

Immigrant Attraction and Retention in Oxford County

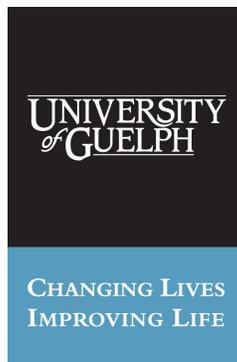
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We would also like to thank the Ontario Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs for funding this research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rural Immigration Project chose Oxford County as one of four case studies to understand best practices in immigrant attraction and retention in rural Ontario. The researchers conducted key-informant interviews with 7 policymakers and 14 service providers as well as 2 focus groups with 30 immigrants to understand the County's efforts in this regard. This research had three main objectives:

1. To understand the steps that Oxford has taken to attract and retain immigrants;
2. To assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the immigrant attraction and retention strategy in Oxford County; and,
3. To explore the perceptions and experiences of immigrants living in Oxford County.

The findings suggest that Oxford County has incorporated immigration into their economic development strategy. They have created an umbrella partnership called the Oxford Workforce Development Partnership within which the immigrant attraction and retention efforts are nested. The Immigration Portal, the Oxford Local Immigration Partnership (Oxford LIP), the Work in Oxford website, and Settlement Services are four key avenues through which the efforts at immigrant attraction and retention are being directed.

The SWOT revealed the many strengths, few weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Oxford LIP and Oxford's immigrant attraction and retention efforts. The key strengths include: their vision; the political will and strong leadership; collaboration and communication; unique model; and, innovative approach. The weaknesses include: the assumption that immigrants will reach out for support, lack of policies relating to immigration; and, lack of monitoring and evaluation system for the efforts. The opportunities include: the location of the County, the availability of employment, and the identity of Oxford as a smaller community. The threats include: language and communication barriers, community resistance to change, and isolation experienced by immigrants. In light of the strengths, opportunities, and threats, the interviewees identified general and specific next steps for the immigration efforts in the County, including: conversation cafes, mapping of community services, and crafting policies. Finally, the interviewees were asked to envision the ideal scenario with respect to immigration in the County, they mentioned: economic prosperity, cultural diversity, and a welcoming community as key elements of successful efforts.

The focus groups revealed the perceptions and experiences of immigrants with respect to attraction, challenges, and supports. Three main factors attracted immigrants to Oxford County: family and friends, job opportunities, and perceptions of the County. The common challenges faced by immigrants included: feelings of isolation, inadequate language training, and difficulty finding employment in their field of work. Immigrants wished that they had online and in-person spaces in which they could connect with other immigrants in the County, interact with Canadian citizens, and find out about the services that are in place in the County. The key finding from the focus groups was that immigrants felt alone and isolated in Oxford County and desired support as they try to settle and integrate into the County.

In light of these findings, 10 recommendations are proposed for Oxford County to enhance their immigrant attraction and retention efforts. They are:

1. Clarify whether the attraction and retention efforts are focused on primary and/or secondary migrants;
2. Reflect the economic and social needs of immigrants in programs and priorities related to immigrant attraction and retention;
3. Reach out to and invite immigrants to become part of the Oxford LIP;
4. Create spaces in which immigrants can interact with other immigrants and service providers;
5. Create a Facebook group that can serve as a platform for immigrants to get to know other immigrants and learn about services available for them;
6. Organize multicultural events to celebrate diversity, educate the community, and to help immigrants integrate;
7. Explore the idea of creating a multicultural association to promote perception of Oxford as a welcoming community;
8. Invite employers around the Oxford LIP table to ensure that attraction and retention strategy aligns with the labour market needs;
9. Consider creating an “adopt a newcomer” initiative where Oxford residents can volunteer to welcome new immigrants to the community; and,
10. Consider creating a mentorship program for internationally trained professionals to give immigrants an inside perspective to their industry and to build their professional networks.

It is hoped that the findings from this research will help Oxford County enhance their immigrant attraction and retention efforts. Moreover, these findings will inform the creation of a best practices toolkit, intended for small municipalities looking to attract and retain immigrants.

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KEY TERMS

Immigrant: Any person who has gone through the Canadian immigration process to become a permanent resident and/or citizen of Canada. For this report, this definition includes people who have chosen to settle in Oxford County as their initial home upon arrival in Canada (primary migrants) and people who have chosen to relocate to Oxford County after initially living elsewhere in Canada (secondary migrants).

Immigrant Attraction and Retention: the efforts aimed at bringing immigrants into the region and encouraging them to stay.

Local Immigration Partnership (LIP): a local initiative funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to help identify gaps in service delivery for immigrants and to collaborate and coordinate services in order to fill these gaps.

Immigration Portal: an initiative funded and administered through the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade, as part of the Municipal Immigration Information Online (MIIO) Program.

Settlement Services: Settlement services are intended for immigrants to help them find their footing in new surroundings. They include, but are not limited to: help with interpreting and filling out government documents, referrals to community services, help finding jobs or training for specific jobs, and English as Second Language (ESL) classes.

English as Second Language (ESL) classes: ESL classes are for immigrants with varied levels of English in addition to their mother tongue. They can range from beginner to advanced levels, depending on the needs of the immigrant.

Policy Makers: For this research, policy makers are defined as any individuals who are affiliated with the government and can influence the policy-making or program implementation process.

Service Providers: For this research, service providers are defined as individuals or organizations that provide social, financial, or advocacy services and/or support for immigrants. These include organizations whose mandate is specific to immigrants and whose mandate encompasses all people, including immigrants.

Note: These definitions are not universal, they are specific to this report.

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INTRODUCTION

Many rural communities in Canada are struggling. They are challenged by forecasts of declining populations, expected changes in the workforce, and increasing national and global pressure to stay competitive (CRRF, 2005). In response to these challenges, all levels of government in Canada are working together with rural communities to encourage the attraction and retention of primary and secondary migrants in order to meet labour market needs, sustain population growth, and enhance diversity. However, many rural communities lack the resources to be able to successfully attract and retain immigrants. This report looks at Oxford County's efforts at immigrant attraction and retention.

To this end, the report is divided into three main sections. First, the purpose of the report, the methods employed, and the context of Oxford County are introduced. Next, a findings section presents key themes, best practices, and guiding principles that emerged from interviews with 7 policy makers and 14 service providers. Then, the findings from focus groups with approximately 30 immigrants are presented. Finally, recommendations for Oxford County are offered.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study has three objectives. They are:

- 1) To understand the steps that Oxford County has taken to attract and retain immigrants;
- 2) To assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) pertaining to immigration efforts in the County; and,
- 3) To explore the perceptions and experiences of immigrants living in Oxford County.

METHODOLOGY

Oxford County was selected as one of four case studies of interest for the Rural Immigration Project led by Dr. Wayne Caldwell at the University of Guelph, which is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA). The goal of the project is to help rural regions across Ontario develop policies and programs in order to attract and retain immigrants.

