Children's Services
Services à l'enfance

Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan

2025–2029

Start Here

Land Acknowledgement

Ottawa is built on unceded Anishinabe Algonquin territory.

The peoples of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation have lived on this territory since time immemorial. Their culture and presence have nurtured and continue to nurture this land. The City of Ottawa honours the peoples and land of the Anishinabe Algonquin Nation. The City of Ottawa honours all First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, and their valuable past and present contributions to this land.

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Introduction

Message from the Director of Children's Services

Early learning and child care programs play an essential role in building a strong, healthy, and resilient community. I am proud to introduce the **Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan 2025–2029** (Service System Plan), which sets a clear path forward to meet the needs of children and families in Ottawa. The Service System Plan lays out our vision and priorities for the next five years and marks a big step in our commitment to supporting children and families across our community, with a focus of ensuring we address barriers to accessing services for those facing the greatest challenges and for underserved families.

This is an exciting time for the early learning and child care sector as we align with the historic launch of the new Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system. Through this national initiative, we are making child care more affordable and accessible than ever. The CWELCC system's commitments to lowering the cost of child care and increasing spaces across Canada provides us a unique opportunity to meet the needs of children and family, while furthering our commitment to equity and inclusion. This new Service System Plan builds upon the strong foundation that we have established in recent years with the help of our sector partners.

We are proud of what we have achieved together, and those successes have set the stage for even more progress ahead. This Service System Plan will guide us as we continue to grow and adapt to meet the changing needs of our City.

In creating this Service System Plan, we gathered input from families, caregivers, service providers, educators, and community partners. Together, we identified key areas where we can make a real difference locally — from removing barriers and simplifying access to programs and services, to improving supports for children and families, strengthening the sector with enhanced training and resources for the workforce. Each of these goals reflects our dedication to leveraging local assets and partnerships to meet the unique needs of children and families and make Ottawa a better place to live.

While this Service System Plan is ambitious and will give us a strong foundation to guide the work, we know the significant transformation in building the national system will require us to be flexible and adaptable to respond to what comes our way. We also know that we cannot do this alone. We will be continuing to work closely with partners in the community and across City departments to implement the concrete steps that are outlined in this Service System Plan. Over the next five years, we will be tracking our progress, gathering feedback, and making adjustments to ensure we meet our goals and continue to deliver on our priorities.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the development of this Service System Plan. I am confident that together, we can bring this vision to life and create a future where every child has the chance to thrive.

Jason Sabourin
Director, Children's Services
City of Ottawa

Acknowledgements

The 2025–2029 Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan reflects the collaboration and contributions of many people in our community, including families and caregivers, local child care service providers, school board partners, EarlyON service providers, as well as community partners and organizations serving families and children.

Including diverse voices and perspectives, especially of families that are underserved or not connected to the system, was a key goal during the community consultations for this next version of the sector's Service System Plan. Multiple engagement opportunities ensured the voices of diverse and underserved families and caregivers were prevalent in the plan, with feedback gathered through focus groups, an online family survey in multiple languages, and reaching out directly to organizations that serve refugee and newcomer families who may not yet be using the system. Children's Services is grateful for all these connections and the unique perspectives families, service providers and partners were able to share with us, and that contribute to the Service System Plan being richer and more reflective of the experiences and needs of our community.

We would also like to take the opportunity to offer a special mention of appreciation to the members of the Child Care and Early Years System Planning Advisory Group, the Indigenous Early Years Circle, and the Table Francophone whose time, expertise and dedication have been crucial in the development of the Service System Plan. Thank you for your commitment and belief in the power of collaboration. Together, we have achieved a milestone that will positively impact the local early learning and child care landscape for years to come.

Finally, we would like to thank the dedicated City staff whose passion and dedication to serving our community was evident in every aspect of the planning process.

Disclaimer: The Service System Plan incorporates and reflects data, feedback, and community analysis from a variety of sources, collected and analyzed from October 2023 to December 2024. The data, analyses, and content shared in the Service System Plan went through a detailed review process to ensure accuracy and validity. However, we acknowledge that unintentional errors and omissions can happen. For more information or to report an error, please contact ChildrensServices@ottawa.ca.

Executive Summary

Over the past few years, the early learning and child care (ELCC) system has undergone transformative change supported by significant investment and commitment by both the Federal and Provincial governments. The historic launch of a national early learning and child care system has been celebrated by service providers and welcomed by families looking for more affordable, inclusive, and high-quality child care spaces.

As Service System Manager, the City of Ottawa's Children's Services is responsible for the planning and management of early learning and licensed child care programs for children 0 to 12 years old in Ottawa. A key responsibility is the development of a service system plan to ensure that early learning and child care programs adapt to meet evolving Provincial priorities, while responding to the local changing needs of children, families, and service providers.

The Service System Plan outlines the vision and priorities for early learning and licensed child care programs for 2025 to 2029 in Ottawa. The process to develop the Service System Plan offered both the opportunity to reflect on past achievements, as well as future planning. The development of the Service System Plan allowed the chance to engage with over 2,100 members of the local community, including families, licensed child care and EarlyON service providers, community partners, organizations serving diverse families, and City of Ottawa staff. The inclusion of unique voices and experiences of equity-deserving groups were prioritized and integrated by using inclusive engagement strategies and targeted outreach.

Children's Services also worked collaboratively with the Child Care and Early Years System Planning Advisory Group, the Indigenous Early Years Circle, and the Table Francophone in the development of the Service System Plan. The input from these groups ensured that the Service System Plan Framework is inclusive, culturally responsive, and reflective of the lived experiences of families and service providers.

The Service System Plan outlines a long-term vision, a five-year strategy statement, eight strategic priorities, and 55 actions to support the changing needs of children and families. The Service System Plan aims to reduce systemic barriers, improve supports for children and families, and strengthen the ELCC sector so that every child in Ottawa has the opportunity to thrive in a nurturing and inclusive environment.

What We Know

Access to Child Care

Access to a system of high-quality and affordable child care is essential for both children and families. For children, the opportunity to attend quality child care helps them learn and grow in a safe place. It supports their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, getting them ready for social interactions, as well as school. For families, access to affordable and reliable child care allows them to work or pursue an education with the confidence of knowing that their children are in a safe and positive environment.

Summary of Key Findings

- The implementation of the CWELCC system has significantly increased demand for affordable child care spaces, with the number of children 0 to 5 years old waiting for a space rising by just over 300 per cent since 2019.
- The sector is meeting approximately 76 per cent of the demand for affordable child care spaces, with the greatest shortages affecting the infant age group, as well as in Indigenous-led and French-language child care.
- Significant disparities exist in the distribution and availability of affordable child care spaces across the city of Ottawa, with nearly half of neighbourhoods underserved, and limited access in suburban and rural areas.
- Ten Ottawa neighbourhoods are both underserved in terms of child care access and experiencing lower socio-economic conditions.
- The cost of before-and-after school care for older school age children has continued to rise since 2019 and is now significantly higher than the cost of CWELCC-funded before-and-after Kindergarten care.
- Indigenous-led child care is limited to younger children (not yet attending school) with no before- or after-school options. Centre-based care is available at only five locations, often requiring families to travel long distances.
- The transition from Indigenous-led child care to mainstream school systems can be challenging for Indigenous children. As a result, many families choose to keep their children in Indigenous-led child care for Junior and Senior Kindergarten.
- Access to French-language child care for Francophone families is uneven, with fifteen neighbourhoods lacking options for children 0 to 3 years old. About a quarter of French-language spaces are occupied by children who do not identify as Francophone.
- Forty per cent of surveyed parents prioritized improvements to the City's registry and waitlist system as a key change needed in the sector.
- Families identified several challenges to finding and securing child care, including limited understanding and clear information about child care options, difficulty completing applications, and navigating the registry and waitlist system, with materials available only in English and French.

Equity and Inclusion

Ensuring equitable and inclusive access to child care for children facing challenges, such as those with special needs, from racialized communities, or from low-income families, is important to give every child the chance to grow and develop in a supportive environment. Child care can help address inequities and support families who may need additional help, or who are facing economic and caregiving challenges.

Summary of Key Findings

- Families shared that the current system is complex and difficult to navigate, with a major challenge being understanding and effectively accessing the system; these challenges are more significant for low-income and racialized families.
- Racialized and Indigenous families are more likely to access support from local organizations when seeking child care.
- Fewer child care options exist for children with special needs, as not all child care centres can or will provide care to children with special needs. The majority (80 per cent) of children with special needs have a desired child care start date that has already passed. Some families avoid disclosing that their child has special needs on the registry and waitlist system.
- Service providers perceive that there is an increasing number of children with special needs and that they have insufficient resources to adequately support them.
- Some families are unaware of the fee subsidy program, including eligibility, process and documents required; those looking to apply for fee subsidy often require assistance to complete the application process.
- Certain administrative requirements to access or maintain fee subsidies (e.g. limited number of absences per year) are not applied to families benefiting from CWELCC-funded reduced rates.
- Fee subsidies will remain essential for families who would still struggle to afford $10-a-day child care fees, as well as for families with school age children who are no longer eligible for CWELCC-reduced child care rates.
- Flexible child care options, such as weekends, evenings and part-time care, are offered at just one per cent of child care centres; 42 per cent of surveyed parents expressed a need for flexible care, with preferences including drop-in care, early morning or evening care, and weekend availability.
- Socioeconomic and service data gaps limit the ability to fully understand who is using early learning and child care programs and how experiences may vary across communities.

Early Learning Programs and Services

EarlyON Child and Family Centres were established across Ontario following Provincial direction to integrate existing Ministry-funded child and family programs under one brand. In Ottawa, there are 95 active EarlyON Child and Family Centres across seven service areas that offer free programs and services to approximately 20,000 children 0 to 6 years old and their families.

Summary of Key Findings

- 85 per cent of surveyed parents who use EarlyON programs are "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the services provided.
- There are greater variations in the distribution of Indigenous-led and Francophone sites. Indigenous and Francophone families shared that long travel times and other barriers can make it harder to access culturally-appropriate EarlyON programs.
- All children 0 to 6 years old have access to an EarlyON main site within a 10-minute drive (urban areas) or 20-minutes (rural areas) in 42 of 51 neighbourhoods.
- Families find it difficult to access timely and comprehensive information about EarlyON programs (e.g. program locations, hours of operations) and are concerned about the limited availability of programming times.
- Nearly all (92 per cent) of EarlyON service providers reported reaching full capacity in their programs at least once a week in 2023. Families are frustrated at being turned away from programs.
- Some families from diverse backgrounds, including lone parents, parents of children with special needs, and gender-diverse parents, do not feel a sense of belonging in certain EarlyON programs.
- Families, especially newcomer and racialized families, often rely on EarlyON staff to help them access health and social services and guidance in navigating child care options. EarlyON staff feel they lack the training or necessary supports, especially when helping families with complex needs or children with special needs.
- 48 per cent of EarlyON service providers feel that working conditions (such as wages, benefits, hours of work) are "fair" or "poor". Workforce issues such as staff shortages, recruitment and retention represent a key issue for the sector.
- Service data gaps limit the ability to fully understand access patterns, service offerings, and family experiences.

Quality and Workforce

A skilled and dedicated workforce is key to high-quality early learning and child care. These professionals engage children though play and inquiry, supporting the development of lifelong learning skills. Factors like group size and composition, staff qualifications and training, working conditions, and the physical environment create a nurturing and enriching environment for growth and development.

Summary of Key Findings

- There is high satisfaction with the quality of child care among families currently accessing licensed child care (88 per cent of online family survey respondents).
- High-quality early learning and child care has a positive impact on a range of child developmental outcomes. Most child care service providers rate the quality of care they offer as "excellent".
- Gaps remain in the ability to measure and monitor the quality of local early learning and child care programs at a systems level.
- Workforce recruitment and retention is a top priority for the early learning and child care sector, with significant challenges due to insufficient applicants and inadequate salaries, benefits, and working conditions.
- High turnover rates create a high level of uncertainty and significantly impact the stability and sustainability of programs and services. Many educators do not plan to stay in the sector for the next five years or are uncertain about their future intentions.
- Continuous professional learning is vital for the workforce to enhance their skills and provide quality care.
- Embracing diversity within the early learning and child care sector is essential for creating inclusive environments. Significant differences exist in the local demographic and linguistic profiles of educators and management.
- Many educators find fulfillment in their roles, including a sense of personal accomplishment, pride and purpose in their work. However, many also experience challenges, such as compassion fatigue, burnout, and discrimination.

Service System Plan 2025–2029 Framework

Vision

Children and families have equitable access to a system of high-quality, culturally appropriate, inclusive, and affordable early learning and licensed child care services, where children are valued and nurtured to thrive.

Strategy Statement (2025–2029)

We will simplify access for children and families, reduce barriers and systemic inequities, come together for meaningful reconciliation, and strengthen the sector workforce towards a sustainable system of early learning and licensed child care services.

Strategic Priorities

1. **Increase equitable access to affordable, high-quality ELCC services**
   Expand and optimize the availability and responsiveness of affordable ELCC programs, with a focus on underserved neighbourhoods and population groups.
2. **Strengthen the ELCC workforce**
   Support the development, recruitment, retention, and recognition of a diverse and stable workforce within the ELCC system.
3. **Reduce systemic inequities and barriers to access and inclusion**
   Promote equitable access and inclusion of all children and families by actively identifying and removing systemic inequities and barriers in ELCC.
4. **Enhance the ELCC system to better meet the needs of children with special needs and their families**
   Prioritize and address systemic inequities to better meet the needs of children with special needs and their families by supporting access to tailored, inclusive, and supportive services.
5. **Improve and simplify how families find and gain entry to ELCC services**
   Improve the service experience of families by providing clear, accurate information about the ELCC system, responsive supports, and simplified access to care.
6. **Nurture Indigenous wellness and community well-being through ELCC services**
   A commitment to nurture Indigenous wellness and community well-being by integrating holistic and diverse culturally-informed supports within Indigenous-led ELCC services that honour and uphold Indigenous knowledge and traditions.
7. **Enhance the sustainability of ELCC services**
   Ensure the stability and growth of local ELCC programs by simplifying administrative processes, ensuring clarity in both funding and processes, allocating funding equitably, and building capacity to meet the increasingly complex needs of families within a publicly funded system.
8. **Enhance the use and quality of data**
   Enhance data collection practices and analytics to increase understanding of the population and the ELCC system to inform planning, decision-making, monitoring and evaluation practices.

Guiding Principles
These guiding principles are shared commitments among Children's Services, early learning and child care sector partners, and community partners working to plan and advance the priorities and actions in this Service System Plan. These principles influence all aspects of decision-making, planning, program, and service delivery.
Children & Family Focused
We prioritize the well-being and inclusivity of children and families, ensuring their diverse voices are heard, and collaborative efforts are taken in planning and service delivery to meet the unique needs of children and families.
Engagement & Partnership
We build and sustain partnerships, actively listen to diverse views and lived experiences, and work together to plan and deliver responsive early learning and child care programs and services.
Knowledge & Culture
We support programs and services that recognize and respect the diverse cultures, languages, backgrounds, and knowledge that each child and family bring, by weaving a philosophy of continuous holistic learning, cultural safety, and inclusivity
Accountability
We act with integrity and transparency, use the best evidence available, and collectively report on progress towards clear, measurable goals to achieve the best outcomes for children and families.
Workforce Well-being
We prioritize the well-being of the early learning and child care workforce, recognizing the quality of care is fundamentally tied to the health, satisfaction, and expertise of educators.
Equity & Inclusion
We identify, reduce, and remove systemic barriers, elevate diverse voices, and promote equitable early learning and child care environments where children, families and the workforce feel valued, respected, and can thrive.

2

Background

Introduction

Service system planning provides the opportunity for Service System Managers (SSMs) to collect and analyze information about the needs of the community, reflect on existing programs and services, identify opportunities and service gaps, and create a path forward, together, with service providers and community partners.

The Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan (Service System Plan) acts as a road map for the next five years to guide the future of early learning and child care programs in Ottawa. The Service System Plan introduces a long-term vision and strategic statement, as well as strategic priorities and actions, to advance the five key objectives of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system: Access, Affordability, Quality & Workforce, Inclusion, and Data and Reporting.

Implementation of the Service System Plan will generate systemic improvements, ensure ongoing collaboration with community partners and organizations, and address the local needs of children and families. The implementation of the Service System Plan will also establish a strong foundation for the future, with flexibility to respond to evolving child care and early learning initiatives.

The City's Role in Child Care and Early Years – Service System Manager

The City of Ottawa's Children's Services is the Service System Manager (SSM) for early learning and child care in Ottawa. As SSM, Children's Services plays a central role for the planning, funding, administration, and operations of all Ministry of Education-funded early learning and licensed child care programs and services for children 0 to 12 years old in Ottawa, as per the Ontario *Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA)*.

SSMs are Responsible for:[1]

Local Relationships and Expertise

Building and maintaining strong relationships with service providers and community partners to understand the unique social, economic, regional, and demographic forces that shape the local community, to help deliver the right mix of services in the right place.

