Data Governance and Stewardship Resources

These documents were reviewed to provide insight into AHWC’s organizational context, values, guiding frameworks, and existing approaches to research, ethics, and Indigenous data governance. In particular, this review aimed to situate the proposed Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB) within the broader foundation of AHWC’s work, recognizing that the development of an ethics process is not a standalone initiative, but one that emerges from and must remain accountable to the organization’s established principles, relationships, and practices.

Organizational Context and the Development of the UIRL

AHWC’s work is rooted in a long-standing commitment to urban Indigenous health, wellness, and self-determination. Established in 1994, the organization has developed a broad range of programs and services grounded in a wholistic understanding of health. Starting with two, and growing to fourteen programs and counting, AHWC continues to merge social and clinical programming under one roof, and has found this to be an integral part of being able to authentically meet its relatives’ overall health and social needs.



The creation of the UIRL in 2022 reflects a continuation of this work, formalizing AHCW's role in supporting and engaging with research in a more structured and intentional way.

The UIRL represents an important evolution in AHCW's approach to research. While research has historically been supported within the organization, the development of the Lodge signaled a growing recognition of the need for Indigenous-led infrastructure to guide how research is conducted, governed, and mobilized. The consideration of a dedicated Ethics Board builds directly on this foundation. It reflects a proactive effort to ensure that research aligns with community priorities, supports self-determination, and creates meaningful benefit for Indigenous peoples in urban contexts.

Importantly, AHCW's involvement in multiple research partnerships highlights both the opportunities and responsibilities associated with research engagement. The exploration of an ethics process is, therefore, grounded in lived organizational experience, rather than abstract or theoretical considerations. This positions AHCW to develop an approach that is both practical and values-driven.

Core Values and Guiding Principles

Across all documents reviewed, AHCW's work is consistently grounded in Indigenous worldviews that emphasize interconnectedness, relationality, and wholistic wellness. The organization's mission reflects a commitment to providing care that integrates both Indigenous and biomedical knowledge systems, while empowering individuals and communities to take control of their health and well-being. This emphasis on empowerment is directly aligned with the principles of self-determination and choice.

A key principle reflected throughout AHCW's materials is the understanding that individual and community wellness are interconnected, and that health must be understood across physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual dimensions. This wholistic perspective is foundational to both service delivery and ethical decision-making. The Medicine Wheel and the Seven Sacred Teachings provide guiding frameworks, emphasizing balance, respect, humility, and responsibility in all interactions.

Another consistent theme is the importance of respect for autonomy and dignity, balanced with relational accountability. AHCW's ethical framework highlights that respect for an individual's choices is essential, while also recognizing the broader impacts those choices may have within a community context. This balance is particularly relevant for research ethics, where individual consent must be considered alongside collective implications.

The principle of "nothing about us without us" is one of AHCW's core research orientations, and it is strongly aligned with AHCW's existing emphasis on inclusion, participation, and community voice. The organization's approach to care and service delivery positions constituents as active participants rather than passive recipients. Extending this principle into research reinforces the expectation that urban Indigenous people must have a meaningful role in shaping, guiding, and interpreting research that affects them.



AHWC also demonstrates a clear commitment to distinctions-based and culturally responsive approaches. The organization recognizes the diversity of Indigenous peoples, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, as well as the unique realities of urban Indigenous populations. This includes acknowledging that individuals engage with culture, ceremony, and spirituality in different ways, and that ethical processes must respect these differences. The emphasis on flexibility and cultural competency within AHWC's frameworks underscores the need for research ethics processes that can accommodate this diversity rather than applying uniform standards.

Culture of Care and Relational Practice

The Culture of Care Framework reinforces AHWC's commitment to creating environments grounded in care, connection, and support. Core elements of this framework—including access to Elders, ceremony, cultural practices, and community-based activities—highlight the importance of relational and culturally grounded approaches to health and wellness.

This framework also reflects a strong commitment to harm reduction, trauma-informed care, and meeting people where they are at. These principles are directly relevant to research, particularly in ensuring that participation is safe, respectful, and responsive to the needs and experiences of individuals and communities. The emphasis on listening, connection, and non-judgment aligns with broader expectations that research processes should be relational rather than extractive.

The inclusion of social and cultural dimensions of wellness—such as humour, community gatherings, and shared experiences—further highlights the importance of creating spaces where individuals feel safe and valued. These elements suggest that research processes grounded in AHWC's values would need to move beyond formal or clinical approaches, incorporating relational and culturally meaningful practices.

Ethical Framework and Approach to Research

AHWC's ethical framework provides a strong foundation for understanding how research ethics might be approached within the organization. The framework emphasizes that ethics is not only about rules or procedures, but about acting in a “good way,” grounded in values, relationships, and responsibilities. This perspective shifts the focus from compliance to relational accountability.

The framework also highlights the importance of trust, transparency, and reciprocity in all interactions. Trust is described as central to the effectiveness of AHWC's work, and is built through ethical engagement, clear communication, and accountability. In the context of research, this reinforces the expectation that relationships must be established and maintained throughout the research process.

AHWC's approach to ethical research is explicitly relational. It emphasizes co-creation of knowledge, mutual learning, and the importance of giving back to the community. Research is understood as a shared process in which both researchers and community members contribute and benefit. This aligns closely with broader Indigenous research methodologies



and reinforces the expectation that research must be relevant, accessible, and useful to the community.

The framework also highlights established principles related to Indigenous data governance, including OCAP®, OCAS, and Inuit Quajimajatuqangit (IQ). These principles reinforce the importance of Indigenous authority over research inquiry, data, and information sharing. This provides a clear foundation for integrating data governance into any future ethics process.

Indigenous Data Governance and Stewardship

The materials reviewed reflect a strong commitment to Indigenous data sovereignty and responsible stewardship of information. There is recognition that data is not neutral, and that control over data is closely tied to self-determination and community well-being.

AHWC's engagement with established data governance frameworks demonstrates an awareness of the need to respect distinctions across Indigenous groups, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit approaches to data. This distinctions-based approach reinforces the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in research ethics processes.

The emphasis on stewardship rather than ownership in some contexts also reflects a broader Indigenous worldview, where relationships to knowledge, land, and community are understood as interconnected. This has important implications for how data is collected, used, and shared, and suggests that ethics processes must consider not only technical aspects of data management, but also relational, cultural, and generational responsibilities.

Summary: Implications for UIRL-EB Feasibility

Taken together, the documents reviewed demonstrate that AHWC already has a strong and well-articulated foundation for ethical practice, grounded in Indigenous values, relational approaches, and a commitment to community well-being. The development of the UIRL-EB can be understood as a natural extension of this foundation.

Key principles—including self-determination, choice, relational accountability, cultural grounding, and distinctions-based approaches—provide clear guidance for how an ethics process should be designed and implemented. The emphasis on “nothing about us without us” reinforces the need for meaningful community involvement at all stages of research.

At the same time, AHWC's existing work highlights the importance of flexibility, responsiveness, and ongoing learning. The organization's recognition of diversity within Indigenous communities, as well as the unique dynamics of urban contexts, suggests that the UIRL-EB must be adaptable and inclusive in its approach.

Finally, the relational and values-driven nature of AHWC's frameworks underscores that the success of the UIRL-EB will depend not only on its structure or procedures, but on how it embodies these principles in practice. In this way, the Ethics Board is not a departure from AHWC's work, but a continuation and strengthening of it.



Literature Review

Key Findings
Indigenous research ethics are grounded in cultural values, knowledge systems, and relational accountability rather than procedural compliance or one-off “checklist” approval.
There is no single Indigenous model for ethics review; diversity of approaches reflects context-specific governance and priorities; ethics review processes may be understood as ongoing throughout the full research lifecycle, not a one-time approval.
Indigenous ethics processes can be structurally distinct from institutional REBs, emphasizing collective responsibility, ongoing accountability, and community benefit.
Feasibility depends on intentional design choices, including scope, authority, resourcing, data governance, and long-term sustainability.

This literature review was guided by the study’s objectives, including the need to explore the topic from an academic perspective or in published scholarship more broadly, while also paying specific attention to issues of viability, process, best or wise practices, and outcomes. Standard literature review procedures were followed (keyword searches in scholarly databases, keyword searches in general databases, bibliographic genealogy review, etc.), and collected sources were compiled through thematic analysis with the aim of synthesizing the existing literature, research, and insights.

We acknowledge that our assumption from the outset of this review process was that there would be a limited number of examples of Indigenous-led formal ethics review processes to draw from. We also expected that much of the guidance regarding formalized ethics processes regarding Indigenous research would be situated within larger governmental systems, academic institutions, and larger non-governmental organizations, which often have roots in colonial systems. Based on the results below, these assumptions proved to be largely true save for a few examples (see environmental scan results for additional information).

With this in mind, what follows outlines some of the ways that Indigenous ethics have been articulated within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts—and for urban Indigenous contexts, where possible—using specific examples from the literature to demonstrate how values and knowledge systems orient ethical research conduct according to values prioritized in Indigenous research. The discussion, examples, and literature represented in the following overview are not exhaustive but intended to identify some shared principles, while also delineating where distinctions may importantly reside. They provide an essential foundation for considering how Indigenous-led ethics processes may be developed and operationalized through research review, governance mechanisms, and oversight structures.

Research Ethics & Indigenous Cultural Values, Worldviews, and Knowledge Systems

Across the literature, Indigenous research ethics are consistently grounded in Indigenous cultural values, worldviews, and knowledge systems rather than in procedural compliance alone (e.g., Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Brant Castellano, 2004). These ethics are not external frameworks applied to research; they are embedded in Indigenous ways of knowing, relating, governing, and carrying responsibility over time (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009). Kirkness and Barnhardt's (1991) well-known framework describes the four Rs of Indigenous research: respect, relevance, responsibility, and reciprocity. These values are frequently cited and applied or adapted in various ways (see Hayward et al., 2021), and they have even been supplemented by the work of other Indigenous methodology thinkers (such as Wilson, 2008, with the addition of relationship) or more principally developed for adaptable processes (e.g., OFIFC, 2016).

Importantly, while there are similarities between ethical orientations across Indigenous Peoples—such as relationality, accountability to community, importance of land and language, and care—the literature emphasizes that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis values should be treated as distinct, shaped by different histories, worldviews, governance structures, and knowledge systems (e.g., Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023; ITK, 2018). Ethical research, therefore, requires attentiveness to both shared principles and meaningful differences, particularly in urban contexts where First Nations, Métis, and Inuit may all be present and represented by ethics review processes.

This section outlines how Indigenous ethics are articulated within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts, using specific examples from the literature to demonstrate how values and knowledge systems orient ethical research conduct according to values prioritized in Indigenous research.

Relational Accountability as a Shared Ethical Orientation

A central point of convergence across Indigenous research ethics literature is the emphasis on relational accountability (e.g., Wilson, 2008; Brant Castellano, 2004; Kovach, 2009). Rather than treating ethics as adherence to abstract rules, Indigenous ethics understand responsibility as arising from relationships—with people, communities, lands, ancestors, future generations, and knowledge (Wilson, 2008; Brant Castellano, 2004).

For example, Wilson (2008) frames Indigenous research ethics as inseparable from relationships, arguing that ethical research is conducted through relationship, including key moments as relationships are formed, maintained, and honoured over the course of research. Kovach (2009) similarly emphasizes that Indigenous methodologies are grounded in relational ways of knowing, where ethics are enacted through respectful engagement, reciprocity, and accountability rather than detached observation. In this framing, ethical

failure is not simply a procedural breach, but a failure of relationship (see also Hayward, A., Cyr, M. & Hallett, C., 2025; Fast & Kovach, 2019; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

While relational accountability is widely shared, the literature demonstrates that relationality may be understood and enacted in different ways by different Indigenous Peoples groups; as a result, ethical research must be attentive to these distinctions rather than assuming a uniform Indigenous ethical framework (e.g., Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023).

First Nations Ethical Orientations in Research

First Nations research ethics are closely tied to Nation-specific governance, teachings, and responsibilities, reflecting the inherent right of First Nations to self-determination in research involving their peoples, knowledges, lands, and data (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2004; Schnarch, 2004; Cowichan Tribes, 2021). Further to this, there are over 600 distinct First Nations communities and over 70 Nations across what is now called Canada, lending further distinctiveness to the unique peoples, communities, cultures, languages, and knowledges across First Nations.

Teachings and ethical guidance: In many First Nations contexts, ethical expectations for research are grounded in teachings, such as the Seven Grandfather Teachings (wisdom, love, respect, humility, honesty, courage or bravery, and truth) and Medicine Wheel teachings, which emphasize balance, interconnectedness, and wholistic responsibility (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2004; Kovach, 2009; Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023). These teachings can inform expectations for relationship or inform how research is undertaken, how knowledge is treated, and how benefits and harms are understood. It is important to be respectful with these teachings and cautious against symbolic or generalized use of teachings; ethical application requires contextual specificity and respect for Nation-specific knowledge systems (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2004; McCallum, 2017).

Collective responsibility and consent: First Nations ethics emphasize that research affects collectives, not only individuals. As a result, ethical research often requires attention to collective consent, community- or Nation-level review, and collective benefit, which challenges many institutional research ethics models that prioritize individual consent as sufficient (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2004; Schnarch, 2004; Morisano et al., 2024). Ethical authority in First Nations contexts is often exercised through governance bodies, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, or designated ethics committees, reflecting Nation-specific structures of accountability (e.g., Nuuchahnulth Tribal Council, 2008; Six Nations of the Grand River, 2023).

Data governance and OCAP®: First Nations research ethics are closely linked to data sovereignty, most notably through the OCAP® principles—Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession—which articulate ethics as governance over data and knowledge (Schnarch, 2004; Corston et al., 2024). OCAP® frames data governance as an expression of political and ethical self-determination rather than a technical safeguard. Ethical research requires ongoing accountability for how data are

collected, interpreted, stored, shared, and reused over time (e.g., Schnarch, 2004; Paul, 2023).

Increasingly, the literature situates OCAP® within broader conversations about First Nations data sovereignty, which emphasize the inherent rights of First Nations to govern the collection, ownership, interpretation, and application of data about their peoples, lands, and knowledges as an expression of self-determination (e.g., Walter & Suina, 2019; Paul, 2023). Within this framing, data sovereignty is not only a technical or legal concern, but a political, ethical, and epistemological assertion of Nationhood in research.

Urban First Nations realities: In urban contexts, First Nations people may not be directly served by their home communities ethics processes, if they exist, or by regional or territorial Nations' processes. The literature emphasizes that this does not negate First Nations ethics; rather, it creates a need for additional Indigenous-led governance mechanisms that can honour First Nations ethical principles without assuming jurisdiction or speaking on behalf of Nations (e.g., UAKN, 2015, 2016; Doerksen et al., 2024).

Métis Ethical Orientations in Research

Métis research ethics are grounded in Métis self-determination, relational social life, and knowledge systems, and shaped by Métis histories, governance realities, and lived experience (e.g., Fiola, 2025; Forsythe & Markides, 2024; Hayward et al., 2025; Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023).

Métis relational ethics: Métis ethical practice is articulated in different ways and grounded in different teachings and practices. For instance, kitchen table visiting is a relational practice emphasizing listening, reciprocity, informality, trust-building, and kinship (e.g., Allard, 2023; Forsythe & Markides, 2024). As a central feature of the home, the kitchen table features food and is a gathering place, which personifies relationship and trust. Ethical research is assessed not only through formal protocols, but through how researchers conduct themselves within relationships over time, reinforcing a practice-based understanding of ethics.

The Red River Cart Wheel teachings (kaayash ka ishi Pimatishiyaak) are described as a Métis teaching symbolizing the values of honesty, respect, and social responsibility; these teachings centrally feature “reciprocal relationships between Métis people and the land, community, and one another” (Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023, p. 58). While Mashford-Pringle and colleagues note that these values are traditionally held by some Métis people, generally “they are not used in research as part of research frameworks,” although they are being reclaimed as cultural and worldview grounding for Métis methodologies (p. 58).

The Métis Centre of the National Aboriginal Health Organization (2011) set out principles of ethical Métis research. These principles specifically related to health research and included six principles based in: reciprocal relationships and shared



responsibility; safe and inclusive environments; respect for individual and collective autonomy, confidentiality, identity, and protocols and practices; recognizing diversity within and between Métis communities and in worldviews, beliefs, and practices; Métis context (including history, values, knowledge, and appropriate methodologies that reflect positionality); and a “Research Should” principle (that articulates relevance, benefit for all, accountability, responsibility, acknowledging contributions, and protecting cultural knowledge).

For research ethics, these ways of being, principles, and types of teachings support approaches that hold multiple perspectives and respect diversity, emphasize relationship, adapt to context (rather than impose rigid structures), and prioritize collective benefit over individual extraction (e.g., Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023; see also Forsythe & Markides, 2024). Importantly, these values and approaches can be recognized as distinctly situated in Métis culture and identity.

Métis self-determination and governance: Métis governance emphasizes Métis involvement in decisions about research and data collection, use, interpretation, and future application, as well as mechanisms to address misrepresentation or misuse of Métis knowledge. In some instances, OCAP principles are articulated as OCAS—emphasizing Stewardship (rather than Possession)—to emphasize responsibility, care, and long-term accountability for Métis data (e.g., Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025). Métis data sovereignty may rely on governance principles to emphasize Métis authority over how data are generated, contextualized, interpreted, and mobilized in relation to Métis collective identity and representation (e.g., Fiola, 2025). From this perspective, data sovereignty reinforces stewardship as a relational and governance-based responsibility, which may emphasize the participation or involvement of community members who are situated in the communities or hold collective knowledge related to research.

Approval for research involving Métis people may involve formal application to Métis local, regional, or national government offices (e.g., an MOU with Manitoba Métis Federation), which can serve as a formal process to receive approval and build research relationship; however, as Fiola (2025) describes, these are not the only pathways, particularly for Métis researchers, and formal processes may raise potential points of tension between academic freedom and researcher accountability in relation to formal governance processes. While formal governance importantly seeks to protect Métis citizens, these tensions can produce challenging positions when research relationships, academic freedom, and formal processes collide.