To investigate the situation in Oxford County, the researchers used a mixed methods approach that included interviews and focus groups. Additionally, data from the National Household Survey (NHS, 2011) was analyzed to provide more information about the population and immigration trends in Oxford County. The interviews were conducted with people who were identified as key informants. The focus groups were conducted in the form of Circle¹ to create a comfortable space in which immigrants could share their lived experiences. The quantitative analysis of NHS data is presented in the next section.

CONTEXT: OXFORD COUNTY

Oxford County is an upper-tier municipality that consists of eight lower-tier municipalities, including: Blandford-Blenheim, East Zorra-Tavistock, Norwich, Southwest Oxford and Zorra; the towns of Ingersoll and Tillsonburg; and, the City of Woodstock (Oxford County, 2014; Blais, 2011). Geographically, it is located at the junction of Highways 401 and 403 in Southwestern Ontario. “Historically, the County’s excellent soil and mild climate have allowed a prosperous agricultural community to develop. More recently, the County’s location, within 2 hours of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Windsor has also contributed to its [reputation] as a successful manufacturing centre in south-western Ontario” (Blais, 2011, p. 24).

Oxford County has a population of 105, 719 people; however, in the absence of significant immigration this number is expected to decline over the next 20 years due to various factors (Statistics Canada, 2012). The Oxford County Public Health Report (2008) stated that the fertility rate in the County was 1.6 children per woman of childbearing age (p. 3). Demographers note that the minimum replacement rate is 2.1 in Canada (Caldwell, 2014). In addition, a high proportion of the population in Oxford County, like the rest of Canada, is aging. The Elgin-Middlesex-Oxford Workforce Planning and Development Board (2013) estimated retirements in 13 different occupation groups. Within these groups the percentage of employees retiring range 8 to 25, respectively. Moreover, while difficult to find statistics on, it is anecdotally acknowledged that youth continue to migrate out of rural regions to urban centres. In light of these three factors, attracting immigrants has been identified as a potential avenue to mitigate labour market and population challenges. The following section describes the composition of immigrants in Oxford County, as per the NHS conducted by Statistics Canada in 2011.

¹ The Circle Process will be further explained in the Focus Groups Findings section of this report

Immigration Trends

The immigration trends (1996-2011) in Oxford in comparison to Ontario and Canada are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

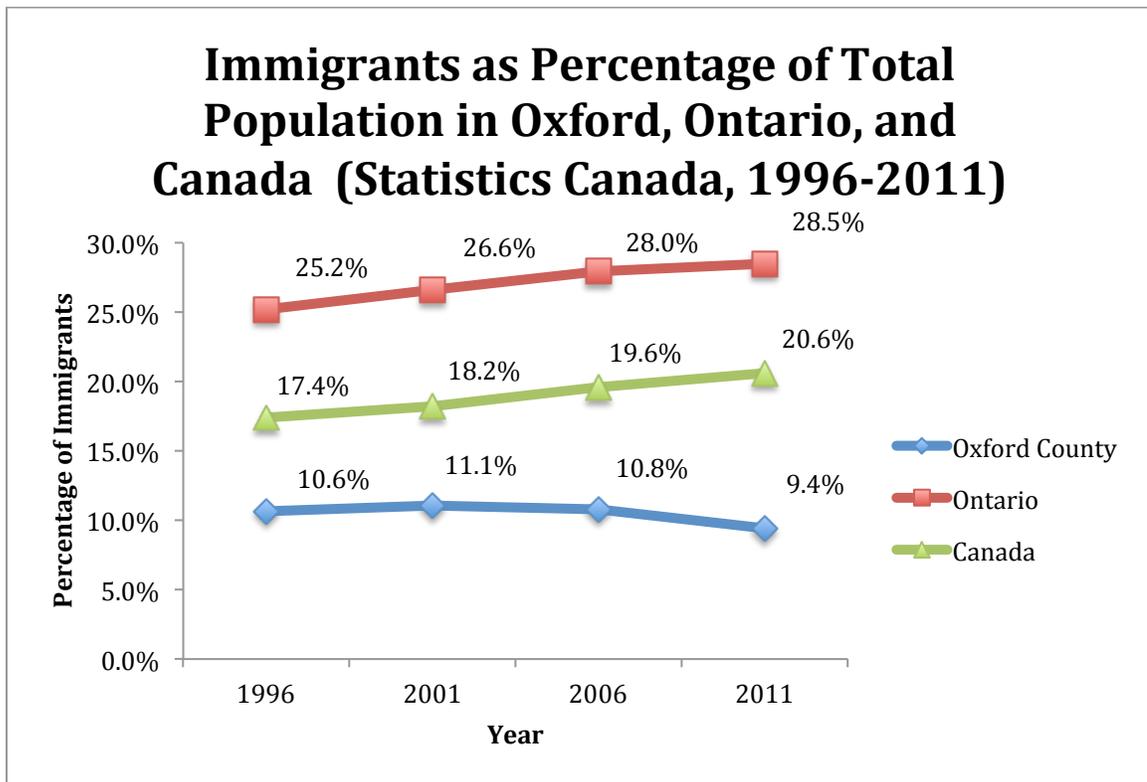


Figure 1: Immigration Trends from 1996-2011 in Oxford, Ontario, and Canada.

From 1996 to 2011, the percentage of immigrants to Oxford County decreased from 10.6 to 9.4 percent, a 1.2 percent decrease. In contrast, the number of immigrants to Ontario rose from 25.2 percent to 28.5 from 1996 to 2011, a 3.3 percent increase. Similarly, the percentage of immigrants to Canada increased from 17.4 percent in 1996 to 20.6 percent in 2011, a 3.2 percent increase. This shows that the percentage of immigrants to Oxford County has decreased slightly while the percentage of immigrants to Ontario and Canada has increased by approximately 3 percent each.

Immigrants in Oxford County

The age and sex distribution of immigrants in the Oxford County as of 2011 is shown in Figure 2.0 below.