Accountability and Oversight

Planning, negotiating, and maintaining service contracts with local EarlyON and child care service providers to ensure that the local delivery of services is efficient, effective, and meets a high standard of quality and safety.

System Planning

Developing and implementing a local Service System Plan to action Provincial priorities, as well as identify and address the needs of the local community in collaboration with families, early learning service providers and community partners.

Workforce and Capacity Building

Providing support to local EarlyON and child care service providers to build sector capacity and knowledge and implement local recruitment and retention initiatives.

Funding Allocation

Managing the allocation of funding for local EarlyON and child care programs in alignment with Provincial guidelines and in response to community needs.

Direct Service Delivery

Coordinating and administering the local child care fee subsidy program and special needs resourcing (SNR) to respond to local needs and support underserved families.

Why Equity Matters

High-quality early learning and child care programs complement a child's family life by providing rich opportunities for children to develop crucial learning skills, strengthen social interactions and support positive child development that can impact a child's lifelong trajectory and overall well-being. Equity in early learning and child care programs ensures that all children, regardless of their background, have access to high-quality early learning opportunities, and has the potential to reduce poverty by providing the necessary supports to families, especially mothers to return or enter the workforce.

Not all children have equitable access to quality early learning environments, which impacts child development, family well-being, and to building a sense of community. National and local systemic inequities continue to persist, and can be seen in uneven investments in the early learning and child care system, which can create barriers for underserved priority populations, as well as a lack of affordable child care options for families.

There is evidence that when early and equitable access to early learning and child care programs is prioritized for underserved communities, inequities and systemic barriers can be reduced. As such, offering more opportunities to improve the life of children and families and ultimately increase the economic and social well-being of the community, is an important foundational aspect of a healthy community.[2]

Recognizing that furthering our commitment to equity and inclusion is a shared responsibility, **Children's Services, working collaboratively with service providers and community partners,** is aligning with Provincial priorities to build a more inclusive and accessible Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system that meets the needs of the community. *Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework 2023* identifies principles and an approach for SSMs to reduce systemic barriers to access and inclusion in ELCC services.

The Province has directed SSMs to actively engage with diverse populations to gather and maintain in-depth knowledge of community needs to support the planning, management and delivery of responsive programs and services. Specifically, SSMs are to develop directed growth plans that ensure CWELCC-funded child care spaces are prioritized for underserved neighbourhoods and available for priority populations such as:

- Children living in low-income families
- Children with special needs and children needing enhanced or individual supports
- Indigenous children
- Francophone children
- Black and other racialized children
- Children of newcomers to Canada and official language minorities
- Children of families working non-traditional hours and requiring flexible hours of care[3]

Children's Services is committed to identify, reduce, and remove systemic barriers, elevate diverse voices, and promote equitable early learning and child care environments where children, families, and the workforce feel valued, respected, and can thrive.

Engagement with Partners for System Planning

Children's Services is committed to building and sustaining partnerships, identifying local priorities, and working together to plan and deliver responsive early learning and child care programs and services.

The Service System Plan was developed in close collaboration with the System Planning Advisory Group (SPAG), the Indigenous Early Years Circle (IEYC), and the Table Francophone (TF) that continue to provide culture- and linguistic-specific guidance in the system planning process.

System Planning Advisory Group (SPAG)

SPAG was established in 2018 during the development of the sector's first Service System Plan. The mandate of SPAG is to provide advice and guidance on the planning and management of a high-quality, affordable, accessible, and inclusive early learning and child care system in Ottawa for all children and families.

SPAG is currently comprised of members representing networks and different segments of the early learning and child care system, such as licensed child care (centre-based and home-based), nursery schools, Headstart programs, EarlyON programs, English and French-language school boards, Indigenous-led organizations, French-language organizations, and organizations that provide services to children with special needs. Children's Services is continually working to enhance community partnerships with organizations that support families and increase the diversity of the SPAG membership and other advisory groups to broaden the perspectives informing local early learning and child care policies, programs, and services.

Indigenous Early Years Circle (IEYC)

The IEYC works together to provide holistic, culturally relevant, and culturally safe programs and services to Indigenous children 0 to 12 years old and their families to help them develop a sense of self and well-being, as well as support their families and the Indigenous community in Ottawa.

Membership to the IEYC is open to all Indigenous-led service providers and organizations providing services to Indigenous children 0 to 12 years old or providing services to the Indigenous community in Ottawa.

Table Francophone (TF)

The TF makes recommendations to the Children's Services that help guide the development and implementation of service plans, designed by Francophone stakeholders for the Francophone community. The group ensures that Francophone families have access to services that are culturally sensitive, of high quality, inclusive, affordable, and in which children are valued and can thrive.

The TF brings together representatives from school boards, community organizations that provide early learning and licensed child care services, services for children with special needs, mental health services, and other French-language groups and networks, as needed.

Reflecting on the 2019–2023 Service System Plan Accomplishments

Since the implementation of the previous Service System Plan, the importance of early learning and child care programs for Ottawa families has continued to be front and centre. The duration of the *2019–2023 Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan* represented a time of significant growth, as well as unprecedented challenges and transformation. The strategic priorities outlined in the last Service System Plan guided the direction of Children's Services and the sector at large, resulting in many service enhancements for local families and children. The 2025–2029 Service System Plan builds on those priorities and accomplishments.

Affordability

24,056 children immediately benefited from lower child care costs, when 94 per cent of licensed child care centres and 100 per cent of licensed home child care agencies enrolled in CWELCC in 2022.

Each year, an average of **6,553 children** are supported each month by the child care fee subsidy program.

$13.03 million in Safe Restart funding was allocated up to December 2020 to help child care service providers reopen safely after pandemic closures.

Responsiveness

800 children with special needs were supported by Children's Inclusion Support Services during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) through a $14.24 million funding allocation.

In **2022**, **a new Family Experience** was launched to make information on the City's Child Care Registry and Waitlist system easier to find and navigate.

76 licensed child care sites offered free emergency child care for children of front-line workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, supported by $3.16 million in funding.

Access

1,733 new community-based CWELCC-funded spaces were allocated through Ottawa's directed growth strategy.

280 new CWELCC-funded Indigenous-led spaces and 125 CWELCC-funded French-language spaces were protected and allocated.

All **25 EarlyON service providers** maintained access and offered virtual programs for families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Quality

~2,700 ELCC professionals participated in the Professional Learning Pilot in 2022, which focused on four key learning areas: Anti-racist and inclusive practices, Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies, mental well-being, and inclusive environments.

1,255 ELCC professionals participated in the first-ever Ottawa Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey (2022) on job satisfaction and working conditions.

$191 thousand was equitably allocated to all 25 EarlyON service providers in 2023 to increase awareness of local resources and support the mental health and well-being of the workforce.

Partnerships and Equity

Working collaboratively with the **IEYC**, Children's Services updated ottawa.ca to include additional information about Indigenous-led ELCC services.

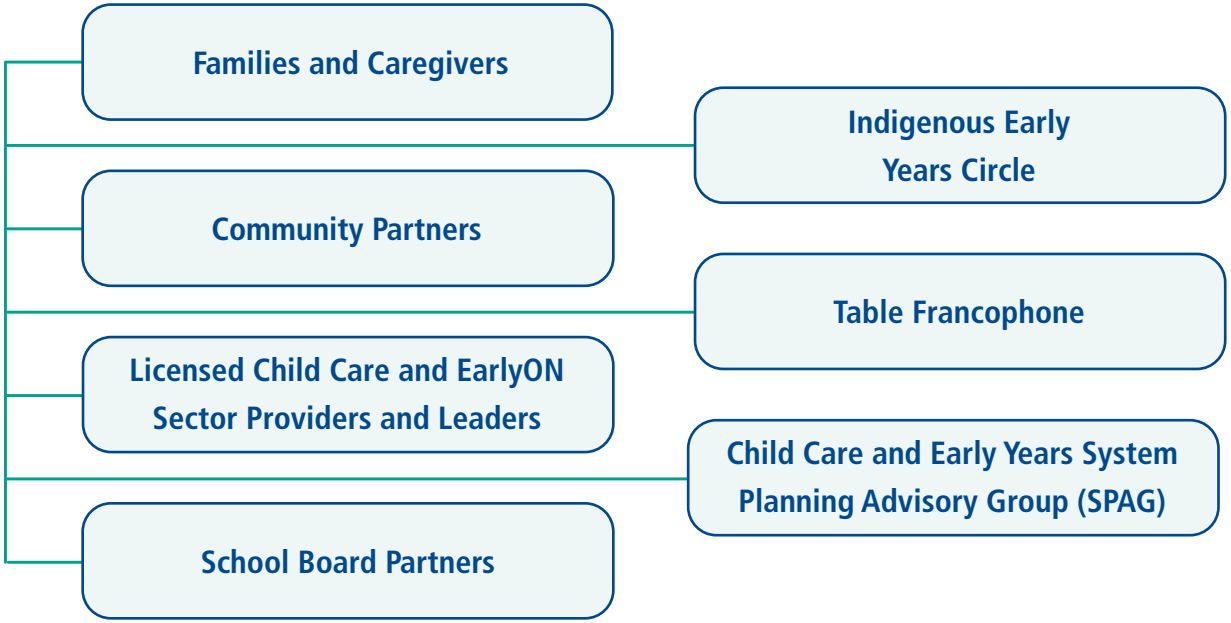
In collaboration with the **TF**, Children's Services updated the French-language designation process to support greater knowledge and access to high-quality French-language programs.

Continued commitment to increase the diversity of the **SPAG** membership to broaden the perspectives informing local ELCC planning and decision-making.

2025–2029 Service System Plan Development and Engagement

To support the development of the Service System Plan, families, service providers and community partners were invited to share their experiences with ELCC programs, including sharing their insights on what is working well, what can be improved and what community needs are most important to them.

The Service System Plan was informed by, and built together through extensive collaboration and engagement with:



An Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (EDIB) lens was intentionally applied throughout the planning process by prioritizing connections with diverse groups and analyzing data broken down by different populations. This approach allowed for an increased understanding of the unique experiences and needs of the community. Combining empirical data with the experience of community partners who support neighbourhoods experiencing barriers, strategies to reduce barriers and promote an equitable early learning and child care system were identified and considered.

Four Main Sources of Evidence

Environmental scanning and review of literature

To identify best practices and alignment with other jurisdictions and City priorities.

Progress review of the 2019–2023 CCEY Service System Plan

To identify lessons learned, successes and challenges, as well as previously identified actions that should either continue or be adapted.

Local demographic and socio-economic data and licensed child care and EarlyON service data

To increase understanding of community demographics and identify service gaps and opportunities for improvement.

Engagement with families, community organizations, and early learning and child care leaders and service providers

To identify opportunities, challenges, and areas for action directly informed by those working in the sector or impacted by programs and services.

Evidence gathered through the planning process was analyzed and discussed with SPAG, the IEYC, and the TF to collaboratively develop a shared vision, strategy statement, guiding principles, and strategic priorities to respond to the needs of the community. Key actions were subsequently identified in collaboration with these advisory groups and community and City partners.

Engagement Strategy

Through inclusive engagement activities and targeted outreach, over 2,100 members of the community, including families and caregivers, licensed child care and EarlyON service providers, community partners, organizations serving diverse families, and City of Ottawa staff were consulted between October 2023 and December 2024.

Who Was Engaged

- Families with diverse backgrounds: Indigenous, Francophone, families living in low income, newcomer, Black and other racialized populations, 2SLGBTQQIA+, lone-parent or caregiver families, and families with children with disabilities and with special needs
- Licensed child care service providers and educators (for home and centre-based child care)
- Managers of licensed child care organizations (for home and centre-based child care)
- Service providers, educators, and managers from EarlyON Child and Family Centres
- Indigenous-led organizations
- French-language organizations
- English and French-language school boards
- Organizations providing services for children with special needs
- Community service organizations and networks that support families (e.g. newcomer and immigration support agencies, community health and resource centres, Ottawa Children & Youth Initiative Steering Committee)
- City of Ottawa Departments (Community and Social Services; Recreation, Cultural and Facility Services; Ottawa Public Health; Ottawa Public Library; Planning, Development and Building Services
- Mayor and Members of Ottawa City Council were provided with a Toolkit to support and encourage ward-specific community engagement

How Engagement Happened

15 focus groups and facilitated discussions with **200** licensed child care and EarlyON service providers.

An online family survey completed by **1,518** parents and caregivers. This survey was available in English, French, Somali, Spanish, Arabic, and Simplified Chinese.

An online provider survey completed by **152** licensed child care and EarlyON service providers. This survey was available in English and French.

14 family focus groups with **83** parents and caregivers, focusing on hard to reach and/or underserved diverse families.

8 key informant interviews with community partners and City of Ottawa staff in various departments.

5 internal focus groups with **96** City of Ottawa Children's Services staff.

5 action planning sessions with 108 diverse community, ELCC sector, and City partners.

Alignment with the City of Ottawa Strategic Plans

The Service System Plan aligns with the commitment identified in *The City of Ottawa Strategic Plan (2023–2026)* to increase and simplify access to early learning and licensed child care services.[4]

In working collaboratively with other City of Ottawa departments, Children's Services will continue to prioritize a client-centric approach to supporting families seeking early learning and child care programs by finding synergies and efficiencies with other City processes to reduce barriers for residents. In working with other City colleagues to wrap services around the client, Children's Services can contribute to alleviating the stress and burden of residents needing to re-tell their situation multiple times.

The Service System Plan is aligned with the commitments in other City strategies to work together for meaningful reconciliation, foster community well-being, and integrate racial and gender equity into all City operations, including policy development, decision-making, program development and evaluation, and outcome measurements.[5]

- ✔ The City of Ottawa Strategic Plan (2023–2026)
- ✔ Reconciliation Action Plan (2018)
- ✔ Anti-Racism Strategy (2023–2028)
- ✔ Women and Gender Equity Strategy (2021)
- ✔ Community Safety and Well-Being Plan (2021–2031)
- ✔ Poverty Reduction Strategy (2024)

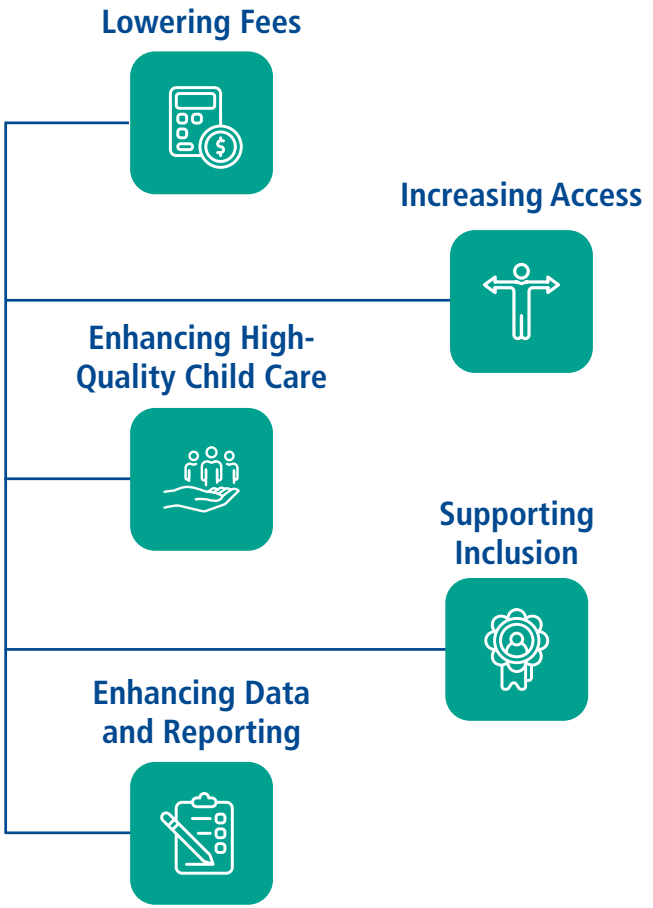
Ottawa City Council approved the plan to establish a new *Corporate Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging (EDIB) Framework* on December 11, 2024. During 2025, City of Ottawa staff – in collaboration with the community – will develop an overarching Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Framework to streamline equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging work at the City.

Children's Services is committed to advancing EDIB initiatives, making it a pillar of future operational work.