Ethical research with Métis people requires attention to Métis-specific communities and processes rather than relying on pan-Indigenous models or First Nations models—even while, it is worth noting, there may be complementary values that can build broader accountability and reciprocity (e.g., Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023).

Cultural and spiritual plurality: The literature recognizes that Métis people may draw on a range of cultural or spiritual practices, including those shared with First Nations communities (e.g., Fiola, 2015, 2025; Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023), which hold roots in the ties between First Nations and Métis people of the past. Ethical research processes should not impose specific practices, but instead emphasize choice, respect, and self-identification, consistent with Métis histories of adaptability and relationality (e.g., Fiola, 2025).

Inuit Ethical Orientations in Research

Inuit research ethics are grounded in Inuit self-determination, Inuit-led governance, and Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (e.g., Bull & Hudson, 2019; Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023). The national association Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) provides an explicit articulation of certain strategies and regional governance frameworks for Inuit research (e.g., ITK, 2018).

Consensus and collective decision-making: Inuit ethics privilege consensus-based decision-making, often through dialogue and shared deliberation rather than hierarchical or adversarial models (e.g., ITK, 2018; Bull & Hudson, 2019). This has direct implications for ethics review processes, including who participates in decision-making and how disagreement is addressed.

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ) as ethical framework:

Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit translates to “that which Inuit have always known to be true,” and IQ may be understood as “guiding a way of living by valuing personal and community wellness” (Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023, p. 57). IQ provides one articulation of Inuit values, linked to Nunavut, that may serve as the epistemological foundation for ethical Inuit research. The eight values of IQ include Inuuqatigiitsiarniq (respect and care for other people), Tunnganarniq (openness and inclusiveness); Pijitsirniq (acts of service toward family and community); Aajiiqatigiinni (decision making through discussion and consensus); Pilimmaksarniq/Pijariuqsarniq (development of skills through observation); Piliriqatigiinning/Ikajuqtigiinni (working together for a common goal); Qanuqtuurniq (being innovative and resourceful); and Avatittinnik Kamatsiarniq (respect for the land) (Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023; see also Nunavut Impact Review Board, <https://www.nirb.ca/inuit-qaujimajatuqangit>; Manitoba Inuit Association, n.d.). These values may be applied to ethical research and inform research processes, including shaping how decisions are made, how knowledge is interpreted, and how responsibility is carried over time.

Data governance and control: Inuit research ethics include Inuit access, ownership, and control over data. This includes vital input and self-determination related to data collection, interpretation, storage, access, and future use. Data governance is framed as an ethical and political responsibility tied to Inuit self-determination, rather than a technical safeguard (e.g., ITK, 2018; Bull & Hudson, 2019). These commitments may be treated as an important part of Inuit data sovereignty, which



asserts Inuit authority over data as integral to Inuit self-determination, governance, and knowledge systems, rather than as an adjunct to research ethics review (e.g., ITK, 2018; ITK, 2020).

ITK's research strategy emphasizes that research involving Inuit must align with Inuit-defined priorities and governance processes, and must contribute to Inuit wellbeing, capacity, and self-determination (ITK, 2018; see also ITK, 2020). Research is a tool for supporting social equity. Ethical research is framed not only at the project level, but at the systems level, including funding structures, institutional accountability, building capacity among Inuit, and aligning with funding and policy priorities (ITK, 2018; see also Morisano et al., 2024).

Urban Inuit contexts: The literature recognizes that Inuit living in urban centres may not be directly served by Inuit governments' ethics processes, national strategies, or territorial governance mechanisms. This may create gaps in research ethics oversight and collective processes. Ethical research in urban contexts, therefore, should seek to include Inuit-informed approaches, rather than defaulting to pan-Indigenous frameworks.

Implications for Ethical Research Conduct

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that Indigenous research ethics are grounded in distinct cultural values and knowledge systems that shape expectations for ethical conduct in concrete ways (e.g., Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023). These values orient research toward relational accountability, collective responsibility, self-determination, and care over time. They also underscore the importance of governance mechanisms capable of honouring these cultural values and knowledge systems in practice—particularly in urban contexts where institutional research ethics boards may be unable to recognize or operationalize Indigenous ethical systems (e.g., Doerksen et al., 2024; UAKN, 2015, 2016).

Across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts, emerging discussions of Indigenous data sovereignty reinforce that ethical research is inseparable from Indigenous governance, which involves respectful contributions and decision-making regarding data, knowledge production, and meaning-making. These concerns are particularly relevant in urban settings where institutional ethics processes often lack mechanisms to support Indigenous principles or collective rights, or to adequately ensure accountability and good relationships undergirding research processes (e.g., Walter & Suina, 2019; Paul, 2023). These cultural values, principles, and knowledge systems provide foundations for the governance and ethics review models that can inform Indigenous ethics processes in urban contexts.

Indigenous-Led Research Ethics Review and Governance Models



The literature documents a wide range of Indigenous-led research ethics review and governance models operating across Canada. These models are diverse in form, scope, authority, and process, reflecting differences in Indigenous governance structures, cultural values, legal contexts, and research priorities. Rather than constituting a single standardized approach, Indigenous ethics review processes are best understood as contextually grounded governance mechanisms designed to uphold Indigenous ethical, cultural, epistemological, and relational systems in research (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021; Brant Castellano, 2004; Schnarch, 2004).

This section describes how Indigenous ethics are operationalized in practice through different governance mechanisms, with attention to how authority is exercised, how decisions are made, and how these processes differ from institutional research ethics boards (REBs). Where possible, urban contexts are included and specific principles identified that relate to urban organizations or urban Indigenous contexts.

Variety of Indigenous Ethics Review Models

A consistent finding across the literature is that there is no single Indigenous model for research ethics review (Hayward et al., 2021; Doerksen et al., 2024). Instead, Indigenous Peoples and organizations have developed a range of governance mechanisms that reflect their specific ethical priorities and contexts. Hayward et al. (2021) describe this diversity as indicative of a “new era” of Indigenous research, in which Indigenous Peoples increasingly assert authority over the ethical governance of research involving them.

Doerksen et al.’s (2024) scoping review identifies three broad categories of Indigenous-led research governance strategies:

1. Guidelines or principles (“Guidelines include documents developed by, with, or for communities to outline ethical behavior or conduct in research with or within the community,” p. 519);
2. Community ethics review boards or committees (“Community review boards offer ethical review of research protocols, much like traditional research ethics boards, but are community led and focus on community interests,” p. 519); and
3. Community advisory boards or reference bodies (“Community advisory boards consist of representatives from a given community and are developed to advise institutions or research teams on community-level ethical matters pertaining to research projects,” pp. 519–520).

While these categories are analytically useful, Doerksen and colleagues (2024) and the broader literature demonstrate that many Indigenous ethics processes combine elements of more than one category, blurring the boundaries between guidance, review, and governance (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021; Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025).

Across these diverse models, a recurring principle is that ethical research must be respectful, beneficial, and responsive to Indigenous needs and priorities, while remaining



sufficiently flexible to accommodate Indigenous knowledge systems, governance structures, and relational practices (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021; First Light, 2023; Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023). Another recurrent theme in the literature consistently cautions against rigid or prescriptive research frameworks that prioritize institutional requirements over Indigenous ethical, cultural, and relational commitments.

First Nation-Based Ethics Review and Jurisdictional Authority

In many First Nations contexts, ethics review is exercised through community-specific or Nation-based governance structures that assert jurisdiction over research involving their peoples, lands, and knowledges. These processes are often formalized through ethics committees, or in handbooks, policy statements, or protocols, which may hold binding authority to approve, apply conditions to, or deny research.

For example, the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council Research Ethics Committee articulates protocols and principles for conducting research “in a Nuu-chah-nulth context,” explicitly situating ethics review within Nation-specific responsibilities and governance authority (Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, 2008). Similarly, the Six Nations of the Grand River Research Ethics Committee provides a detailed ethics handbook outlining expectations for researcher conduct, review processes, and accountability mechanisms, reinforcing ethics review as an expression of jurisdiction rather than consultation (Six Nations of the Grand River, 2023). Mi’kmaw Ethics Watch (MEW), called Eskinuapimk, articulates clear research principles and protocols grounded in Mi’kmaw governance, emphasizing ethical review as an exercise of collective responsibility and authority rather than consultation alone (Mi’kmaw Ethics Watch, 2015; Mi’kmaw Ethics Watch, 2023; Cape Breton University is referred to as MEW’s “administrative home,” although MEW exists autonomously from CBU). Similarly, the Cowichan Tribes describe the process of “bringing ethics review home,” explicitly situating research ethics within Indigenous governance, teachings, and accountability structures rather than institutional research ethics frameworks (Cowichan Tribes, 2021). As with other Nation-based processes, these examples reinforce that ethical authority is grounded in Indigenous jurisdiction and responsibility, and that institutional REB approval is typically understood as necessary but insufficient.

Hayward et al. (2021) emphasize that these Nation-based ethics processes often extend beyond project approval to include conditions related to data governance, knowledge mobilization, and ongoing relationship maintenance. In these contexts, ethical authority is clearly related to Indigenous self-governance and self-determination—and, relatedly, institutional REB approval is typically understood as a necessary component of a series of measures to support the ethical conduct of research.

Indigenous-Led Ethics Review in Urban and Organizational Contexts

Urban Indigenous contexts present distinct challenges and opportunities for Indigenous-led ethics review. For instance, Indigenous people may belong to multiple Nations, have multiple Indigenous cultural connections or identities, or have connection to multiple communities. The realities of these identities may be further complicated in urban spaces



where jurisdictional authority may not cover or align appropriately. In cities, Indigenous people may not be able to be represented by their home communities' ethics processes, they may be across the country or at significant distance from their home community territories/land, or they may not have clear connection with a specific Nation, government, or Indigenous community. As a result, they may engage with research through Indigenous-led organizations rather than governments. Indigenous ethics governance in urban settings often relies on organizational, relational, and moral authority, rather than jurisdiction alone (UAKN, 2015, 2016; OFIFC, 2016; Hayward et al., 2021). As such, establishing the scope of an urban Indigenous ethics review process and the principles to guide such processes—as both specific enough to represent Indigenous Peoples and broad enough to ensure accountability for Indigenous people—are vital considerations.

The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN) provides an example of an urban-oriented ethics framework through its Urban Aboriginal Research Charter, which emphasizes relationship-building, respect, community relevance and practicality, honesty, fairness, protection, ownership and intellectual property rights, and community driven research as ethical foundations (UAKN, 2016). Rather than functioning as a formal approval body, the UAKN's guiding ethical principles operate as a governance mechanism to establish shared expectations for researcher conduct across the research lifecycle, particularly in contexts where jurisdictional authority is diffuse, multiple, or complex.

Similarly, the USAI Research Framework developed within the Friendship Centre context emphasizes Utility, Self-Voicing, Access, and Inter-relationality as ethical criteria for research involving urban Indigenous populations (OFIFC, 2016). This framework positions ethics review as an assessment of whether research aligns with Indigenous organizational priorities and community benefit, rather than as a procedural checklist.

The First Light Research Policy Framework provides an additional example of Indigenous-led research governance operating in an urban, organizational, service-based context in St. John's, Newfoundland. The framework emphasizes that research involving Indigenous peoples must be respectful, relational, and directly responsive to Indigenous needs and priorities, while allowing for flexibility in research design and methods to reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and community contexts (First Light, 2023). Rather than prescribing a single research model, the framework foregrounds ethical principles related to benefit, accountability, and relational responsibility, reinforcing the role of Indigenous organizations as key sites of ethical governance in research, particularly in urban and service-delivery settings.

Organizationally based ethics processes are increasingly important in urban settings, where Indigenous organizations play a central role in mediating research relationships and upholding Indigenous ethics in the absence of Indigenous-specific jurisdiction or accountability.

Decision-Making Authority, Refusal, and Conditions

An important feature of Indigenous-led ethics review processes is the recognition that conditional approval or withdrawal of support are legitimate ethical outcomes (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021). Similarly, participant or community “refusal” is an important act of agency that may decline, avoid, or otherwise deny access to participants’ voice, knowledge, or ability to intervene through research (e.g., Tuck & Yang, 2014, 2018).

Indigenous ethics review is not primarily oriented toward enabling research; rather, it aims toward ensuring that research aligns with Indigenous ethical, cultural, and governance priorities. For example, Hayward et al. (2021) document numerous examples in which Indigenous ethics bodies assert the right to impose conditions, require changes, or deny approval altogether. This authority is often exercised to protect against misrepresentation, extractive research practices, or misalignment with community priorities. Importantly, refusal or withdrawal is framed not as an ethical failure, but as an ethical responsibility. This re-orientation toward what might be considered “successful” research reinforces the role of Indigenous ethics review as a mechanism of care, relationship building, humility, accountability, boundary-setting, and self-determination, rather than protocol adherence.

Many Indigenous ethics processes include expectations for continued engagement, reporting, and responsiveness to community concerns throughout the research lifecycle. Hayward and colleagues (2021) highlight that Indigenous ethics protocols often require researchers to remain accountable beyond data collection, including responsibilities related to interpretation, dissemination, and secondary data use. Data governance mechanisms — such as OCAP® or Inuit data sovereignty frameworks — frequently function as ethics infrastructure or principles for conducting research, embedding ethical obligations into agreements, possession or stewardship data practices, or longer-term governance arrangements (Schnarch, 2004; ITK, 2018; Walter & Suina, 2019). In urban contexts, these ethics processes may be held by organizations through principled ethics review processes that approve research access, establish partnership agreements or working relationships, or otherwise establish relational and ethical guidelines for research.

Implications for Urban Indigenous Ethics Processes

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that Indigenous-led research ethics review and governance processes are highly diverse, context-specific, and values-driven. In urban contexts, where jurisdictional authority may be partial or absent, Indigenous ethics processes frequently operate through organizational governance, relational accountability, and cultural authority rather than formal legal power (Hayward et al., 2021; UAKN, 2016).

These findings underscore that the design of an urban Indigenous research ethics process is not a matter of replicating First Nations processes, government-based models, or institutional REBs. Instead, such a model involves intentional choices about scope, authority, process, and resourcing that reflect Indigenous cultural and knowledge systems, enhance ethical commitments in research, and account for urban realities; it seeks to ensure alignment with Indigenous ethical, cultural, and governance priorities, while



supporting research that is respectful, beneficial, and responsive to Indigenous-defined needs (Hayward et al., 2021; First Light, 2023; ITK, 2018). These considerations are taken up more explicitly in the following section, which examines ethics review as an ongoing process of accountability and governance.

Ethics Review as Ongoing Accountability, Relationship, and Governance

Across Indigenous ethics review models, ethics review is not described as one-time approval but as an ongoing process of relationship and accountability (e.g., Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025; Hayward et al., 2021; Wilson, 2008). This emphasis on ongoing accountability differs between institutional REB models, which often treat ethics review as a front-loaded, procedural, time-limited process (Hayward et al., 2025). Indigenous ethics processes, by contrast, frame ethics as a living relationship that must be continually negotiated, revisited, upheld, and repaired if damage occurs (Hayward et al., 2025). This framing reflects Indigenous ethical orientations that emphasize responsibility over time, relational continuity, and care for people, knowledges, and future generations.

The following section examines how Indigenous ethics are enacted as ongoing governance, including expectations for relationship-building, continued accountability, data stewardship, and responsiveness to change. These practices are particularly significant in urban contexts, where the application of Indigenous ethics principles may be the primary means through which Indigenous ethical, cultural, and knowledge systems are upheld in research (UAKN, 2015, 2016; OFIFC, 2016).

Ethics as Relationship Over Time & Ongoing Accountability

Indigenous research ethics literature consistently emphasizes that ethical responsibility begins before a research project is approved and continues after formal data collection has ended (e.g., Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Brant Castellano, 2004; Hayward et al., 2021). Ethics are understood as embedded in the quality of relationships between researchers and Indigenous peoples, rather than in compliance with predefined procedural steps. Many Indigenous ethics protocols require evidence of relationship-building prior to approval, including meaningful engagement with Indigenous partners, clarity about mutual expectations, and demonstrated responsiveness to Indigenous priorities (Hayward et al., 2021). Similarly, relational methodologies literature emphasizes that ethical accountability extends through interpretation, dissemination, and knowledge mobilization, with particular attention to misrepresentation, harm, and benefit (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Fast & Kovach, 2019). Accordingly, ethics review is inseparable from how research unfolds in practice—including how researchers show up in relationships, respond to concerns, and remain accountable over time.



A defining feature of many Indigenous-led ethics review and governance processes is the expectation of ongoing accountability, rather than one-time authorization (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021; Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch, 2015, 2023; Six Nations of the Grand River, 2023; Cowichan Tribes, 2021). Accountability mechanisms may include ongoing communication or reporting requirements, conditions attached to approval that must be met throughout the project, opportunities for Indigenous partners to raise concerns as research proceeds, and the ability to amend, pause, or withdraw support if ethical concerns arise. Indigenous ethics protocols often explicitly retain the authority to revisit ethical decisions as research contexts change (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021).

This flexibility reflects Indigenous ethical commitments to responsiveness, care, and relational responsibility rather than rigid adherence to initial approvals (e.g., Doerksen et al., 2024). This approach differs markedly from institutional REBs, where ethics approval is often treated as fixed unless formal amendments are submitted. Indigenous ethics processes, by contrast, emphasize dialogue, negotiation, and accountability over time as indicators of ethical rigour.

Data Governance and Ethics as Infrastructure

Across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts, data governance emerges as one of the primary ways in which ethics is enacted over time (e.g., Schnarch, 2004; ITK, 2018; Walter & Suina, 2019). Rather than treating data as a technical matter resolved at the outset of a project, Indigenous ethics processes frequently embed ethical responsibilities into data ownership, stewardship, access, interpretation, and future use. For instance, principles such as OCAP® articulate ethics as involving ongoing governance of data and knowledge through possession and ownership, reinforcing that ethical responsibility does not end once data are collected but continues through reporting and future use (Schnarch, 2004; Corston et al., 2024).