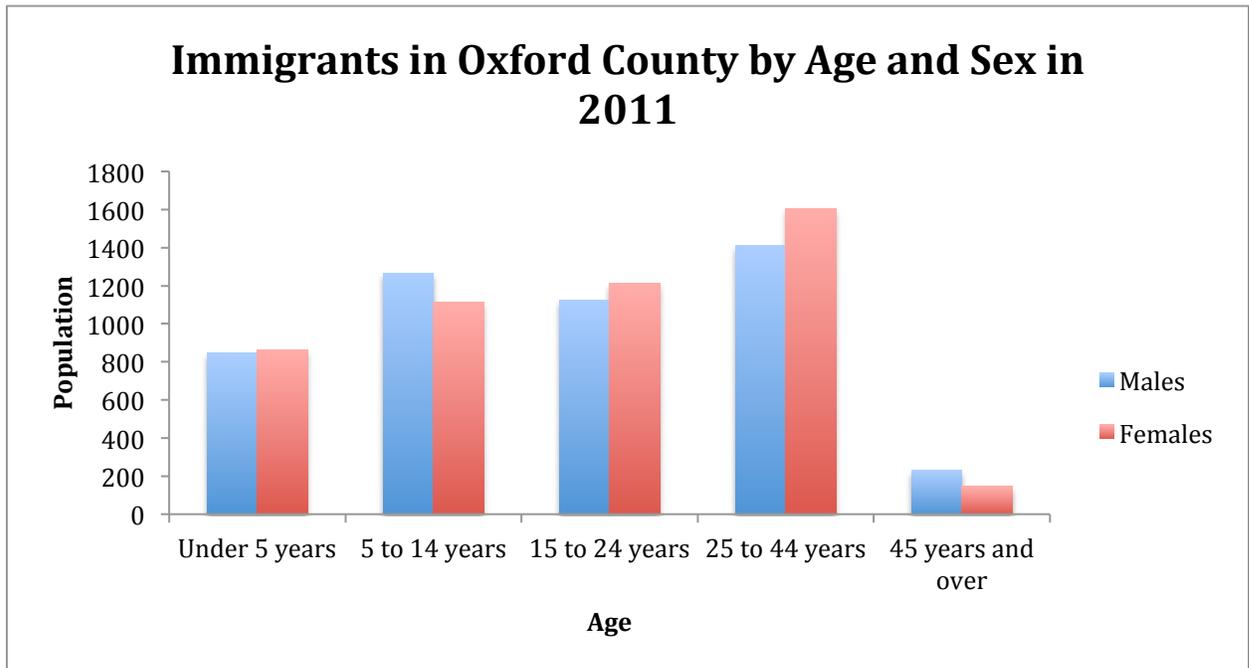


Figure 2: Immigrants in Oxford County by age and sex in 2011 as per Statistics Canada data.

In 2011, the highest number of immigrants were between the ages of 25 to 44, accounting for 31 percent of the immigrants in the County. By contrast, the lowest number of immigrants were between the ages of 45 and over, approximately four percent.

The regions of origin of the immigrants in Oxford County as of 2011 are presented in Figure 3.0 below.

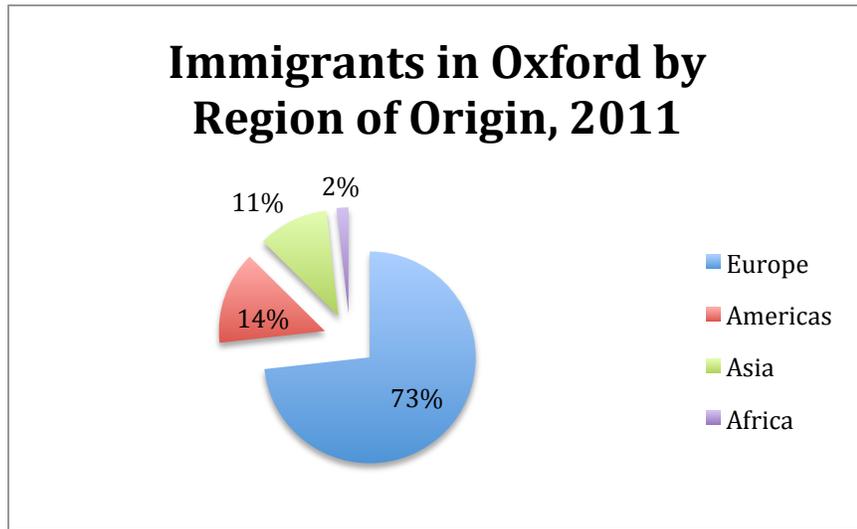


Figure 3: Immigrants in Oxford County by region of origin as per Statistics Canada, 2011.

As of 2011, the majority of immigrants in Oxford County emigrated from Europe, approximately 73 percent. Immigrants of African descent made up the minority of the immigrants in the County, approximately 3 percent.

The number of immigrants, as a percentage of total immigrants in 2011, by country of origin in Oxford County are presented in Figure 4.0 below.

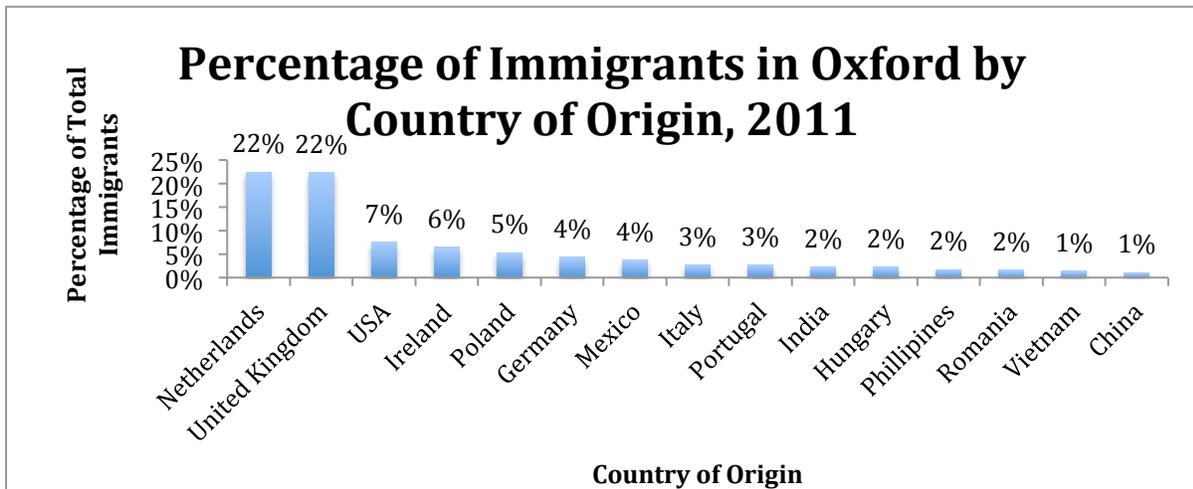


Figure 4: Immigrants (as percentage) by county of origin in Oxford County as per Statistics Canada, 2011.

In 2011, approximately 86 percent of all immigrants came from 15 countries of origin. Approximately 45 percentage of immigrants in the County identified the Netherlands or the United Kingdom as their country of origin; whereas, approximately four percent identified Philippines, Vietnam, and China as their countries of origin, a 41 percent difference.

These statistics paint a picture of the population and immigration trends in Oxford County based on data from the NHS. The following section will highlight the immigration efforts that are being championed in Oxford County.