A Changing Early Learning and Child Care Landscape: Provincial and Federal Context

Since 2018, the Federal and Provincial governments have made increasingly significant investments into the early learning and child care system recognizing the importance of supporting children, families and communities and ensuring every child gets the best start in life. The early learning and child care system is transforming in Ontario with the historic launch of the *Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care (CWELCC) system* that is being implemented in stages from 2022 to 2026.[6]

This transformation focuses on five key pillars:



ELCC System Transformation Highlights

March 2022

The Province signed a historic deal with the Government of Canada for the *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) Agreement* aiming to lower parent fees for children 0 to 5 years old to an average of $10 per day by 2026.[7]

November 2022

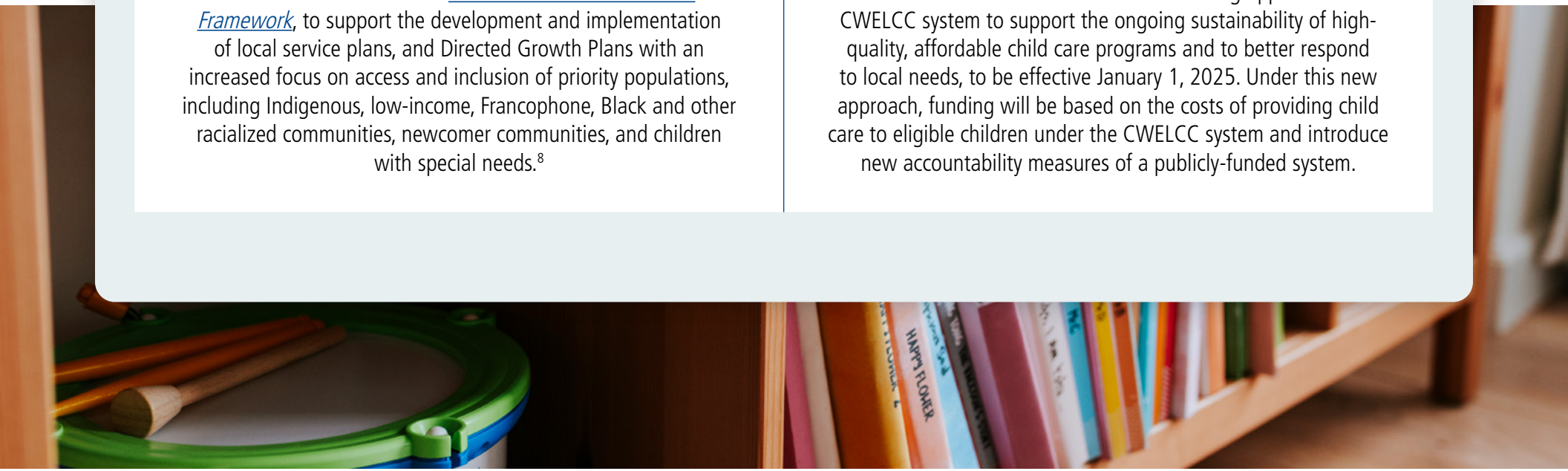
94% of licensed child care centres and 100% of licensed home child care agencies in Ottawa enrolled into the new CWELCC system, immediately making child care more affordable for children 0 to 5 years old in licensed child care.

June 2023

The Province released the *Ontario Access and Inclusion Framework*, to support the development and implementation of local service plans, and Directed Growth Plans with an increased focus on access and inclusion of priority populations, including Indigenous, low-income, Francophone, Black and other racialized communities, newcomer communities, and children with special needs.[8]

August 2024

The Province released a new cost-based funding approach for the CWELCC system to support the ongoing sustainability of high-quality, affordable child care programs and to better respond to local needs, to be effective January 1, 2025. Under this new approach, funding will be based on the costs of providing child care to eligible children under the CWELCC system and introduce new accountability measures of a publicly-funded system.



Directed Growth Moving Forward

Since the launch of the CWELCC system, the Province shifted from open eligibility – where all licensed service providers could enroll into the system – to a directed growth where a limited number of new CWELCC-funded spaces would be allocated annually through 2026.

The Province is allocating new CWELCC-funded spaces using a model that focuses on improving equity of access by working towards a common Provincial access ratio of 37 per cent by 2026. The Province is also prioritizing access to new CWELCC-funded spaces based on the needs of families who face various systemic barriers including Indigenous, Francophone, Black and other racialized communities, newcomers, sole support parents, families living in low income and children with special needs.

The Province is allocating 2,903 new CWELCC-funded spaces for Ottawa, to be operationalized by 2026. Children's Services developed a directed growth strategy to manage the allocation of the new limited community-based spaces, in line with *Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework (2023)*. An equity and inclusion lens, as well as an evidence-based approach, were used to identify priority neighbourhoods of the city where the new CWELCC-funded spaces will be allocated.

3

The Early Learning and Child Care System

Value of a Solid Early Learning and Child Care System

A solid early learning and child care system is vital for a thriving economy and a healthy community. Early learning and child care programs play a critical role in creating positive life outcomes for children and families. High-quality early learning and child care programs support the healthy development of children during the foundational years of life and allow parents and caregivers to participate in the workforce and educational activities.

Publicly-funded child care systems, such as the *Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC)* system, can enhance these outcomes as it aims to provide more families with access to affordable, high-quality, and inclusive early learning programs.

Removing Barriers for Families

High-quality early learning programs, such as EarlyON Child and Family Centres, provide families and caregivers with a welcoming and safe environment to seek support when they have questions about their child's development and when they are looking for local specialized support services.[9] Staff of these programs recognize the importance of providing support to families with diverse needs and will help families navigate community resources.

School Readiness

Early learning and child care environments provide an inclusive space for all children to play, learn and socialize. Early Childhood Educators and other early learning and child care professionals are trained to support children in all areas of development through inquiry-based learning by implementing the Provincial *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years* framework.[10]

Early Intervention

Studies show that children living in low-income experience higher negative effects of adversity on their cognitive development during early school age years.[11] Equitable access to early intervention in early learning and child care programs can lessen the impacts of early adversity and improve healthy development of children, especially with social-emotional skills.[12]

Addressing Social Inequality

Publicly-funded child care systems provide parents and caregivers with increased opportunity to make important life decisions for their families, such as choosing to go work or go to school.[13] Studies have shown that early education can lift children and their families out of poverty and social exclusion, develop a more literate and skilled workforce, reduce crime rates, and offer equal opportunities for all children.[14] Overall, early learning programs can increase the well-being of communities and help bridge the gap of social inequality.

Sense of Belonging for Local Communities

Early learning and child care programs foster opportunities for children and families to engage in meaningful, caring relationships that support the development of a sense of belonging and connectedness. Culturally and linguistic relevant programs, such as programs offered by Indigenous-led service providers and French-language service providers for Indigenous and Francophone children and families, foster a sense of belonging and the importance of strong cultural identities and language preservation within local communities.[15]

Women Participating in the Workforce

High-quality, reliable, and affordable early learning and child care programs promote greater economic security and gender equality by providing women the opportunity to participate in the workforce, advance their careers and contribute to their household income.

In addition, the early learning and child care workforce predominantly identifies as female, with women accounting for 97 per cent of the workforce in Ottawa.[16] High-quality child care allows parents and caregivers to participate in the workforce while also creating thousands of job opportunities in the early learning and child care sector across the city, especially for women.

Essential Service for Economic Prosperity

A strong early learning and child care system means a strong local economy with opportunity for the most skilled workforce to participate and stimulate growth within a community. Investments in quality early learning and child care programs are investments for the well-being of families and for a thriving economy where "for every dollar invested in early learning and child care, the Canadian economy makes a return of $1.50 to $2.80".[17]

Types of Early Learning and Child Care Programs in Ottawa

Licensed Child Care

Licensed child care is regulated by the Ministry of Education, who sets overall policy, legislation and regulations for the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) sector, including overseeing licensing and inspection of child care locations to ensure programs meet Provincial health, safety, and development standards set out in the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014*. Licensed child care is offered by not-for-profit and for-profit child care service providers.

Centres

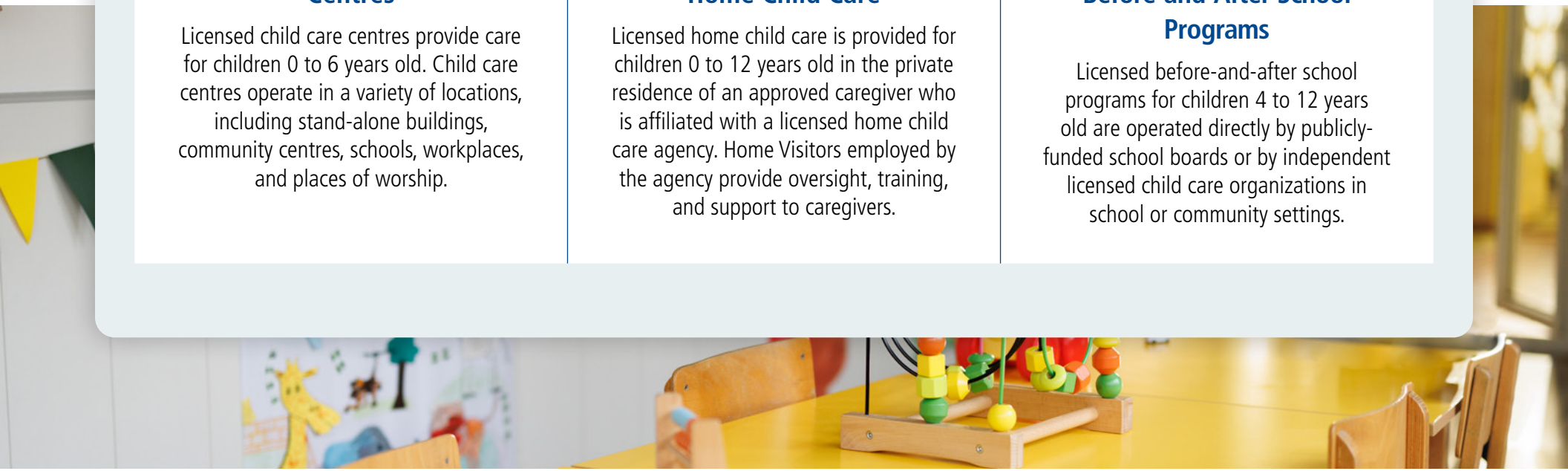
Licensed child care centres provide care for children 0 to 6 years old. Child care centres operate in a variety of locations, including stand-alone buildings, community centres, schools, workplaces, and places of worship.

Home Child Care

Licensed home child care is provided for children 0 to 12 years old in the private residence of an approved caregiver who is affiliated with a licensed home child care agency. Home Visitors employed by the agency provide oversight, training, and support to caregivers.

Before-and-After School Programs

Licensed before-and-after school programs for children 4 to 12 years old are operated directly by publicly-funded school boards or by independent licensed child care organizations in school or community settings.



Authorized Recreation

Authorized programs for children 4 to 12 years old include summer camps, as well as recreational and skill-building programs where the primary purpose is to provide child care (e.g. before-and-after school care outside of a school setting). These programs may be operated by the municipality or other authorized recreation service providers.

Informal (Unlicensed) Home Child Care

Informal child care is provided in a private residence by a caregiver who is not affiliated with a licensed home child care agency. This type of care is not licensed or inspected by the Ministry of Education and service providers are not required to meet the same Provincial standards as licensed settings.[18] Informal care can also be provided in a child's own home by a nanny.

Early Learning Programs

There is a range of in-person and virtual early learning programs and services offered to families of young children in Ottawa. EarlyON Child and Family Centres offer free, high-quality early learning programs and services to all children from birth to six years old and their families/caregivers. Early learning programs and services include playgroups, parent support and education programs, and school readiness programs.

Indigenous-Led Early Learning and Child Care Programs

Indigenous-led service providers that offer child care, EarlyON Child and Family services, and early years programs consistently provide holistic services for the entire family.

The Indigenous Early Years Circle, in collaboration with Children's Services, developed the description below of Indigenous-led early learning and child care services and the unique qualities of these programs and services.

Indigenous-led child care, EarlyON child and family services, and early years programs are grounded in the sovereignty of Indigenous Nations and peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) and are to be governed, as well as operationally and financially managed by Indigenous-led organizations.

This system is:

I. Regulated in accordance with distinctions-based (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) governance that must include Urban Indigenous populations

II. Guided by varied and distinct Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies

III. Open to all Indigenous peoples to access resources, experiences, Indigenous languages, and cultural practices as part of the holistic development of Indigenous children and families

IV. Culturally relevant, engaging, and provides a safe early learning environment that is supported by Indigenous-specific funding streams, outside the funding models of the non-Indigenous system

V. Reflecting of our (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples) desire to provide, without barriers, the cultural teachings and early learning experiences that have often historically been kept from our children and families

French-Language Early Learning and Child Care Programs

By virtue of its status as a language minority, guaranteeing access to accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality programs for children and their families is necessary to ensure the vitality and linguistic and cultural sustainability of the Francophone community.

These French-language programs are also essential to children's identity building and the development of their sense of belonging to the community.

Although French language rights are protected under the *Official Languages Act*, access to French-language services is an ongoing challenge due to the need to assert rights, language use and cultural expression, and to facilitate equal access to French-language resources and services.

To support Francophone families in making informed choices and finding culturally relevant care, Children's Services manages a French-language designation process for licensed child care programs. To qualify, child care service providers must demonstrate that they meet a list of key language criteria in the following areas: program administration, staffing, programming, communication, and policies and procedures. Approved French-language designated programs are identified on the City of Ottawa's Child Care Registry and Waitlist system and a French-language designation certificate is issued to the service provider to post in each approved site.

Francophone families also have access to culturally appropriate EarlyON services offered citywide by French-language services providers.

Child Care Community Navigator

The Child Care Community Navigator is part of a community-based integrated team to improve child care system navigation and simplify access to fee subsidies, early learning programs, and other services for families facing systemic barriers. This program aims to:

- Simplify the fee subsidy application process and procedures
- Support families with the fee subsidy application process (in-person at selected community-based locations)
- Assist families with child care selection/placement and early learning services
- Provide wrap-around services, in partnership with other City of Ottawa programs and services
- Facilitate referrals/warm transfers to other programs or services
- Share information about the fee subsidy program and child care options to community agencies and families
- Act as point of contact for community agencies supporting families
- Identify barriers to access and facilitate innovative solutions

Child Care Registry and Waitlist System

The City's Child Care Registry and Waitlist system (registry and waitlist) is a centralized online system that helps families find and connect with licensed child care service providers, including centre and home child care and before-and-after school programs. The system allows families to search and apply to service providers that meet their geographical, language, and care preferences, including being able to access a list of child care programs that have opted-into the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system. Families can also apply for help to pay for their child care costs (fee subsidy). The registry and waitlist system is also used by child care service providers to effectively manage their waitlists for both full fee and subsidized child care. **The registry and waitlist system is currently the point of entry to access all affordable licensed child care programs in Ottawa.**

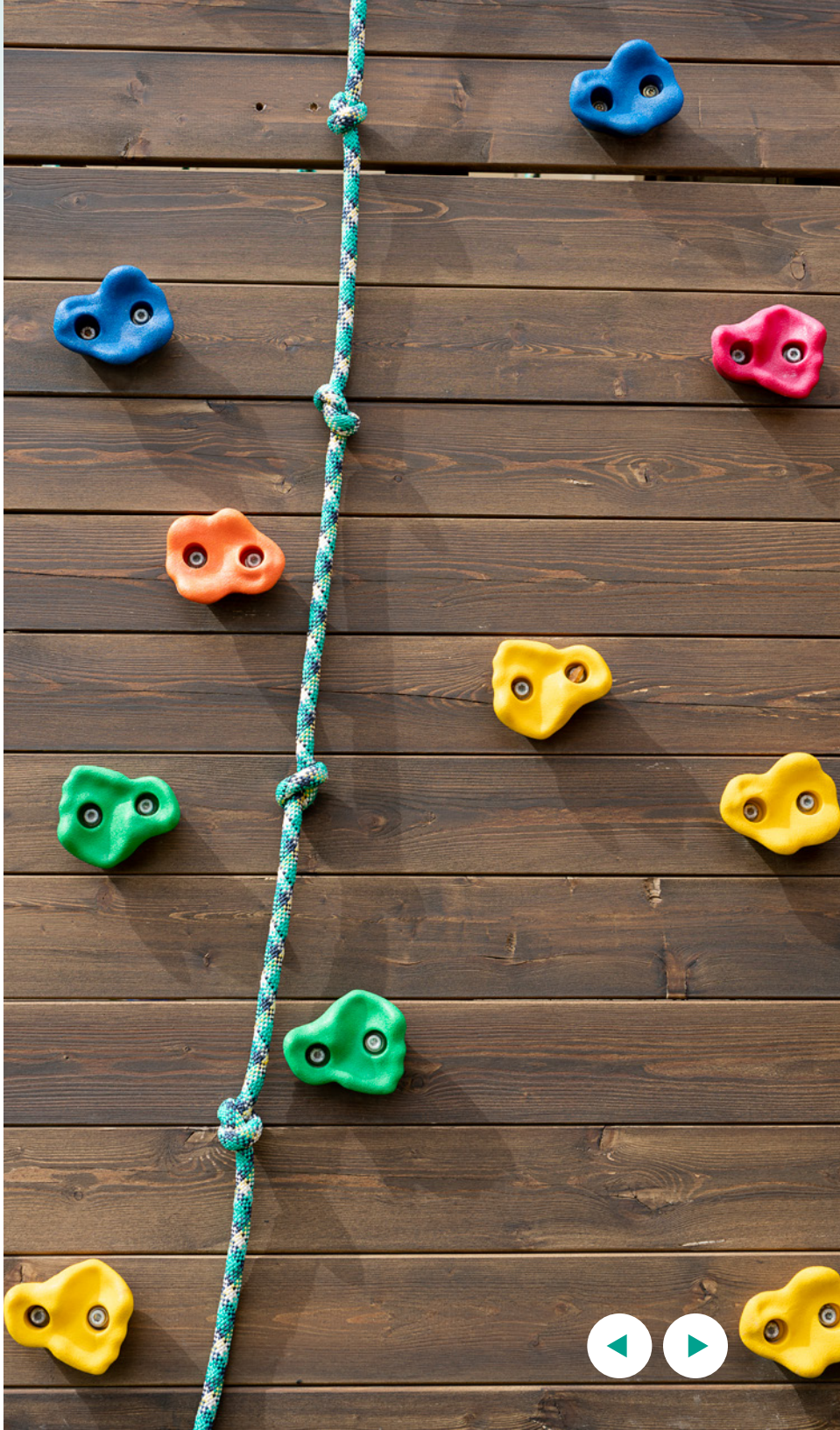
Note: The Ministry of Education (EDU) has launched in-depth user consultations in 2024 with SSMs and service providers to inform the development of their IT Modernization Initiative. Through this exercise, the EDU may implement changes to the registry and waitlist system used by Children's Services to support simplifying access to information for families and the management of a registry and waitlist system for SSMs.