More broadly, emerging discussions of Indigenous data sovereignty emphasize that ethics review cannot be separated from questions of who controls data, how meaning is produced, how Indigenous knowledge is collected and represented, and who has authority over secondary use and interpretation (Walter & Suina, 2019; Paul, 2023; Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025). In this sense, data governance principles (or agreements) may function as ethics infrastructure – they may help to embed ethical commitments into shared understandings, agreements, protocols, decision-making, or governance arrangements that extend throughout the life of the research.

An important implication of ethics-as-governance is the recognition that ethical approval is conditional and may be revisited. Indigenous ethics literature consistently affirms that withdrawal of support, refusal, or recognition that new conditions or research requirements are needed are legitimate ethical responses when research no longer aligns with Indigenous ethical, cultural, or governance priorities (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014, 2018). For example, Indigenous ethics bodies may explicitly retain the authority to halt research, require substantive changes, or renegotiate agreements if harms arise, representations become problematic, or priorities shift. This authority reinforces ethics as



an expression of care, boundary-setting, and self-determination, rather than procedural compliance.

Implications for Urban Indigenous Ethics Processes

In urban contexts, where Indigenous-led ethics processes may operate without formal jurisdictional authority, the emphasis on ongoing accountability, relationship, and governance becomes particularly significant (e.g., UAKN, 2016; OFIFC, 2016; First Light, 2023; Hayward et al., 2021). Indigenous organizations, networks, and ethics bodies in urban settings often serve as the primary sites through which Indigenous ethical systems are enacted across the research lifecycle. In these contexts, ethical effectiveness depends less on enforcement mechanisms and more on clear expectations, relational accountability, transparency, and sustained engagement (Doerksen et al., 2024; Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025). Ethics review can be understood as a continuous practice embedded in reciprocal relationships, mutually beneficial research objectives, and governance arrangements that protect Indigenous data, knowledge, and identities—rather than ethics as a single-outcome decision process.

These findings underscore that designing an urban Indigenous research ethics process requires intentional attention to how accountability will be sustained over time, how data governance will be operationalized, and how ethical authority will be exercised relationally.

Feasibility, Scope, and Sustainability of an Urban Indigenous Research Ethics Process

Indigenous-led research ethics processes can take a variety of models but generally aim to ensure that Indigenous cultural values, knowledge systems, and governance priorities are meaningfully upheld in research. At the same time, the variety of Indigenous ethics models underscores that feasibility is not a question of whether such a process can exist but how it can be intentionally designed, scoped, resourced, and sustained.

The following section seeks to more directly identify what the literature says about questions of feasibility, scope, and sustainability. It aims to identify key feasibility considerations relevant to establishing an urban Indigenous research ethics process. Rather than proposing a single model, there are a series of decision points related to purpose, scope, authority, resourcing, and long-term sustainability that can inform the shape of a research ethics process.

Mandate and Purpose of an Ethics Process

A consistent finding across the literature is that Indigenous ethics processes are most effective when their purpose, ethical mandate, and scope (or jurisdiction) are clearly articulated at the outset (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2004; Hayward et al., 2021; First Light, 2023). Indigenous-led ethics review is not intended to be a supplementary procedural step



in conducting research; rather, it should function as a governance mechanism designed to uphold Indigenous ethical, cultural, epistemological, and relational systems in research.

Ethics processes may serve multiple, overlapping purposes, including creating accountability mechanisms that extend beyond institutional REBs, upholding Indigenous values and knowledge systems in research, protecting Indigenous self-determination and governance, and ensuring research is respectful, beneficial, and responsive to Indigenous priorities (e.g., Doerksen et al., 2024; Kovach, 2009; UAKN, 2015; Wilson, 2008).

In urban contexts, organizationally grounded ethics processes may function as bridging mechanisms—not replacing institutional ethics review but supplementing it by addressing ethical dimensions directly related to Indigenous people that institutional frameworks cannot adequately address (Hayward et al., 2021; OFIFC, 2016).

Scope and Authority

Feasibility is closely tied to the scope of an Indigenous ethics process. There are significant differences in how Indigenous ethics bodies position themselves in relation to research approval, oversight, and accountability. Key scope-related decision points identified in the literature include whether the process provides binding approval, conditional approval, or ethical guidance; whether review applies to all research involving Indigenous participants served by an organization, or only to specific types of research (e.g., health research); and whether the process engages at the proposal stage only, or across the full research lifecycle (e.g., Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch, 2015; Six Nations of the Grand River, 2023; Cowichan Tribes, 2021).

In urban and organizational contexts, ethics processes often rely on cultural, values-based, relational, or organizational authority (UAKN, 2015; First Light, 2023). Such authority can be ethically robust when expectations are clearly articulated and consistently applied, particularly when researchers are required to demonstrate alignment with Indigenous priorities as a condition of partnership or access (OFIFC, 2016; Hayward et al., 2021).

Authority may also involve considerations about who participates in ethics review processes and how, such as organizational leadership, Elders or Knowledge Keepers, partner organizations, staff, community members, or even invited researchers. Considerations such as these may further inform how research occurs and what ethics reviews processes aim to accomplish. For instance, considering how research relationships are built may involve considering who has capacity for what type of work, who has sufficient research literacy to review ethics protocols, and even what roles committee members play in regard to ethics processes (e.g., Doerksen et al., 2024).

Resourcing, Labour, and Capacity

The feasibility of Indigenous ethics processes is inseparable from questions of resourcing and labour. Multiple sources caution that ethics review requires sustained intellectual, relational, and emotional labour, particularly when grounded in Indigenous values of care,



accountability, and relationship (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2004; Doerksen et al., 2024; Hayward et al., 2021; Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025).

Resourcing considerations may include compensation and honoraria for Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and reviewers; administrative and coordination capacity; training and support for ethics reviewers; and time required for relationship-building and deliberation (e.g., Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch, 2023; Doerksen et al., 2024). Under-resourcing ethics processes risks reproducing extractive dynamics where Indigenous labour is relied upon without adequate support, benefit, or sufficient tools (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021). Similarly, Cunningham-Reimann et al. (2025) emphasize that meaningful governance over data and ethics requires investment in infrastructure, not just principles.

Flexibility and Adaptability Over Time

Flexibility in Indigenous research ethics processes is another important consideration. Rather than prescribing rigid or universal procedures, many Indigenous frameworks emphasize adaptability to context, relationship, and evolving priorities (e.g., Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023; First Light, 2023; Doerksen et al., 2024). In some cases, research principles are established and relied upon to guide processes, emphasizing the necessarily flexible nature of research processes and ability to adapt over time (e.g., First Light, 2023; OFIFC, 2016). Flexibility is reflected in ethics processes that evolve through practice rather than being fully predetermined, mechanisms for revisiting decisions as relationships and contexts change, and openness to learning and refinement over time (Hayward et al., 2021).

Rather than removing structure, flexibility and adaptability over time reinforces ongoing accountability and the maintenance of relationships, even while research is underway and specific circumstances may change; flexibility also reinforces the ability to address problematic issues, make room for learning in research processes, respond to conflicts or address questions, and maintain relational accountability and responsiveness throughout the life of research (e.g., Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Where possible, flexibility may serve to avoiding rigid frameworks that prioritize institutional convenience over relational responsiveness and ethical accountability.

Data Governance and Data Sovereignty

Data governance was repeatedly identified as a core feasibility consideration for Indigenous ethics processes (e.g., Andersen et al., 2025; ITK, 2018; Schnarch, 2004; Walter & Suina, 2019). Ethics processes that lack clarity regarding data ownership, access, and future use risk undermining Indigenous self-determination even when other ethical commitments are articulated. Ethics processes should articulate expectations regarding data governance early, align with Indigenous data sovereignty principles, and ensure ongoing oversight of data use beyond project completion (e.g., Paul, 2023; Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025). In urban contexts, ethics processes play a critical role in asserting Indigenous authority over how data are interpreted, shared, and mobilized over time (UAKN, 2015, 2016; OFIFC, 2016). Further, Andersen et al. (2025) argue that building data sovereignty involves not only



attending to ownership and access issues but also building capacity among Indigenous communities and researchers, having a say in how research occurs and who conducts it, and shaping the types of approaches that are used (e.g., non-deficit framings for research, partnering in research processes).

Sustainability and Long-Term Impact

Sustainability is closely linked to whether Indigenous ethics processes are embedded within organizational structures, values, and decision-making practices, rather than operating as ad hoc or project-based initiatives (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021; First Light, 2023). Ethics processes are more likely to endure when they are clearly mandated, adequately resourced, supported by leadership, and understood as integral to Indigenous governance rather than optional add-ons. Importantly, sustainability does not require scale or formalization at the outset. There is potential value in starting with a limited scope, learning through practice, and allowing ethics processes to evolve in response to experience and feedback (e.g., Doerksen et al., 2024; Hayward et al., 2021).

Summary: Feasibility as Intentional Design

The feasibility of an urban Indigenous research ethics process depends less on replicating existing models and more on intentional design choices aligned with Indigenous values, well defined principles, and organizational realities. Key considerations include clarity of purpose, scope and authority, resourcing, flexibility, data governance, and sustainability. Rather than a single blueprint, the literature offers a series of pathways for developing Indigenous ethics processes that are responsive, grounded, and capable of evolving over time.

Summary: Implications for an Urban Indigenous Research Ethics Process

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this feasibility study demonstrates that Indigenous-led research ethics processes are structurally, epistemologically, and relationally distinct from institutional research ethics boards (REBs). Across diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts, ethics are consistently framed as expressions of Indigenous governance, knowledge systems, and self-determination, rather than as authoritative mechanisms. This final section integrates key insights from this review to highlight several takeaways.

NO SINGLE MODEL: DIVERSITY OF APPROACHES AS A STRENGTH

A central insight from the literature is that there is no single Indigenous model for research ethics review. Indigenous ethics processes vary widely in form, scope, authority, and operation, reflecting differences in Indigenous governance structures, cultural values, knowledge systems, and research priorities (e.g., Doerksen et al., 2024; Hayward et al.,



2021). Rather than indicating inconsistency or lack of rigour, this diversity reflects the ethical necessity of contextual grounding.

Feasibility for an urban Indigenous ethics process does not depend on replicating an existing model; rather, Indigenous ethics processes are grounded in principles that enable flexibility, prioritize relational responsiveness, and allow for ongoing accountability. These types of ethics processes depend on intentional design choices that reflect the specific populations served, the organizational context, and the ethical commitments of AHWC.

INDIGENOUS ETHICS PROCESSES ARE STRUCTURALLY DISTINCT

The literature consistently emphasized that Indigenous ethics processes are structurally different from institutional REBs. While institutional REBs are typically procedural, front-loaded, and focused on individual consent and risk mitigation, Indigenous ethics processes emphasize respectful relationships, ongoing accountability, collective rights and decision-making, care over time, wholistic wellbeing, and benefits and reciprocity (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2004; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2009; Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023; Schnarch, 2004; Wilson, 2008; UAKN, 2016).

Indigenous ethics processes are not replacements for institutional REBs; they are necessary complements that address ethical dimensions that institutional frameworks are incapable of handling or not designed to engage. In urban contexts in particular, Indigenous-led ethics processes play a critical role in ensuring that Indigenous cultural, epistemological, relational, and governance systems are honoured in research involving Indigenous peoples.

ETHICS REVIEW AND RESEARCH AS ONGOING RELATIONSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts, ethics review is consistently framed as an ongoing process, rather than a one-time approval event. Ethical responsibility extends across the full research lifecycle, including relationship-building, interpretation, dissemination, data stewardship, and future use (e.g., Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025; Hayward et al., 2021).

This insight has significant implications for feasibility. An urban Indigenous research review process would need to be designed not merely as a review checkpoint, but as a site of ongoing ethical governance, capable of sustaining relationships, responding to change, and revisiting decisions as contexts evolve. As a result, there may be cause to consider internal capacity, scope, resourcing, and duration of projects as important factors in whether research is undertaken or approved.

INDIGENOUS VALUES AND KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN GOVERNANCE

Indigenous ethics processes are grounded in distinct cultural values and language and knowledge systems, including but not limited to relational accountability, balance, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility. These values are articulated differently across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contexts—through teachings, governance principles, and lived



practices—and are not easily separated from ethics review processes (e.g., Brant Castellano, 2004; Mashford-Pringle et al., 2023; ITK, 2018).

The differences between Indigenous Peoples are important. For instance, Métis-relevant values and principles may include teachings such as the Red River Cart Wheel teachings (kaayash ka ishi Pimatishiyaak), kitchen table visiting, OCAS research principles, or reciprocity in relationships and affirmation of the diversity within and between Métis communities. For Inuit contexts, this may include Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, consensus-based decision-making, or Inuit-led governance priorities articulated through ITK research principles. For First Nations contexts, this includes Nation-specific teachings (such as Anishinaabeg Seven Grandfather Teachings), collective responsibility and consent processes, or OCAP®-based data governance.

While it may not always be feasible to continually pivot between these values or articulate every research process through the distinct teachings of different groups, there may be opportunities to build across knowledge systems, ensure flexibility is part of the process, provide assurance that the diversity of Indigenous peoples is recognized, important, and affirmed in research review processes, and possibly even establish organizationally distinct principles for research (as other urban Indigenous organizations have). Importantly, anchoring research processes and governance in Indigenous values and knowledge systems will help to ensure AHCW's research ethics processes maintain a distinct identity, purpose, trustworthiness, and ethical legitimacy.

DATA GOVERNANCE AND DATA SOVEREIGNTY AS CORE ETHICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Data governance and data sovereignty are not ancillary concerns in research ethics or practice; they are core components of respectful, reciprocal, and accountable research with Indigenous people. Across the literature, ethics processes functioned as mechanisms for asserting Indigenous authority over how data are generated, interpreted, stored, shared, and reused (e.g., Andersen et al., 2025; Paul, 2023; Schnarch, 2004; Walter & Suina, 2019). Discussions about data governance and sovereignty build ethics infrastructure, embedding ethical commitments into long-term stewardship, access, and accountability rather than treating data as a technical matter resolved at project outset.

INTENTIONAL SCOPE, RESOURCING, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Finally, Indigenous research ethics review processes need to be intentional about scope, authority, resourcing, and sustainability. Ethics review requires sustained relational, intellectual, and administrative labour, and it is important that there are realistic conversations about resourcing, capacity, compensation, and duration to ensure research is conducted appropriately and in accordance with expectations (e.g., Hayward et al., 2021; Cunningham-Reimann et al., 2025). This does not mean that ethics review processes must be fully formalized or expansive at inception; they may grow over time, evolve as needed or as resources become available, or develop increased scope. For instance, some Indigenous

ethics initiatives begin with limited scope and then evolve through practice and expand as capacity and trust develop (Doerksen et al., 2024). Feasibility, therefore, is not about immediate scale, but about alignment between ethical commitments and organizational capacity.

Conclusion

In summary, the literature indicates that establishing an Indigenous research ethics review process is ethically justified and aligned with best practices in Indigenous research governance. However, feasibility depends on recognizing that such a process would not simply mirror institutional REBs, nor function solely as a protective mechanism; rather, it would serve as a distinct research governance or accountability space through which Indigenous ethical, cultural, relational, spiritual, and knowledge systems are honoured in research involving urban Indigenous peoples.

The key implication for decision-making is not whether an Indigenous ethics process should exist, but how to design a process that maintains clarity of purpose and scope, respect for Indigenous diversity, commitment to ongoing accountability, explicit attention to data governance, and realistic resourcing. These considerations provide a grounded foundation for the next phases of the feasibility study, including organizational scanning, stakeholder engagement, and co-design with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members.

Environmental Scan

Key Findings
Indigenous ethics processes are more relational, flexible, and community-driven compared to standardized, procedural institutional REBs.
Indigenous models expand the scope of ethics to include community benefit, data sovereignty, self-determination, and long-term relational accountability.
Review processes often involve broader participation, including Elders, community members, and leadership, rather than solely formal committees.
Structural differences highlight the need for an urban Indigenous model that is adaptable, relational, and grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural collective identities.

The following section provides a brief summary of several trends shaping the research ethics processes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations in Canada. Where possible, further analysis is offered that considers how these trends may influence the feasibility of a research ethics process at AHC.

In total, 24 organizations were included in the environmental scan; specifically, 14 Indigenous REBs and 10 Manitoba REBS were examined, representing a range of research organizations. The following table outlines the organizations that were included in the environmental scan and the respective category within which they operate.

Organizations

Indigenous Organizations	• Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) • National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) • First Light (St. John's Friendship Centre) • Nunatsiavut Kaujisapvinga Research Centre (NKRC) • Manitoulin Anishinaabek Research Review Committee (MARRC) • Six Nations of the Grand River (SNGR) • Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI (MCPEI) • Mawkim - Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq • Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) • Cowichan Tribes Nation-Led Ethics Review Process (CTNER) • Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council (NTC) • Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN) • Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador (AFNQL) • Manitoba First Nations Education Centre (MFNEC)
Non-Indigenous Organizations	• University of Manitoba (UM) • Research Improvements through Harmonization in Manitoba (RITHIM) • University of Winnipeg (UW) • Cancer Care Manitoba (CCM) • Aurora College Research Programs (ACRP) • Health Canada and Public Health Agency Canada (PHAC) • Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) • University of Toronto (UT) • Nova Scotia Health (NSH) • Health Research Ethics Board of Alberta (HRECA)

Procedures for Ethics Board Reviews

The scan of research ethics board processes highlights several important procedural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations. These include differences in structure ethics board reviews, requirements for ethical adjudication, and fee structures.

STRUCTURE

In terms of ethics review structure, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations shared core procedural elements, including an application submission, review process, and communication of final decision.

However, the structural design of Indigenous review processes often extended beyond procedural. Many incorporate dialogic and relational mechanisms such as draft-stage engagement, iterative feedback and resubmission, consultation process, project co-development, and in some cases ceremony and other cultural processes. These elements embed ethics within governance, relationship-building, and cultural process.