IMMIGRANT ATTRACTION AND RETENTION EFFORTS

This section will describe the immigration efforts in Oxford County. It is important to note that the following is not intended to provide a complete picture of immigration efforts in Oxford; rather, this report is reflective of the data collected from October to November 2014 and February 2015.

The immigration efforts in Oxford started when a group of leaders identified the need for a renewed labour force development strategy. After establishing their common agenda, they commissioned research that informed the economic and social development priorities for the community. On the economic side of the coin, the Oxford Workforce Development Partnership came together as the conduit through which economic development can be fostered in the region. The Workforce Development Partnership took stalk of the situation and used research as their point of departure into a three-pronged approach to workforce development:

1. Cultivating entrepreneurship;
2. Reinforcing career pathways; and,
3. Attracting and retaining people.

A full-time, dedicated staff member was hired to further the work of the Oxford Workforce Development Partnership (Oxford WDP). The attracting and retaining people component is of particular interest for this report. This component first created a welcome portal for Oxford County – an interactive website that features the success stories of newcomers who chose Oxford as a place where they can ‘live, work, and play’ (Welcome to Oxford, 2015). The website

promotes and markets Oxford County as a desirable place of residence and a place where the contributions of newcomers will be valued. In addition to the Welcome to Oxford Portal, a Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) was created in 2013 to facilitate the attraction and retention of newcomers to the region. The purpose of the LIP is to collaborate and coordinate services that are intended to benefit newcomers. Moreover, Settlement Services were created, the same year as the LIP, to meet the practical needs of immigrants as they settle into the County.

The Welcome to Oxford portal was the first venture that the attraction and retention component undertook. A 'local champion' or 'agent of change' created this web portal using her knowledge of the community's assets – i.e. the services, key players, and the resources. This local champion took the time to develop trust, rapport, and relationships, thereby creating a network of stakeholders. The active involvement of this network in the venture was encouraged and facilitated so that the end product became something that the community of practitioners could take ownership over. Upon the foundation of this social capital, the LIP was built. The initial members of the partnership included: Community Employment Services, the United Way, the County of Oxford, the Warden, the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, the Ontario Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Rural Affairs, and Citizenship and Immigration Canada. With time, this core group expanded to include members from the religious community, youth-serving community, mental health associations, health units, police services, and members of the immigrant community. As of November 2014, 27 organizations formed the Oxford LIP.

Alongside the Oxford LIP, Settlement Services were created in Oxford County to help immigrants integrate into the community. Settlement Services is comprised of one Settlement Counselor who provides information, referrals, support, and advocacy for newcomers and their families. She acts as a liaison between newcomers and organizations to help newcomers get access to quality services, navigate a new system, and find their footing in the County of Oxford.

These four elements of the attracting and retaining people component of Oxford's workforce development strategy are coordinated by the Program Director of the Oxford WDP. Oxford WDP is the umbrella organization that ensures that the workforce needs of the community are being met through various avenues.

FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS AND POLICY MAKERS

Twenty-one interviews were conducted in Oxford County with seven policy makers and fourteen service providers, respectively. The individuals representing organizations at the Oxford LIP committee were first contacted for interviews and then the invitation was extended to get the perspective of additional policy makers. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the role of various organizations in attracting immigrants to Oxford County and retaining them within the region. In addition, the interviewees were asked to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their strategy and the opportunities and challenges that immigration presents for the region. Moreover, the interviewees were asked to identify the next steps for the region and articulate the bigger vision for the community.

SWOT Analysis

One objective of this report is to provide a SWOT analysis to Oxford County with respect to immigration efforts. A SWOT analysis looks at the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of any unit of analysis (such as an organization, partnership, or strategy). The strengths are the qualities, practices, or philosophies that help the unit in question, Oxford County in this case, progress towards their goals. By contrast, weaknesses are any qualities, practices, or philosophies that hinder progress towards defined goals. As such, strengths and weaknesses are internal to Oxford County; whereas, opportunities and threats are external.

Guiding Philosophies

- 1) *When there is a Will there is a Way*
- 2) *Step in the shoes of an immigrant*
- 3) *Integrate an immigrant lens to the programs that already exist*
- 4) *Stretch your dollar*
- 5) *Give incentives to ease hesitation*
- 6) *Collaborate with everyone: service-providers, ministries, policy-makers, businesses, immigrants, and the community*
- 7) *Dispel myths through stories*
- 8) *Support the supporters*
- 9) *Allow research to facilitate decision-making*
- 10) *Listen carefully, think big picture, and plan carefully*
- 11) *Engage in praxis: action, reflection, learning, and improvement*
- 12) *Garner political will and community support*
- 13) *Establish communication lines and keep them open*
- 14) *Go above and beyond*
- 15) *Build trust and rapport, maintain relationships*
- 16) *Have a vision but trust the process*
- 17) *Integrated and holistic approach*

Opportunities are the trends, conditions, or characteristics in the larger picture that can help Oxford County progress towards their goal. In contrast, threats are trends, conditions, or characteristics that are external to immigration efforts in Oxford County. A SWOT analysis is often used as an analytical tool to understand the forces at play within and outside an organization. In this case, a SWOT analysis was conducted to unpack the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Oxford’s immigration strategy (including the Oxford LIP).

“Oxford has adopted an integrated approach which provides an environment that allows the ability to undertake initiatives that would be impossible to achieve in isolation. The partnership stimulates creativity and allows us to dovetail our collective resources in innovative ways to achieve our goals.”

Strengths

“We do have a strong group of leaders in the community who do a really great job of working together. The Local Immigration Partnership is proof that leaders want to be involved with immigration and want to create a community where people feel welcome.”

Stakeholders express that Oxford’s immigration strategy and the Oxford LIP have many strengths. The top five strengths that were mentioned most frequently include: political will and leadership; culture of collaboration; communication; unique model; and, innovative approach.

Approximately 86 percent of the interviewees mentioned the important role that support from politicians and leaders plays in furthering the cause of immigration. All service providers and three policymakers spoke of the “culture of collaboration” and the efforts put forth to avoid duplication. At least 16 interviewees spoke about communication, through listening at meetings and through the success stories of their efforts. At least 12 interviewees mentioned that Oxford’s model is unique because the portal, the website, the LIP, and settlement services are

“...leadership has that vision and I don’t think that happens in a lot of other rural communities. When I sit down with high ranking bureaucrats, they are always impressed with the proactive approach that we always put forward in Oxford as opposed to many places that are still in a reactionary mode.”

connected to WDP. At least eight interviewees mentioned Oxford's innovative approach to problem-solving as exemplified by the jointly funded positions (such as the Program Director of the WDP and the Settlement Services Counselor) and jointly funded events and campaigns (such as the Leadership Breakfast in November 2014 and the Smile Campaign). In addition to these strengths, the researchers would like to add "research-based practice" to commend the willingness of Oxford's leaders to look to research as a way to strengthen their practice. It is worth noting that other strengths such as strategic planning and vision, service excellence model, and the immigrant lens that is integrated into their work are not elaborated upon in this section but were mentioned by the stakeholders.

