WINDSOR-ESSEX COMMUNITY OPIOID & SUBSTANCE STRATEGY

WINDSOR-ESSEX COMMUNITY OPIOID AND SUBSTANCE STRATEGY (WECOSS)

2026-2030 ACTION PLAN

WHO WE ARE

The Windsor-Essex Community Opioid and Substance Strategy (WECOSS) is a unified, community-based strategy focused on preventing and reducing the harms associated with substance use in Windsor-Essex County (WEC). Launched in 2018, the WECOSS works towards a healthier community for all by building effective partnerships, sustaining community-level interventions, and enhancing the quality and range of supports available to address substance use issues locally. The WECOSS intervenes with multiple forms of substance use – including opioid, drug, alcohol, cannabis, and tobacco/nicotine use – integrating a broad spectrum of evidence-based and multi-disciplinary strategies to meet diverse needs in the community.

OUR PARTNERS

The WECOSS is a large network of community stakeholders from various sectors and backgrounds who are committed to driving a coordinated response to substance use. The Windsor-Essex County Health Unit (WECHU) acts as the backbone and resource agency for the WECOSS and works with many community partner agencies and people with lived and living experience with substance use (PWLLE) to implement the strategy. Sectors represented on the WECOSS include, but are not limited to, public and community health, substance use treatment and mental health, harm reduction, emergency services, municipal and public administration, Indigenous health, social services, peer support, and community outreach.

Thank you to our community partners for their unwavering dedication and support in making this strategy possible. Together, we are stronger, turning challenges into opportunities and bringing critical support to those who need it most.

For the most up-to-date listing of active partners, please visit our website at https://www.wecoss.ca.

OUR HISTORY

WECOSS ACTION PLAN (2018)

The WECOSS was initiated in December of 2016 as a response to the worsening opioid and drug epidemic. A Leadership Committee was formed, bringing together key stakeholders across multiple sectors to collectively address the rising rates of opioid and drug use in WEC. Together, the WECOSS Leadership Committee developed the first action plan for the strategy, guided by an environmental scan of existing community resources, a review of best practices, and a local community consultation process. The action plan included eight recommendations for the WECOSS to address in its work, categorized under the four pillars of 1) Prevention and Education, 2) Harm Reduction, 3) Treatment and Recovery, and 4) Enforcement and Justice.

With oversight and guidance from the Leadership Committee, four Working Groups representing each pillar area were established to support implementation of the recommendations in the action plan. Efforts to address these recommendations began

in 2018 and concluded in 2021. Key highlights from this period are summarized in our 2018 – 2021 Annual Reports.

WECOSS MODERNIZATION (2021)

In late 2020 through early 2021, a comprehensive evaluation of the WECOSS was conducted to assess the level of awareness and early impact of the strategy in the community and identify areas to improve for the future. Results were used to create a modernized action plan for the WECOSS, introducing collective impact approaches to strengthen the existing four-pillar model (Prevention and Education, Harm Reduction, Treatment and Recovery, and Enforcement and Justice).

The Modernization included five structural and capacity-building recommendations and six priority action areas for the WECOSS to address, which focused on enhancing the strategy's functioning and implementing additional interventions under the four pillars. Projects completed over the modernization period are summarized in our 2022 – 2025 Annual Reports.

OUR ACTION PLAN FOR 2026 – 2030

BACKGROUND

With the modernization period concluding, the WECOSS initiated the creation of a new Action Plan in 2025, aiming to reposition the strategy with new priorities and areas of focus for 2026 – 2030. The Action Plan renewal was undertaken to ensure that the strategy and its objectives remain timely, relevant, and in alignment with other initiatives introduced across the sector.

ACTION PLAN CONSULTATION

To inform the development of the 2026 – 2030 Action Plan, a community consultation was conducted to gather perspectives from key stakeholders on the future direction of the strategy. The goals of the consultation were as follows:

1. Identify the most pressing issues and concerns impacting the WEC community as it relates to various forms of substance use.
2. Confirm existing strengths, capacities, and resources currently available to address these concerns at the community level.
3. Solidify community needs, gaps, and priorities for the WECOSS to address in its future work with community partners.
4. Define the WECOSS' role in the larger system by identifying actions to improve coordination, align strategies, and reduce duplication between the WECOSS and other community initiatives.
5. Use results from the consultation to generate recommendations guiding the strategic direction for the WECOSS in 2026 and beyond.