In contrast, the non-Indigenous models reviewed are characterized by standardized digital submission systems, administrative screening, risk-stratified review pathways, and formal decision communication. These structures emphasize procedural formalism and institutional governance, with less evidence of embedded relational or cultural components within the formal review structure.

REQUIREMENTS

Non-Indigenous organizations required standard ethics documentation (e.g., certifications, conflict of interest statement, submission checklist, CVs, approvals, etc.). While Indigenous organizations also required many of these materials, their process extended further. They emphasized demonstration of cultural humility, positionality, reflexivity, and familiarity with Indigenous research practices and history, joint research agreements, letters of support, consultation with community, and/or data-sharing protocol.

Relationality

As mentioned, many Indigenous ethics review processes prioritized relationality and, by extension, reciprocity as a core organizing principle, rather than a supplementary feature. This is reflected in practices such as relationship building, accountability, consultation, and co-development.

Non-Indigenous organizations did not demonstrate the same degree of emphasis on relationality or reciprocity within their formal ethics structures. While some institutions (e.g., UM, PHAC, UT) included opportunities for applicants to revise and resubmit proposals, these mechanisms functioned as a compliance requirement. As such, they enable responsiveness to institutional requirements but do not necessarily reflect the reciprocity approach seen in Indigenous organizations ethics reviews.



The relational differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations can even be seen in their submission processes. Most Indigenous organizations tended to begin the process with a personal connection, whether through email, formal letter, or direct in-person contact (OFIFC, NKRC, MCPEI, Mawkim, and MFNEC). On the other hand, nearly all non-Indigenous organizations, with one exception (CCM), had an online portal or document for submission.

Culture and Ceremony

Only one Indigenous organization (CTNER) explicitly stated how cultural ceremony is formally integrated into their ethics approval process. In this example, ethics recognition included participation in a blanketing ceremony, as well as ceremonial songs and dancing. CTNER's documentation states, these ceremonies were conducted "to give respect to the Cowichan Tribes' culture and ancestors, who are viewed as a higher approval authority than any modern ethics board."

Cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ethics boards were also evident in who was at the table during the review process. Across the Indigenous organizations reviewed, participation extended beyond a single committee structure and often involves multiple layers of authority and engagement with voices selected by the community. Most organizations included a formal research ethics board or committee responsible for reviewing applications (OFIFC, NKRC, SNGR, MCPEI, CTNER, MFNEC). However, several processes also incorporate governance level decision makers, such as Board of Directors, Chief and Council, or tribal leadership. Additionally, some reviewal processes involved senior leadership teams, research team members, community members, managers, or departmental representatives.

Non-Indigenous organizations conducted their reviews mostly through formal research ethics boards/committees composed of members with varying expertise and experiences that were assigned from an institution: subject-matter experts, research ethics specialists, legal experts, community representatives, Indigenous members, and healthcare consumers. In some cases, additional actors are involved, such as administrative or secretariate staff (UM, PHAC, SHA, HREBA), other ethics boards (RITHIM & UT), impacted departments (CCM), supervisory or unit-level authorities (UT), institutional reviewers (NSH), and executive authority including REB Chairs, Directors of Research, or presidents.

FEES

Only one Indigenous organization (MARRC) provided information on fees, while six out of 10 non-Indigenous organizations stated their fee information.

MARRC, the only Indigenous organization identified in the scan that publicly articulated a structured fee model, utilized a scale tied to total project budget. For example, projects under \$5,000 were charged \$300, while projects exceeding \$50,000 were charged \$2,500.

In contrast, non-Indigenous organizations did not employ sliding scale fee structures; instead, they applied fixed fees that were triggered exclusively for privately funded or industry-sponsored projects. Under these circumstances, ethics board review fees generally

ranged from \$2,500 to \$4,000; several institutions also applied additional fees dependent on the intensiveness of the work required by the REB, such as annual renewal fees, amendment fees, archive review fees, or differentiated fees for full board versus delegated review.

Scope of Ethics Review

The scope of ethics review varied notably between Indigenous and non-Indigenous models, particularly in terms of what factors were considered relevant to ethical decision-making.

Indigenous ethics models typically take a broader more wholistic view of scope. In addition to standard considerations such as consent, privacy, and risk, these processes often incorporate principles and frameworks such as OCAP®, USAI, UNDRIP, and FPIC. Reviews frequently extended to include considerations of community benefit, reciprocity, self-determination, data sovereignty, and long-term impacts of research on communities.

Non-Indigenous ethics review processes followed a more defined and standardized scope, guided primarily by TCPS 2. These reviews focused on the protection of human participants and include established criteria such as informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, risk-benefit analysis, data management, equity considerations, and findings dissemination.

Cultural and Knowledge Foundations of Ethics Review

Beyond what is reviewed, there are important differences in how ethics itself is understood and applied.

Indigenous ethics review processes are grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and community worldviews. Ethics is approached as relational and interconnected, with an emphasis on responsibility, reciprocity, and respect. These processes often reflect values such as humility, honesty, and care, and may be informed by concepts such as *mino-pimatisiwin* (living a good life). As a result, ethics review is not only concerned with minimizing harm, but also with ensuring that research contributes positively to the well-being of individuals, communities, and future generations.

Non-Indigenous ethics review processes are primarily grounded in Western ethical frameworks and institutional standards. These models are structured around formal roles and predefined criteria, with ethics applied through consistent procedures designed to ensure compliance with establish guidelines.

At-a-Glance Comparisons

The following table highlights differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous REBs along several key dimensions.

Dimension	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
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Overall Model	Community driven, context-specific, and variable across communities	Standardized, institutional REB models with consistent structures
Fees	Limited information; scaled by project size (\$300-\$5,000)	Fees were applied to private or industry-funded research only (2,500 - \$4,000)
Review Structure	Dialogic and relational • Pre-submission relationship building • Integrative feedback • Consultation • Project co-development • Cultural/ceremonial elements	Procedural, standardized, and limited relational components • Online submission portals • Administrative screening • Formal decision with feedback
People Involved	Broad participation: • Typical institutional roles (REB board) • Elders • Community advocates • Program staff • Chief and Council	Defined institutional roles: • Subject experts • Legal and ethics experts • Community members • Occasionally Indigenous and a community representative
Scope of Review	Wholistic: • Standard ethics criteria (TCPS2) • Value to community • Data sovereignty • OCAP®, USAI, UNDRIP (FPIC) • Respect, wisdom, love, honesty, humility, truth, and bravery	Standardized; guided by TCPS 2 • Consent • Privacy • Risk/Benefit to individuals • Data management • Equity • Compensation • Deception • Dissemination Plan



Level of Focus	Individual and community level considerations	Individual participant level considerations
Approach	Includes elements of Western research ethics but went further and emphasized the importance of relationship-centered and collaborative research	Institutional and standards-based
Knowledge Foundations	Grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, values, and community governance	Grounded in Western ethical frameworks and institutional standards
Requirements	• Typical documents (CVs, letters of approval, permits, ethics and TCPS training, etc.) • Demonstration of cultural humility, positionality, and reflexivity. • Joint research agreements • Identification of community protocols and requirements • Community consultation • Learn about the history of Indigenous peoples	• Typical documents (CVs, letters of approval, permits, ethics and TCPS training, etc.)

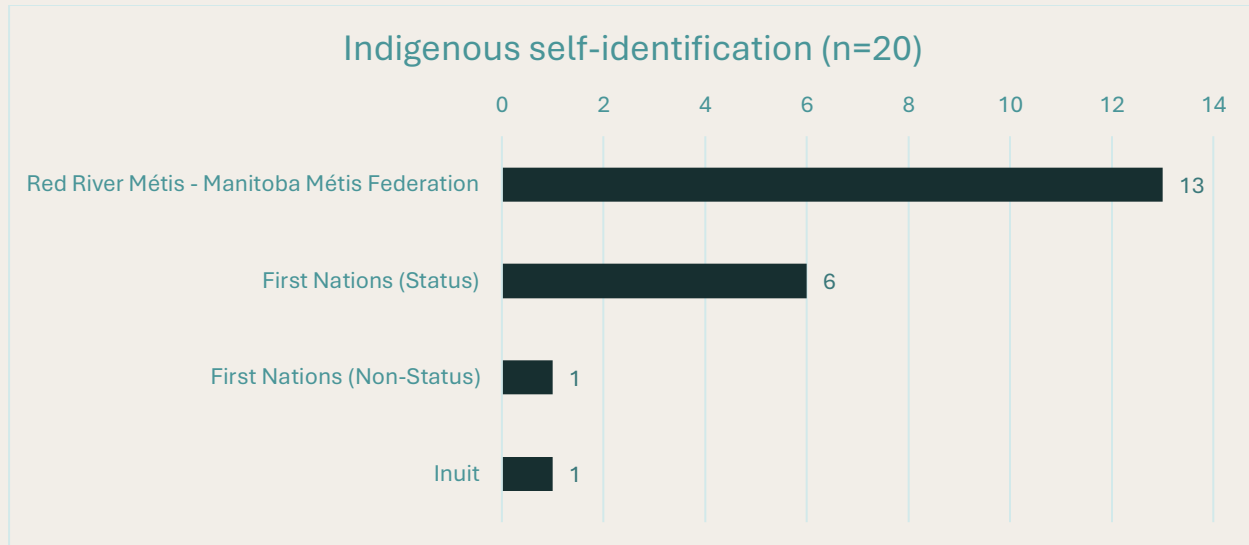
Survey of Key Partners & Stakeholders

Key Findings
There is strong and consistent support for the development of a UIRL-EB.
Existing institutional research ethics processes are widely seen as insufficient for addressing the realities of urban Indigenous communities.
Respondents emphasized the need for Indigenous governance and community leadership in research ethics decision-making.
Urban Indigenous contexts require flexible approaches that can navigate multiple nations, identities, and governance structures.
Respect for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit distinctions is essential, and that respect must be upheld within the complexity of urban Indigenous realities.
Indigenous values such as relational accountability, reciprocity, and self-determination are seen as foundational to ethical research.
A UIRL-EB is seen as a mechanism to strengthen accountability, community benefit, and trust in research.
Successful implementation of a UIRL-EB process will require a clear mandate, strong partnerships, adequate resourcing, and careful integration with existing systems.

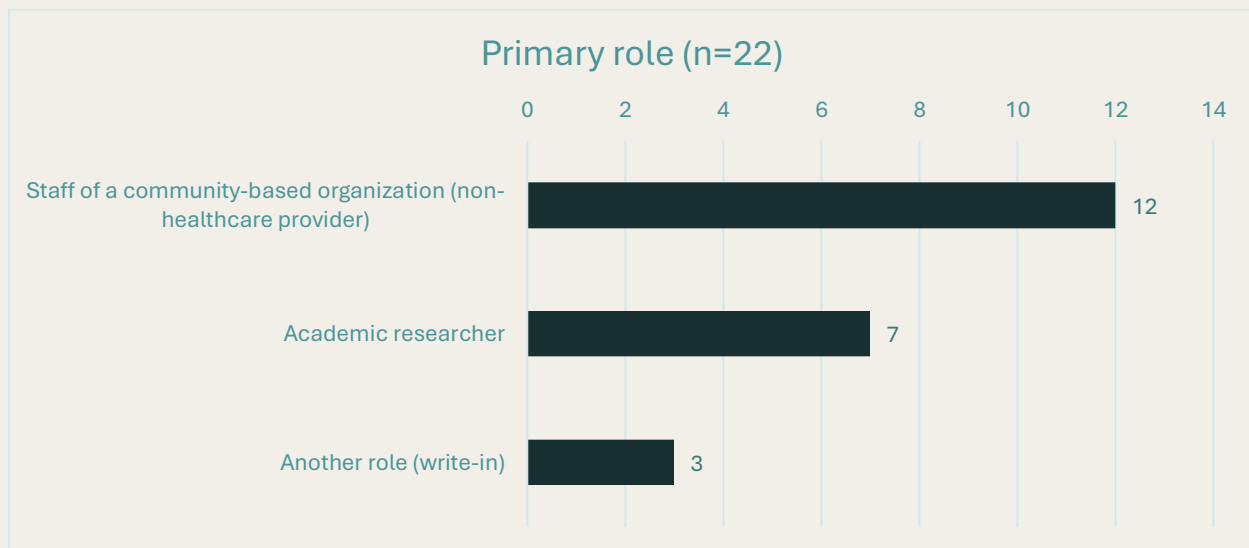
A survey questionnaire was circulated to key partners and stakeholders, including community-based organizations (both non-healthcare and healthcare providers), academic researchers and institutional research ethics offices. Data were collected from key partners and stakeholders in March and April 2026.

The questionnaire included a total of 16 questions, both closed-ended (8) and open-ended (8) question types. The questionnaire set out to provide opportunities for key partners to contribute their important perspectives and insights to the study, as well as to supplement findings from focus groups and interviews.

A total of 22 responses were recorded, with 91% identifying as Indigenous (n=20) and 9% identifying as non-Indigenous (n=2). Of those who identified as Indigenous, 65% were Red River Métis with Manitoba Métis Federation, 35% were First Nations (30% Status and 5% Non-Status), and 5% Inuit. (While we provided options for Métis to identify with Métis Nation Saskatchewan and Métis Nation of Alberta, no respondents identified with these governments.)



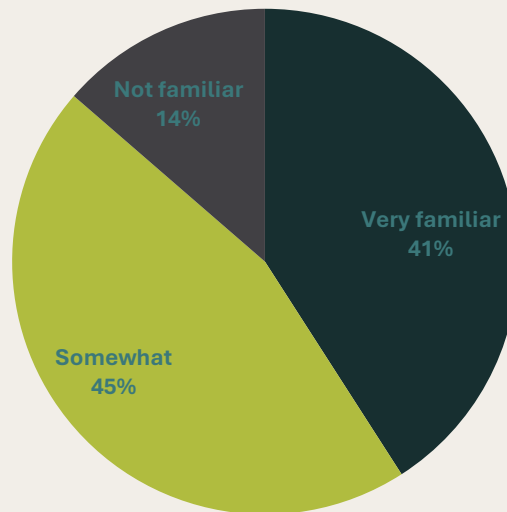
Respondents identified their primary role mainly as either staff of a community-based organization (non-healthcare provider) or academic researchers (55% and 32% respectively). A small number (14%) of respondents selected the “Other” option and wrote in their roles as Finance, Board of Directors, and Administrator. (No respondents selected the response options of “Healthcare provider” or “Institutional ethics/REB.”)



Question: How *familiar* are you with *Indigenous-specific research ethics frameworks*? (e.g., OCAP®, OCAS, Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, USAI, Chapter 9 of TCPS 2)

When asked how familiar they were with Indigenous-specific research ethics frameworks, the majority indicated some level of familiarity, either somewhat (45%) or very (41%) familiar. A small number (14%) indicated they were not familiar with Indigenous ethics frameworks, and none reported having limited knowledge of these frameworks.

Familiarity with Indigenous-specific research ethics frameworks (n=22)



Question: *From your perspective, how do **Indigenous ways of knowing** in research and ethics **support self-determination** in community for Indigenous community members? We want to learn more about how these two important aspects of research by, with, and for Indigenous communities connect.*

Responses to this question consistently emphasized that Indigenous ways of “relational accountability was being treated as a procedural checkbox.” This reflects a broader critique that ethics boards are frequently oriented toward institutional risk management rather than meaningful engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems, leading to recommendations that can be paternalistic or disconnected from community realities knowing and ethical frameworks are foundational to self-determination, particularly through the re-centering of authority, knowledge, and purpose within community contexts. A dominant theme across responses was the shift in decision-making power, where Indigenous communities are positioned not as participants but as leaders in defining research priorities, processes, and outcomes.

Several respondents described this as a direct challenge to colonial research traditions, noting that Indigenous approaches “position communities as the primary decision-makers in the research process” and ensure that “it’s less about studying and more about partnership.” This emphasis on control extended to all stages of research, including how knowledge is generated, interpreted, and shared, reinforcing principles of data sovereignty and governance.



Closely connected to this was a strong focus on relational accountability and reciprocity. Respondents described Indigenous knowledge systems as inherently relational, grounded in responsibilities to people, land, and culture rather than transactional data extraction. One participant explained that knowledge is “held within families, Elders, land, language, and lived experience and not something to be extracted or owned by institutions,” highlighting how ethical research must prioritize trust, relationships, and long-term community benefit. This relational approach was often contrasted with academic systems that prioritize outputs such as publications, which may not align with community-defined measures of success, such as gatherings, accessible materials, or local policy impacts.

Another prominent theme was the role of Indigenous ways of knowing in strengthening cultural continuity, identity, and governance. Respondents noted that grounding research in Indigenous epistemologies supports language preservation, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and community-defined knowledge creation. One response described these approaches as “integral to the maintenance of our own sovereignty and reduce academic exploitation,” while another emphasized that culturally grounded research makes findings more meaningful and usable within community decision-making processes. Trust in research outcomes was also linked to whether methods respected cultural protocols, with one respondent noting that without this alignment, “we cannot trust that research to form or direct” decisions.