Weaknesses

Despite many strengths of the immigrant attraction and retention efforts in the Oxford County, there are three key weaknesses to be highlighted. These include: 1) the assumption that immigrants will reach out for support; 2) the lack of organizational and community level policies around diversity and inclusiveness; and, 3) the lack of a monitoring and evaluation system. Like the strengths, these weaknesses stem from the interviews with key-informants and the researchers' observations.

"Well I guess the numbers might speak for themselves if we are successful and people are coming and finding employment opportunities and feeling welcome and sticking around and making Oxford their home. That would be the best indication that the strategies have been successful. Then, we can claim ourselves to be leaders. But, maybe it's premature to say that."

First, Oxford County has yet to design opportunities for immigrants to interact with community residents and connect with service providers. The efforts at present assume that immigrants will knock on at least one agency's door and the no-wrong door approach will help them get guided in the right direction. However, the reality is that many immigrants are unaware of the services available to them. Therefore, it is important to create opportunities for immigrants to interact with community residents and connect with service providers to raise awareness of the services available to them and the networks they can tap into. For example, a multicultural hub could serve the dual purpose of linking immigrants with other immigrants and connecting them with services that meet their needs.

Second, Oxford County and the service organizations within are lacking policies with respect to immigration. In the Oxford LIP’s consultative report, service organizations articulated the need to craft policies around inclusiveness and diversity as one of the next steps in their efforts to attract and retain immigrants. At the time of the interviews, none of the organizations interviewed for this research had crafted policies to this effect. Research reveals that crafting policies can have two positive outcomes with respect to immigration: 1) immigrants perceive the community to be more welcoming when there are policies outlining the need to treat all clients in a culturally-sensitive, inclusive manner. This appears to be the case because it creates the perception of a safety net that immigrants can turn to in the event that discrimination occurs; and, 2) workforces become more diverse as employers encourage inclusive hiring practices. A diverse workforce also influences immigrants’ perceptions of communities as welcoming. Policies that are diverse and inclusive, therefore, can contribute to the creation of welcoming communities.

Third, the immigration strategy in Oxford, and the Oxford LIP by extension, do not have a monitoring and evaluation system in place. Research suggests that monitoring and evaluation is critical because it allows organizations, projects, and programs to track

“Another big thing we are trying to implement is how ‘do we measure this’ so that we can honestly say that we are successful.”

progress, measure success, and revise strategies based on lessons learned. The need to develop a monitoring and evaluation system was mentioned by four interviewees, signifying that the folks in Oxford recognize that a monitoring and evaluation system needs to be created as they progress in their efforts.

These three weaknesses – the assumption that immigrants will reach out, lack of policies, and lack of monitoring and evaluation system – are hindering the County of Oxford’s immigrant attraction and retention efforts. If addressed, they can serve to facilitate the County’s efforts.

Opportunities

Oxford County has many opportunities that can be capitalized upon to improve the immigrant attraction and retention strategy. The opportunities identified by the interviewees include: availability of employment, identity of Oxford as a smaller community, and geographic location of County. Approximately 76 percent of interviewees mentioned the availability of employment in Oxford as an opportunity that has

“I think the biggest opportunity is where we are: we’ve got Toyota and Cisco. There seems to be lots of new housing cropping up. [We are] close to the 401 and 403 and driving distance from so many places. We are affordable. We have local jobs...and that’s all based on geography and where we are.”

helped the immigrant attraction and retention strategy. Approximately 60 percent of the interviewees mentioned the appeal of Oxford as a smaller community to immigrants. Approximately 15 percent of the interviewees mentioned the geographic location of the County as an opportunity. Many interviewees summed up these opportunities when they are asserted that “attraction is not a problem for Oxford, retention is more of the issue.” Interestingly, interviewees that are involved with the Oxford LIP seem to agree that attracting immigrants is not a problem for Oxford because of the availability of employment and the geographic location of the County; however, many policymakers seem to be concerned about attracting secondary immigrants that either have the skills that employers are looking for or have the entrepreneurial spirit to contribute economically to the County. The next steps many of the interviewees offered draw upon the opportunities mentioned in this section.

Threats

Some threats exist that can potentially hinder Oxford County’s efforts at immigrant attraction and retention. They include: community perceptions, immigrants’ experiences with isolation and disenchantment, language and communication barriers, and lack of professional level ESL classes and adequate transportation services. Approximately 80 percent of the interviewees mentioned “community perceptions”, “community resistance”, “community attitudes”, or “conservative rural community” as a threat to the immigration efforts in Oxford. Approximately 60 percent of the interviewees mentioned language barriers facing immigrants as a challenge.

Similarly, approximately 50 percent of the service providers interviewed mentioned communication barriers as a challenge for service organizations. Approximately 35 percent of the interviewees mentioned immigrants' experiences with isolation either directly or by relaying anecdotes of immigrants they know having experienced isolation, prejudice, or loneliness while living in the County. Approximately 10 percent of the interviewees also spoke about the disenchantment that immigrants often face upon moving to a rural community. According to the interviewees, these two factors – isolation and disenchantment—often lead to immigrants leaving the community. One interviewee said: “I think people keep seeking until they [find a place] where they fit in and can call their home.” Approximately 75 percent of the interviewees mentioned the underserved nature of the County as a problem: the lack of transportation and lack of advanced ESL classes were the two associated factors that were mentioned most frequently. Lack of critical mass and funding were two additional threats that were mentioned by two interviewees, respectively. Like the opportunities, the next steps identified by the interviewees draw upon the above-mentioned threats.

“I don't think we've had success yet. I think people come to Oxford but they leave, once they find work or services in another bigger center. We have done nothing in terms of making people feel like they belong in this community.”

Next Steps

In light of the strengths, opportunities, and threats, the interviewees identified general and specific next steps for the immigration efforts in the County. The general next steps included: expanding the LIP table to include more immigrants and employers, marketing the opportunities of the County, raising awareness of services, reaching out to immigrants, engaging businesses, and educating the community. The specific next steps included: conversation cafes, mapping of community services, and crafting policies. These identified next steps may help guide the County's efforts in the future.

With respect to the general next steps, approximately 10 out of the 18 (55 percent) LIP council members who were interviewed identified the need to expand the LIP table to include more immigrants and employers. One interviewee said: “I think having more newcomers at the planning table on all the planning committees [would be the next step]. I think programs are

going to be most appropriate when they involve those who they are designed for.”

Approximately 48 percent of the interviewees said that the County should market its opportunities – such as its attractive geographic location, availability of jobs, etc. – outside of the County. Similarly, approximately 15 percent of the interviewees mentioned the need to promote the services that exist in the County to immigrants and to reach out to immigrants.

