Establishing goals for a local housing strategy and monitoring progress

When developing a local housing strategy, cities, towns, and counties should identify high-level goals that enable them and the general public to track the jurisdiction’s overall progress in achieving its housing policy objectives. When developing the initial strategy – or afterward, in formulating an implementation plan – localities should also identify programmatic goals that describe what each policy or program is expected to achieve and milestones that describe important procedural achievements that are necessary to implement the strategy and achieve its goals. All three types of goals will help facilitate effective monitoring, an essential step in implementing a local housing strategy. Monitoring will help localities assess progress and determine if changes to the strategy or implementation are needed to meet their goals and achieve their policy objectives. In this brief, we provide guidance on developing meaningful, measurable goals and a monitoring process to track progress.

Establishing goals

Cities, towns, and counties should identify at least one high-level goal to support each of the policy objectives that motivate their housing strategy. Policy objectives describe in a broad, general way, the high-level desired results of housing-related activities, such as increasing the affordability of rental housing or expanding affordable housing in resource-rich areas. Policy objectives like these are useful in describing what a locality hopes to achieve with its housing strategy, and in guiding the selection of policies, programs, and measurable goals, but they generally do not represent specific, measurable goals in and of themselves. For example, a policy objective of increasing rental affordability describes broadly what a jurisdiction wishes to achieve through its housing strategy, but it doesn’t explain how the jurisdiction will measure affordability or by how much you want to increase affordability.

A next step, then, would be to identify specific, measurable goals that will help a city, town, or county determine whether and to what extent it is making progress in achieving its policy objectives. Goals are specific, measurable accomplishments a locality aims to achieve as a result of implementing its housing strategy. Goals are often quantitative, such as the development of a specified number of affordable rental units, but not always. Some goals are based on procedural results that are not easily quantified, such as the passage of a land use ordinance by City Council.

There are three main types of goals for a local housing strategy and benefits to identifying goals within each category in a local housing strategy:
• High-level goals describe the expected overall achievements of a local housing strategy. Many housing strategies, for example, promise to “Produce at least X thousand units of affordable housing” or to “Help Y thousand renter households become homeowners.” In a comprehensive and balanced housing strategy, high-level goals are usually the product of multiple housing policy tools and not a single policy or program. High-level goals are useful for communicating with internal partners, external stakeholders, and the public what a locality aims to achieve from its housing strategy. But, they are often not specific enough to facilitate day-to-day monitoring to ensure all systems are running sufficiently well to produce the desired outcome.

• Programmatic goals describe the expected achievements of a specific policy or program within a housing strategy. Having a programmatic goal for each policy or program in your strategy will help localities determine whether each program is contributing as expected toward achievement of the high-level goals.

• Milestones are generally procedural targets that reflect the completion of a particular project, such as the implementation of a new downpayment assistance program or passage of a general obligation bond issue to raise local funds for affordable housing.

High-level goals are almost always outlined in a jurisdiction’s written housing strategy, while programmatic goals and milestones can either be described there or included within a more internal document, such as an implementation plan, or a monitoring plan.

All goals should generally adhere to the SMART principles, which means they are:

Specific: Specific goals provide enough detail to establish what the locality seeks to accomplish and are easier to measure than vague goals. The targets that are set and metrics selected to measure progress toward the goal should be as specific as possible. As an example, a goal to develop 500 new housing units affordable to households below 80 percent AMI within two years is preferable to a goal simply to promote affordable housing opportunities for low-income households. Among other questions to consider in making goals specific are: by what date will the target be achieved? What is the level of affordability being targeted? Is a special population being targeted? Are the units to be produced rental or for-sale?

Measurable: In addition to being specific, goals should be capable of being measured. Production targets based on the number of dedicated affordable housing units supported by local government are fairly easy to measure but other types of goals may
be more challenging. For example, a goal of incentivizing the private sector to produce 20% more housing units than it would have absent the new housing strategy would be difficult to measure since that counterfactual cannot be determined. A better measure would be to establish a baseline (e.g., the average annual number of housing starts between 2017 and 2019) and set a goal for new housing starts in 2022 to be at least 20% above that baseline.

Action-oriented: Programmatic goals and milestones should ideally specify concrete steps to be taken during implementation of an activity, rather than vague and aspirational plans. For example, a milestone of submitting zoning code text amendments that support increased residential density to city council within one year is preferable to a less action-oriented milestone of reviewing land use ordinances for barriers to housing affordability.