Five methods were used to engage stakeholders in the community consultation, which were as follows:

- 25 responses were gathered from partnership evaluation surveys conducted with WECOSS partners.
- 16 key informant interviews were conducted with members of the WECOSS Leadership Committee and other community leaders.
- 4 focus groups were held with 38 members of the WECOSS Pillar Working Groups.
- 3 focus groups were facilitated with 15 members of the WECHU's Substance Use Peer Advisory Committee.
- 32 drug strategies across Ontario were reviewed to inform improvements to the strategy's structure, priorities, and engagement methods.

Results were used by the partnership to develop a community-informed action plan with a new mission, vision, values, strategic framework, and priority action areas for the years ahead. The new action plan aims to strengthen coordination, align multi-sectoral priorities, and ensure accountability across all areas of action. It is built to support a streamlined and evidence-informed approach, one that will enable partners and communities to continue working together toward shared goals.

2026 – 2030 MANDATES

The mission, vision, and values for 2026 – 2030 represent the core mandates guiding the strategy. These mandates establish a common understanding of the strategy's purpose, the outcomes we aim to achieve, and the approaches that will be used to implement the work.

MISSION

To coordinate an equitable response to the substance use crisis that improves health and well-being for all residents.

VISION

A community that supports all people to live well and reduce preventable substance-related harms.

