



What We Heard and Recommendations

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About imagiNorthern Community Conversation #1

January 24, 2026, 10 am to 12 pm

Number RSVPs received: 127

Number participating online: 63 (51 online plus 3 locations with 12 in-person participants)

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Purpose of the Community Conversations

imagiNorthern is convening two broad, open community conversations to test two proposed governance options and ensure that the future structure of the network reflects Northern realities, Indigenous values, and community priorities. The January 24th conversation was the first of these two conversations. (The second one will take place on Monday February 2nd.) Participants included artists, makers, cultural workers, community leaders, organizational representatives, and partners from across Northern Manitoba and Northern Saskatchewan.

The intent was not to seek abstract preferences, but to understand what would genuinely support local leadership, inclusion, accountability, and long-term sustainability for Imaginorthern as a regional network.

The Imaginorthern Steering Committee reviewed the original proposed governance framework and in response to their concerns the Alternative option was developed for discussion and feedback by the wider community.

About Imaginorthern and the Two Options Being Considered

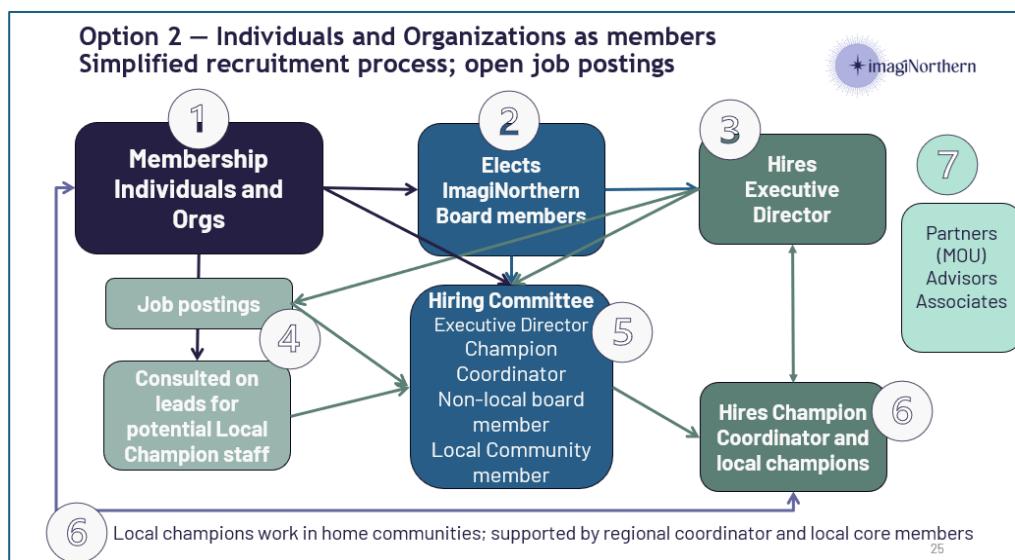
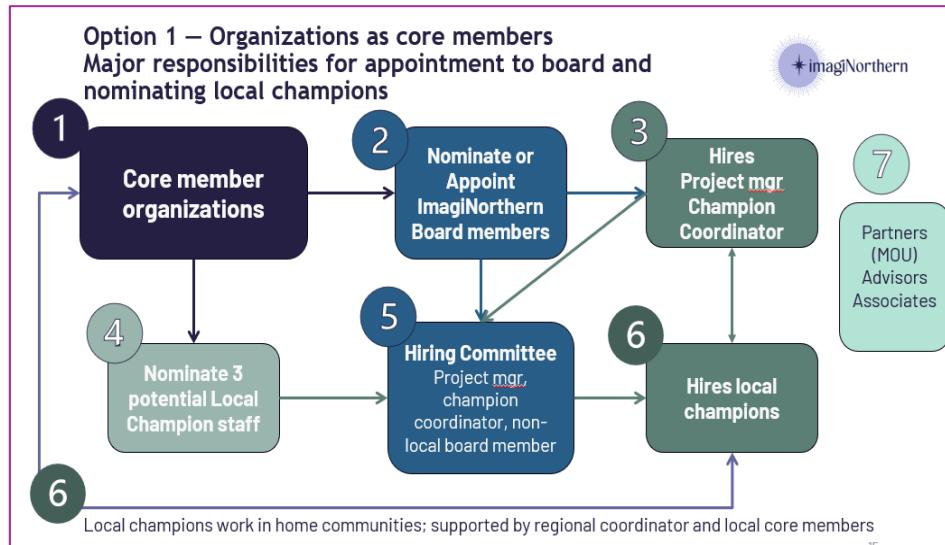
ImagiNorthern is a Northern-led network supporting artists, makers, creative, culinary and cultural workers across Northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan. It has been incubated as an initiative by the Flin Flon Arts Council. It has grown out of years of relationship-building, gatherings, workshops, and shared work in communities across the region. Imaginorthern's purpose is to strengthen Northern creative and cultural life in ways that:

- Reflect the lived realities of Northern and remote communities
- Support artists, makers, and food producers to thrive
- Honour Indigenous leadership and knowledge
- Contribute to community well-being and a vibrant, resilient Northern economy

That means decisions should not sit with one person, one community, or one organization. They should be made with care, clarity, and shared responsibility, in ways that reflect Northern realities and Indigenous values.

The governance approach is intended to:

- Share leadership
- Keep decisions close to communities
- Be clear about who decides what
- Avoid unnecessary bureaucracy
- Stay flexible as the network grows



	Original Framework - Organizations	Alternative Option – Individuals and Orgs
End-Users	Individual artists, makers, food producers; access to infrastructure, training, and opportunities; provide input on needs to Local Champions	Same. In addition, individuals can also join as members.
Members	Arts and food organizations north of the 53 rd are Core Members; nominate or appoint board members and nominate local champions; support the local work	Individuals and organizations. Participate in gatherings, events and activities; provide feedback and input to staff and board. Can nominate or be nominated for board positions; elect board members.



	Original Framework - Organizations	Alternative Option – Individuals and Orgs
Board Members	Appointed (or nominated) by Core Members Accountable to organizations that are members.	Elected by all members. Accountable to all members. Board composition can balance: Regional representation; Indigenous leadership and Functional expertise (e.g. finance, legal, HR, governance).
Regional Staff – direct reports to board	Project Manager and Champion Coordinator oversee operations, strategy execution, budgeting, and support Champions and board administration. Both report to Board (2-headed organization)	Executive Director provides operational and financial leadership, staff oversight, implementation of plans. Northern Champions Coordinator reports to Executive Director; supports local champions work, delivery of programs and community engagement
Hiring Committee for champions	Project Manager Champion Coordinator Non-local board member	Executive Director Champion Coordinator Non-local board member Local Community member
Local Champions	Nominated by Core Members and contracted by imagiNorthern to support local programming, lead outreach, coordinate collaborations, lead <i>Creative Pulse</i> data collection.	Public job postings mean hiring is open and transparent, rather than dependent on local organizations' participation. Local members can provide leads and encourage applications.
Partners	Organizations with shared values; work collaboratively with imagiNorthern via Agreements	same
Advisors	Individuals with regional or thematic expertise	same
Associates	Informal contributors such as tourism companies or marketing agencies	same



What We Heard

Across breakout groups and the full-group dialogue, participants consistently emphasized the need for a governance structure that is inclusive, democratic, practical in small and remote communities, and rooted in lived Northern experience.

Five strong themes emerged.

1. Membership Must Reflect How Northern Communities Actually Work

Participants overwhelmingly supported a model where both individuals and organizations can be members of imagiNorthern.

Key reasons included:

- Many artists, makers, Elders, and culture-bearers are not part of formal organizations
- In some communities, informal leadership is more important than incorporated organizations
- Organizational membership can create unintended barriers related to cost, capacity, and access
- A people-centred network better reflects Indigenous and Northern ways of organizing

Community members stressed that limiting formal membership to organizations would exclude many of the very people imagiNorthern is meant to serve and empower.

What this tells us:

A membership model based only on organizations that have certain powers (like appointing /nominating board members for a regional grassroots initiative) does not fit Northern realities as well. A flexible, people-centred model better supports inclusion, equity, and local leadership.