Realistic: Goals should be ambitious but grounded in the reality of what can reasonably be achieved given available resources, constraints, and opportunities. Factors to consider in setting realistic goals may include funding and staff time dedicated to an activity, as well as political support and the buy-in of key partners. Reviewing the results of similar activities implemented in the past by the jurisdiction or other peer jurisdictions may help in establishing realistic goals.

Time-bound: Include an anticipated timeframe for achievement as part of any goal. A timeframe promotes actions to make progress on an activity and maintain it as a priority in the face of competing demands for a local government’s attention. Goals for more complex or long-term activities such as affordable housing production may benefit from interim goals or milestones that reflect progress after a defined period of time – for example, after four years of progress toward an eight-year high-level goal – or at key stages in the work. Consider a high-level goal to produce 1,000 units of dedicated affordable rental housing. It may take many years for this goal to be achieved, or even for the first units to be completed. Tracking the establishment of a new program to produce these units (a milestone) is one type of interim measure that can be measured sooner. Another would focus on tracking the number of units at various stages of the production pipeline – such as projects that apply for financing, get approved for financing, and begin construction.

How many goals should be included in a local housing strategy?

As discussed earlier, it’s important to have at least one high-level goal to measure progress toward each of your housing policy objectives. In some cases, a single high-level goal can be sufficient to measure progress toward multiple policy objectives. In other cases, several high-level goals may be appropriate to measure progress toward a
single policy objective. Complex activities, such as producing or preserving affordable housing, may benefit from sub-goals to ensure you are promoting affordability at specific income levels in need of affordable housing or for specific subgroups, such as older adults or persons with disabilities. Additional sub-goals might include more-detailed metrics such as the distribution of units of different sizes and types to be constructed or rehabilitated, and the number of households to be assisted in resource-rich neighborhoods.

When multiple programs will contribute to the achievement of a single high-level goal, it’s also important to have a programmatic goal associated with each program so the agency responsible for each program has a target that tracks their contribution to the high-level goal.

Monitoring progress

In the context of a local housing strategy, monitoring is the process through which a locality reviews data to measure progress toward its goals and determines if changes are needed in the strategy or implementation to achieve your goals and policy objectives. Monitoring begins once the strategy has been adopted and is being implemented.

Benefits of monitoring

Monitoring is valuable to the successful execution of a local housing strategy in multiple ways:

Tracking progress: Monitoring provides a systematic means of measuring progress over time against high-level goals, programmatic goals, and milestones established for a housing strategy. This enables a jurisdiction to regularly keep tabs on which parts of a housing strategy are meeting, exceeding, or failing to meet expectations.

Making adjustments: The monitoring process can reveal that certain policies or programs are overperforming or underperforming relative to expectations. This could be due to a number of factors. For example, a program that is underperforming relative to the milestones or programmatic goals established to track its progress might not have enough staff resources dedicated to the program; alternatively, this may be a sign that expectations for the program were initially set too high. A program that is overperforming relative to its programmatic goals could either be a sign the program is capable of producing more with enough resources, or alternatively a sign that a portion of financial resources allocated to it might be better distributed to other programs. Regular monitoring enables a jurisdiction to flag unexpected results, analyze why certain policies or programs are or are not working well, and change
course as needed. Relatedly, ongoing monitoring can help a lead entity justify the need for additional resources or the realignment of resources to an elected official(s) or manager who approve such requests.

Managing and coordinating activities: Localities would benefit from having an implementation plan detailing which government agencies and departments are leading and supporting the policies and programs that comprise a local housing strategy, as well as which activities of other partners, such as social service providers or nonprofit housing developers, also play supporting roles. The implementation plan should also specify which person or entity is responsible for overseeing the overall implementation process and coordination across agencies that are needed to successfully implement a housing strategy.

While these roles should all be established before monitoring begins, the monitoring process can serve as an ongoing project management tool through which the lead entity keeps track of the partners’ activities and progress made toward milestones and goals. In addition to helping the lead entity determine whether resources need to shift between activities in order to achieve the jurisdiction’s goals, the monitoring process can also help identify opportunities to better coordinate activities among the partners that may not have been apparent during the planning phase of the strategy.

Promoting accountability: An important byproduct of monitoring is that it helps hold partners implementing a housing strategy accountable for their actions and results. Ideally, monitoring is conducted in a transparent manner in which the partners, elected officials, and the public at large can all easily understand if and how progress is being made in implementing the strategy. This, in turn, encourages the partners to remain focused on achieving the expected results for their respective activities. Given the competing demands on local government agencies and departments, monitoring can help ensure housing activities remain a high priority.