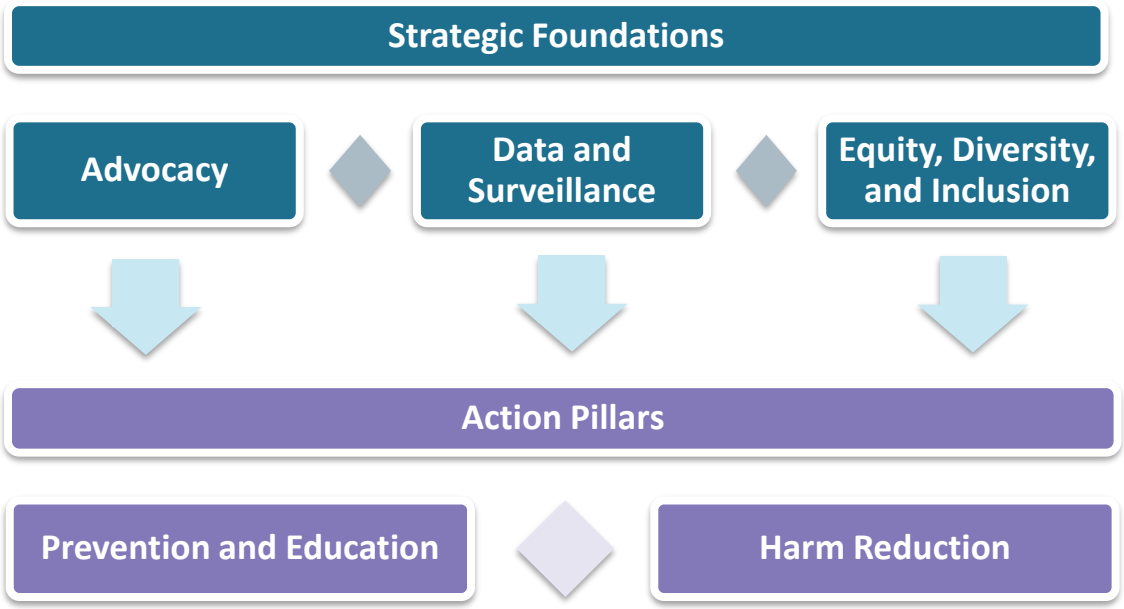
VALUES

- **Collaboration:** Working together across sectors, organizations, and communities to create coordinated, effective solutions.
- **Coordination:** Aligning strategies, resources, and communication to strengthen a unified response to substance-related harms.
- **Compassion and Dignity:** Treating every person with humanity, respect, and non-judgement, actively reducing stigma in all forms.
- **Evidence-Informed Decision-Making:** Using timely data, research, and living/lived experience to guide planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- **Accountability and Transparency:** Setting clear expectations, measuring progress, communicating openly, and committing to continuous improvement.
- **Innovation:** Embracing creativity and new approaches to address complex substance-related challenges and improve health outcomes.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The 2026 – 2030 Action Plan shifts from a four-pillar model to a tiered framework guided by both strategic foundations and action pillars (Figure 1). This framework ensures a balanced approach grounded in strong principles while driving meaningful, measurable change.

Figure 1 – WECOSS' STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR 2026 – 2030



WHY A NEW STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK?

Through the 2025 Action Plan Consultation, it became evident that two of the traditional pillars for the WECOSS – Treatment and Recovery and Enforcement and Justice – are now prioritized through other community-led initiatives, such as the Mental Health and Addictions Sector Table (MHAST) and the Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Plan. Where it was appropriate for the WECOSS to invest in these pillars over previous years, the emergence of new initiatives dedicating substantial resources to this work has strengthened system capacity and reshaped the WECOSS' role in the community.

To strengthen coordination and reduce duplication of work, the WECOSS has refined its strategic framework, concentrating efforts where it is uniquely positioned to add the greatest value based on its expertise, resources, and capacity. The new strategic framework will prioritize investments in two remaining action pillars – Prevention and Education and Harm Reduction – each of which will be grounded in and incorporate the strategic foundations of Advocacy, Data and Surveillance, and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

STRATEGIC FOUNDATIONS

The strategic foundations are the core principles that guide and shape the work of the WECOSS' action pillars. These principles reflect the priorities and approaches that partners identified as important to embed across the strategy's interventions.

All interventions delivered through the action pillars will intentionally integrate the strategic foundations in their design, implementation, and evaluation. In doing so, the strategy ensures consistency across projects, strengthens alignment among partners, and supports more efficient use of resources by providing a strong base for sustainable action over time. Systems and processes will be established to ensure that the strategic foundations are applied and remain a central focus within all action-level work.

The three strategic foundations for the WECOSS are Advocacy, Data and Surveillance, and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Table 1 describes the strategic foundations and provides examples of how each may be applied through the action pillars. While not exhaustive, these examples serve as a guide to support understanding and implementation.

Table 1. Strategic Foundations Summary

Strategic Foundation	Description	Examples of Action Pillar Activities
Advocacy	Advocacy as a strategic foundation focuses on influencing systems, policies, and social environments to create conditions that prevent and reduce substance-related harms. It involves identifying barriers within existing systems, fostering collective voices among partners, and advancing changes that support equitable, health-centered approaches to prevention and harm reduction.	• Coordinating opportunities for partners to inform municipal, provincial, and federal policy decisions related to substance use harms. • Developing coordinated policy documents, such as position statements, policy briefs, and grant submissions, that highlight priority issues, gaps, and required actions and resources. • Advancing improvements to policies, laws, and regulatory practices that impact substance use health and related outcomes. • Advocating for funding and investment in evidence-based prevention and harm reduction strategies.

Data and Surveillance	Data and surveillance as a strategic foundation supports the coordinated use of information and data to guide planning, decision-making, and actions. It supports a standardized approach to monitoring trends, identifying emerging issues, and assessing the reach and impact of interventions. By embedding data and surveillance into all areas of work, the strategy ensures that actions are informed by timely, accurate, and locally relevant information and remain responsive to the evolving needs of the community.	• Using existing data, evidence, literature, and research to guide project approaches. • Establishing systems to track trends related to substance use health, determine emerging risks, and inform timely responses. • Expanding data-sharing and academic/research partnerships to improve the quality, scope, and usefulness of information used to guide the work. • Developing shared indicators and data collection tools to support consistent evaluation, reporting, and performance monitoring. • Using evaluation findings to support continuous learning, accountability, and quality improvement efforts.
Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I)	Equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) as a strategic foundation involves addressing the inequities that exacerbate substance use harms. The WECOSS recognizes that substance use is profoundly influenced by trauma, violence, and historical and ongoing systems of oppression, including colonialization, racism, classism, and gender discrimination. Guided by an ED&I approach, the WECOSS is committed to actions that aim to dismantle structural barriers, redistribute power, and invest in community-driven	• Meaningfully engaging PWLLE throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects. • Designing, implementing, and evaluating strategies in collaboration with diverse communities to ensure cultural relevance and safety. • Respecting Indigenous ways of knowing, healing, and relationship-building and supporting Indigenous-led leadership and decision-making within interventions.