Approximately 10 percent of the interviewees mentioned the need to “engage businesses to see what they can do to help immigrants integrate.” Approximately 90 percent of the interviewees mentioned the need to continue to educate the community. In the words of one interviewee: “I think the key thing we have to continue to work on is acceptance by the community.”

With respect to the specific next steps, approximately 80 percent of the LIP members mentioned conversation cafes as a next step. Approximately 11 percent of the LIP members interviewed mentioned “mapping community services” as a next step. And, approximately 11 percent of the LIP members mentioned crafting policies as a next step. To this effect, one interviewee said: “we need something [that is] a little bit more structured, organized, and clearly articulated.” Another next step that was articulated by one interviewee is the creation of a transportation service that is both flexible and accessible to those who need it. Together, these general and specific next steps can help Oxford break down barriers in the community by tackling negative perceptions and debunking myths regarding immigrants and help Oxford continue being proactive in its immigration efforts.

Ideal Vision

When asked to reflect on the bigger vision for their community with respect to immigration, the interviewees all mentioned various permutations of three key elements: economic prosperity, cultural diversity, and welcoming community. One interviewee stated that ideally, “upon arriving here [immigrants] would receive the message that they are a valued contributor to the community and that there are people here to help them integrate into the community”. Another interviewee said: “our dream scenario would be a dynamic, culturally diverse community with 100 percent employment.” Finally, another interviewee said: “I would like for them as a newcomer not to feel like an immigrant but to feel like they are part of the community.” These three quotes show that the key-informants value immigrants for the economic and cultural contributions and see their role in helping immigrants settle so that they can contribute to the community.

Summary of the SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weakness
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Political will and leadership• Culture of collaboration• Communication• Unique model• Innovative approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assumption that immigrants will reach out• Lack of immigration related policies• Lack of monitoring and evaluation system
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Geographic location• Availability of employment• Oxford has a small community feel	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community perceptions• Immigrants' experiences with isolation• Language and communication barriers• Lack of professional ESL classes and adequate public transportation

FINDINGS: FOCUS GROUPS WITH IMMIGRANTS

Two focus groups were held to help understand the experience of immigrants living in Oxford County. Both focus groups used a Circle process, facilitated by Dr. Jennifer Ball who is a trained Circle process facilitator, and were well received by participants. Using Circle allowed the researchers to collect data, but it also created a supportive space for participants to share their stories and network with each other. Using a Circle format encourages equal participation through the use of a talking piece and other participatory techniques. Many participants requested events using a similar format be organized, such as conversation cafes. It is important to note that the Circle process is a native tradition that should not be appropriated without proper training.

The two focus groups took place in November and February, respectively. The first focus group was held at the Woodstock Public Library with 24 participants in attendance. The second focus group took place in Tillsonburg at the Glendale High School with an ESL class of 6 students. At each focus group some basic demographic information was collected. Between both focus groups, there was representation from 19 countries and the age of participants ranged from 18 to 60+ years. Eighteen of the thirty participants settled elsewhere in Canada before choosing Oxford County as their home, making them secondary migrants. The amount of time residents were in Canada ranged from 1 to 50 years; however, the majority have lived in Canada for less than 10 years. Even though the focus group participants were diverse in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds, there were a lot of similarities in the barriers and challenges that they faced after they arrived in Canada.

The following questions were discussed in the focus groups: what attracted people to Oxford County, what supported their integration journey, what challenges and barriers did they face, and what supports did immigrants wish were available to them. These questions will guide the way this next section is organized. After discussing the findings of the focus groups, recommendations identified by the participants and the researchers will be discussed.

Choosing Oxford

Not surprisingly, newcomers come to Oxford for a variety of reasons. Most commonly, there was an existing family member or friend who lived in the area who attracted immigrants to the region. In a few cases, a job offer encouraged immigrants to relocate. Interestingly, almost 25 percent of participants chose Oxford because they perceived the County to be a nice place to live. The most common factors for relocation included: slow pace of life, beautiful landscape, perceived business opportunity, comfortable and safe environment to raise children, lack of congestion, low cost of living, and close proximity to other urban centres. Over half of the participants in the focus groups moved to Oxford from other areas in Canada (mostly larger cities), suggesting that immigrants are mobile and willing to relocate to a community that better aligns with their preferences. According to 2011 census data, a significant portion (37.4%) of all foreign-born residents live in Toronto (Statistics Canada, 2011). If new immigrants are as mobile as the focus group participants, it would be worthwhile for Oxford to create strategies specifically to attract secondary migrants from the surrounding urban centres promoting the rural lifestyle the participants seemed to be attracted to.

“I have a small property maintenance business and moving to Woodstock was so nice because there is less competition, a lot of job opportunities, a lot of volunteer opportunities, and lots of potential for growth. I had nobody here and we just walked in here without anything. We knew that Woodstock is between London and Kitchener. This is the best place for us; I don’t think we are going to leave unless we find something better.”

Challenges and Desired Support

Immigrants face immediate and on-going challenges upon arrival to a new community. A prominent finding from the focus groups was the almost unanimous struggle with social inclusion. Participants spoke of the general kindness of folks in Oxford County, but reiterated the challenge of making friends and having a physical space to engage in meaningful social interactions. Social isolation was especially concerning for the stay-at-home spouses of working immigrants who relocated for their partners’ economic opportunity. While social isolation was mostly attributed to the lack of opportunities to engage with others in the community (i.e. through multicultural events, conversation cafes, etc.) comments were also made about the lack

of diversity in the community. Several of the immigrants at the focus groups were surprised to see 20+ other immigrants in the room, whereas they had previously thought that they were the only immigrants in the community. The common perception that their needs

“I just noticed that the real reason we moved here is right here in this room. The diversity we have here – we have people from Iran, Egypt, Korea – we would never have the opportunity to meet all these nationalities and get to know other cultures anywhere else. I have lived in a few countries and there is always a Chinatown if you want to interact with Chinese people or a Little Italy to get to know Italian folks but a community like this, where in the same city everyone talks to everyone...It is a really good thing for kids to grow up in multicultural environments.”

to be a critical mass of specific ethnic groups for successful settlement was debunked as one participant articulated that lack of cultural enclaves encouraged cross-cultural interaction among different ethnic groups.

To truly make Oxford a welcoming community and to combat social isolation, the participants wanted more organized opportunities to interact

“It is nice to know that I am not the only one struggling and that hopefully we can find some more resources and help in the future.”

with community members. Participants hoped to socialize with other Canadians; however, there was a strong desire to connect with other immigrants who understand their struggles. In some of the interviews with members of the LIP, concern was communicated that immigrant specific events could hinder the integration efforts. However, a majority of the participants spoke of the importance of interacting with other immigrants to know that they are not alone in the challenges they face and to be able to support each other in the process of settlement.

