

Modernizing the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission



The Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission was created in 1967 to help resolve allegations of discrimination on an individual and systemic level, and to help prevent discrimination.

The Department of Justice is working in partnership with the Commission to modernize current practices to better serve the public. Hearing directly from Nova Scotians is an important part of this effort.

In 2025, Narrative Research was contracted to carry out community engagement and jurisdictional research. They collected feedback that reflected the views of the general public, legal community, employers, business/industry associations, groups protected under the *Human Rights Act*, and others with in-depth experience including complainants, staff and commissioners.

- *12 interviews with human rights commissions and tribunals across Canada*
- *55 people attended engagement sessions*
- *290 people responded to an online survey*

Key findings from the engagement

The engagement showed strong support for comprehensive changes to the Human Rights Commission's model, including separating its dispute resolution and public education functions to allow for a more focused mandate. Improving the complaint process and ensuring timely service were also clear priorities for Nova Scotians. There was general support for using restorative approaches in resolving human rights complaints. Feedback showed a desire for enhanced training for staff and commissioners, as well as for education of the wider public to deepen understanding of human rights.

Feedback from other human rights commissions

Feedback showed that other human rights commissions are facing similar challenges as the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission and are taking a variety of actions to address them:

- Many use restorative practices, complaint triage, early mediation and integrated technology
- Several have adopted regular case review meetings to maintain oversight and promote timeliness
- Some are creating team-based intake models and electronic case management systems
- Some are restructuring to unify mediation and investigation functions or using external investigators
- Some have navigators to help people understand the legal process and complaint systems

Feedback from engagement sessions

People who attended the engagement sessions generally showed strong support for comprehensive changes to the Human Rights Commission. We heard that people would like to see:

- A new model that separates dispute resolution and public education
- A simplified complaint process with multiple, easier ways to get information and submit complaints, with resolution in a timely, consistent and transparent manner
- More supports for complainants, including navigators
- More work with African Nova Scotians to feel engaged and represented in the human rights system
- An examination of whether employment-related cases with unionized workers should be exclusively addressed through labour arbitration
- Staff and commissioners who are representative of the communities they serve and have training in trauma-informed practices

Feedback from the survey

People who responded to the survey also showed support for changes to the Human Rights Commission. We heard that people would like to see:

- A more disciplined complaint process with clearer, simpler and more accessible forms, easier ways to submit complaints, and faster resolution
- Structural changes to move away from the commission's current dual mandate
- More supports for complainants, including language and legal supports
- More awareness and education for complainants, commission staff, commissioners

60% of survey respondents favoured a new model with two separate organizations – a commission that educates and a tribunal that adjudicates. Lawyers tended to favour these two organizations plus a third to help complainants through the process.

There was general support for using restorative approaches in resolving human rights complaints. Some respondents said to use restorative approaches only when there is an admission of wrongdoing, while others supported broader use.



Next steps

We thank everyone who provided valuable feedback through this engagement effort. Everything we heard will help inform the next steps to modernize Nova Scotia's human rights dispute resolution model.