	responses that reflect the diverse lived experiences and identities of residents. These principles ensure that the WECOSS' efforts are accessible, relevant, responsive, and accountable to priority populations and communities disproportionately affected by the substance use crisis.	• Adapting communications, outreach, and resources to reflect diverse languages, identities, and cultural contexts. • Establishing systems to ensure that interventions are guided by trauma and violence-informed and anti-oppressive practices, promoting trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

ACTION PILLARS

Action pillars define the primary areas through which the strategy advances its goals and focuses its efforts. Each pillar represents a distinct yet interconnected domain of action, outlining where coordinated efforts are directed outwardly to the community to prevent and reduce substance use harms. Together, they provide a clear structure for translating the strategy's priorities into tangible, community-level actions.

The two action pillars for the WECOSS are 1) Prevention and Education and 2) Harm Reduction.

PREVENTION AND EDUCATION

Prevention and Education as an action pillar focuses on preventing and delaying the onset of substance use by addressing the social determinants of health that influence use and improving community understanding of substance use as a health issue. This pillar emphasizes upstream, evidence-based approaches that support overall well-being by strengthening protective factors and reducing risk factors early in life. A particular focus is placed on children and youth, recognizing the critical and lasting impact of early intervention in reducing long-term harm. Overall, the goal of Prevention and Education is to equip the community with the knowledge, capacity, and supports needed to prevent substance use issues and achieve optimal health across the life span.

Priority Action Areas

To advance these goals, this Action Plan outlines three priority action areas for the Prevention and Education Pillar to address in its work over 2026 – 2030. These action areas are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Priority Action Areas for Prevention and Education

Priority Action Area	Description
1. Engage youth in the development of a wellness education program that is relevant, accessible, and responsive to the needs of youth. ***(2-3 Years)***	Engaging youth as active partners in the development of a wellness education program will ensure that prevention tools and resources are relevant, accessible, and responsive to the real-world needs and experiences of young people. This youth-driven solution will emphasize upstream prevention efforts by meeting youth where they are, while empowering them as leaders in developing wellness supports for their peers. Youth will be meaningfully involved throughout all stages of development, including identifying priorities and shaping content, design, and delivery. A co-design approach will ensure the program reflects youth perspectives, priorities, language, and culture, increasing trust, usability, and sustained engagement. The program will function as a prevention-focused education tool for youth, blending substance-specific content (alcohol, cannabis, tobacco/nicotine, and illicit substances) with other upstream prevention topics that prioritize overall wellness (e.g., coping, self-esteem, healthy relationships, bullying prevention). The program may include in-person and digital components, interactive activities, self-reflection tools, service navigation information, and youth-appropriate educational content that supports healthy behaviours and resilience. By integrating youth voices with evidence-informed prevention principles, the program will serve as a scalable and sustainable tool that supports population-level prevention efforts across WEC.
2. Strengthen the role of parents and caregivers by delivering a parent-led education campaign to support youth substance use prevention. ***(2-3 Years)***	The WECOSS will deliver an education and engagement campaign designed with parents for parents to strengthen their confidence, skills, and roles in preventing youth substance use. This campaign will center parent voices, lived experiences, and practical tools to normalize early, ongoing conversations with children and youth about substance use, wellness, and decision-making. It will recognize parents and caregivers as critical protective factors and position prevention as a routine and essential part of everyday parenting. The campaign will use a co-creation approach, engaging parents and caregivers in the design of key messages, content development, and the selection of delivery and promotional methods. Campaign activities will include parent-led learning opportunities featuring parents speaking directly to other parents (e.g., videos, keynote speeches, workshops), alongside practical