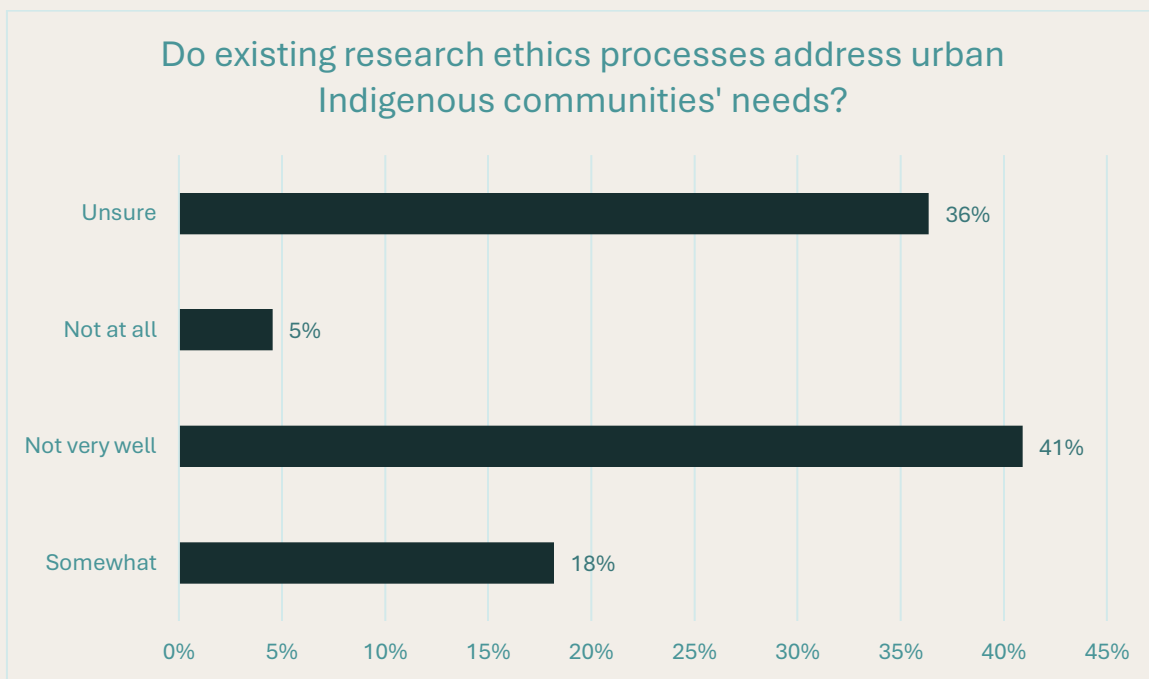
One Inuk respondent provided a distinct and detailed articulation of these connections through Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ), emphasizing that Indigenous knowledge systems are not supplementary but foundational. They stated, “Self-determination in research means we are no longer subjects of study. We are knowledge holders, decision-makers, and leaders shaping our own futures,” underscoring how principles such as consensus decision-making, collective responsibility, and community service translate directly into ethical research practice. This perspective reinforced broader themes while also highlighting nation-specific frameworks and the importance of grounding ethics in lived systems of governance and knowledge.

Some responses introduced more nuanced or less frequently raised considerations. A small number of participants pointed to tensions within existing systems, particularly around funding structures and institutional ethics processes that continue to privilege academic control. Others noted potential risks if Indigenous frameworks are applied rigidly or without care, suggesting that misinterpretation could reproduce exclusion or limit whose voices are heard. One respondent also raised the complexity of balancing collective self-determination with individual autonomy in urban, multi-nation contexts, questioning how authority is determined when participants come from diverse Indigenous backgrounds.

Overall, the responses indicate that Indigenous ways of knowing and ethics are inseparable from self-determination. They function not only as guiding principles for research conduct but as mechanisms for reclaiming authority, ensuring relevance, and aligning research with the priorities, values, and futures defined by Indigenous communities themselves.

Question: *Do existing research ethics processes address the needs of urban Indigenous communities?*

When asked if existing research processes address the needs of urban Indigenous communities (on a 4-point rating scale “Very well” to “Not at all”), no one indicated that existing research processes addressed needs “Very well.” Almost half (46%, n=10) indicated existing research processes did not serve urban Indigenous communities’ needs (either “Not at all” or “Not very well”). Almost one-fifth (18%, n=4) indicated research ethics review processes addressed Indigenous community needs “somewhat.” Roughly one-third (36%, n=8) said they were unsure of whether research ethics processes served community needs.



Overall, the results of this question reveal that there is little confidence that existing research ethics processes are serving the needs of urban Indigenous communities.

Question: *Please tell us more about your response to the previous question.*

When prompted with a follow-up to the previous question, respondents were asked to expand on their ratings. The responses discussed below are grouped by level of confidence, with separate summaries for those who answered “Somewhat,” “Not at all / Not very well,” and “Unsure.”

Somewhat: Among those who felt existing research ethics processes address the needs of urban Indigenous communities only *somewhat*, responses pointed to a consistent pattern: While current frameworks may have relevance in principle, they fall short in practice due to their limited ability to reflect the complexity of urban Indigenous realities.



A central theme in these responses was the mismatch between existing ethics structures and the diversity of urban Indigenous communities. Participants noted that many frameworks are designed with more clearly defined, and often singular, community governance structures in mind. In contrast, urban settings are characterized by multiple nations, overlapping territories, and varied relationships to governance, making it difficult to apply standardized approaches. As one respondent explained, “they do not recognize that urban indigenous populations are not governed by one community/government,” highlighting a key structural limitation.

Closely related to this was the challenge of navigating consent and authority in multi-nation urban contexts. Respondents described uncertainty around who holds the appropriate authority to provide consent or guidance for research, particularly where several Indigenous nations coexist or where relationships between those nations may be complex. One participant noted that ethics frameworks “have a tougher time articulating how to move forward respectfully when multiple Indigenous nations share the same territory,” pointing to a gap in existing guidance for researchers working in urban environments. This reflects a broader concern that current processes lack the flexibility and nuance required to engage respectfully across diverse and sometimes competing governance structures.

At the same time, there was recognition that existing frameworks are not entirely without value, particularly in situations where there is a clearly defined Indigenous community with established leadership. However, even in these cases, respondents suggested that the underlying design of these processes is not grounded in Indigenous worldviews. One response emphasized that, despite often being “done with good intentions,” current ethics processes “cannot accurately address the needs of the Urban Indigenous Community as they are not created from an Indigenous lens.” This points to a deeper critique that partial alignment is insufficient when foundational assumptions remain externally imposed.

These responses suggest that while existing ethics processes may offer some useful elements, they are not designed to adequately account for the relational, political, and cultural complexity of urban Indigenous life. The result is a system that can be applied in limited ways but requires significant adaptation to meaningfully support urban Indigenous communities.

Not at all / Not very well: Among respondents who indicated that existing research ethics processes serve urban Indigenous communities *not at all* or *not very well*, there was a strong and consistent critique that current systems are structurally misaligned with the realities of urban Indigenous life. A central theme was the inability of existing frameworks to account for the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of urban Indigenous identities and governance. Participants emphasized that ethics processes are often built around assumptions of singular, clearly defined communities, typically modeled on reserve-based or nation-specific governance. In contrast, urban Indigenous communities are described as “diverse, mobile, and often organized through relationships rather than formal governance structures,” making it difficult for standardized ethics approaches to determine who can speak for community, how consent should be obtained, and what accountability should look like in practice.



This challenge was further compounded by tensions between formal governance bodies and lived urban realities. Some respondents pointed to a disconnect between provincial or territorial Indigenous organizations and urban Indigenous populations, particularly those who have lived in cities across generations. One participant noted that “urban Indigenous people are not aware of the role of the provincial organizations... and I’ve heard many say the provincial level orgs don’t speak for them because they don’t speak with them,” highlighting concerns about representation, legitimacy, and engagement. These dynamics create additional uncertainty for researchers attempting to navigate ethical approvals in ways that are both respectful and appropriate.

A second prominent theme was the limited understanding of Indigenous ethical frameworks within academic and institutional systems, including among those responsible for overseeing ethics review processes. Respondents described persistent gaps in knowledge, where even basic distinctions—such as the applicability of OCAP—are not well understood. This reflects a broader critique that ethics boards are frequently oriented toward institutional risk management rather than meaningful engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems, leading to recommendations that can be paternalistic or disconnected from community realities.

Related to this was a broader concern about the extractive nature and limited benefit of research conducted under existing frameworks. Several respondents emphasized that current ethics processes do not sufficiently ensure that research is conducted “in a good way,” with one noting that “often research done is extractive and does not contribute to the Indigenous communities it is done in.” Others pointed to methodological limitations, suggesting that dominant quantitative and scientific approaches fail to capture the full scope of Indigenous knowledge or adequately assess the real-world impact of programs and research outcomes.

A smaller number of responses introduced additional considerations, including the lack of urban-specific research perspectives, which can lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentation, and the ongoing tension between distinction-based approaches and the need for more cohesive structures that reflect the interconnectedness of urban Indigenous communities. One respondent also noted that outcomes can vary depending on the individual researcher or ethics board’s level of understanding, suggesting inconsistency in how existing processes are applied.

Overall, these responses reflect a high level of concern that existing research ethics systems are not only insufficient but, in some cases, actively misaligned with the relational, governance, and cultural realities of urban Indigenous communities.

Unsure: Responses from those who selected *unsure* were generally characterized by limited familiarity with research ethics processes or uncertainty about how consistently they are applied in practice. Several respondents explicitly noted a lack of direct involvement or knowledge, with four indicating they did not know enough about research ethics processes to assess them (including two non-Indigenous respondents), and one leaving the follow-up



response blank. This suggests that uncertainty is partly driven by gaps in exposure and accessibility, rather than neutral perceptions of effectiveness.

Among those who elaborated, uncertainty often reflected inconsistency and uneven implementation, rather than confidence in existing systems. One respondent observed that processes “are looked at, not sure they are followed through,” pointing to concerns about whether ethical standards are meaningfully upheld beyond formal review. Another response highlighted structural ambiguity, noting that ethics oversight may depend heavily on community-based organizations that often lack the resources to establish or sustain their own processes, limiting accountability outside of university systems.

One Inuk respondent again raised a distinct consideration, emphasizing that while Inuit-specific frameworks exist, “their consistent implementation within mainstream ethics processes... remains unclear and uneven,” particularly in urban contexts. Overall, uncertainty in this group appears to stem from limited visibility, uneven application, and a lack of clearly defined, accessible processes for urban Indigenous research contexts.

Question: *What **gaps or limitations** have you observed in current research ethics processes related to urban Indigenous research?*

Responses to this question identified a range of interrelated gaps, with a strong emphasis on the structural mismatch between existing ethics processes and the realities of urban Indigenous communities.

Many participants noted that current systems are built on assumptions of singular, clearly defined communities with formal governance structures, which do not reflect the complexity of urban environments. Urban Indigenous communities were described as diverse, fluid, and often organized through relationships rather than centralized authority, creating persistent uncertainty about “who the correct representative body is to oversee data governance” and how meaningful consent should be obtained. This limitation was frequently linked to rigid approval requirements, including reliance on organizations that “may not represent or speak for all urban Indigenous individuals or communities,” resulting in processes that can feel more like gatekeeping than authentic engagement.

Closely connected to this was a recurring concern about the overreliance on colonial or institutional frameworks that marginalize Indigenous governance and relational accountability. Respondents described ethics boards as often privileging reserve-based, First Nations-centric, or distinctions-based governance models, while failing to recognize urban Indigenous organizations, Elders networks, and grassroots leadership as legitimate sources of authority. One participant noted that current processes “rely on colonial approval structures that don’t reflect how urban communities actually function,” which can sideline community-driven, relational, and women-led forms of governance. This creates barriers not only for researchers, but also for communities seeking to assert control over research that affects them.



Another prominent theme was the limited understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems and ethical frameworks within institutional review processes. Several responses pointed to foundational misunderstandings among ethics boards, including the misapplication of frameworks such as OCAP and a broader lack of training in Indigenous research approaches. One participant observed that “relational accountability was being treated as a procedural checkbox,” underscoring how institutional systems often reduce complex, relationship-based ethics to technical requirements. This disconnect is compounded by the fact that many ethics boards function primarily as risk-management bodies for universities, rather than as mechanisms to support community-defined ethical engagement.

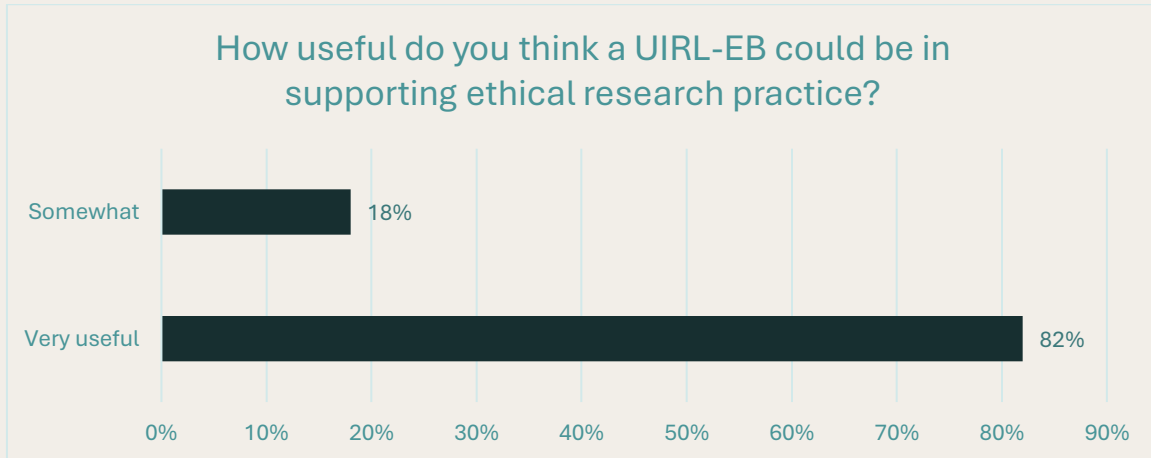
Participants also highlighted gaps in inclusion, representation, and resources, particularly in relation to urban and Inuit-specific contexts. The Inuit respondent emphasized that provincial frameworks are often “First Nations and Métis centric,” with “limited Inuit-specific recognition” and unclear pathways for identifying appropriate authority in urban settings. More broadly, respondents questioned how often Indigenous people are meaningfully involved in ethics review committees at all. Others pointed to practical barriers that limit equitable participation in research, including transportation, technology access, and the failure to consider broader relational responsibilities to “water, plants, animals,” indicating that current processes do not fully account for Indigenous worldviews.

Several responses raised tensions and contradictions within governance and consent processes, particularly in complex or sensitive contexts. While some emphasized the importance of seeking approval from Indigenous governing bodies, others noted that this is not always straightforward or appropriate. Concerns were raised about situations where governing bodies may lack capacity, hold biases, or where seeking approval could be unsafe, highlighting the difficulty of balancing community governance, individual autonomy, and academic freedom. Relatedly, participants pointed to challenges in conducting research that spans multiple Indigenous identities or experiences, where strict distinctions-based requirements may not align with the nature of the research or the lived realities of participants.

Finally, a smaller number of responses identified broader systemic issues, including limited urban Indigenous research perspectives, methodological constraints within dominant quantitative frameworks, and a general lack of pathways to initiate ethical research in these contexts. While a few respondents indicated they had not observed gaps due to limited involvement, the overall pattern across responses reflects a consistent view that current research ethics processes are insufficiently flexible, inadequately informed by Indigenous knowledge systems, and poorly equipped to engage with the relational and governance complexities of urban Indigenous research.

Question: *How useful do you think an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge - Ethics Board could be in **supporting ethical research practice**?*

When asked how useful they thought a UIRL-EB would be to supporting ethical research practice, respondents overwhelmingly indicated support for the initiative – with 82% indicating it would be “Very useful” (n=18) and the remaining 18% indicating it would be “Somewhat” useful (n=4).



Question: Please *tell us more* about how an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board could support ethical research practices.

When prompted to tell us more about how a UIRL-EB could support ethical research, respondents expressed strong support for the potential of the UIRL-EB to support ethical research for urban Indigenous communities. Responses to this question expressed strong and consistent support for the creation of a UIRL-EB, with participants identifying a range of ways it could address current gaps and strengthen ethical research practice.

A central theme was the potential for the UIRL-EB to recenter Indigenous governance, knowledge systems, and community authority within research processes. Many respondents emphasized that such a body would move ethics away from institutional control and toward community-led decision-making grounded in Indigenous values. This was often framed as a corrective to existing systems, with one participant invoking the principle that “No decisions about us, without us,” underscoring the importance of Indigenous leadership in determining how research is conducted, interpreted, and shared.

Closely connected to this was the role of the UIRL-EB in bridging the gap between institutional ethics processes and urban Indigenous realities. Respondents described current systems as poorly equipped to navigate the diversity and complexity of urban Indigenous communities, particularly where multiple nations, identities, and governance structures intersect. A Lodge-based model was seen as uniquely positioned to provide context-specific guidance, including identifying appropriate engagement pathways, advising on data governance, and supporting researchers in building meaningful relationships with urban Indigenous organizations and communities. As one respondent noted, such a board could help ensure that research is “relational, community-informed, and accountable beyond institutional requirements.”

Another prominent theme was the emphasis on relational ethics, accountability, and ongoing engagement. Participants highlighted that ethical research should not be limited to initial approval processes but must extend throughout the lifecycle of a project. A UIRL-EB could reinforce expectations around reciprocity, community benefit, and the return of knowledge, supporting practices such as community gatherings, accessible reporting, and policy-relevant outputs. One respondent observed that existing systems often fail to ensure continued engagement after funding is secured, suggesting that a Lodge-based approach could help address this gap by embedding accountability within relationships rather than procedures.