Support for Affordable and Inclusive Early Learning and Child Care Programs

Child Care Fee Subsidy – Financial Assistance for Child Care

A child care fee subsidy can help families pay for licensed child care costs for children up to age 12. Child care fee subsidy is available to families who meet certain financial eligibility criteria (as set by the Province).

A family must apply through the City's registry and waitlist system to access a child care space with reduced rates. This system allows families to search for licensed child care service providers on a map and access information on each service provider, including vacancies, hours of operation, age groups, language of care, and programming.



Services for Children with Special Needs

Together with community partners, the City is committed to supporting families and child care service providers with information and resources to ensure the inclusion of children with special needs in child care.

Children can have a wide variety of needs and do not require a diagnosis to be considered a child with special needs to access services through child care programs. Defined by the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014*, **a child with special needs means a child whose cognitive, physical, social, emotional, or communicative needs, or whose needs relating to overall development, are of such a nature that additional supports are required for the child**.

Inclusive child care programs provide opportunities for all children to meaningfully participate in, and benefit from, child care programs. The principle of inclusion goes beyond the notion of physical integration and fully incorporates basic values of supporting the unique needs of children and celebrating diversity. Licensed child care programs are in a unique position to provide inclusive and supportive environments for children with special needs and their families. Children with special needs are supported in licensed child care at no extra cost to families.

In response to local special needs and to support the provision of inclusive environments in child care, supports include specialized equipment and toys, enhanced staff to child ratios, referrals to community services, and training and resources for child care educators to support children with special needs and their families.

EarlyON Programs and Services

EarlyON Child and Family Centres offer free, high-quality programs and services to children from birth to six years old and their family and caregivers.

EarlyON centres play a vital role in supporting the healthy development of children and the well-being of families by creating welcoming environments for families to learn and play with their children, have access to a range of early learning services and resources, and opportunities to connect with other families.[19] Indigenous-led and French-language designated EarlyON centres cater to the unique cultural and linguistic needs of the Indigenous and Francophone communities.

EarlyON centres offer a range of in-person and virtual services and resources where children, families and caregivers can:

- ✔ Join free drop-in play groups (games, arts and crafts, songs, and stories)
- ✔ Connect with qualified early learning professionals
- ✔ Obtain resources and referrals to community-based family services
- ✔ Attend parenting and child development information sessions and workshops
- ✔ Meet and build connections with other families, caregivers, and children in the community
- ✔ Access toy libraries and other resources

EarlyON Programs are Located Across Ottawa in Main, Outreach, or Mobile Sites

Main EarlyON Sites

- ✔ Permanent locations
- ✔ Five days a week (including Saturdays and evenings

Outreach EarlyON Sites

- ✔ Permanent locations
- ✔ Less than five days a week (may include Saturdays and evenings)

Mobile EarlyON Sites

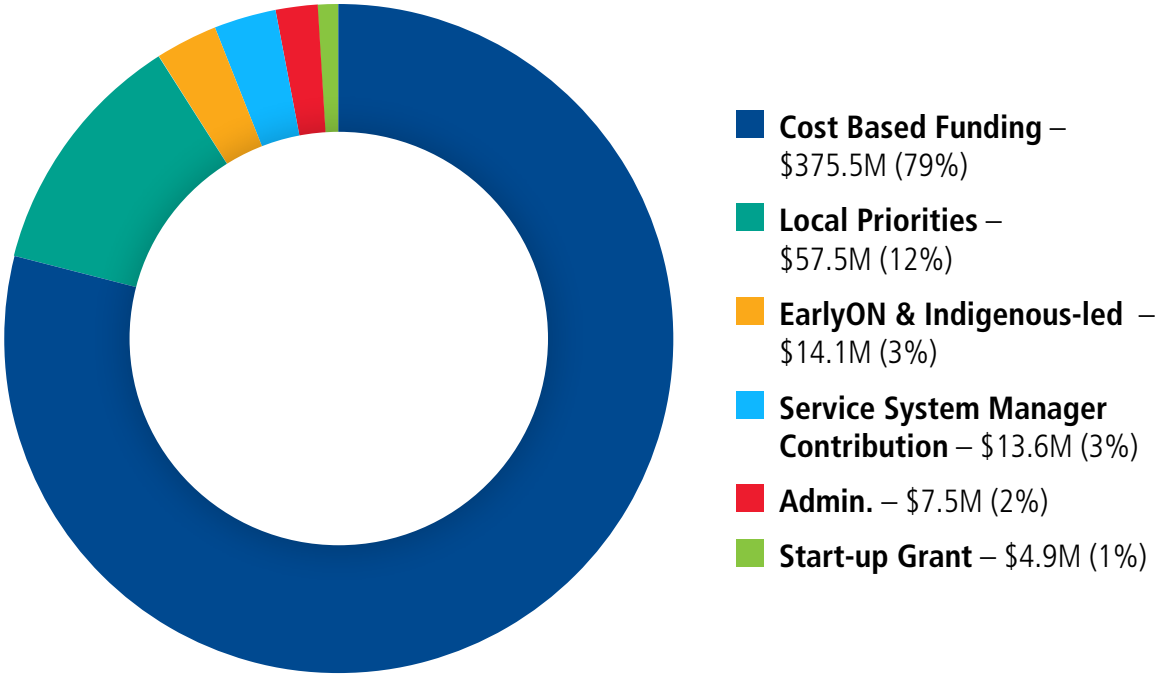
- ✔ Set-up and take-down programs
- ✔ Hours and locations vary

Funding and Budget

The 2025 Children Services budget of $473,331,471 is a 31% increase over 2024, driven by two key factors:

- **Cost-Based Funding:** This funding reflects the rising costs of providing services, including staffing, inflation, and maintaining or expanding programs to meet growing demand. It's designed to ensure the budget keeps pace with the actual costs of delivering child care services.
- **Local Priorities Funding:** This funding is allocated to address specific City needs. It ensures flexibility to respond to local challenges and priorities, such as increased support for special needs services and targeted approaches for underserved populations.

Figure 1: 2025 Children's Services Budget



4

Portrait of Ottawa Children, Families, and Neighbourhoods

Ottawa is home to just over one million people and is geographically the largest major city in Canada.

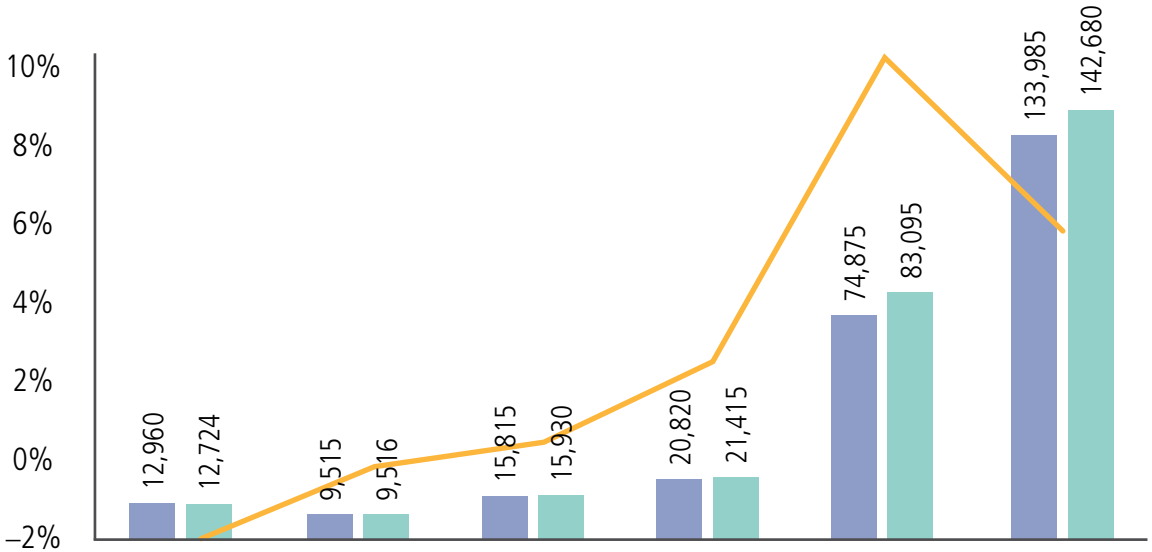
Understanding the characteristics of Ottawa's children, families, and neighbourhoods is essential for planning programs and services that cater to their needs. This snapshot offers an overview of the key features that guide early learning and child care program planning efforts.

Unless otherwise specified, the snapshot uses data from the 2021 Census of Population, Statistics Canada (and the 2016 Census of Population when population changes are highlighted).[20]

Children 0 to 12 Years Old

Ottawa is home to 142,680 children 0 to 12 years old in 2021, a 6.5 per cent increase from 2016. The growth was primarily driven by an 11 per cent increase in children 6 to 12 years old. The infant age group (0 to 17 months of age) saw a small decrease from the last census (2016) (Figure 2).

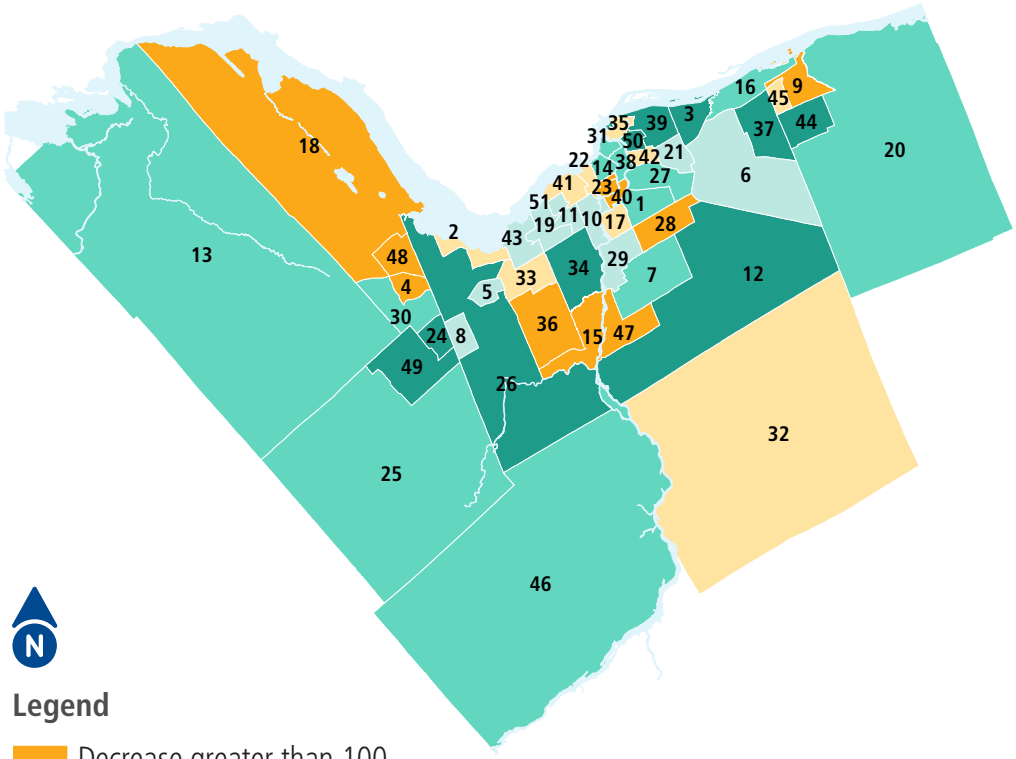
Figure 2: Population of Children 0 to 12 Years old by Child Care Age Categories, 2016 and 2021, and Per cent Change.[21]



	Infant (0–17 mos)	Toddler (18–29 mos)	Preschool (30 mos–3 yrs)	Kindergarten (4–5 yrs)	School Age (6–12 yrs)	Total (0–12 yrs)
2016	12,960	9,515	15,815	20,820	74,875	133,985
2021	12,724	9,516	15,930	21,415	83,095	142,680
Per cent Change	–1.82%	0.03%	0.71%	2.86%	10.98%	6.49%

The top five fastest growing Ottawa neighbourhoods for children 0 to 12 years old between 2016 and 2021 are Carlsbad Springs/Findlay Creek, Stittsville, Half Moon Bay/Stonebridge, Glen Cairn, and Portobello South (Map 1).

Map 1: Absolute Change in the Number of Children 0 to 12 Years Old from 2016 to 2021, by Neighbourhood



Neighbourhoods

1. Alta Vista
2. Bayshore/Crystal Bay
3. Beacon Hill
4. Beaverbrook/Marchwood
5. Bells Corners
6. Blackburn Hamlet/Mer Bleue
7. Blossom Park
8. Bridlewood
9. Cardinal Creek/Fallingbrook
10. Carleton Heights
11. Carlington
12. Carlsbad Springs/ Findlay Creek
13. Carp/Fitzroy/Kinburn
14. Centretown
15. Chapman Mills/Rideau Crest
16. Chatelaine/Convent Glen
17. Clementine/Riverside Park
18. Constance Bay/Dunrobin
19. Copeland
20. Cumberland/Navan/Vars
21. Cyrville
22. Dalhousie
23. Glebe
24. Glen Cairn
25. Goulbourn/Munster/Richmond
26. Half Moon Bay/Stonebridge
27. Hawthorne Meadows/Riverview
28. Hunt Club East
29. Hunt Club West
30. Katimavik/Hazeldean
31. Lower Town
32. Metcalfe/Osgoode/Greely
33. Nepean Central
34. Nepean East
35. New Edinburgh/ Rockcliffe Park
36. Old Barrhaven
37. Orléans South
38. Ottawa East/Sandy Hill
39. Ottawa North East
40. Ottawa South
41. Ottawa West
42. Overbrook
43. Pinecrest/Queensway
44. Portobello South
45. Queenswood Heights
46. Rideau
47. Riverside South
48. South March
49. Stittsville
50. Vanier
51. Westboro

Quick Facts About Children 0 to 12 Years Old in Ottawa

15%

speak a non-official language most often at home.

Arabic, Mandarin, and Spanish are the most spoken non-official languages.

6%

are newcomers to Canada (arrived between 2016 and 2021).

Syria, the United States, and India are the top three countries of origin for newcomer children.

11%

live in low income households.

Of all children in low-income households, 67% belong to a Black or racialized population.

42%

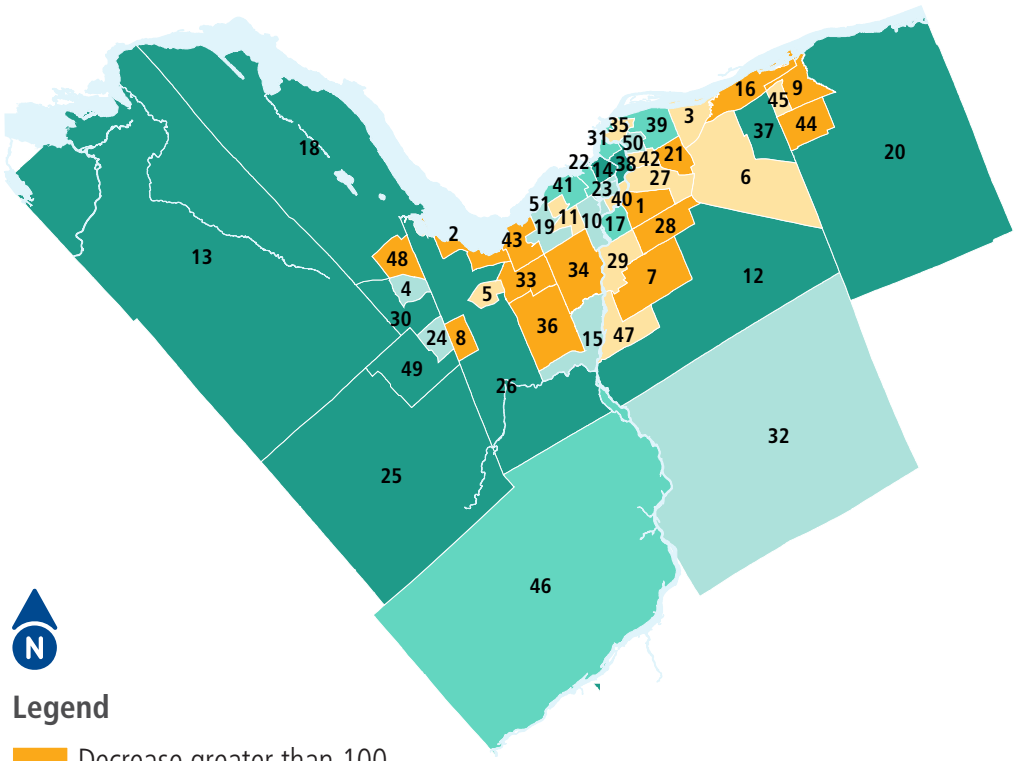
belong to a Black or racialized population.