	resources such as conversation guides, tip sheets, and interactive tools. By elevating parent voices through these formats, the campaign will enhance trust, relevance, and credibility, increase engagement, and improve reach among diverse and historically underserved parent groups.
3. Build professional capacity to prevent youth substance use by establishing a cross-sector Professional Capacity-Building Network. ***(2-3 Years)***	Preventing youth substance use requires more than individual programs – it requires a skilled, connected workforce that understands youth development, risk and protective factors for youth substance use, and prevention science. Establishing a Professional Capacity-Building Network will strengthen the foundation for youth substance use prevention by investing in the people and systems responsible for prevention. This network will provide a platform for shared learning and coordination, helping to ensure prevention practices are consistent and aligned across systems that influence youth well-being. The network will include professionals who directly or indirectly support youth, such as educators, youth-serving providers, family and mental health professionals, public health staff, equity-focused community partners, and PWLLE. It will function as a capacity-building and professional development platform and include activities such as learning sessions, workshops, communities of practice, coaching and mentorship supports, and other knowledge and resource-sharing on youth substance use prevention. This collaborative approach will support more effective, timely, and coordinated prevention responses across the settings where youth live, learn, and grow.

HARM REDUCTION

Harm Reduction as an action pillar focuses on reducing the health, social, and economic harms associated with substance use, without requiring abstinence as a condition of care or support. By upholding the dignity, autonomy, and human rights of people who use substances, this pillar recognizes the complex realities of substance use and prioritizes practical, accessible, and low-barrier interventions that meet people where they are. This pillar responds directly to the risks posed by a toxic and unregulated drug supply through evidence-informed strategies designed to save lives and improve well-being. Overall goals are to prevent drug poisonings and deaths, improve access to harm reduction supplies and education, improve system coordination and harm reduction service pathways, and reduce substance use stigma within systems and the broader community.

Priority Action Areas

To advance these goals, this Action Plan outlines three priority action areas for the Harm Reduction Pillar to address in its work over 2026 – 2030. These action areas are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. Priority Action Areas for Prevention and Education

Priority Action Area	Description
1. Standardize and coordinate harm reduction service access in WEC. ***(3-4 Years)***	The WECOSS will aim to strengthen and standardize harm reduction service pathways to ensure that people who use substances, harm reduction providers, and system partners have a shared understanding of the range of services available, eligibility and access processes, and appropriate points of entry into the harm reduction system. Inconsistent pathways, variable practices, and limited coordination across organizations can result in service gaps, duplication, and missed opportunities to prevent harm. By improving consistency across harm reduction services, this activity will enhance access, continuity of care, and system responsiveness to the evolving risks associated with the toxic and unregulated drug supply. This initiative will involve mapping existing harm reduction services across the region, including their locations, hours of operation, eligibility criteria, service offerings, referral requirements, and capacity. This process will help to clarify the services that exist, how they function within the broader system, and where improvements in coordination are most needed. Using these insights, the WECOSS will convene local harm reduction organizations to align practices, integrate services, and reduce duplication across the system. Coordination with the treatment system will also be strengthened to ensure appropriate integration of care and smooth transitions between harm reduction, treatment, and other supports. Building on this collaborative work, the WECOSS will develop clear, user-friendly access pathways that assist both individuals and service providers in navigating the harm reduction system. These pathways will include practical tools and resources for both service providers – supporting effective intake and referral processes and coordinated system access – and for people who use substances, increasing awareness of available supports and how to access them. To maintain system alignment and coordination, the strategy will continuously monitor emerging data, new service availability, and evolving harm reduction supports to ensure pathways remain current, responsive, and reflective of the region's changing needs. The WECOSS will also work to improve the accessibility and availability of harm reduction services across WEC by strengthening access in priority settings and addressing existing system gaps. A key focus will be implementing harm reduction strategies in