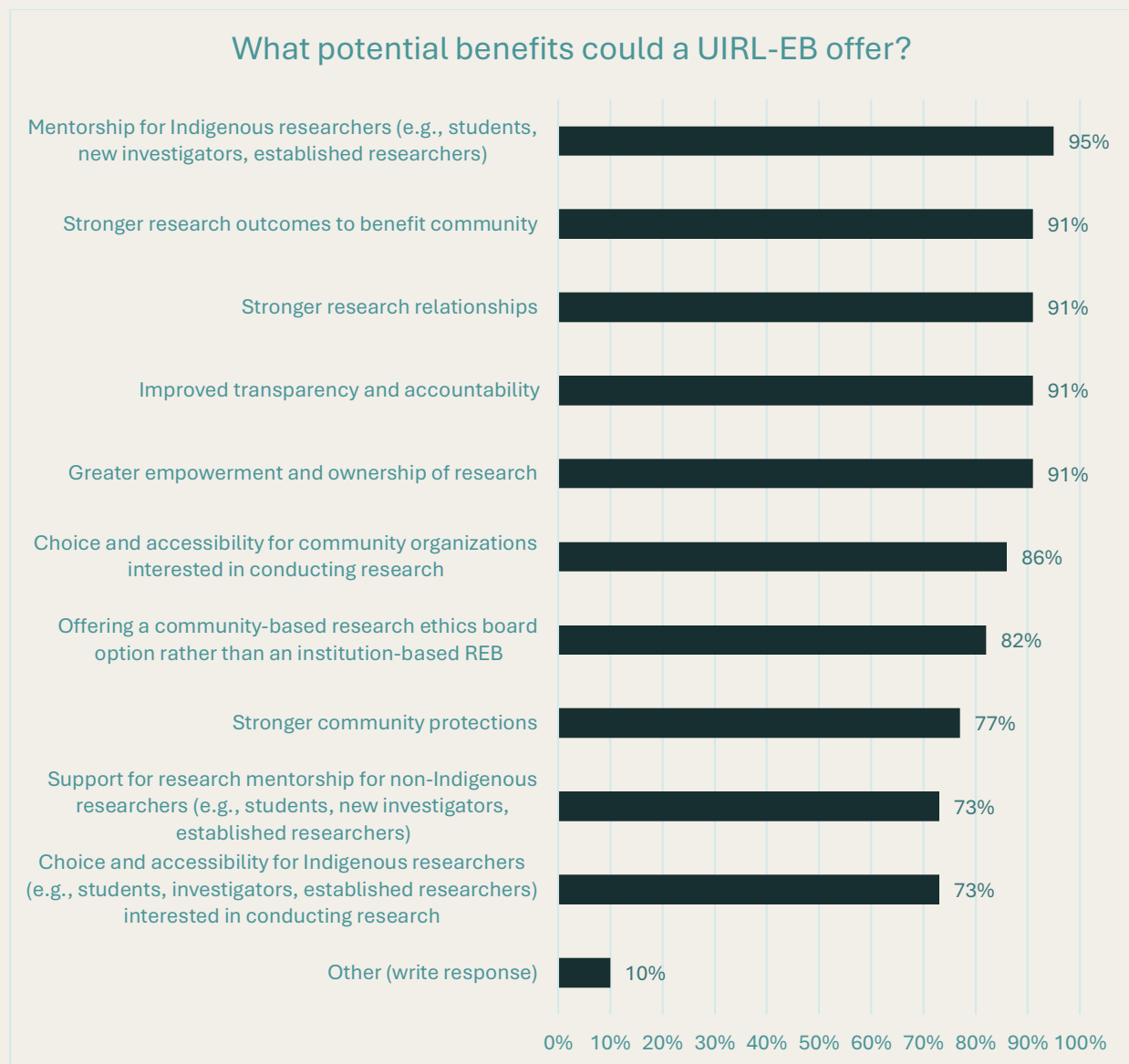
Respondents also pointed to the potential for the UIRL-EB to increase accessibility and build capacity, particularly for Indigenous-led organizations and researchers. Several noted that current ethics processes can be bureaucratic, eurocentric, and difficult to navigate, whereas a Lodge could offer mentorship, guidance, and culturally grounded support. This included helping community-based organizations undertake their own research, supporting Indigenous-led methodologies, and creating opportunities for employment and leadership within an Indigenous-led research infrastructure. One participant noted that it could “grow into a new industry that is indigenous lead creating new jobs for Indigenous people,” pointing to broader economic and capacity-building impacts.

At the same time, some respondents emphasized that the effectiveness of a UIRL-EB would depend heavily on its design, governance, and scope. A small number cautioned that if implemented rigidly, it could risk becoming “just another layer of bureaucracy,” rather than a transformative alternative. Others raised practical questions about mandate, integration with existing institutional ethics boards, and whether it would apply across disciplines or remain focused on health research. There were also nuanced considerations around ensuring representation across diverse Indigenous groups, including Inuit perspectives, and avoiding pan-Indigenous generalizations while still providing coherent guidance in complex urban contexts.

Overall, respondents viewed the UIRL-EB as a critical and timely intervention that could shift research ethics from a model of compliance and risk management toward one grounded in Indigenous governance, relational accountability, and community-defined priorities.

Question: *What **potential benefits** could an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board offer? (Select all that apply.)*

When asked about potential benefits, the majority of respondents (73%) selected multiple potential benefits from the list of options. The most frequently selected option was “Mentorship for Indigenous researchers (e.g., students, new investigators, established researchers)” (95%), followed closely by “Stronger research outcomes to benefit community,” “Stronger research relationships,” “Improved transparency and accountability,” and “Greater empowerment and ownership of research” (91% each).



The remaining options were rated more moderately, but still showed extremely high ratings for the potential benefits for a UIRL-EB: “Choice and accessibility for community organizations interested in conducting research” (86%), “Offering a community-based research ethics board option rather than an institution-based REB” (82%), “Stronger community protections” (77%), “Choice and accessibility for Indigenous researchers (e.g., students, investigators, established researchers) interested in conducting research” (73%), “Support for research mentorship for non-Indigenous researchers (e.g., students, new investigators, established researchers)” (73%).

Two respondents chose the *Other* option and wrote in their own responses, emphasizing support for emerging community leadership and noting that “all these options can be true” but questioning whether they can achieve every benefit equally in practice.

Question: *In your own words, tell us more about the potential benefits of having an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board.*

Responses to this question reinforced and expanded on earlier findings, with participants identifying a range of interconnected benefits centered on Indigenous governance, alignment with community realities, and strengthening ethical research relationships. A key theme was the potential for a UIRL-EB to ensure that research ethics frameworks are grounded in Indigenous values and lived experience, rather than imposed through institutional systems that may not reflect community priorities. Several respondents noted that while many researchers are attempting to “do the work in a good way,” they are often guided by ethics processes that do not align with the communities they engage. In this context, a Lodge-based Ethics Board was seen as a mechanism to realign research practice with Indigenous worldviews and expectations.

Another prominent benefit was the ability to clarify engagement pathways and improve accountability in complex urban contexts. Participants emphasized that urban Indigenous communities are diverse, and that existing systems often fail to provide clear guidance on who to engage or how to do so appropriately. One respondent noted that such a body could “clearly define appropriate engagement pathways and expectations that reflect this diversity,” particularly for Inuit and other groups whose governance structures may not be well understood in urban settings. This clarity was linked to stronger accountability, ensuring that research is not only approved but conducted in ways that are transparent, respectful, and responsive to community needs.

A closely related theme was the importance of recognizing and valuing Indigenous knowledge, labour, and expertise, including through fair compensation and more equitable research relationships. Respondents highlighted ongoing concerns about Indigenous individuals and organizations being overburdened and undercompensated, particularly when asked to contribute cultural knowledge or lived experience. A UIRL-EB was seen as a way to formalize expectations around compensation, partnership agreements, and intellectual ownership, while also helping to distribute engagement more equitably across communities. One participant emphasized that such a model could help ensure Indigenous contributions are recognized as valuable, rather than treated as informal or voluntary inputs.

Participants also identified the potential for the UIRL-EB to build capacity and provide mentorship, particularly for Indigenous researchers, students, and community-based organizations. Several responses pointed to the challenges of developing in-house research processes within community organizations, noting that this work often relies on a small number of individuals and can contribute to burnout. A centralized, community-rooted ethics body could offer guidance, resources, and shared infrastructure, creating “more opportunities for Indigenous people” and supporting the growth of Indigenous-led research environments. This was also framed as a way to support learning for non-Indigenous researchers, improving their understanding of Indigenous ethical responsibilities and reducing the likelihood of harm or conflict.



Another important benefit identified was the potential to rebuild trust and shift the purpose of research toward meaningful community outcomes. Respondents noted that many Indigenous communities have experienced extractive research practices, leading to skepticism and disengagement. A UIRL-EB could help address this by ensuring that research is reviewed through processes grounded in Indigenous governance and relational accountability, signaling that community priorities are being taken seriously. As one participant noted, this could help create “a research environment that respects Indigenous expertise, addresses historical inequities in knowledge extraction, and ensures that urban Indigenous voices are engaged in ways that are ethical, equitable, and sustainable.”

Some respondents also identified more targeted or less frequently mentioned benefits. These included the potential to deter harmful or exploitative research practices, such as work that focuses disproportionately on trauma without contributing to meaningful change, and the opportunity to enhance the credibility of Indigenous-led research. Others highlighted that all research conducted through such a body would be shaped through “the lens of Indigenous people,” reinforcing the broader goal of supporting independent, Indigenous-led research systems.

Overall, responses suggest that a UIRL-EB is viewed not only as a procedural addition to existing ethics systems, but as a transformative model capable of strengthening alignment, accountability, capacity, and trust in urban Indigenous research contexts.

Question: *What **concerns or risks**, if any, do you see with an Ethics Board initiative like this?*

Responses to this question identified a number of important considerations, with most concerns centering on governance, capacity, and the risk of reproducing the very limitations the initiative seeks to address. A prominent theme was the need to ensure inclusive and representative decision-making, particularly in the context of diverse urban Indigenous populations. Several respondents emphasized the risk that certain groups—especially Inuit—could be overlooked if the board is not intentionally structured to reflect distinctions and lived urban realities. One respondent cautioned that “urban Inuit could be unintentionally overlooked,” underscoring the importance of deliberate inclusion across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives, as well as broader diversity in gender, age, and experience.

Another key concern was the potential for the UIRL-EB to become overly bureaucratic or procedural, replicating institutional ethics models rather than offering a relational, community-driven alternative. Participants warned that without careful design, the board could “replicate colonial or patriarchal power dynamics” or become “procedural rather than relational,” limiting its transformative potential. Related to this was the risk of tokenism or gatekeeping, where a small group of Indigenous experts or Elders may be overburdened or positioned as symbolic participants without adequate authority, compensation, or support.

Capacity and resourcing emerged as significant and recurring concerns. Respondents noted that urban Indigenous organizations and knowledge holders are already under considerable strain, and that adding ethics review responsibilities could exacerbate this without sustained investment. There were concerns about the volume of submissions, delays in review processes, and the labour required to provide meaningful mentorship and oversight, particularly if expectations are not clearly defined. As one participant noted, the burden could become “very onerous,” especially if the board is expected to compensate for gaps in institutional systems.

Participants also raised practical and structural challenges related to integration with existing institutional ethics processes. Given that researchers are typically required to obtain approval from university-based research ethics boards, there is a risk of duplication, misalignment, or conflicting requirements. One response emphasized that “universities cannot require faculty members to submit ethics applications to bodies outside of the institution,” pointing to the need for careful coordination, partnership models, or mutual recognition agreements. There was also concern that institutions might use the existence of a Lodge-based board to offload responsibility for Indigenous research ethics without relinquishing institutional power or providing adequate support.

Tensions with existing governance structures were also noted, including the need to navigate relationships with provincial or nation-based organizations and the potential for disagreement over authority or representation. Some respondents pointed to broader risks, including backlash from Indigenous governments, lateral tensions between organizations, or the perception that the board is secondary to established institutional processes.

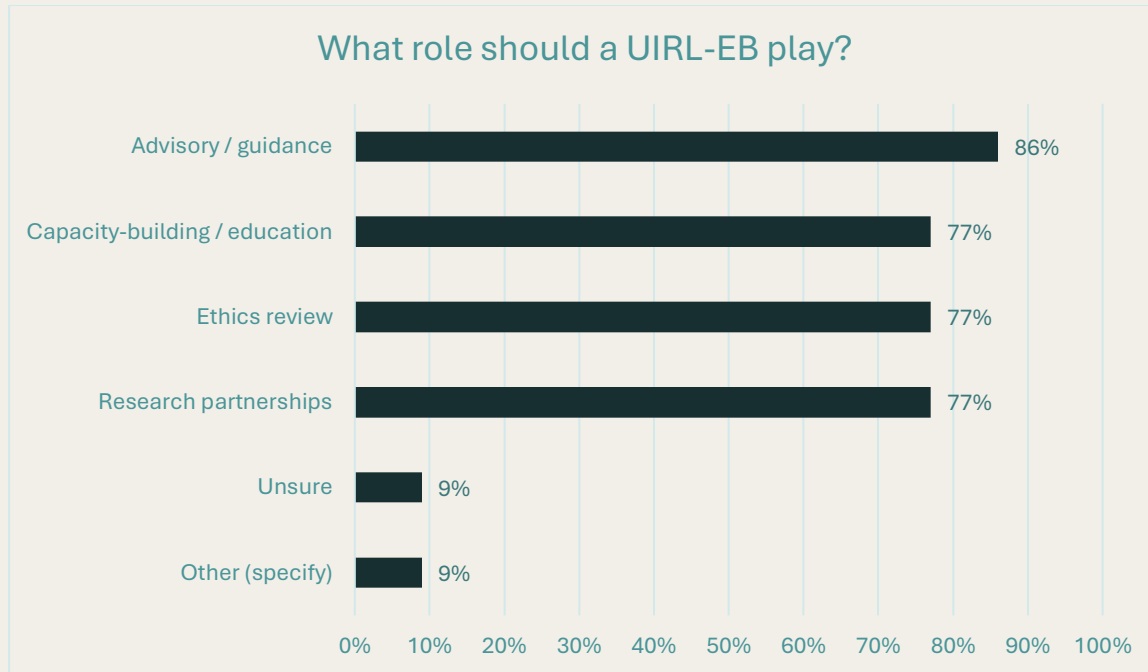
Finally, a smaller number of responses highlighted accountability and ethical risk over time, noting that even well-designed processes cannot fully anticipate how research relationships may evolve. Concerns were raised about how misconduct, shifting dynamics, or conflicts would be addressed after approval, and who would hold responsibility in such cases.

While a few respondents indicated no concerns, the overall pattern suggests that support for the initiative is accompanied by a clear recognition that its effectiveness will depend on careful attention to governance, resourcing, representation, and its relationship to existing systems.

Question: *In your view, **what role** should an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board ideally play? (Select all that apply)*

When asked what role a UIRL-EB should ideally play, the greatest number of respondents indicated they should play an “Advisory / guidance” role (86%), followed closely by “Capacity-building / education” (77%), “Ethics review” (77%), and “Research partnerships” (77%).

Two respondents (9%) selected *Unsure* in response to this question.



Another two respondents (9%) chose the *Other* option and wrote in their own responses, including the observation that there is potential for a UIRL-EB to “own a portion of the ethics review that centres on the Indigenous aspect of the project,” and the other noting that the Board should play a role in information sharing about how this process would differ from existing ethics pathways and why it is important.

Question: *What considerations are important to ensure **respect for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis distinctions** in an urban context?*

Responses to this question strongly reinforced themes raised throughout earlier sections, particularly the need to move beyond pan-Indigenous approaches and meaningfully account for the diversity, governance, and lived realities of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in urban settings.

Participants consistently emphasized that distinctions are not symbolic, but grounded in unique histories, legal relationships, knowledge systems, and governance structures that must be actively recognized in research and ethics processes. As noted in earlier responses, existing frameworks often struggle with this complexity, and respondents reiterated that urban contexts do not erase Nationhood or identity. One participant stated clearly: “Nationhood, laws, and knowledge systems do not disappear in urban centres,” underscoring the importance of maintaining distinctions in shared urban environments.

A central consideration across responses was representation and governance, with many participants stressing that no single organization can speak for all Indigenous peoples in an urban context. This reflects earlier concerns about overreliance on centralized or provincial bodies. Respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring that First Nations, Inuit, and



Métis voices are meaningfully included in decision-making structures, with attention to proportionality, diversity, and avoiding tokenism. This includes not only distinctions-based representation, but also inclusion across gender, age, and community roles, with one response emphasizing the need to “centre those most impacted, including women, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, youth, and Elders.” An Inuk participant again highlighted a specific gap, noting that Inuit in urban centres are often not automatically connected to territorial governance and must be intentionally included through appropriate organizations and leadership, rather than assumed representation.

Closely tied to this was the importance of clarity around authority, consent, and engagement pathways, which has been a recurring theme across multiple questions. Respondents noted that respecting distinctions requires identifying who holds the right to guide or approve research within each group, while also acknowledging the layered and mobile nature of urban Indigenous identities. This includes navigating situations where individuals may belong to multiple communities or where research spans across distinctions. Some participants pointed to the need for flexibility, suggesting that researchers must be able to justify when a distinctions-based approach is required versus when research may appropriately examine shared experiences, while still maintaining accountability to the Nations represented.

Another key theme was the need for resourcing and capacity to support meaningful participation. Several responses emphasized that distinctions cannot be upheld in practice without adequate compensation, time, and support for Indigenous participants, organizations, and knowledge holders. This aligns with earlier concerns about overburdening communities and reinforces that respect for distinctions must be operationalized, not simply acknowledged. Practical considerations such as honoraria, food, ceremony, and harm reduction were also identified as essential components of ethical engagement.

Finally, respondents highlighted the importance of ongoing, relational approaches and transparency, including maintaining open dialogue with different Nations, sharing findings appropriately, and ensuring that research does not override or undermine sovereignty. A small number of responses noted the inherent complexity of balancing distinctions-based approaches with the realities of urban, multi-nation contexts, where trade-offs may be necessary and require careful, context-specific judgment.

Overall, the responses affirm that respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis distinctions in urban research requires intentional design, inclusive governance, adequate resourcing, and a flexible, relational approach that reflects both Nation-specific rights and the interconnected realities of urban Indigenous life.

Question: Any *advice or key considerations* AHCW should keep in mind as it explores an Ethics Board initiative?



Finally, we asked respondents for any advice or key recommendations for AHCW to keep in mind as they explore the UIRL-EB initiative. While some respondents indicated they had no additional comments, others offered targeted advice that reinforces and extends earlier findings, particularly around governance, pacing, relationships, and implementation strategy.

A consistent thread was the importance of intentional design from the outset, especially in relation to distinctions-based representation. As noted in earlier responses, participants stressed that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis inclusion must be embedded structurally, not assumed. One respondent emphasized that “urban Inuit are often left out of decision-making spaces unless inclusion is deliberate,” reinforcing the need for proactive and balanced representation across all groups.

Several respondents highlighted the importance of clarity of mandate and integration with existing systems, particularly institutional research ethics boards. Building on earlier concerns about duplication and misalignment, participants advised early engagement with universities and research institutions to ensure that processes are complementary rather than burdensome. This included clarifying roles, expectations, and how a Lodge-based review might be recognized within existing compliance frameworks. Without this alignment, there is a risk that researchers—especially Indigenous scholars—could face unnecessary barriers.