“The government wants skilled workers but the employers want Canadian experience. So, you come here with your skills but without experience and then you don’t get a job. I think the criterion of Canadian experience has to be waived.”

Many participants felt these social environments should be facilitated by Oxford County through the development of a multicultural hub, multicultural events, a Facebook page, or community cafes. Participants suggested having some immigrant-specific events as well as some events that would be open to the entire

community. For example, a multicultural festival would give immigrants the opportunity to share their culture while interacting with Canadian-born residents. Oxford may have social events in the County, but the majority of participants were not aware of such events. To address this challenge, immigrants need to be made aware of these events through targeted promotion efforts, through a channel such as a Facebook page.

Other anticipated challenges were raised such as issues with credential recognition, lack of Canadian experience, absence of bridge programs or professional internships, poor quality public transportation, and lack of higher proficiency ESL classes for professionals. However, struggles with social isolation overshadowed these challenges demonstrating a continuing need for a holistic approach to immigrant integration with a focus on social along with economic inclusion.

Experiences with Settlement Services

Most participants who used existing friend and/or family networks for support expressed that their initial settlement process was less challenging. Friends and family supported the basic settlement needs of immigrants such as helping them find accommodation and teaching them how to navigate the Canadian system. Three participants

“I moved here because I like quiet so I like it here. But, I am a young woman too and I like to do things. Sometimes, it is too quiet here. But, I don’t have friends. There are restaurants but nothing else. There is no place to get to know people. I don’t like to be at home all the time...I was starting to look for a job in my field of study; but I couldn’t find anything. I went to Walmart, Canadian tire, and even tried to find a volunteer job but they said they can’t take me because I don’t have Canadian experience. So, I am at home. But, I would like to do something about that.”

used religious organizations or other social organizations to support their initial settlement. Five participants said that they have no support upon arrival and they struggled to learn the system on their own. Of the 15 direct clients of settlement services that attended the focus group, three participants mentioned using Settlement Services, going to Community Employment Services (CES), or participating ESL classes. However, it is important to note that one participant mentioned accessing all three services (CES, Settlement Services, and ESL classes). His point of first contact was his ESL teacher who then connected him to Settlement Services and CES. This example shows that if Oxford continues to encourage a “no wrong door approach” among all service providers, it could increase the number of immigrants who access support for their settlement journey. Additionally, two participants spoke of accessing settlement services online before arrival, which aided in their decision to choose Oxford.

This section has presented the similar challenges faced by immigrants regardless of when they came to Canada; however, there is one key difference that is worth noting. The more recent immigrants articulated higher expectations from the government to provide services that will help with their settlement and success in Canada. In contrast, immigrants who came to Canada 25+ years ago expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be able to come to Canada and expressed a lot of pride in taking up the responsibility for settling into Canada. This contrast highlights that

“First time we chose Woodstock, we were looking for something between Kitchener, London, and Hamilton and close to Toronto. We talked to someone on the Internet (Karen) who works for the city here, she helped us find a house. We also got help from a real estate agent. We haven’t met Karen yet but she is the person who really helped us find a house and to rent it.”

economic immigrants, who are the focus of attraction and retention efforts, have high expectations from the government to assist as they settle into their lives in Canada. Recognizing these expectations along with the mobility of economic immigrants, municipalities have a strong role to play in ensuring that the services available for recent immigrants are meeting their settlement needs. The risk for not meeting these needs is higher for the municipality than it is for the immigrants, as immigrants can leave in favour of a community that is socially and economically inclusive.

Focus Group Participant's Recommendations

From the two focus groups, 30 participants came up with the following six key recommendations for Oxford County:

1. Host community cafes for immigrants to meet each other and share their trials and tribulations;
2. Organize multicultural events to celebrate diversity in the County;
3. Consider creating a space to act as a multicultural hub (similar to what is in London);
4. Create Facebook page to connect new and prospective immigrants and share information;
5. Work with employers to develop professional internships for immigrants to be able to gain essential Canadian experience; and,
6. Advocate to higher levels of government to streamline the credential recognition process for immigrants.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

Weaving together the findings of this research, the researchers offer the following recommendations for future action based on conversations with 14 service providers, 7 policymakers, and 30 immigrants:

1. It is unclear whether Oxford is focusing its efforts on attracting primary or secondary migrants, or both. The findings suggest that small towns and rural communities have a better chance at attracting and retaining secondary migrants, it is recommended that these findings be reflected in future plans;
2. Recognize that the social and economic needs of immigrants go hand-in-hand and one cannot take priority over the other. As such, it is recommended that programs and priorities of the Oxford LIP take into account the social and economic needs of immigrants equally;
3. Reach out to more immigrants and invite them to become part of the Oxford LIP to raise awareness of the immigrant attraction and retention efforts in the County and empower immigrants by including them around the decision-making tables;
4. Create spaces to facilitate social interactions between immigrants and service providers. For example, conversation cafes could be hosted at the public library and service providers could be invited to connect with immigrants in that space. This interaction between immigrants and service providers could raise awareness of the help that is available in the County for new immigrants;
5. Create a Facebook group to link immigrants with each other and raise awareness of the various websites that immigrants can tap into to find out about employment, settlement, and integration in Oxford;
6. Organize multicultural events to celebrate diversity, educate the community, and to help immigrants integrate. Community events are a great way to build social capital that can bridge the different worlds of immigrants, service providers, policymakers, and community members;

7. Explore the multicultural associations that other communities have in place to promote welcoming communities and a sense of belonging (such as the Multicultural Association of Perth-Huron and the North Bay and District Multicultural Centre). Immigrants in Oxford County desired such a hub and perceived it to be part of a welcoming community;
8. Invite employers around the Oxford LIP table or create an employer's council (if it doesn't already exist) to ensure that attraction and retention strategy aligns with the labour market needs;
9. Consider creating an "adopt a newcomer" initiative where Oxford residents can volunteer to welcome new immigrants to the community. They can welcome immigrants by visiting with them, inviting them to community events, and providing them with information about amenities in Oxford. This companionship could assist immigrants in becoming socially integrated and it gives community members the opportunity to meet new people;
10. Consider creating a mentorship program for internationally trained professionals to give immigrants an inside perspective into their industry and to build their professional networks. Guelph Wellington is a good example; they receive funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the program is housed in an employment services organization called Lutherwood. See <http://www.lutherwood.ca/employment/services/mentorship-internationally-trained-professionals> for further details.

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APPENDIX

Innovations

Innovative Partnerships: Oxford Workforce Development Partnership (Oxford WDP)

In 2010, leaders in Oxford County recognized that the reality that changing demographics are going to affect their labour force. As a result, they commissioned research out of which came three recommended avenues through which labour force needs could be met: attracting and retaining immigrants, youth entrepreneurship, and reinforcing career pathways for current residents. The leaders in the County transformed these recommendations into priorities for action and garnered support from policymakers, employers, and service providers to ensure the economic prosperity of the community.