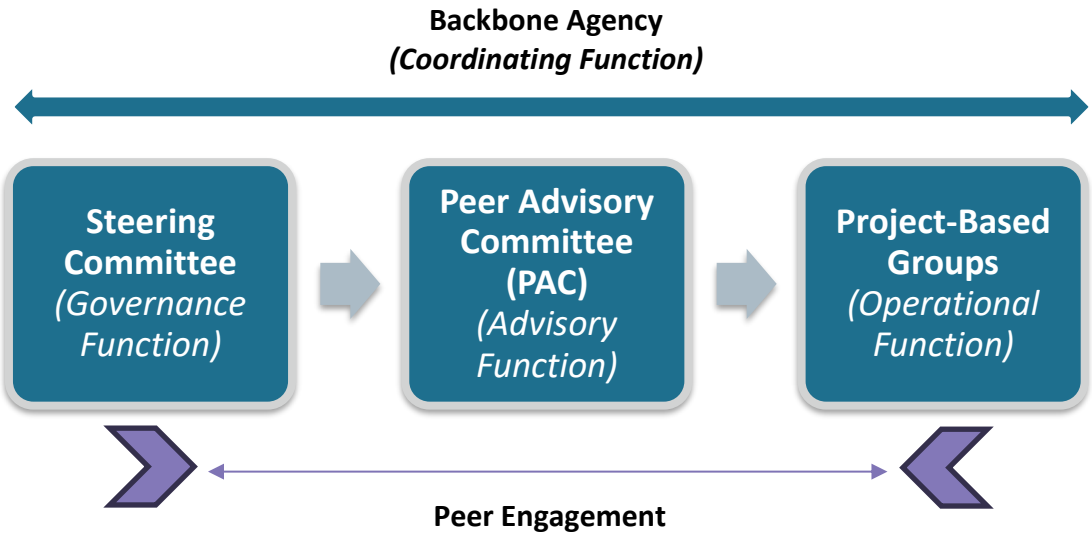
	higher-risk environments — particularly private dwellings and emergency shelters—where drug poisoning risks are elevated. Expansion of afterhours and rural service availability will also be explored.
2. Support community partners in adopting organizational policies, practices, and standards that align with harm reduction and anti-stigma approaches. ***(3-4 Years)***	The WECOSS will support community partners across service settings to enhance organizational readiness in applying harm reduction and anti-stigma principles. A key focus of this work will be promoting broader uptake and implementation of the Reducing Substance Use Stigma Policy Template and accompanying e-learning modules released by the WECOSS in 2025, supporting additional organizations in formally adopting and operationalizing the policy within their own environments. By providing practical guidance and support for implementation, this initiative will help embed stigma-reducing, harm reduction-oriented approaches into everyday organizational practices, policies, and decision-making. In addition, the WECOSS will support the development of complementary, topic-specific policy templates for organizations that align with the overarching anti-stigma/harm reduction policy framework. These tailored policies may address priority harm reduction areas such as overdose prevention and response, harm reduction supply distribution, safe needle disposal practices and availability, and other relevant practices within organizational settings. Together, these efforts will support greater adoption of harm reduction and anti-stigma standards, strengthening organizational capacity, improving safety for clients and staff, and contributing to a more equitable service system across WEC.
3. Reduce stigma by creating safe, meaningful platforms for PWLLE to share their stories and perspectives on substance use. ***(2-3 Years)***	The WECOSS will work to reduce substance use stigma by amplifying the voices, experiences, and leadership of PWLLE. This priority action area will focus on expanding the promotion and reach of existing online anti-stigma campaigns and resources that centre lived experience (e.g., Label Me Person Anti-Stigma Campaign, regionally, provincially, and federally-led initiatives), helping to challenge misinformation, humanize substance use, and shift public attitudes toward more compassionate, health-focused perspectives. In addition, the WECOSS will support additional in-person and community-based opportunities for dialogue and learning, such as PWLLE-led workshops, community storytelling series', speaker panels, town halls, or other engagement platforms determined with PWLLE. These spaces will be designed to be safe, inclusive, and trauma- and violence-informed, supporting meaningful participation and connection between PWLLE, service providers, decision-makers, and the broader community. Through these

	efforts, this initiative aims to foster greater understanding, dignity, and inclusion for people who use substances, while contributing to sustained stigma reduction over time.