Another prominent area of advice focused on resourcing, capacity, and sustainability. Respondents reiterated that meaningful Indigenous engagement requires adequate funding, compensation, and long-term support, particularly for Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members who contribute to ethics processes. The need for consistent and ongoing funding was explicitly noted, alongside concerns about overburdening individuals if expectations are not matched with resources.

Participants also emphasized the importance of relationships over structure, advising that the initiative should be grounded in ongoing engagement, trust-building, and responsiveness to community needs. One respondent cautioned to “start with relationships not structure,” while another stressed the importance of continually asking communities what they want and need. This relational approach was paired with advice to move deliberately and carefully, recognizing both the potential impact and the risks of missteps. As one participant noted, “Good things take time... once a mistake is made there is no going back,” highlighting the need for thoughtful, well-paced development.

Additional considerations included the need for transparent governance, open communication, and accountability mechanisms, particularly in how concerns or issues are addressed after project approval. Some respondents also pointed to practical implementation needs, such as developing processes to triage applications or ensuring that research labeled as “urban” is appropriately scoped.

A smaller number of responses offered broader encouragement and caution, including the need to anticipate resistance, remain inclusive in engagement efforts, and ensure that research leads to tangible outcomes for communities. Taken together, these responses



suggest that while there is strong support for the initiative, its success will depend on careful attention to design, resourcing, relationships, and alignment with existing systems.

Summary

The survey of key partners and stakeholders provides a broad view of how individuals working within and alongside urban Indigenous communities understand current research ethics processes and the potential role of a UIRL-EB. Overall, responses reflect strong alignment across participants, with clear support for the development of a UIRL-EB and consistent identification of both the gaps in existing systems and the opportunities such a model could address.

A central finding is the high level of support for the establishment of a UIRL-EB. All respondents indicated that such a body would be useful, with the majority identifying it as “very useful.” This support is grounded in a shared recognition that existing research ethics processes are not adequately serving urban Indigenous communities. Few respondents expressed confidence in current systems, and many identified them as limited in their ability to reflect the complexity, diversity, and relational nature of urban Indigenous life.

Taken together, the results suggest that the question is not whether an urban Indigenous ethics body is needed, but how it should be designed and implemented.

PURPOSE AND VALUE OF AN URBAN INDIGENOUS ETHICS BODY

Survey responses consistently point to the importance of an urban Indigenous ethics body as a mechanism for strengthening Indigenous governance in research. Participants emphasized that such a body would help shift research ethics away from institutional models focused on compliance and risk management, and toward approaches grounded in Indigenous values, community priorities, and relational accountability.

A key role identified for the UIRL-EB is bridging the gap between institutional research ethics processes and the realities of urban Indigenous communities. Respondents noted that existing frameworks are often designed for more clearly defined, singular communities and struggle to account for the multi-nation, relational, and fluid nature of urban Indigenous contexts. An urban Indigenous ethics body was seen as uniquely positioned to provide guidance on appropriate engagement, clarify expectations for researchers, and ensure that research is responsive to community-defined priorities.

Participants also highlighted the potential for the UIRL-EB to strengthen accountability across the full research lifecycle. Rather than focusing solely on project approval, respondents emphasized the importance of ongoing relationships, reciprocity, and meaningful benefit for communities. This includes ensuring that research findings are returned in accessible ways, that knowledge is mobilized in



ways that support community needs, and that researchers remain accountable beyond data collection.

In addition, respondents identified a strong role for the UIRL-EB in mentorship and capacity building. This includes supporting Indigenous researchers, students, and community-based organizations in conducting their own research, as well as helping non-Indigenous researchers better understand their ethical responsibilities. The development of a Lodge-based ethics process was also seen as an opportunity to build Indigenous research infrastructure and create new pathways for leadership and employment within community.

INDIGENOUS VALUES, KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS, AND DISTINCTIONS

Across responses, Indigenous ways of knowing and ethical frameworks were described as foundational to ethical research practice. Participants emphasized that Indigenous ethics are not supplementary to research, but central to how research should be conducted, understood, and evaluated. Core principles identified include relational accountability, reciprocity, respect, responsibility, and community benefit.

A dominant theme was the importance of self-determination. Respondents consistently described Indigenous ethics as a means of ensuring that communities are not simply participants in research, but leaders in defining research priorities, processes, and outcomes. This includes control over data, interpretation, and knowledge sharing, reinforcing the importance of Indigenous data sovereignty.

At the same time, respondents strongly emphasized the need to respect distinctions between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Participants highlighted that ethical research must reflect the unique governance structures, knowledge systems, and cultural practices of each group, rather than relying on pan-Indigenous approaches. This is particularly important in urban contexts, where multiple nations and identities are present and where authority, consent, and representation can be complex.

Responses also pointed to the importance of flexibility in navigating these distinctions. While distinctions-based approaches are essential, participants recognized that urban Indigenous realities require approaches that can hold multiple perspectives and relationships at once. This reinforces the need for an ethics process that is both grounded in Indigenous principles and adaptable to diverse and evolving contexts.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In addition to articulating the need and purpose of a UIRL-EB, respondents provided a range of practical considerations for how such a process could be developed and sustained.

A consistent theme was the importance of clear governance, mandate, and scope. Participants emphasized the need to define the role of the UIRL-EB early on,



including how it relates to existing institutional ethics boards and whether it functions as an advisory body, a review body, or both. Early engagement with universities and research institutions was identified as important to reduce barriers for researchers, and support alignment between systems.

Resourcing and capacity were also identified as critical. Respondents emphasized that meaningful Indigenous-led ethics processes require sustained funding, administrative support, and fair compensation for Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members. Without adequate resources, there is a risk of overburdening individuals and undermining the relational and ethical commitments of the process.

Participants also highlighted the importance of partnerships. Building relationships with Indigenous organizations, governance bodies, and research institutions was seen as essential for ensuring legitimacy, avoiding conflict, and supporting shared accountability. At the same time, respondents emphasized the need for AHWC to maintain a clear and distinct role, particularly in representing urban Indigenous perspectives.

Other practical considerations included developing transparent and accessible processes, providing mentorship and guidance to researchers, and ensuring that ethics review processes are adaptable and relational rather than overly bureaucratic. Some respondents also identified the potential for fee structures or other mechanisms to support sustainability, though these would need to be carefully designed to avoid creating barriers.

Finally, respondents emphasized the importance of proceeding deliberately and relationally. Building trust, ensuring inclusive representation, and grounding the process in ongoing community engagement were identified as essential to long-term success.

Overall, survey findings indicate strong and consistent support for the development of an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board. Participants identified clear gaps in existing research ethics systems and articulated a shared vision for a model that is grounded in Indigenous governance, relational accountability, and community-defined priorities.

At the same time, responses underscore that the effectiveness of such a model will depend on careful attention to design, resourcing, partnerships, and the ability to balance structure with flexibility. The survey results provide a clear indication that there is both a need and an opportunity to develop an ethics process that reflects the realities of urban Indigenous communities and supports research conducted in a good way.

Focus Groups

Key Findings
Research must be community-driven and grounded in the priorities, needs, and lived realities of Indigenous people.
Participants emphasized that research should lead to tangible benefits and meaningful change for individuals and communities.
Relational approaches based on trust, reciprocity, and ongoing engagement are essential to ethical research practice.
Existing research processes are often experienced as rigid, extractive, or disconnected from community realities.
Cultural grounding, including teachings, ceremony, and wholistic understandings of wellness, must be central to research.
Indigenous control over information, data sovereignty, and data governance are critical considerations across the research lifecycle.
There is strong interest in inclusive participation, including meaningful roles for individuals with lived experience.
An AHCW-led ethics process is supported as a way to set standards, build trust, and strengthen community accountability.

Focus groups were conducted with Indigenous staff of AHCW and with one of the agency's Peer Advisory Circles. These sessions provided an opportunity to explore experiences with research, perspectives on what is important for research ethics, and priorities in considering the development of an ethics board at AHCW's Urban Indigenous Research Lodge.

The focus groups were all hosted at AHCW on March 19, 2026. In total, 23 people participated in the focus groups and contributed their voices.

Peer Advisory Group and Community Members

This focus group brought together a total of seven participants (5 Safer Consumption Site Peer Advisory Circle members and 2 walk-in community members), with one additional Peer contributing their perspectives through a brief separate one-on-one conversation following the group, whose insights were integrated into these summary notes.

Participants engaged with a series of guiding questions related to research priorities, the purpose and benefits of research, involvement in research processes, and their potential interest in participating in research ethics structures. The discussion was grounded in their



lived experience and reflected both immediate service-related concerns and broader reflections on how research can better serve them and their communities.

Key Themes

In opening the focus group with Peer participants, we began by asking about what is worth researching, what experiences they'd had with research, and what are worthwhile research goals. Discussions about what should be researched centered on gaps in existing systems of care, particularly the absence of appropriate responses to mental health crises. Participants highlighted the need for alternatives to traditional emergency responses, suggesting a role for mental health-specific first responders. Concerns about youth involvement in substance use also emerged, including recognition that young people may already possess significant knowledge about drug use at an early age. This raised questions about both prevention and education.

Participants emphasized the importance of broadening how addiction is understood, noting that research should not be limited to substances such as drugs and alcohol but should also consider other forms of addiction, including gambling and food. Within substance use, there was particular attention to the toxicity of the drug supply and the implications for safer consumption. Participants discussed variability in tolerance and dosage, pointing to the need for more nuanced, practical information that reflects real-world conditions of use.

When reflecting on the goals of research and who benefits, participants consistently returned to the idea that research should ultimately help people in diverse and responsive ways. This included supporting individuals who are currently using substances, those seeking to reduce or stop use, and those navigating harm reduction. The range of desired outcomes was not fixed; rather, participants emphasized that research should accommodate multiple pathways and definitions of success. They also identified broader systemic benefits, including reduced strain on healthcare systems and improved safety for users.

Throughout this discussion, we sought to bring Peer participants to a place of rooted, experiential understanding about their own expertise in research conversations to speak to research practices and ethical research conduct. As the above summary demonstrates, participants had detailed and robust contributions about what research they think is needed, how knowledge can be shared, and what roles they can play in those processes.

A strong theme across the discussion was the importance of inclusive participation in research. Participants indicated that “everyone” should have a role, including individuals who may not see themselves as knowledgeable. This was framed not only as a matter of inclusion but also as a way to build awareness and strengthen community engagement. At the same time, participants identified the need for researchers to provide participants with material supports for their contributions that honour their lived expertise and provide substantive compensation to participants (e.g., bus tickets were jokingly mentioned but conveyed the deeper point that researchers need to recognize and compensate participants through relationship and material supports). There was also recognition that Peers



themselves could play active roles in conducting research, such as gathering information within their communities.

Knowledge sharing and education emerged as a significant subtheme, particularly through the idea of a “manual for drug use.” One participant reflected on the absence of accessible, practical information about the long-term effects of substance use and expressed that having such knowledge earlier could have influenced their decisions. This extended beyond risk awareness to include strategies for caring for one’s body while using substances. Participants implicitly linked this idea to research mobilization, suggesting that research outputs should be practical, accessible, and directly relevant to lived experience.

Participants also raised concerns about how research processes are structured. There was a clear preference for approaches that are flexible, informal, and relational rather than rigid or institutional. Discussions highlighted how formal research environments can feel alienating and may limit meaningful participation, particularly when shaped by external ethics requirements. This connected to broader reflections on wellness, including the importance of humour, social connection, and wholistic approaches, which participants felt should also be reflected in how research is conducted.

During the discussion about how research may be usefully given back to community, participants focused on topics or recounted experiences related to the importance of identifying knowledge gaps and providing practical information that is relevant to people’s experiences and needs. The idea that even individuals with limited knowledge should be involved in research also pushed beyond typical assumptions about expertise, highlighting a more expansive view of participation.

Notable Recommendations and Takeaways

Participants expressed clear support for Peer involvement in research and in decision-making processes related to whether and how research is conducted. They emphasized that research should not be extractive and must be grounded in existing relationships with communities. Where such relationships do not exist, participants suggested that building them should be a prerequisite to proceeding with research. Transparency and shared decision-making were identified as essential, with participants expecting to have a meaningful role in shaping research processes and outputs.

There was also a strong emphasis on compensation and material support for participation, as well as the need to design research processes that are accessible, adaptable, and engaging. Participants highlighted that research should extend beyond a single organization and reflect the interconnected nature of community networks. They expected that research outcomes would have broader impacts across the community landscape.

Summary

Overall, participants framed research as a tool that should be directly responsive to lived realities, emphasizing practical knowledge, harm reduction, and systemic gaps in care.



There was a clear expectation that research be inclusive, relational, and non-extractive, with meaningful opportunities for Peer involvement at all stages.

Notably, as in various data sources throughout this study, participants described the tension between the desire for flexible, community-driven approaches and the constraints of formal research structures, particularly ethics processes. One of the key tasks moving forward will be to find the balance (or resolve this tension) in ways that meaningfully empower community, are responsive to community needs, and support accountability, respect, and reciprocity in research relationships. Participants also identified a gap in accessible, experience-based knowledge about substance use and its impacts, pointing to opportunities for more effective knowledge mobilization—all of which exemplify considerations for ethical research practices.

Staff Focus Groups

Three staff focus groups were conducted with Indigenous staff members at AHCW with a total of 15 participants (7 participants in the first focus group, 2 participants in the second, and 6 in the third group). These discussions were designed to centre Indigenous lived experience, regardless of participants' prior involvement in formal research.

Across groups, participants reflected on their experiences with research, the role and responsibilities of research in Indigenous contexts, and the potential value and risks of establishing a research ethics board or equivalent process within AHCW. Conversations were wide-ranging, combining practical considerations with deeper reflections on values, culture, and systemic dynamics.

Key Themes

Participants described a range of prior experiences with research, from formal academic work to community-based and programmatic engagement. These included involvement in graduate-level research, participation in sharing circles and digital storytelling projects, facilitation of Peer support groups, and informal roles such as “fact checking” or gathering information to support program delivery. Across these experiences, participants emphasized that research is fundamentally about making sense of the world, but also raised critical questions about ownership, control, and use of research outputs. Concerns about exploitation surfaced early, with participants questioning who benefits from research and whether it can reproduce harm if not handled appropriately.

A central theme across all groups was that research must lead to meaningful, demonstrable impact for Indigenous communities. Participants drew a distinction between academic or “pure” research and community-based research, emphasizing that the latter carries a higher obligation to produce tangible benefits. This included returning findings to the community, influencing programs and policies, and addressing real-world issues. Several participants stressed the importance of being connected to the full lifecycle of research—



from design through to implementation—highlighting that impact is often contingent on relationships and networks that enable findings to be acted upon.

Closely tied to this was a strong emphasis on community-driven research. Participants consistently raised the need to prioritize research that emerges from community-identified needs rather than researcher-driven agendas. Determining “community fit” was seen as a key function of an ethics or governance process, including assessing whether research questions are relevant and whether researchers have established meaningful relationships with the community. Where such relationships do not exist, participants suggested they should be developed before research proceeds.

Data governance and sovereignty were also prominent concerns. Participants discussed the importance of Indigenous ownership and control over data, referencing principles such as OCAP and emphasizing the need to consider the full “data life cycle,” including how information is collected, stored, accessed, and used. There was recognition that an AHCW-led ethics process could play a foundational role in embedding these principles.

Cultural grounding emerged as a defining expectation for research processes. Participants described the importance of centring Indigenous values, teachings, and ways of knowing throughout the research process—not as an add-on, but as a foundational approach. This included starting and ending research in ceremony, integrating the Seven Teachings, and ensuring that cultural elements are applied authentically and intentionally. Broader conceptions of health and wellness were also emphasized, including spiritual, social, and relational dimensions that extend beyond biomedical models. Participants noted that humour, connection, and storytelling are integral to wellness and should be reflected in research approaches.

Relationship-building was identified as essential and often in tension with institutional research processes. Participants highlighted how colonial or administrative models of research can feel rigid, extractive, and alienating, particularly when they treat individuals as subjects rather than partners. In contrast, participants emphasized relational approaches grounded in trust, reciprocity, dignity, and humility. This included co-creation of research, shared interpretation of findings, and meaningful involvement of individuals with lived experience. Participants stressed that without these elements, research risks reinforcing harm, including experiences of racism, othering, and re-traumatization.

Time was identified as a critical factor in enabling relational research. Participants noted that building trust and meaningful relationships cannot be rushed and may not align with typical institutional timelines. Allowing flexibility in timelines was seen as necessary to ensure genuine participation and informed consent.

Another key theme was the importance of addressing root causes rather than surface-level issues. Participants expressed frustration with research that focuses on “band-aid” solutions or quantitative outputs without engaging with underlying drivers such as colonization, housing instability, and systemic inequities. For example, discussions about homelessness emphasized the need to understand not only housing access but also the broader social and cultural dimensions of “home,” as well as the impacts of displacement



and loss of land. Participants called for research that engages deeply with these core issues and reflects lived realities.

Participants also highlighted the need for experiential understanding among researchers. It was suggested that researchers should engage directly with communities and contexts rather than relying solely on abstract or quantitative data. This was framed as necessary to develop a more accurate and grounded understanding of the issues being studied.

The potential value of an AHCW-based ethics or research governance body was framed in several ways. Participants noted that such a body could set standards for research involving urban Indigenous communities, including requiring researchers to demonstrate relevance and accountability. It could also enhance transparency, build trust, and increase AHCW's visibility and influence. Some participants described the potential for a small but impactful entity that could shape how research is conducted and interpreted. Additionally, there was interest in the role of such a body in supporting mentorship and capacity building, including creating pathways for Indigenous community members and emerging researchers to be involved in research processes.