The four largest racialized populations are Black, Arab, South Asian, and Chinese, who collectively make up 78% of racialized children.

It is expected that the population of children 0 to 4 years old will increase by approximately 6,000 children between 2021 and 2031. About half of Ottawa neighbourhoods are expected to see an increase in the number of children while the rest may see a decrease.[22]

Most of the growth is projected to occur in some central and suburban areas as well as all rural areas. The three neighbourhoods expected to see most of the growth are Carlsbad Springs/Findlay Creek, Constance Bay/Dunrobin, and Stittsville (Map 2).[23]

Map 2: Projected Change in Number of Children 0 to 4 Years Old, 2021 to 2031[24]



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16. Chatelaine/Convent Glen
17. Clementine/Riverside Park
18. Constance Bay/Dunrobin
19. Copeland
20. Cumberland/Navan/Vars
21. Cyrville
22. Dalhousie
23. Glebe
24. Glen Cairn
25. Goulbourn/Munster/Richmond
26. Half Moon Bay/Stonebridge
27. Hawthorne Meadows/Riverview
28. Hunt Club East
29. Hunt Club West
30. Katimavik/Hazeldean
31. Lower Town
32. Metcalfe/Osgoode/Greely
33. Nepean Central
34. Nepean East
35. New Edinburgh/ Rockcliffe Park
36. Old Barrhaven
37. Orléans South
38. Ottawa East/Sandy Hill
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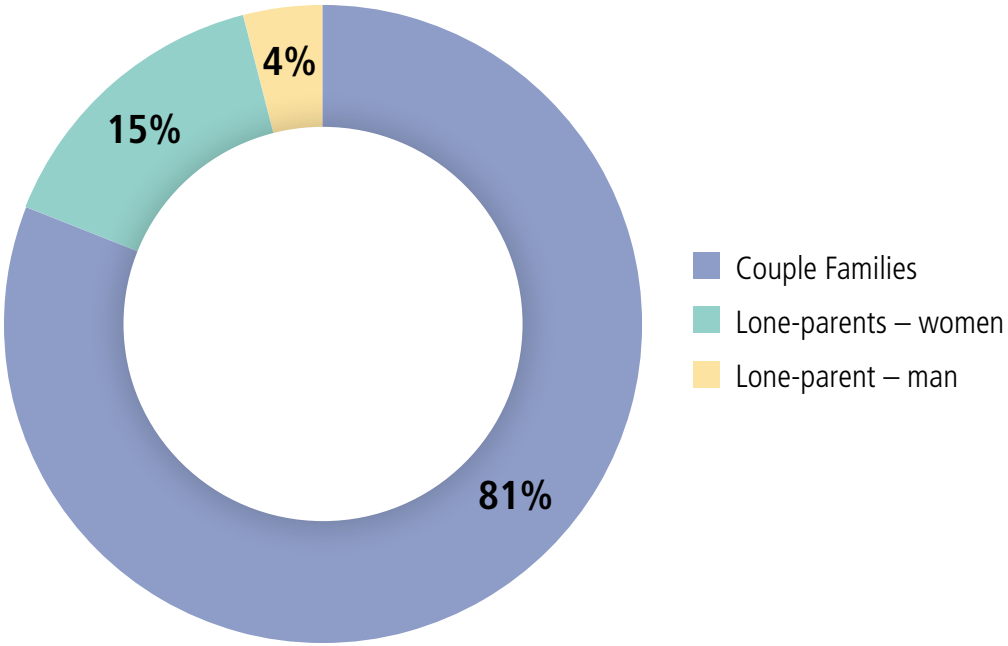
Families of Children 0 to 12 Years Old[25]

The majority of families (81 per cent) with children 0 to 12 years old are coupled families, while lone-parent families making up the remainder. Almost 80 per cent of lone-parents are women (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Family Composition of Children 0 to 12 Years Old



Ottawa families have higher educational qualifications and incomes, lower unemployment rates, and are more likely to be in the labour force than the average Ontario family.

However, there are some inequalities between families:

- Average parental after-tax income is highest among parents in couple families and lone parents who are men. Lone parents who are women have the lowest average after-tax income, at $56,950, which is $12,250 less than that of lone parents who are men.
- Labour force participation rate of parents in Ottawa differs based on gender. The participation rate and employment rate of men are significantly higher than those of women, while the unemployment rate of women is nearly twice as high as that of men.

The Socio-Economic Status of Families Living in Ottawa

	Parents who have a university degree or higher	Average after-tax income of parents (not households)	Parents in the labour market (either employed or looking for work)	Parents who are unemployed
Ottawa	56%	$65,800	86%	7%
Ontario	43%	$58,200	83%	9%

Special Consideration

It is important to note that employment and income data are from 2021 and 2020, respectively. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in permanent and temporary loss of employment and the related implementation of emergency government benefits (e.g. the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)) during this time; as such, income and employment data from the 2021 Census cycle is likely to be significantly different than current and previous Census cycles.

Indigenous Children

There are approximately 4,385 children 0 to 12 years old that identify as Indigenous, making up three per cent of all children in Ottawa.

The number of Indigenous children 0 to 12 years old grew at more than twice the rate as all children between 2016 and 2021. Just over half of Indigenous children identify as First Nations, just over one third as Métis, and almost one in ten as Inuit (Table 1).

Nearly all Indigenous children 0 to 12 years old speak either English or French most often at home. Very few Indigenous children, less than four per cent, have knowledge of an Indigenous language, and even fewer speak an Indigenous language regularly at home. There is a slightly higher proportion (12.5 per cent) of Indigenous children living in low-income households compared to all children 0 to 12 years old.

Neighbourhoods with higher concentrations of Indigenous children 0 to 12 years old are located across the city (Map 3), with the top three located in the west side of Ottawa (Old Barrhaven, Pinecrest/Queensway, and Stittsville).

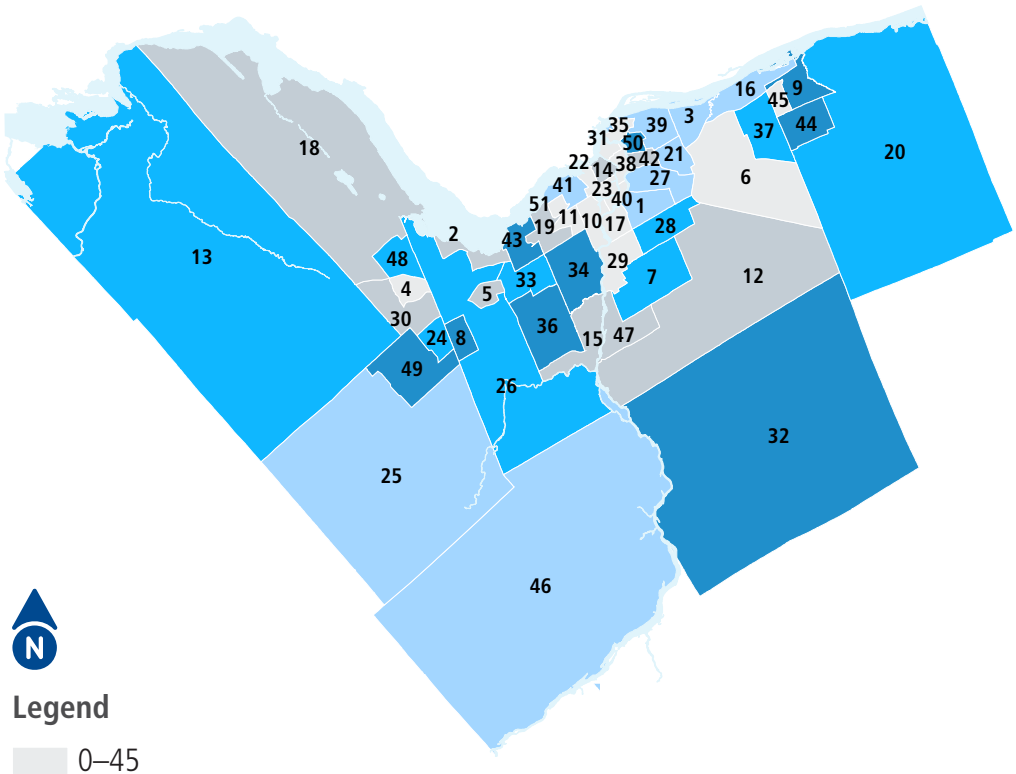
Table 1: Number and Per cent of Children 0 to 12 Years Old, by Indigenous Identity

Indigenous Identity	Number of Indigenous Children	Per cent of Indigenous Children
First Nations	2,275	52%
Métis	1,540	35%
Inuk (Inuit)	355	8%
Multiple and other	230	5%
Total	**4,385**	**100%**

Special Consideration

Census estimates of urban Indigenous populations are generally considered to be lower than actual. Urban Indigenous peoples are at risk of non-participation in the census due to factors including historical distrust of government and migration between geographic locations.[26]

Map 3: Number of Children 0 to 12 Years Old who Identify as Indigenous, by Neighbourhood



Neighbourhoods

1. Alta Vista
2. Bayshore/Crystal Bay
3. Beacon Hill
4. Beaverbrook/Marchwood
5. Bells Corners
6. Blackburn Hamlet/Mer Bleue
7. Blossom Park
8. Bridlewood
9. Cardinal Creek/Fallingbrook
10. Carleton Heights
11. Carlington
12. Carlsbad Springs/ Findlay Creek
13. Carp/Fitzroy/Kinburn
14. Centretown
15. Chapman Mills/Rideau Crest
16. Chatelaine/Convent Glen
17. Clementine/Riverside Park
18. Constance Bay/Dunrobin
19. Copeland
20. Cumberland/Navan/Vars
21. Cyrville
22. Dalhousie
23. Glebe
24. Glen Cairn
25. Goulbourn/Munster/Richmond
26. Half Moon Bay/Stonebridge
27. Hawthorne Meadows/Riverview
28. Hunt Club East
29. Hunt Club West
30. Katimavik/Hazeldean
31. Lower Town
32. Metcalfe/Osgoode/Greely
33. Nepean Central
34. Nepean East
35. New Edinburgh/ Rockcliffe Park
36. Old Barrhaven
37. Orléans South
38. Ottawa East/Sandy Hill
39. Ottawa North East
40. Ottawa South
41. Ottawa West
42. Overbrook
43. Pinecrest/Queensway
44. Portobello South
45. Queenswood Heights
46. Rideau
47. Riverside South
48. South March
49. Stittsville
50. Vanier
51. Westboro

Francophone Children

Almost one in three Francophone children 0 to 12 years old in Ontario reside in Ottawa, making it one of the largest Francophone communities in the Province.

There are 24,785 Francophone children 0 to 12 years old in Ottawa, making up 17 per cent of all children (Table 2).

More Francophone children live in neighbourhoods in the east end of Ottawa (Map 4), however some neighbourhoods in the west, such as Stittsville and Glen Cairn, experienced the highest growth rate in Francophone children between 2016 and 2021.

Table 2: Number of Francophone Children 0 to 12 Years Old, by Child Care Age Categories[27]

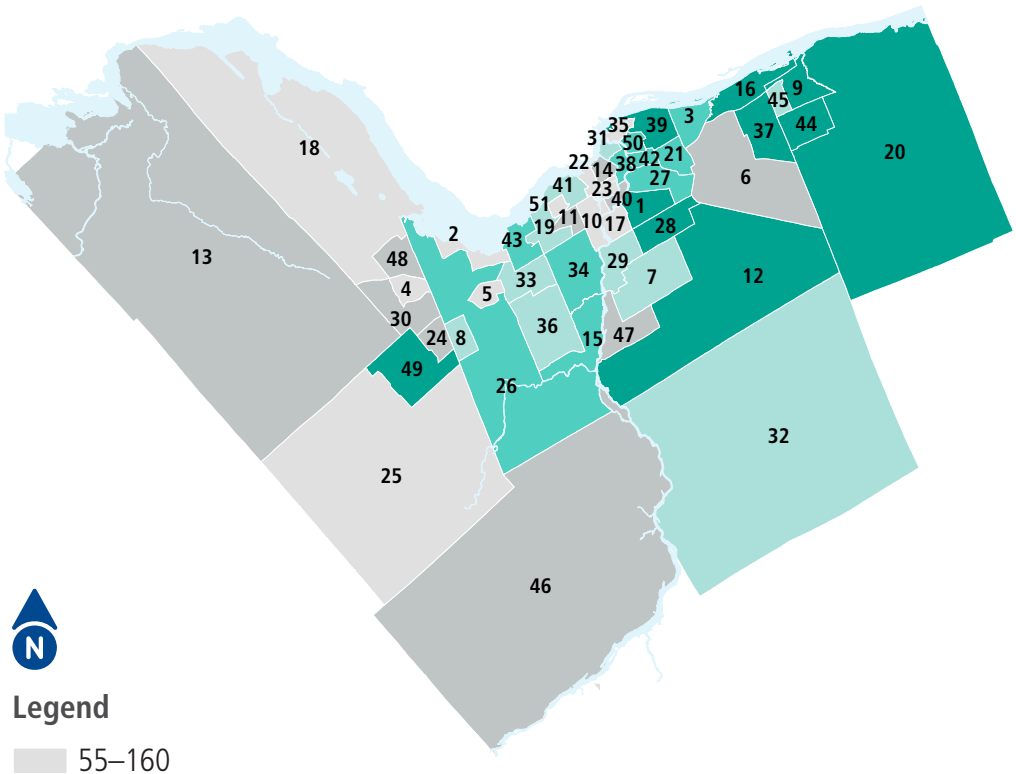
Child Care Age Categories	Number of Francophone Children
Infant (0–17 months)	2,015
Toddler (18–29 months)	1,445
Preschool (30 months–3 years)	2,475
Kindergarten (4–5 years)	3,380
School age (6–12 years)	15,470
Total (0–12 years)	**24,875**

Inclusive Definition of Francophone

The number of Francophone children is calculated based on the Inclusive Definition of Francophone:[28]

Francophones are persons whose mother tongue is French, plus those whose mother tongue is neither French nor English but have a particular knowledge of French as an official language and use French at home.

Map 4: Number of Francophone Children 0 to 12 Years Old, by Neighbourhood



N

Legend

- 55–160
- 161–345
- 346–470
- 471–625
- 626–2195

Neighbourhoods

1. Alta Vista
2. Bayshore/Crystal Bay
3. Beacon Hill
4. Beaverbrook/Marchwood
5. Bells Corners
6. Blackburn Hamlet/Mer Bleue
7. Blossom Park
8. Bridlewood
9. Cardinal Creek/Fallingbrook
10. Carleton Heights
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34. Nepean East
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39. Ottawa North East
40. Ottawa South
41. Ottawa West
42. Overbrook
43. Pinecrest/Queensway
44. Portobello South
45. Queenswood Heights
46. Rideau
47. Riverside South
48. South March
49. Stittsville
50. Vanier
51. Westboro

Quick Facts About Francophone Children 0 to 12 Years Old

12%
are immigrants

44%
are racialized

10%
live in low-income households

3%
identify as Indigenous

Francophone children 0 to 12 years old are more likely to be immigrants, including newcomers, than the general population of children in Ottawa.

A slightly higher proportion of Francophone children are Black or racialized compared to all children, and a slightly smaller proportion of Francophone children live in a low-income household compared to all children 0 to 12 years old. The most spoken non-official language by Francophone children is Arabic, with six times more speakers than the next most spoken language.

Children Belonging to a Black or Racialized Population

The population of Black or racialized children 0 to 12 years old in Ottawa makes up 42 per cent of all children. This is the fastest-growing population, with a 29 per cent increase between 2016 and 2021.

4
largest racialized populations are Black, Arab, South Asian, and Chinese, who collectively make up **78%** of racialized children.

1 in 3
racialized children are Black, and 1 in 5 racialized children are Arab.