OUR NEW STRUCTURE

To implement the 2026 – 2030 Action Plan, the WECOSS will adopt a new collaborative structure that ensures strategic oversight, community engagement, and effective coordination across multiple organizations and stakeholders. The new structure is comprised of a WECOSS Steering Committee (**Governance Function**), a Peer Advisory Committee (**Advisory Function)**, and Project-Based Groups (**Operational Function**), all of which are coordinated and supported in a backbone capacity by the WECHU (Figure 2). PWLLE will be meaningfully involved and engaged across all aspects of the strategy, ensuring peer expertise guides decision-making, direction-setting, and operations.

Figure 2 – WECOSS Structure



Together, these groups will work collaboratively to fulfill the following roles and responsibilities:

- **Backbone Agency (WECHU)** – The backbone agency will continue to coordinate the WECOSS by serving as the central intermediary among all groups, enabling effective communication, alignment, and collaboration to ensure cohesive implementation of the Action Plan.
- **Steering Committee** – The Steering Committee will provide strategic direction and oversight and guide decision-making related to the advancement of recommendations outlined in the Action Plan. The committee will be comprised of organizational leaders across WEC and PWLLE Liaisons from the Peer Advisory

Committee, ensuring activities remain aligned with the strategy's mandates and responsive to the evolving needs and priorities of the community.

- **Peer Advisory Committee (PAC)** – The PAC will advise strategy partners by providing structured input, recommendations, and support grounded in lived and living experience. The PAC will contribute meaningfully to project-level decisions by informing, co-creating, and supporting the implementation of Action Plan projects, in collaboration with the Steering Committee. Two PWLLE Liaisons from the PAC will also sit on the Steering Committee to facilitate effective communication and coordination between the two groups.
- **Project-Based Groups** – Project-Based Groups will be established by the Steering Committee when dedicated, time-limited coordination is required to support the implementation of specific Action Plan projects. These groups may be composed of representatives from Steering Committee member agencies. The PAC may also function as a Project-Based Group where appropriate. Project-Based Groups will be accountable to the Steering Committee and responsible for advancing project-level goals, activities, and deliverables approved by the Steering Committee. Groups will remain active for the duration of their assigned projects and dissolve upon project completion.

In the first year of the Action Plan, a new Terms of Reference for the WECOSS will be developed to further define these roles and outline the specific processes through which the groups will collaborate to advance the Action Plan.

OUR NEXT STEPS: THE PATHWAY AHEAD

With the Action Plan finalized, next steps for the WECOSS are as follows:

- **Formally Launch and Promote the Action Plan** – The WECOSS will publicly launch the Action Plan on WECOSS.ca and coordinate communications with partner organizations to promote the launch to the community. This will involve aligning and amplifying partner messaging to build awareness, shared ownership, and momentum for Action Plan implementation.
- **Re-Build Governance and Operational Structures** – Governance and operational structures will be realigned to support effective implementation of the Action Plan. This will include revising the Terms of Reference, updating governance materials, and reorienting existing WECOSS committees to align with the new operating structure.
- **Prioritize Action Plan Activities for Year 1 (2026)** – Strategy partners will collaboratively identify and prioritize Action Plan activities to initiate in Year 1, based on readiness, capacity, resource availability, and anticipated impact. Once priorities are confirmed, project-level planning and implementation will begin.
- **Confirm Funding and Resource Strategies** – The strategy will identify and pursue funding opportunities to support Action Plan implementation, such as coordinated grant applications and resource planning. This will involve confirming staffing and resource needs, data and surveillance infrastructure, and evaluation capacity required to advance priority initiatives.

- **Establish Performance, Monitoring, and Reporting Measures** – Systems and processes will be developed to monitor implementation progress, measure outcomes, and track performance across Action Plan initiatives. These measures will support continuous learning and improvement, enable transparent reporting, and maintain accountability to partners, funders, and the community.