While there was broad alignment across groups, there were some unique discussions worth noting that highlighted various aspects of research. For example, one group strongly emphasized grassroots governance, suggesting that community members themselves should constitute the decision-making body. Another participant highlighted the importance of cross-cultural considerations, noting that research should not be limited to Indigenous contexts alone but should also engage with broader, interconnected communities. There were also nuanced discussions about the role of non-Indigenous researchers, with participants acknowledging both challenges and practical realities, while emphasizing the need for mentorship and capacity building for Indigenous researchers.

Concerns about risk also emphasized varied perspectives and aspects of research. Some participants emphasized reputational and financial risks, including the potential for criticism or stereotypes about Indigenous organizations. Others focused more on relational and ethical risks, such as harm to participants or communities through poorly conducted research.

Notable Recommendations and Takeaways

Participants offered a number of concrete recommendations for developing a research ethics or governance process at AHCW. These recommendations included prioritizing transparency and avoiding “black box” decision-making, ensuring face-to-face and relational engagement where possible, and requiring researchers to establish relationships with the community prior to ethics review. Participants emphasized the importance of clearly defining expectations, including how research relates to urban Indigenous communities and how findings will be used.

There was also a strong call to embed Indigenous values and teachings into all aspects of the process, including decision-making frameworks, evaluation criteria, and overall governance. Participants highlighted the importance of compensation and recognition of



time, as well as practical considerations related to workload, scheduling, and board composition.

Partnerships were identified as a key strategy for navigating potential overlaps with existing organizations and avoiding duplication or conflict—particularly, as a strategy to avoid jurisdictional conflict or “stepping on toes.” This was particularly important in the urban context, where multiple organizations, Nations, and governing bodies have overlapping roles and responsibilities. At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of developing a distinct identity for AHCW’s research role, particularly in relation to urban Indigenous contexts.

Finally, some participants expressed interest in being involved in ongoing research processes, including ethics review and governance, and emphasized the importance of building capacity within the community to support this work over time.

Summary

Staff participants consistently emphasized that research must be community-driven, relational, and grounded in Indigenous values, with a clear expectation of tangible benefit for communities. There was a strong critique of extractive and rigid research models, alongside a call for approaches that prioritize trust, reciprocity, and cultural integrity.

Key tensions emerged between institutional research structures and the need for flexible, relationship-based processes, particularly in relation to timelines, ethics requirements, and definitions of impact.

Participants also highlighted gaps in current research approaches, including insufficient attention to root causes, lived experience, and qualitative knowledge.

Overall, there was clear support for an AHCW-led research governance process, provided it is transparent, inclusive, and capable of setting and enforcing standards that reflect community priorities and Indigenous ways of knowing.



Interviews with Elders and Knowledge Holders

Key Findings
Indigenous-led research and ethics processes are necessary to ensure research is conducted in a respectful and culturally grounded way.
Research is fundamentally relational and must be grounded in trust, accountability, and ongoing relationships.
Ethical research must provide meaningful benefit to Indigenous communities and uphold principles of reciprocity.
Indigenous values, teachings, ceremony, and spiritual guidance must be meaningfully integrated into research processes.
Data sovereignty and Indigenous control over knowledge are essential components of ethical research.
Ethics processes must reflect wholistic understandings of knowledge, including storytelling, lived experience, and non-linear ways of knowing.
Clear governance, accountability mechanisms, and defined roles are necessary to support ethical practice.
Respect for distinctions and the diversity of Indigenous perspectives—including Inuit-specific approaches—is essential.

Six interviews were conducted with Elders Billie Schibler, Michael Pierre, Gramma Geraldine Shingoose, Damon Johnston, Mary Wilson, and Tagaak E-Palmer. Elders were invited by email to meet with Chris Campbell or Jared Star. Interviews were held virtually in April 2026 (on April 7, 8, 9, and 16).

Tobacco and honoraria were offered to all Elders in accordance with cultural protocols. In some cases, tobacco was delivered in person to the Elder or given under the direction of the Elder.

Interviews were conversational and relational in nature, following the lead of each Elder. Discussions focused broadly on the role of research, the purpose and responsibilities of research ethics review processes, and AHC’s proposed Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB).

Elders also shared guidance, cultural or spiritual teachings, and reflections to inform both the development of an ethics review process and the broader conduct of research in Indigenous contexts. Conversations were responsive and adaptive, allowing Elders to guide the direction and emphasis of each discussion.

Shared Themes and Guidance

This section summarizes key shared teachings, guidance, insights, and recommendations that were raised by Elders.

Across conversations, Elders consistently emphasized the need for Indigenous-led research and ethics processes grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing. There was a clear position that existing Western, biomedical, or institutional ethics boards often lack the cultural, relational, and spiritual understanding necessary to appropriately guide research involving Indigenous communities. As a result, an Indigenous-led process was seen as necessary to ensure that research is conducted in a way that is respectful, relevant, and beneficial to Indigenous peoples.

A closely related theme was the importance of relationship-building as foundational to research. Elders described research not as a transactional or procedural activity, but as a relational process requiring trust, presence, and accountability. This included the expectation that researchers engage meaningfully with communities, build relationships over time, and remain accountable beyond the life of a project. Relationship-building was also linked to ethical responsibility, with the understanding that research conducted without relationship risks harm, misrepresentation, or extraction.

Elders also emphasized that research must directly benefit Indigenous communities. This included both tangible and intangible forms of benefit, such as improved services, policy change, increased understanding, or strengthened cultural knowledge. There was a consistent expectation that research go beyond knowledge generation and contribute to meaningful change, with reciprocity identified as a core principle. Research was framed as a process of giving and receiving, rather than one-directional extraction.

Another shared theme was the need to centre Indigenous values, teachings, and cultural practices throughout the research process. This included the use of ceremony, involvement of Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and grounding in teachings such as the Seven Sacred Teachings. Elders stressed that these elements should not be superficial or symbolic, but should meaningfully shape how research is designed, conducted, and interpreted.

Elders also highlighted the importance of data sovereignty and Indigenous control over information. This included concerns about ownership, access, and long-term use of data, as well as the need for Indigenous communities to govern how their information is collected and used. There was recognition that current systems often limit access to relevant data or filter it through non-Indigenous frameworks, reinforcing the need for community-controlled approaches.

A further shared emphasis was on wholistic and non-linear understandings of knowledge and health. Elders described research as needing to reflect the full complexity of Indigenous experience, including spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical dimensions. Storytelling, lived experience, and oral knowledge were identified as essential components of understanding, alongside or in place of written or quantitative forms.



Elders also spoke to the importance of clarity of purpose, accountability, and integrity in research processes. This included defining the mandate and authority of an ethics board, ensuring clear expectations for researchers, and establishing mechanisms to prevent harm and respond when harm occurs. Trust was identified as central, with recognition that it must be actively built and maintained.

Finally, Elders noted the importance of recognizing diversity across Indigenous nations and contexts, including distinctions between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives, as well as differences between urban and non-urban experiences. Ethics processes were expected to be flexible and responsive to this diversity rather than applying uniform approaches.

Important consideration: While Elders shared teachings and guidance openly within the context of these interviews, it was emphasized—particularly by Gramma Shingoose—that some teachings, ceremonial knowledge, or cultural practices are not intended to be recorded, reproduced, or directly embedded into research processes. Respecting protocols and boundaries around what can and cannot be shared is itself a core ethical responsibility and must be built into any research or ethics framework.

Elders' Unique Insights

Elder Billie Schibler emphasized the importance of grounding research ethics in spirituality and spirit-based guidance, describing how ethical decision-making should extend beyond formal or procedural standards. She highlighted the limitations of mainstream ethics frameworks and emphasized that ceremony, storytelling, and spiritual practices are essential to understanding and evaluating research in Indigenous contexts. She also spoke to the importance of collective data sovereignty, including the potential for shared Indigenous data systems that support governance and decision-making across organizations. Additionally, Elder Billie underscored the value of storytelling as a method of conveying knowledge, drawing on her experiences with research work, such as the child death reviews she advocated to bring into her department as child advocate, to illustrate how research can better reflect lived realities and honour individuals and communities.

Elder Michael Pierre focused on the need for an ethics process that protects Indigenous communities from extractive research practices, grounded in a clear understanding of historical harms. He emphasized that there needs to be a clear need on the part of community to undertake a UIRL-EB initiative, and that such a board would need a clear mandate in order to operate effectively. He raised concerns related to data ownership, consent, and long-term use of information, noting that current systems often prioritize institutional control over community interests. Michael also highlighted the importance of board composition, advocating for strong representation from Elders, community members, and individuals with lived experience alongside researchers. He raised practical considerations related to accountability, risk, and governance, including the need for clear mandates, procedures for addressing harm, and attention to reputational and legal risks. He also identified the potential role of the ethics process in supporting participants directly, such as through access to cultural or emotional supports during research.



Gramma Geraldine Shingoose expressed strong support for the development of an Indigenous-led ethics board, emphasizing that such a process must capture the spirit of research, not just its procedural elements. She highlighted the importance of ceremony, Elder guidance, and oral knowledge, noting that many aspects of Indigenous research cannot be fully translated into written formats. She also emphasized reciprocity as central to research, including the expectation that researchers give back to communities in meaningful ways. Gramma Shingoose raised important considerations around respect, consent, and boundaries, including the need to ensure that certain teachings or ceremonial knowledge are not recorded or shared inappropriately. She also described the potential for an Indigenous ethics process to advocate for Indigenous researchers and bridge relationships with Western institutions through approaches such as Two-Eyed Seeing.

Elder Damon Johnston emphasized the importance of establishing clear standards, protocols, and accountability mechanisms within an Indigenous ethics process. He highlighted the need to balance Indigenous knowledge and Western academic credentials, ensuring that both are recognized and integrated appropriately. Damon also stressed the importance of consensus-building and cooperation across diverse Indigenous groups, particularly in urban contexts where multiple nations and perspectives intersect. He identified data sovereignty as a critical component of ethical research and emphasized the need for accurate, community-relevant data. Additionally, he underscored the importance of wholistic health frameworks, ensuring that research reflects the interconnected physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of well-being.

Elder Mary Wilson emphasized the importance of humility, openness, wellness, and intention as foundational principles for research. She described research as a process that should be grounded in respect for all forms of life and knowledge, with a focus on creating safe and inclusive spaces for participants. She also highlighted the importance of commitment and follow-through, noting that researchers must be accountable for completing their work and ensuring continuity. Mary Wilson underscored the role of Indigenous teachings, particularly the Seven Sacred Teachings, as guiding frameworks for both behaviour and reflection within research processes. She also spoke to the potential for an Indigenous ethics process to reduce fear, break down barriers, and foster growth, particularly by addressing racism and other systemic challenges.

Elder Tagaak E-Palmer highlighted the importance of Inuit-specific perspectives in research ethics, noting that existing frameworks (such as OCAP) do not fully reflect Inuit understandings of knowledge, ownership, and stewardship, particularly the concept of “owning” land. She emphasized the role of natural laws and storytelling as foundational to ethical understanding, describing how these are passed down through lived experience rather than formal documentation. Tagaak also stressed the importance of grassroots community involvement in shaping research ethics, noting that many decision-makers lack direct experience in community contexts. She highlighted the significance of relationship-building and in-person engagement, and raised considerations related to the diversity of Indigenous experiences, particularly between northern and urban contexts.

Summary

Across the interviews, Elders consistently framed research as a relational, ethical, and culturally grounded practice that must be led by and accountable to Indigenous communities. Shared themes emphasized the importance of Indigenous leadership, reciprocity, relationship-building, and the integration of cultural values and teachings. At the same time, each Elder contributed distinct perspectives that deepen and extend this shared foundation.

Notably, Elders highlighted different dimensions of what an Indigenous ethics process could become: a spiritually grounded decision-making body (Elder Billie), a protective and accountable governance structure (Michael Pierre), a ceremonial and relational process rooted in reciprocity (Grama Shingoose), a standards-based and collaborative framework (Damon Johnston), a values-driven and transformative space (Mary Wilson), and a model that respects the specificity and diversity of Indigenous nations, including Inuit perspectives (Tagaak E-Palmer). Each spoke of potential opportunities to support the work, whether in their openness to hearing more about it as AHC progress with the work or in their offering to work as advisors for or serve on such an ethics board (e.g., Elder Billie and Grama Shingoose).

Taken together, these contributions suggest that an effective Indigenous research ethics process must balance structure and flexibility, governance and relationship, and shared principles with respect for distinct cultural perspectives.

Synthesis of Findings

Across all components of the Feasibility Study, there was consistent support for the establishment of an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB). No data source indicated opposition to its development. Instead, findings point to a clear conclusion: the creation of a UIRL-EB is both feasible and would serve an important purpose.

The central questions are not whether it should be established, but how it should be designed, implemented, and sustained—specifically in relation to governance, membership, processes, partnerships, and sequencing of development.

The following synthesis organizes cross-cutting findings into key design domains where decisions about the form, structure, process, and engagement will be made. These domains highlight the core considerations that will inform the development of the UIRL-EB.

Governance and Authority

- There is strong consensus on the need for an Indigenous-led ethics body grounded in a community-based authority.
- Indigenous governance and decision-making must be central to an ethics review process, not merely play an advisory role.
- Governance structures related to an urban Indigenous research ethics board should include Elders, Knowledge Holders, community members, and individuals with lived experience in some fashion.
- There is a fundamental need to clearly define roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority.
- Governance needs to reflect collective, community-informed approaches rather than institutional research ethics board models.
- An urban Indigenous ethics board housed at AHCW needs to align with AHCW's existing values, frameworks, and organizational direction.

Representation and Inclusion

- Representation must be substantive and embedded in governance, not symbolic.
- Ethics processes must reflect the diversity of urban Indigenous communities.
- There was a strong emphasis on the importance of meaningful, distinctions-based inclusion of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples – which goes beyond naming and needs to involve material practices to recognize, honour, and provide pathways for different collective identities, protocols, and ways of being and knowing.

- An urban Indigenous ethics board needs to recognize that urban contexts involve multiple Nations, identities, governance relationships, and jurisdictional authorities.
- Individuals with lived and living experience need to have meaningful involvement through decision-making roles.

Ethics Processes and Ways of Knowing

- Ethics is understood as relational, ongoing, and grounded in practice—not a one-time approval process.
- Ethical responsibility spans the full research lifecycle.
- Relationship-building, trust, and reciprocity are central in ethical research.
- Ethics processes need to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and wholistic frameworks.
- There is a need for flexible, adaptable processes that can respond to diverse research contexts and community needs.
- There is widespread recognition that checklist-based, rigidly standardized REB models are insufficient and not reflected or responded to the realities and priorities of Indigenous peoples, historically or in the present.

Accountability, Data Governance, and Community Benefit

- There is a strong emphasis on Indigenous data sovereignty and governance principles, including community authority, ownership, control, access, stewardship, and culturally grounded responsibilities related to data and knowledge
- Data sovereignty practices needs to reflect diverse Indigenous values and ways of knowing, and emphasize caring for individual and community wellness through ethical research practices and data management.
- Ethical processes must ensure community authority over how data and knowledge are used.
- There needs to be a clear expectation that research produces tangible benefits for Indigenous communities.
- Research needs to maintain active, ongoing accountability to community—not only to institutions or funders.
- There is a need to address and prevent extractive research practices through structure and oversight.
- *Trust* was identified as both a prerequisite and outcome of ethical research systems.

Partnerships, Integration, and Sustainability

- UIRL-EB will need to prepare to operate within a broader research and institutional ecosystem.
- There will need to be defined relationships with academic REBs, organizations, and systems, which importantly need to establish pathways for collaboration, coordination, and potential mutual recognition processes.
- Dedicated resources—including funding, staffing, and infrastructure—will be required for a sustainable ethics board initiative.
- There is a need for capacity-building within AHCW and among partners.
- Long-term sustainability must be considered from the outset.

Taken together, these findings identify the broad areas within which key decisions about the development of a UIRL-EB will need to be made. They highlight where there is strong alignment across data sources and stakeholder groups, and collectively outline the foundational considerations for governance, representation, process design, accountability, and sustainability. Rather than prescribing a single model, the synthesis provides a structured understanding of what must be considered to ensure that any future ethics body is grounded, responsive, and effective.

The Feasibility Study demonstrates not only that establishing a UIRL-EB is possible, but that there is clear support, strong alignment with AHCW's existing values and approaches, and meaningful insight into the considerations that will shape its development. Moving forward, the focus will be on bringing these elements together in a coherent and practical way — clarifying mandate, identifying appropriate structures and partnerships, and ensuring that the process remains sustainable, values-driven, and responsive to community. This work will require continued engagement, careful planning, and an iterative approach as AHCW moves toward the next phase of development.

Conclusion

This Feasibility Study demonstrates that the development of an Urban Indigenous Research Lodge – Ethics Board (UIRL-EB) at AHCW is both feasible and well supported. Across all lines of evidence, there was no indication that such a model should not move forward. Instead, findings consistently point to a shared understanding that the need already exists, alongside the importance of establishing a clear mandate.

The central consideration is not whether to proceed, but how. This includes decisions related to governance, representation, processes, partnerships, and the sequencing of development. As reflected throughout this report, careful attention to these elements will be essential to ensuring that the UIRL-EB is grounded in Indigenous values, responsive to urban Indigenous realities, accountable to community, and capable of supporting ethical research in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Should AHCW decide to proceed with the development of a UIRL-EB, additional engagement will be important, including targeted discussions with institutional research ethics boards, such as university REBs. This would help clarify potential relationships, areas of alignment, and practical considerations for integration within existing research systems. Building on these insights, a proposed development plan could be prepared for AHCW's consideration, which would in turn inform a future implementation plan.

Any future development of a UIRL-EB would benefit from an iterative and relational approach. Ongoing input from community, partners, leadership, Indigenous researchers, and Elders and Knowledge Holders will be critical, with flexibility to refine or adjust direction as planning progresses. Further engagement would also support more detailed consideration of how the UIRL-EB could reflect the specific needs, priorities, and realities of the communities it is intended to serve.

Taken together, the findings of this study provide a clear and credible foundation for moving forward—grounded in broad support, informed by multiple perspectives, and guided by a shared commitment to Indigenous-led, community-centered research ethics.

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