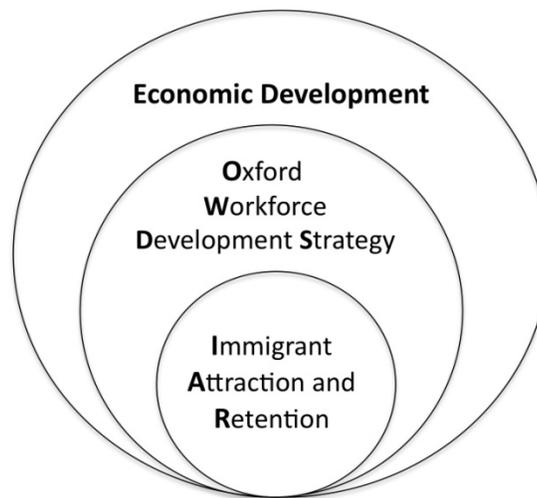


Figure 5: Immigrant attraction and retention as an integral part of the County of Oxford's economic development strategy.

Innovative Partnerships: Oxford Local Immigration Partnership (Oxford LIP)

The Oxford LIP falls within Oxford's economic development strategy under the banner of immigrant attraction and retention. The Oxford LIP came about in 2014 to facilitate the attraction and retention of immigrants in Oxford County. As of November 2014, the Oxford LIP was comprised of 30 partners, including service providers, faith based community representatives, politicians, federal and provincial government representatives, and one immigrant with lived experience (see Figure below for details). The Oxford LIP meets once a

month at Community Employment Services in Woodstock. The partnership is strong because of the people around the table, their research-based practice, collaborative culture, and action-orientation. The Oxford LIP meetings serve as a forum for the Settlement Services Counselor to share the experiences of primary and secondary immigrants as they try to settle into their lives in Oxford. The Warden of the County along with representatives from OMAFRA and CIC show their support for Oxford LIP by being present at the meetings. The goal of the Oxford LIP is two-fold: to help the County attract the people they need to fill labour force needs and to provide the services that immigrants need to want to stay in the County.

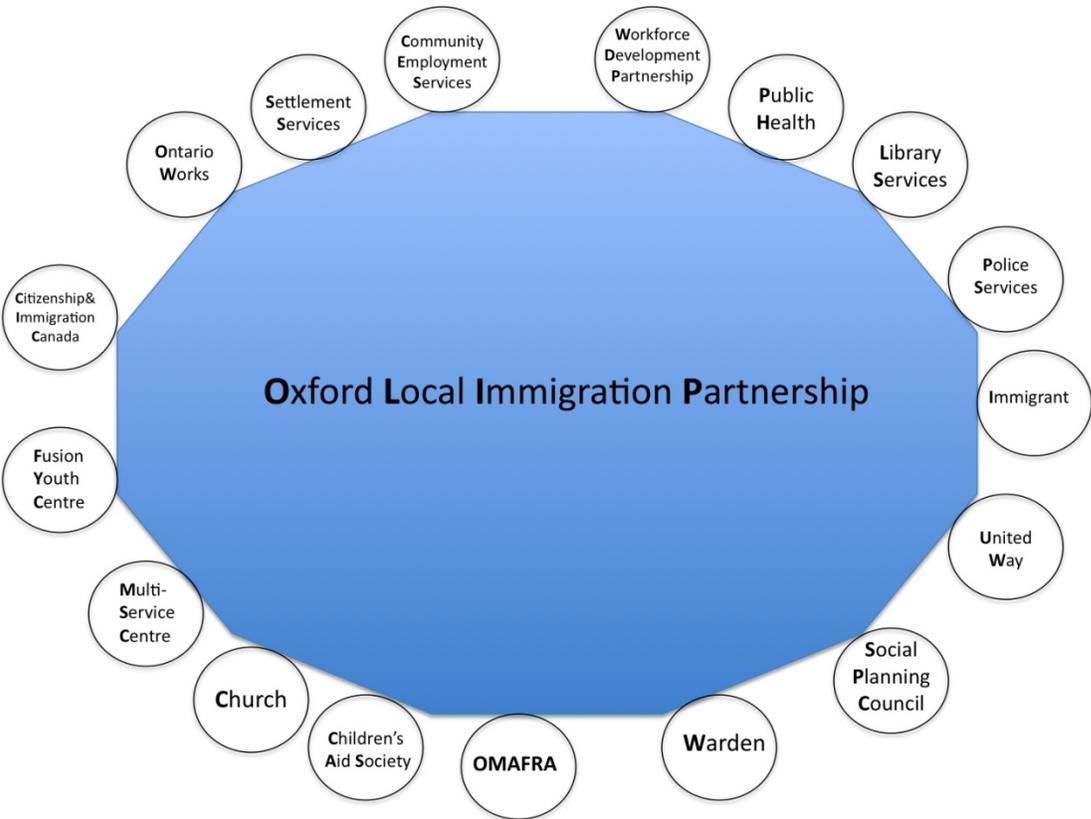


Figure 6: An illustration of the community leaders that make up the Oxford Local Immigration Partnership as of November 2014.

Innovative Initiatives: Settlement Services Counselor

Karen Oldroyd is the settlement services counselor in Oxford County. She works with recent and older immigrants to help them settle into the region by building a relationship with clients, assessing their needs, and creating action plans with them. First, she builds a relationship with them by asking them about themselves and their situation. Then, she conducts a needs assessment by asking some of the following questions: what is happening right now, what are your barriers? And, what can I do today to make you walk out of that door feeling a little bit better? Finally, she creates an action plan with the clients that articulates their goals and outlines responsibilities for herself and the client. She reports that she loves her job and loves that people follow up with her to let her know how things ended up. Being a member of the Oxford LIP, she relays her success stories to the various stakeholders so that they can see the impact of the efforts on immigrants. Her position is jointly funded by CIC and CES to ensure that no immigrant (new or old) is turned away.

Innovative Initiatives: Program Director of Workforce Development

Natalie Surrige is the Program Director of the Oxford Workforce Development Partnership. She is a local champion who invests in relationships and ensures collaboration, keeps the bigger picture in mind, and makes sure that things get done. She works with the economic development officers, the social planning council, service organizations, the private sector, and government to "keep and hold the Oxford County's labourforce". She is primarily responsible for all initiatives that support the growth of the local and regional labourforce, including: youth retention, lifelong opportunities for residents, and newcomer attraction and retention. Her duties include collaborating with stakeholders (private, public, and non-governmental sector), print and digital media relations, and publications. Her role is jointly funded by three organizations to ensure that she can devote her time and energy to her duties on a full-time basis.