2. Leadership Should Be Chosen Democratically by the Whole Community

Participants consistently preferred that the Board of Directors be elected by all members/users, rather than appointed by a small group of organizations.

Reasons included:

- Ensuring every voice matters
- Creating accountability to the full network
- Supporting diversity of experience, culture, region, and skills
- Avoiding concentration of power



- Building legitimacy and trust

Many emphasized one-member-one-vote as essential to fairness and transparency.

What this tells us:

Community trust is built through democratic participation. An elected board aligns with principles of shared leadership and accountability.

3. A Clear Executive Director Structure Is More Practical and Accountable

When staffing models were discussed, participants strongly favoured:

- A single Executive Director reporting to the Board
- Clear reporting lines for the Champions Coordinator and Local Champions

Concerns were raised that a two-headed reporting structure could:

- Create confusion
- Slow decision-making
- Weaken accountability

People consistently asked for simplicity, clarity, and efficiency.

What this tells us:

In systems with limited capacity, clear leadership structures are essential for momentum and transparency.

4. Local Champions Should Be Hired Openly and With Community Involvement

Rather than relying on organizational nominations alone, participants supported:

- Open job postings
- Local advertising and outreach through radio, newspapers, markets, and events
- Community-weighted hiring committees
- Transparent processes

Creative ideas emerged to ensure Champions are trusted locally while remaining accountable to imagiNorthern. Specific criteria in terms of community connection and support would be demonstrated through the job description requirements and references that would be checked.

**What this tells us:**

Champions should emerge from community trust and open opportunity — not from organizational priorities, potential local politics or closed processes.

5. **ImagiNorthern Should Support Communities — Not Control Them**

Throughout discussions, participants repeatedly emphasized that **ImagiNorthern** should:

- Act as a connector, resource hub, and support system
- Keep decision-making close to communities
- Remain flexible for communities with limited formal capacity
- Honour Indigenous leadership and relational ways of working
- Advance reconciliation by championing Indigenous artists and build relationships that bring Indigenous voices, artworks, food products to wider markets
- Communicate beyond digital-only platforms

One participant described **ImagiNorthern** as a “battery pack” for communities — fueling local initiatives and connecting them to resources.

What this tells us:

The governance structure must enable local leadership, provide support to people and organizations in local communities, and while having clear accountability not impose centralized control.

Recommended Model

Based directly on this community input, it is recommended to adopt the Alternative Model proposed: Both individuals and organizations as full members, elected board with regional / functional skills, and executive director as lead.

This model best aligns with what participants from across the North clearly articulated as necessary for success.

The Preferred Model Delivers on Community Priorities

Community Priority	How the Preferred Model Responds
Inclusive participation	Open membership to individuals and organizations
Democratic leadership	Board elected by and accountable to all members
Strong accountability	Clear reporting lines under an Executive Director



Local empowerment	Local champions rooted in community, able to connect local community with regional resources, assist to fill local needs
Transparency	Open hiring and nomination processes
Flexibility	Adapts to varied community capacity
Indigenous and Northern values	Relationship-based, shared leadership approach

Why the Organization-Only Model Was Not Supported

While well-intentioned, participants identified significant risks in the organization-only approach:

- Exclusion of informal leaders and individual artists from key decisions
- Capacity challenges in small communities
- Capacity challenges in community organizations that are often volunteer-run
- Concentration of decision-making power
- Barriers to participation for individuals and organizations
- Less broadly based community accountability

Simply put, it does not reflect how Northern communities function in practice.

On the other hand, the preferred model aligns with ImagiNorthern and community goals to:

- Honour Indigenous and Northern ways of working
- Strengthen community ownership
- Build long-term trust
- Enable sustainable regional collaboration

Next Community Conversation

Monday, February 2, 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm.

[To RSVP, please click here!](#)

This second Community Conversation builds on what we heard in the first gathering. We will reflect on this *What We Heard* summary, and continue the conversation about decision-making within the ImagiNorthern network.

We will also have time to talk about how participants think ImagiNorthern should work, the specific roles and responsibilities of local champions, specific ways how the regional staff can support local initiatives, and what kinds of supports it can and should provide to local communities.