18%
live in low-income households

29%
speak a non-official language most often at home

16%
are immigrants

Children Living in Low-Income Households[29]

Approximately 11 per cent of children 0 to 12 years old live in a low-income household.

19%
are immigrants

67%
belong to a Black or racialized population

33%
speak a non-official language most often at home

7,705
live in families in receipt of social assistance (Ontario Works), with **58%** of these children between the ages of 6 to 12 years old[30]

Neighbourhood Vulnerability

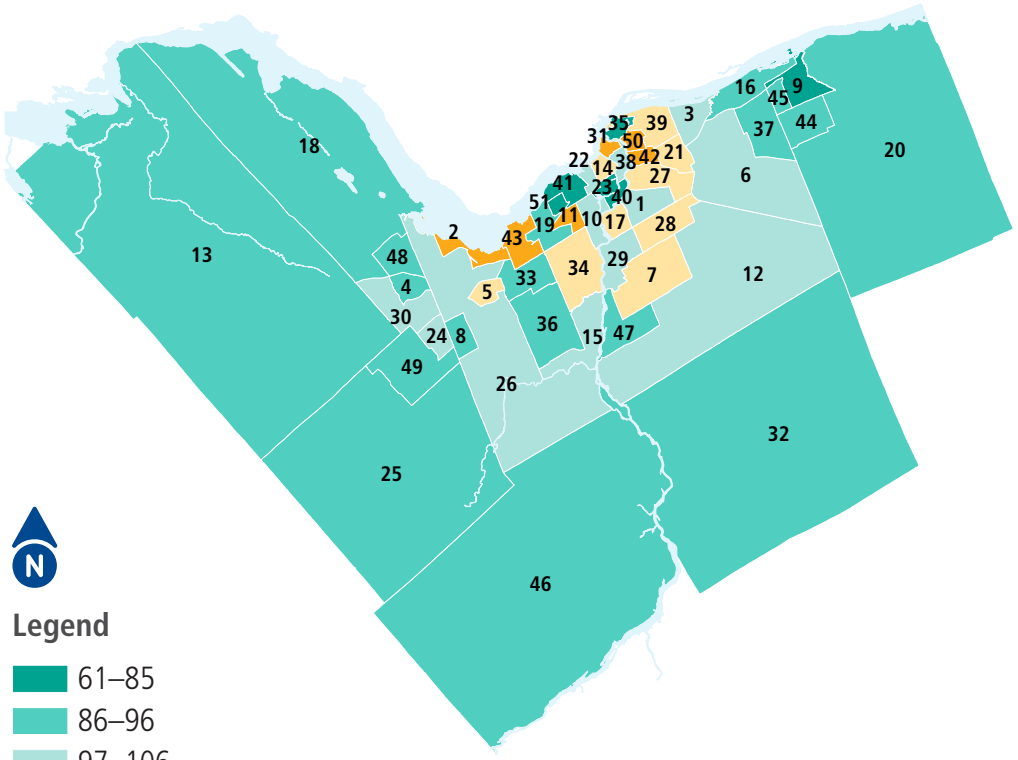
Neighbourhood vulnerability (risk for negative early child development outcomes) is measured by the Canadian Neighbourhoods and Early Child Development socio-economic status index.

In Ottawa, 15 neighbourhoods are considered vulnerable for negative early child developmental outcomes. Approximately a quarter (24 per cent) of children 0 to 12 years old live in these neighbourhoods (Map 5).

What is the Canadian Neighbourhoods and Early Child Development Socio-Economic Status (CanNECD SES) Index?

The Canadian Neighbourhoods and Early Child Development socio-economic status (CanNECD SES) index is derived from scores in ten domains that can help or hinder early childhood development outcomes.[31] A neighbourhood is considered vulnerable for negative early child developmental outcomes if it has a score of 107 or higher on the index (Map 5).

Map 5: Canadian Neighbourhoods and Early Child Development (CanNECD) Socio-Economic Status Index Scores, by Neighbourhood[32]



Vulnerable neighbourhood=CanNECD score of 107 or higher.

Neighbourhoods

1. Alta Vista
2. Bayshore/Crystal Bay
3. Beacon Hill
4. Beaverbrook/Marchwood
5. Bells Corners
6. Blackburn Hamlet/Mer Bleue
7. Blossom Park
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17. Clementine/Riverside Park
18. Constance Bay/Dunrobin
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31. Lower Town
32. Metcalfe/Osgoode/Greely
33. Nepean Central
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35. New Edinburgh/ Rockcliffe Park
36. Old Barrhaven
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39. Ottawa North East
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41. Ottawa West
42. Overbrook
43. Pinecrest/Queensway
44. Portobello South
45. Queenswood Heights
46. Rideau
47. Riverside South
48. South March
49. Stittsville
50. Vanier
51. Westboro

Early Childhood Development Outcomes[33]

What is the Early Development Instrument?

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a 103-item checklist completed by Senior Kindergarten (SK) teachers that measures a child's performance in five general areas of development:

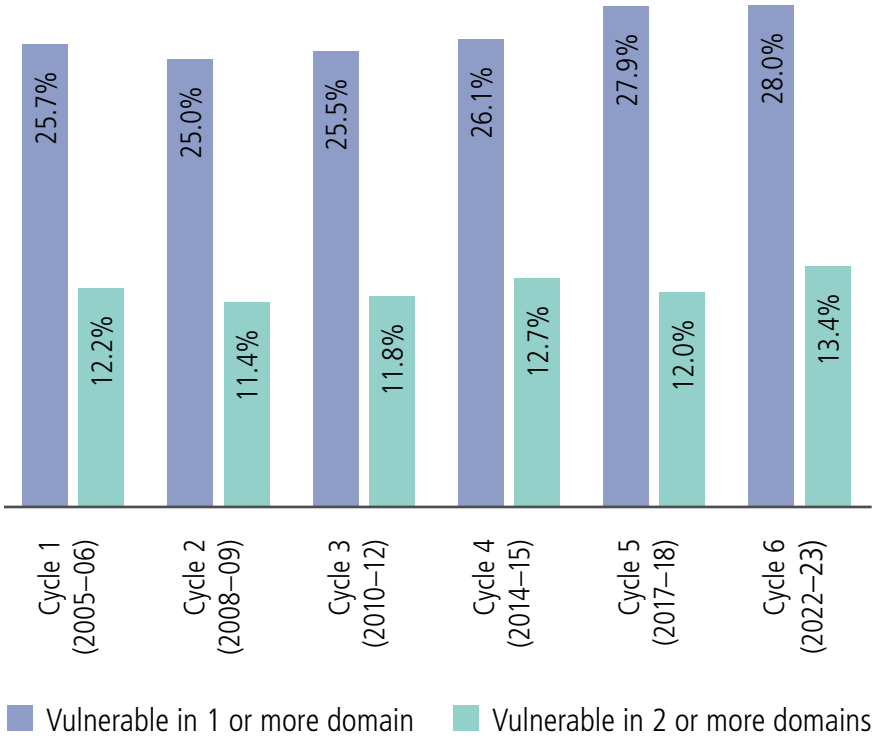
1. **Physical health and well-being**
2. **Social competence**
3. **Emotional maturity**
4. **Language and cognitive development**
5. **Communication skills and general knowledge**

A child is considered vulnerable for negative child development outcomes if they are in the lowest 10th percentile in any domain.

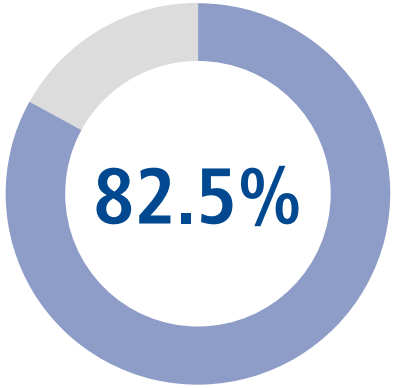
The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a globally utilized tool for assessing the status of early childhood development. The latest EDI data available for Ottawa is from 2022–2023 (Cycle 6).[34]

In Ottawa, **28 per cent of children in senior kindergarten (SK) show vulnerability in one or more domains, which is unchanged from Cycle 5.** However, there has been a slight increase over time starting from cycle 2 onwards. When looking at **vulnerability in at least two domains, there was an increase from Cycle 5** (Figure 4).

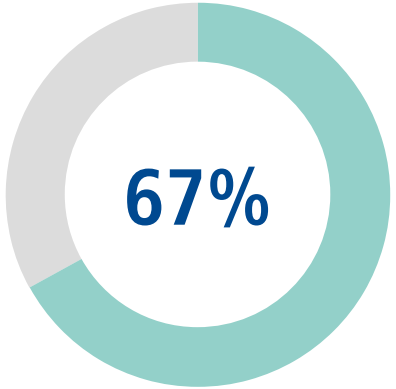
Figure 4: Per cent of Children in Senior Kindergarten who are Vulnerable in at Least One Domain of the Early Development Instrument over Time, Ottawa



Focus on Children with Special Needs



Vulnerable in at least **one** EDI domain



Vulnerable in at least **two** EDI domains

5

Analysis

The Analysis section presents key findings from extensive data analysis and engagement conducted to inform the development of the Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan (Service System Plan).

This section explores critical issues and opportunities across four focus areas: access to affordable child care, equity and inclusion, EarlyON Child and Family Centres, and quality and workforce. By integrating quantitative data with insights from families, sector partners, and community organizations, the analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the current system, identifies gaps and challenges, and highlights opportunities for improvement to guide strategic planning and decision-making.

Access to Child Care

Overview of Licensed Child Care in Ottawa (Children 0 to 12 Years Old)[35]

Child Care Centres

435
locations

164
service providers

10
are municipally-operated

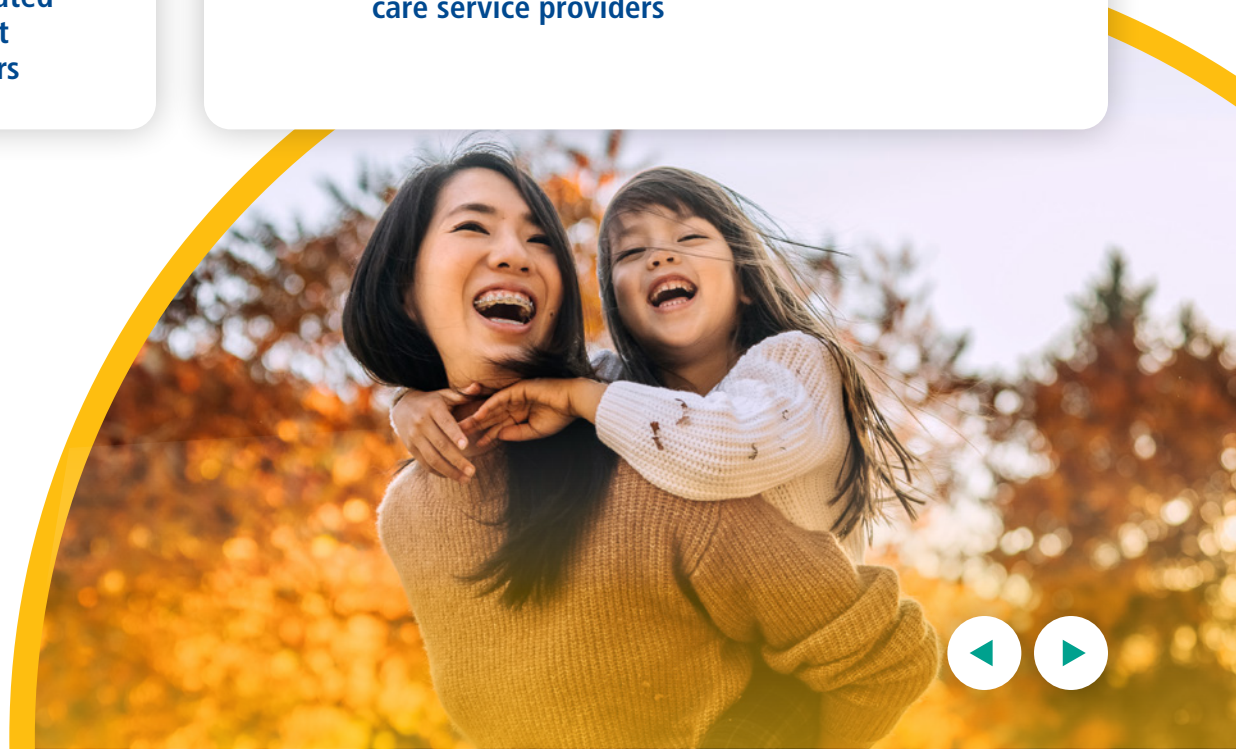
82%
of child care centres (sites) are operated by not-for-profit service providers

Home Child Care

16
home child care agencies

100%
of licensed home child care agencies are not-for-profit

888
active home child care service providers



Affordable Child Care

In this report, affordable child care refers to child care provided in a licensed centre or home setting that offers reduced fees under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system.

The historic launch of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system has been celebrated by service providers and welcomed by families looking for more affordable, inclusive, and high-quality child care spaces.

> **Daycare costs were higher than the mortgage! The CWELCC program is really important to make access more equitable for everyone.**
>
> — Parent, focus group participant

While the reduction in child care fees has provided much-needed financial relief for families enrolled in CWELCC-funded programs, the demand for these affordable child care spaces has surged in Ottawa, making it more difficult for families to find care.

The number of children 0 to 5 years old registered on the City's registry and waitlist system and waiting for a child care space (within the next six months or more) has increased by just over 300 per cent since 2019.[36] Approximately 8,500 children 0 to 5 years are waiting to access child care within the next six months.[37] Families are also registering their children on the registry and waitlist system earlier, knowing that high demand makes securing a space increasingly difficult.[38]

85%
of surveyed service providers reported an increase in the number of families with children 0 to 5 years old seeking care.[39]

48%
of surveyed services providers reported an increase in the number of families willing to pay to hold a space.[40]

67%
of surveyed parents who were looking for child care indicated that they were unable to secure a space for their child. Furthermore, 60 per cent had been searching for six months or more.[41]

How well is the sector meeting demand for affordable child care in Ottawa?

A useful way to assess how well the child care sector meets the demand for affordable child care is by comparing the supply (available spaces) to the demand (children enrolled plus those waiting for a space). A balanced coverage rate falls between 95 per cent and 105 per cent. A coverage rate below 95 per cent suggests a deficit, while a rate above 105 per cent indicates a surplus.[42]

In Ottawa, the current supply of CWELCC-funded affordable child care spaces for children 0 to 5 years old meets about 76 per cent of the demand, with the greatest shortage occurring in the infant age group, as well as in Indigenous-led and French-language child care (Table 3). To fully meet the demand for affordable child care for children 0 to 5 years old, an estimated 7,400 additional CWELCC-funded spaces would need to be created across the city.

Table 3. Ability of Affordable Child Care Supply to Meet Demand, by Age Group and Type of Care (Note 1)[43]

	Full Day				Before and After	
	Infant (<18 months)	Toddler (18 to 29 months)	Preschool (30 to 47 months)	Total (0 to 3 years)	JK/SK (4 to 5 years)	Total (0 to 5 years)
Total	34%	74%	80%	70%	94%	76%
Indigenous-led	29%	51%	86%	59%	N/A (Note 2)	N/A (Note 2)
French-language	15%	58%	67%	52%	90%	63%

Note 1: Child care supply represents the operating capacity of CWELCC-funded centre-based and home child care spaces. Operating capacity is the number of spaces that service providers are operating. Differs from the licensed capacity which is the maximum number of spaces approved by the Ministry of Education.

Note 2: There are no before-and-after Indigenous-led centre-based child care spaces and few home child care spaces for Indigenous children 4 and 5 years old.

How many affordable child care spaces are there in Ottawa?

Table 4. Number of Affordable Child Care Spaces, By Age Group and Type of Care (Note 1).[44]

	Full Day				Before and After	
	Infant (<18 months)	Toddler (18 to 29 months)	Preschool (30 to 47 months)	Total (0 to 3 years)	JK/SK (4 to 5 years)	Total (0 to 5 years)
Total	**1,442**	**5,213**	**9,765**	**16,420**	**6,576**	**22,996**
Indigenous-led	32	60	133	255	N/A (Note 2)	N/A (Note 2)
French-language	176	824	1,585	2,585	1,805	4,390

Note 1: Represents the operating capacity of CWELCC-funded centre-based and home child care spaces. Operating capacity is the number of spaces that service providers are operating. Differs from the licensed capacity which is the maximum number of spaces approved by the Ministry of Education.

Note 2: There are no before-and-after Indigenous-led centre-based child care spaces and few home child care spaces for Indigenous children 4 and 5 years old.

Child Care for Children 0 to 3 Years Old

There are 16,420 affordable CWELCC-funded child care spaces for children 0 to 3 years old (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) in Ottawa, which are operated by licensed child care centres and home child care service providers (Table 4). Full-day child care spaces for children 0 to 3 years old are essential for parents to work or pursue an education.