Communicating progress: Monitoring can also serve as a means for communicating progress made on the implementation of a housing strategy with partner agencies and departments, elected officials, external stakeholders, and the public at large. Information shared with each of these groups may vary — an agency directly leading a housing activity will likely need more detailed monitoring data about the activity that other partners or stakeholders — but regularly sharing updates on progress can benefit implementation in several ways. For example, it can help partners identify opportunities to collaborate or more effectively allocate resources, promote accountability among partners, and provide information to elected officials to aid decision-making and explain the impact of housing activities to constituents. A well-designed dashboard can be an effective means of keeping the public informed of
progress made and building support for addressing unmet housing needs.

Establishing a monitoring process

Given that a housing strategy should include numerous activities across multiple partners, including those within and external to local government, it will be important to design a process that works for any partner expected to assist with monitoring. If resources allow, a sophisticated monitoring process could include the development of an online tool for partners to report progress, though such a step is not crucial. What is crucial is that the monitoring process be designed and managed in a manner that provides regular and reliable data that enables a jurisdiction to assess progress toward its goals. The process should include regular opportunities for implementation partners to review data, discuss how the implementation is proceeding, and, if needed, refine implementation. Additionally, the process should include opportunities for the public to receive updates and provide feedback on progress. Consider the following questions to design a monitoring process that will support your jurisdiction’s housing strategy.

What role will partners play in the monitoring process? Responsibility for the monitoring process will likely mirror how the partners are organized to implement the housing strategy, with a lead entity taking overall responsibility for monitoring and partners participating at varying levels based on their roles in implementation. This could mean that agencies or departments most involved in implementing housing-related activities are regularly providing and reviewing monitoring data for multiple activities, potentially with staff dedicated to monitoring tasks. Agencies or departments with less implementation responsibility would likely be much less involved, such as participating in progress updates to municipal staff. Some activities, such as the development of affordable housing within transit-oriented developments, may involve multiple partners. In those cases, each partner’s monitoring roles and responsibilities should be determined early in the process to avoid conflicts or delays.

How frequently will you conduct monitoring? Housing activities can vary widely in the time required for implementation and impact. Accordingly, the frequency of monitoring may vary across activities. For example, it may be valuable to track programs that promote affordability by providing down payment or security deposit assistance on a quarterly basis, while the development of multifamily apartments may only need to be monitored on a bi-annual basis. As noted above, monitoring should include records of interim steps toward the achievement of production targets, such as applications submitted, approvals, closings, ground-breaking, etc. Ideally, a jurisdiction would tailor the frequency of monitoring across activities according to how quickly each activity can be expected to provide meaningful data that
demonstrates if progress is being made or barriers to implementation are present.

How will data quality be assured? Monitoring the implementation of a housing strategy involves multiple partners, each of which may have unique reporting systems or definitions of key variables, such as income levels that qualify a household for an affordable unit. It will be important for the implementation partners to have common definitions for data that will be monitored. Ideally, key data points will be defined before any monitoring begins, such as when goals and metrics are being established during the development of a housing strategy or in formulating the implementation plan. Once monitoring begins, additional steps should be taken to ensure that data collected from the implementation partners are timely and accurate. For example, it may be necessary to check that partners are aggregating or disaggregating data in a consistent manner and that data are deduplicated in cases where multiple agencies are involved in the production or preservation of an affordable unit, so each unit is counted only once despite multiple agencies being involved in helping making it affordable.

How will monitoring findings be shared with the elected officials, the public, and implementation partners? As discussed earlier, it is useful to identify three types of goals: high-level goals, programmatic goals, and milestones. For the monitoring process, localities will need to determine how to share updates on each of these with different stakeholders. Progress toward high-level goals should be shared with elected officials and the public, ideally via a data-dashboard or similar tool that enables viewers to quickly understand if and to what extent the overall housing strategy is working. Additional monitoring data will need to be shared with implementation partners. While progress toward high-level goals can be valuable to share with implementation partners to maintain a shared sense of its direction and purpose, it is important also to provide these partners with detailed data about progress made toward programmatic goals and milestones. These data may reveal barriers encountered during implementation and allow the partners to change course. A data dashboard can be useful to share monitoring data with implementation partners, though it may be useful to have a different and more detailed internal dashboard for sharing with implementation partners than the more streamlined version posted for public viewing. Ideally, implementation partners should also regularly meet to review and discuss monitoring data and, if needed, adjust implementation in a coordinated fashion.