Access to affordable child care within one's neighbourhood is a key priority for families, yet availability varies significantly across Ottawa (Map 6). Generally, children living in central-urban neighbourhoods have better access to full-day child care than those in suburban and rural areas, with some exceptions.

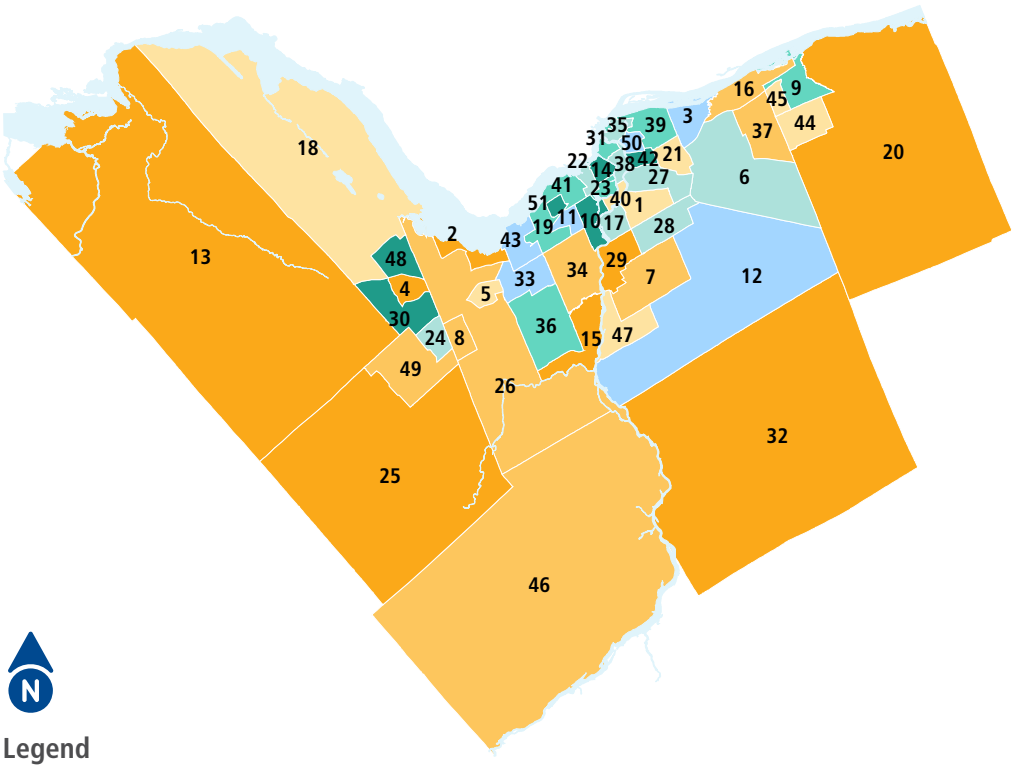
Nearly half of Ottawa neighbourhoods can be considered underserved, where fewer than 37 per cent of children having access to an affordable child care space.[45] Access is particularly limited in rural areas, where all six rural neighbourhoods considered underserved. In fact, children living in rural Ottawa are more likely to attend a child care centre outside their neighbourhood (74 per cent) compared to children living in urban areas (49 per cent).[46]

Having access to child care close to home is even more critical for families who rely on public transportation or live in neighbourhoods with lower socio-economic conditions.

In Ottawa, 10 neighbourhoods experiencing lower socio-economic conditions[47] are also underserved from a child care access perspective.

- ✓ Alta Vista
- ✓ Bayshore/Crystal Bay
- ✓ Bells Corner
- ✓ Blossom Park
- ✓ Chapman Mills/Rideau Crest
- ✓ Cyrville
- ✓ Halfmoon Bay/Stonebridge
- ✓ Hunt Club West
- ✓ Nepean East
- ✓ Portobello South

Map 6: Access to Affordable Child Care for Children 0 to 3 Years Old, by Neighbourhood[48]



Neighbourhoods

1. Alta Vista
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18. Constance Bay/Dunrobin
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21. Cyrville
22. Dalhousie
23. Glebe
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25. Goulbourn/Munster/Richmond
26. Half Moon Bay/Stonebridge
27. Hawthorne Meadows/Riverview
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37. Orléans South
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39. Ottawa North East
40. Ottawa South
41. Ottawa West
42. Overbrook
43. Pinecrest/Queensway
44. Portobello South
45. Queenswood Heights
46. Rideau
47. Riverside South
48. South March
49. Stittsville
50. Vanier
51. Westboro

Child Care for Children 4 to 12 Years Old

Most before-and-after school child care programs are operated by independent child care organizations or school boards within school settings. School board-operated programs usually run only during the school year, leaving families to find alternative care for the summer months.

There are 6,576 affordable before-and-after school care spaces for children 4 to 5 years old being operated by child care service providers in Ottawa (Table 4). Since reduced fees, as a part of CWELCC, only apply to children up to five years old, the cost of before-and-after school care for older school age children (6 to 12 years old) has continued to rise since 2019 and is now significantly higher. This has caused issues for some families not being able to afford before-and-after school child care once their children are six years of age and no longer eligible for reduced rates through CWELCC. Service providers also reported that many families are not aware of this timeline and change of cost.[49]

Indigenous Children

There are 225 affordable, CWELCC-funded, Indigenous-led child care spaces for eligible children not yet enrolled in school (Table 4). Three Indigenous-led child care centres offer culturally-relevant child care programming to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children up to 6 years old (not yet enrolled in school).

Two Aboriginal Head Start programs also provide free licensed child care spaces with a holistic approach to education. There are no Indigenous-led before-and-after school programs for children who are enrolled in the school system.

Indigenous-led centre-based care is provided at very few locations. Four centres are located in the adjacent neighbourhoods of Ottawa North East and Vanier (Central East) and one centre is in Carlington (Central West) (Map 7). Home child care service providers are distributed mostly across the central portion of the city, with few home child care service providers in the West area.

As a result, attending an Indigenous-led child care centre often requires significant travel for families, unless transportation is provided (Aboriginal Head Start programs). There are also several neighbourhoods with large numbers of Indigenous children in the East and West areas without access to Indigenous-led child care (e.g. Orleans South, Portobello South, and Stitsville) (Map 7).

Additionally, in facilitated discussions, Indigenous service providers have acknowledged that the transition from holistic, culturally-based Indigenous-led child care to the mainstream school and before-and-after school child care systems can be particularly challenging for Indigenous children, negatively impacting their well-being and learning.

As a result, many families choose to keep their children in Indigenous-led child care for Junior and Senior Kindergarten rather then move to the mainstream system.[50] There is a need to build awareness and understanding of Indigenous practices and culture for staff, schools, children, and families in the mainstream sector. The mistrust of mainstream institutions and unique experiences of Indigenous children and families are rooted in the legacy of colonial practices and harm done to Indigenous peoples.

Overview of Indigenous-Led Licensed Child Care (0 to 6 Years Old)[51]

Child Care Centres

2
service providers

100%
of child care centres (sites) are operated by not-for-profit service providers

5
locations

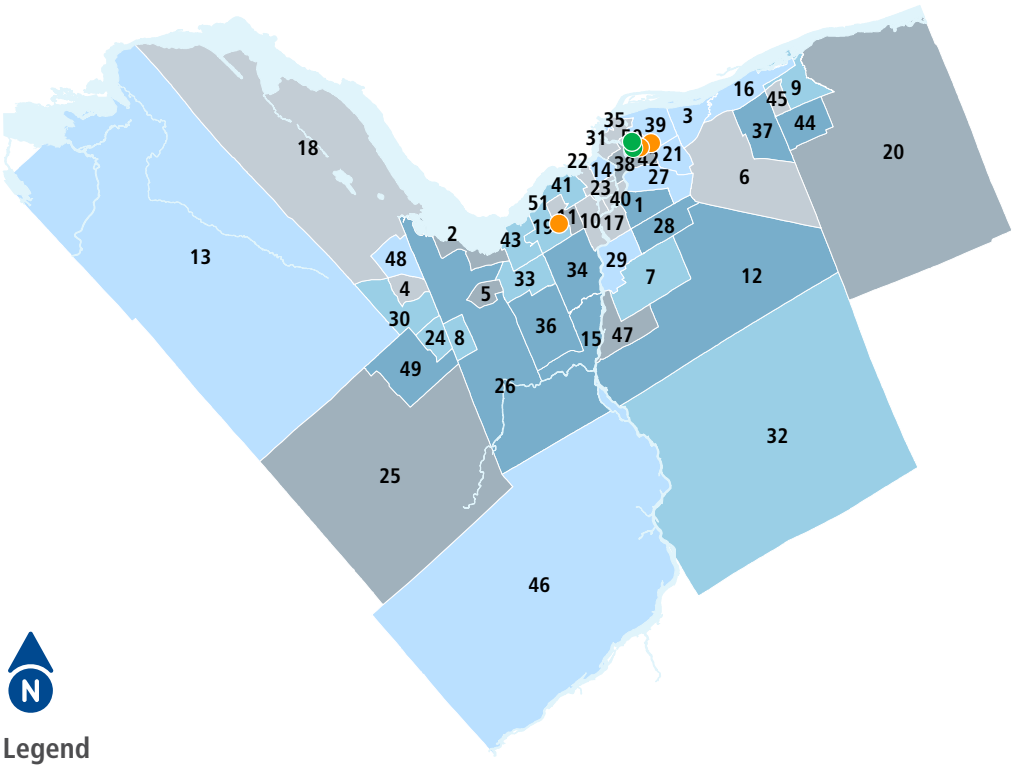
Home Child Care

1
home child care agency

100%
of home child care agencies are not-for-profit

12
active home child care service providers

Map 7: Indigenous-led Child Care Centres and Population of Indigenous Children 0 to 6 Years Old, by Neighborhood[52]



Neighbourhoods

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2. Bayshore/Crystal Bay
3. Beacon Hill
4. Beaverbrook/Marchwood
5. Bells Corners
6. Blackburn Hamlet/Mer Bleue
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9. Cardinal Creek/Fallingbrook
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26. Half Moon Bay/Stonebridge
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29. Hunt Club West
30. Katimavik/Hazeldean
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50. Vanier
51. Westboro

Francophone Children

There are 2,585 affordable, CWELCC-enrolled French-language child care spaces for children 0 to 3 years old, which are operated by child care centres and home child care services providers (Table 4).

The ability for Francophone families to access French-language child care in their own neighbourhood varies significantly across Ottawa (Map 8). Fifteen neighbourhoods have no French-language care for children 0 to 3 years old, including all but one rural neighbourhood (Cumberland/Navan/Vars), but six neighbourhoods have more Francophone children than French-language spaces. Overall, 57 per cent of neighbourhoods (29 of 51) are considered underserved for French-language care.[53]

Approximately 24 per cent of French-language spaces are currently occupied by children who do not identify as Francophone on the registry and waitlist system.[54] This may, in part, explain the challenges Francophone families face in securing a space in their preferred language.

Overview of French-Language Licensed Child Care (Children 0 to 12 Years Old)[55]

Child Care Centres

21
service providers

99%
of child care centres (sites) are operated by not-for-profit service providers

77
locations

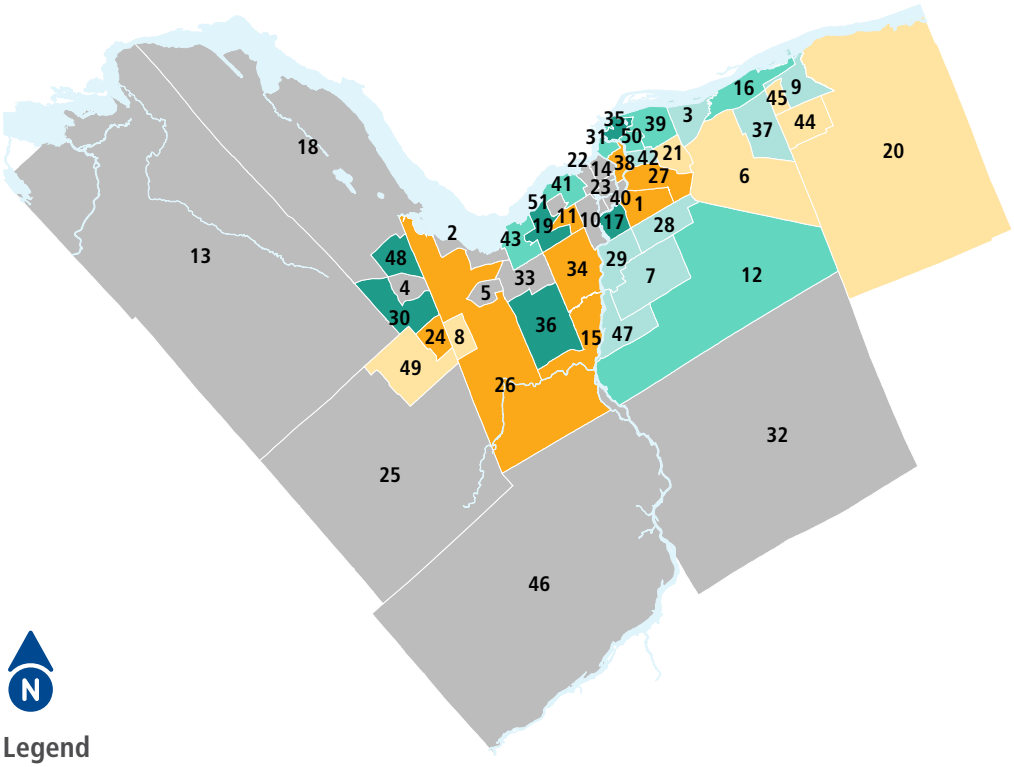
Home Child Care

1
home child care agency

100%
of home child care agencies are not-for-profit

70
active home child care service providers

Map 8: Access to Affordable French-Language Child Care for Children 0 to 3 Years Old, by Neighbourhood[56]



Legend

- No access to child care (0%)
- Below provincial access target (1-18%)
- Below provincial access target (19-37%)
- Meets or above provincial access target (38-57%)
- Above provincial access target (58-93%)
- Above provincial access target (94-363%)

Neighbourhoods

1. Alta Vista
2. Bayshore/Crystal Bay
3. Beacon Hill
4. Beaverbrook/Marchwood
5. Bells Corners
6. Blackburn Hamlet/Mer Bleue
7. Blossom Park
8. Bridlewood
9. Cardinal Creek/Fallingbrook
10. Carleton Heights
11. Carlington
12. Carlsbad Springs/ Findlay Creek
13. Carp/Fitzroy/Kinburn
14. Centretown
15. Chapman Mills/Rideau Crest
16. Chatelaine/Convent Glen
17. Clementine/Riverside Park
18. Constance Bay/Dunrobin
19. Copeland
20. Cumberland/Navan/Vars
21. Cyrville
22. Dalhousie
23. Glebe
24. Glen Cairn
25. Goulbourn/Munster/Richmond
26. Half Moon Bay/Stonebridge
27. Hawthorne Meadows/Riverview
28. Hunt Club East
29. Hunt Club West
30. Katimavik/Hazeldean
31. Lower Town
32. Metcalfe/Osgoode/Greely
33. Nepean Central
34. Nepean East
35. New Edinburgh/ Rockcliffe Park
36. Old Barrhaven
37. Orléans South
38. Ottawa East/Sandy Hill
39. Ottawa North East
40. Ottawa South
41. Ottawa West
42. Overbrook
43. Pinecrest/Queensway
44. Portobello South
45. Queenswood Heights
46. Rideau
47. Riverside South
48. South March
49. Stittsville
50. Vanier
51. Westboro

Child Care Registry and Waitlist System

The registry and waitlist system is the central source of information and access to licensed child care in Ottawa.

The City's registry and waitlist system is the central source of information and access to licensed child care in Ottawa. 40 per cent of online family survey respondents prioritized improvements to the registry and waitlist system as a key change needed to better support families in accessing child care.[57]

Family focus group participants shared that some of their main concerns with the registry and waitlist system are the lack of communications about the status of their application and the frequent absence of callbacks from service providers. Many participants mentioned reaching out to individual service providers directly, while service providers themselves noted challenges in managing the volume of calls and their inability to provide sufficient support to applicants.[58]

> **I missed an email and lost my spot on the waitlist. If you didn't have access to email, then it would be easy to miss. A phone call or something would have been beneficial.**
>
> — Parent, focus group participant

System Awareness and Navigation

One of the first steps in accessing child care is understanding the types of programs available and how to access them, along with any financial supports. However, families described the process of securing a child care space as confusing and stressful.

In all family focus groups, participants noted the following challenges:[59]

- Limited understanding of the available options within the child care system
- Difficulty finding clear and comprehensive information online
- Challenges reaching a live contact person
- Complicated application processes for child care and fee subsidies
- The registry and waitlist system is not intuitive or easy to use
- Information and forms only available in English and French

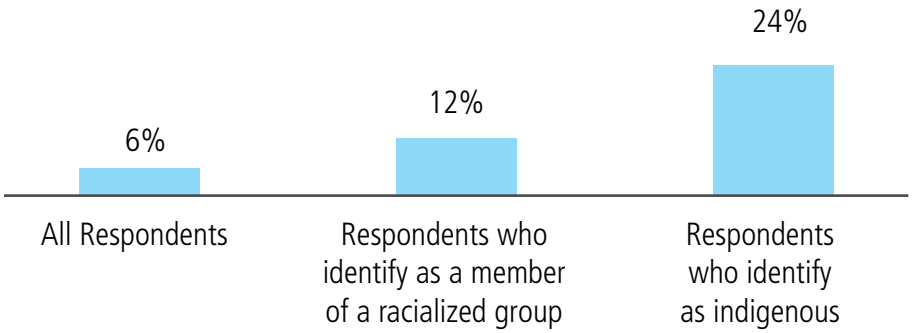
Equity & Inclusion

Families and community organizations shared that the current early learning and child care system is complex and difficult to navigate, with one major challenge being understanding and effectively accessing the system.

Families living in low-income and those from racialized backgrounds reported greater challenges in finding information about child care options and navigating the application process, often due to limited technology access and language barriers.

Findings from the online family survey also suggest that racialized and Indigenous families are more likely to access support from local organizations when seeking child care (Figure 5).[60] Child care and community organizations reported dedicating significant resources to help families navigate the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system and are actively seeking additional resources to support this effort.[61]

Figure 5: Online Family Survey Respondents Who Secured a Child Care Space with Support from an Organization[62]



Ontario's vision for access and inclusion is that more children (of all abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds) can actively and meaningfully participate in child care, and be supported in forming authentic, caring relationships with their peers and educators.[63]

Financial constraints make securing child care more challenging, emphasizing the need for reduced rates and fee subsidies.

Racialized and Indigenous families who responded to the online family survey stated that they actively seek out service providers participating in programs like CWELCC and those accepting families with a fee subsidy. They are also more likely to receive a subsidy than non-racialized or non-Indigenous families.[64]

Indigenous and Francophone families face unique challenges in accessing child care that respects their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The limited availability of Indigenous-led and French-language child care spaces often requires families to travel long distances or attend care that is not culturally-specific. For example, some Inuit families shared that moving outside designated areas without transportation options may mean losing access to Indigenous-led care.

Service Data Gaps

Service data gaps, particularly in socioeconomic information for families, exist for some of the priority populations identified by the Province. These gaps limit the ability to fully understand who is accessing ELCC programs and how experiences may vary across communities, especially among underserved groups like Black and other racialized communities, children with special needs, and families needing flexible care.

> **I had lost job opportunities because my son wasn't in daycare. I haven't been able to improve my English and go to in-person classes because I have to take care of my son. I was in a waiting list for eight months for daycare placement. I couldn't find a subsidized place for my son. Now [just got access to child care], my son and I have better opportunities to meet others and improve our English. There needs to be some sort of solution for immigrants. Not all immigrants can afford daycare. We also miss out on opportunities, especially immigrant mothers, they miss out on several years because they have to take care of our children.**
>
> — Refugee, mother, focus group participant

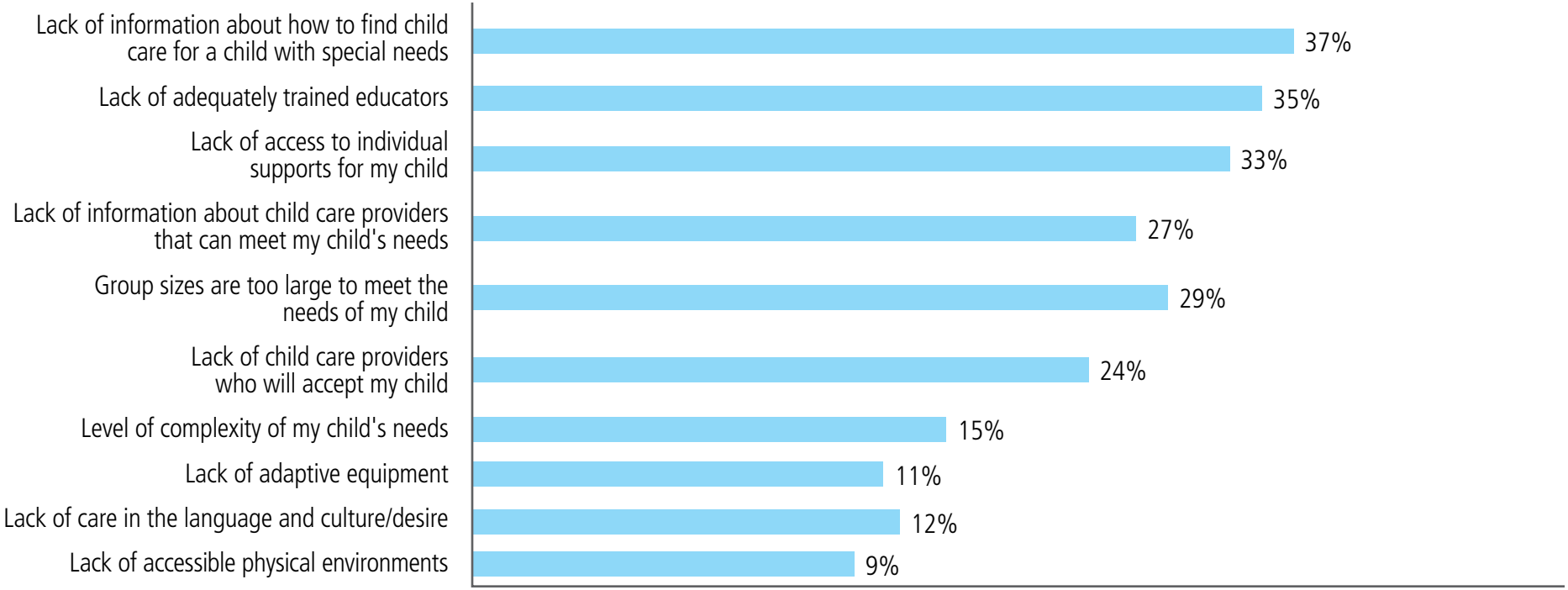
Children with Special Needs

Families of children with special needs often face additional challenges in accessing child care and require supports to secure inclusive care.

According to the online family survey respondents, these challenges include a lack of information on how to find suitable child care options, inadequately trained educators, limited individualized support for their child, large group sizes, and a shortage of child care service providers willing to accept children with special needs (Figure 6).[65]

> **When you have a young child and a need is emerging, it's hard for parents to know how to say what their child's needs are. We don't know the cause, it might be in the range of developmental 'normalness'. By the time you sign up for something, you may have missed the window for it. You're moving at the rate of waitlists (waitlist for diagnosis, waitlist for childcare). Even looking at the child care sign up waitlist, I procrastinated because I was intimidated by it.**
>
> — Refugee, mother, focus group participant

Figure 6: Top Barriers or Challenges to Accessing Child Care for Children with Special Needs[66]



All families, including those of children with special needs, must register on the registry and waitlist system to apply for a child care space.

During registration, families are asked to indicate if their child has special needs. Service providers then accept children based on their own selection criteria, capacity, and resources to support the children in their care.

In practice, there are fewer child care options available to families of children with special needs, as not all child care centres can or will provide care to children with special needs. Approximately 63 per cent of community-based licensed child care service providers (centre-based and home child care) receive additional funding for special needs resources (SNR) and capacity-building supports for children with special needs in their care.[67]

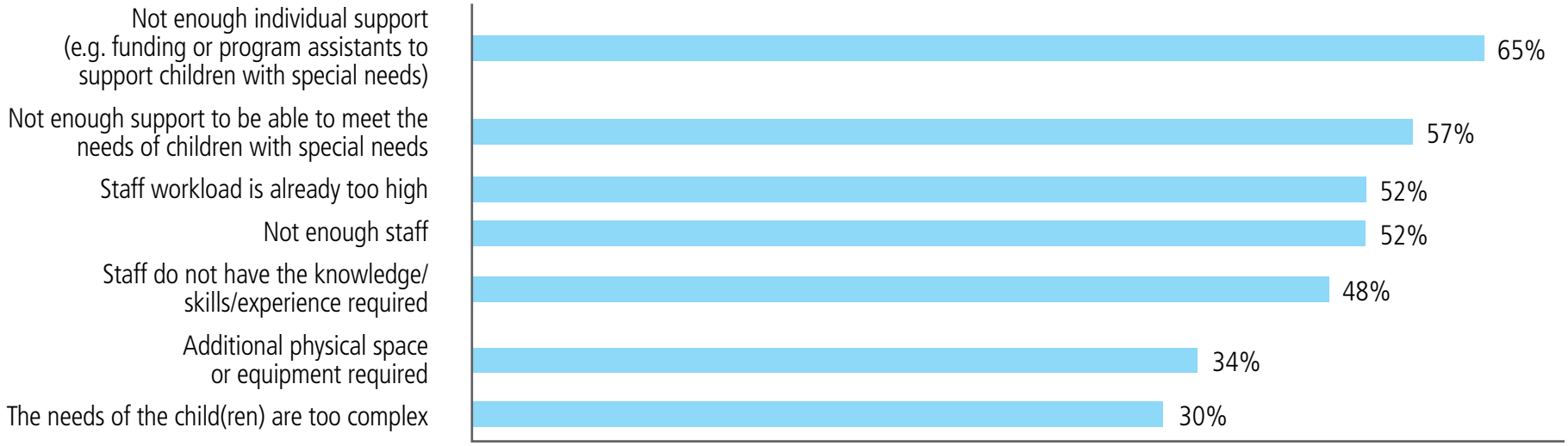
Families who indicate on the registry and waitlist system that their child has special needs face greater difficulty securing a space. Over 80 per cent of children with special needs on the registry and waitlist system have a desired start date for child care that has already passed, compared to just under 50 per cent for children without special needs.[68]

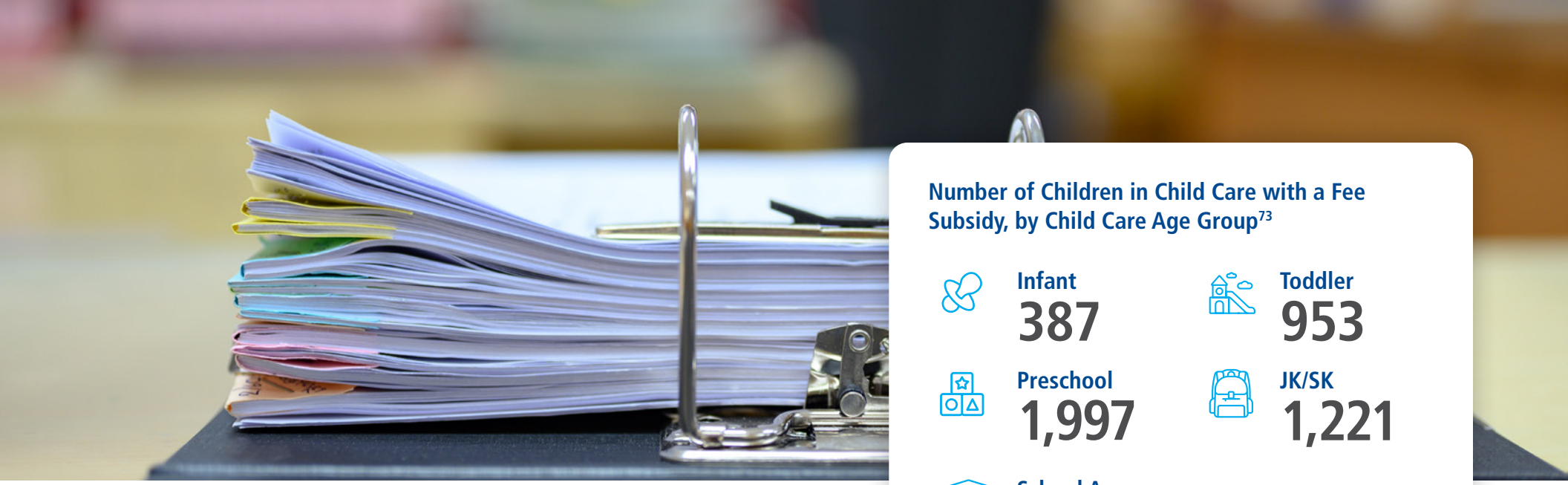
In family focus groups, parents of children with special needs shared that some families avoid disclosing their child's special needs on the registry and waitlist system, fearing their child may not be selected by child care service providers. Although 17 per cent of online family survey respondents identified they have a child with special needs, self-identification data on the registry and waitlist system is much lower, with only three per cent of children identifying as having special needs.[69]

Service providers perceive that there is an increasing number of children with special needs and that they have insufficient resources to adequately support them.

Child care service providers who responded to the online provider survey expressed concerns regarding the sector's capacity to meet the demand for inclusive programs and individualized support, citing insufficient resources, staffing issues and overwhelming workload demands as primary obstacles (Figure 7).[70]

Figure 7: Top Barriers to Providing Child Care for Children with Special Needs[71]





Number of Children in Child Care with a Fee Subsidy, by Child Care Age Group[73]

Infant
387

Toddler
953

Preschool
1,997

JK/SK
1,221

School Age
2,227

Children Receiving a Fee Subsidy

Families living in low-income who are looking for financial assistance to cover the costs of child care must register and apply for a fee subsidy using the registry and waitlist system.

Service providers have noted that families are often unaware of the fee subsidy program, including eligibility, process and documents required and often require assistance to complete the application form.

Some service providers have a mandate to serve priority populations and will prioritize families that are approved for a fee subsidy. Of all children currently waiting for a child care space in Ottawa, about 10 per cent have been approved for a fee subsidy.[72]

Fee Subsidy Program – Children 0 to 12 years old[74]

- Approximately 6,300 children are currently receiving a fee subsidy (enrolled in child care)
- 75% are enrolled in child care centres and 25% are in home child care
- 47% have the full cost of care covered
- Half are in a lone parent family
- Approximately 50% of parents of children with a fee subsidy are working and 20% are attending school

The number of children approved for a fee subsidy and waiting for a space has increased since the introduction of CWELCC-funded child care, as demand for these affordable spaces has grown.

At the beginning of 2024, 723 children 0 to 5 years old were approved for a fee subsidy and waiting for a child care space, compared to about 436 children prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (a 66 per cent increase).[75]

The increasing difficulty to access a child care space translates to long wait times for many families who will have a fee subsidy. A majority (86 per cent) of children who will have a fee subsidy have a desired start date for child care that has already passed.[76]

Despite the implementation of additional CWELCC-funded reduced rates, fee subsidies will remain essential for families needing financial assistance. A significant number of families currently receiving a fee subsidy will still struggle to afford $10 a day child care fees. Currently, 77 per cent of children with a fee subsidy pay less than $10 a day, and about 47 per cent have their full child care costs subsidized, reflecting a family income less than $20,000 per year.[77]

In addition, fee subsidies continue to be essential for the families of school age children that age out of CWELCC-funded child care. There are currently 2,227 children 6 to 12 years in school age programs receiving a fee subsidy.[78]

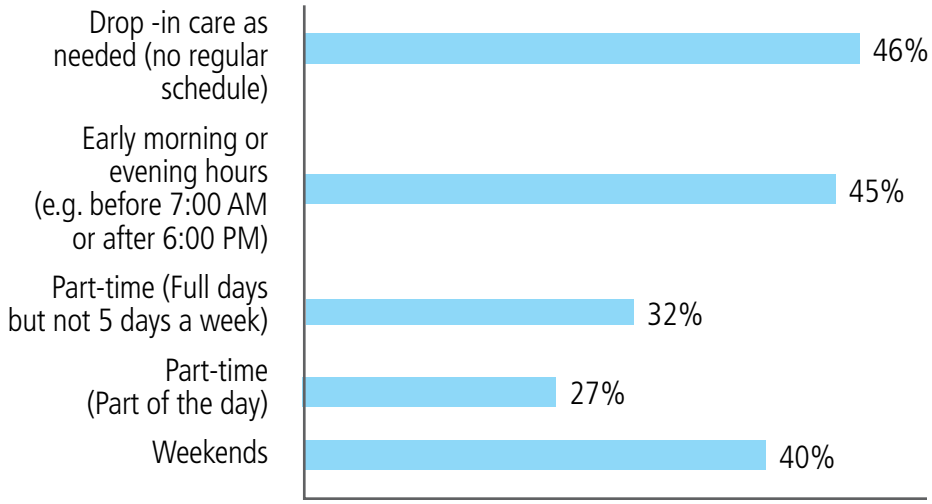
> **Even $10 a day, when you're paying $2.2k a month for rent, it's not really achievable for many people. There's a lot of immigrants and newcomers where it won't help them. Building up the subsidized system is important.**
>
> — Parent, mother, focus group participant

Families Seeking Flexible Child Care

Having access to atypical child care hours (part-time, weekend hours, or evening and overnight hours) can be crucial for families who have non-traditional work schedules.

In Ottawa, only 10 per cent of child care centers offer flexible options, most of which are nursery schools providing half day programs. Other forms of flexible care, such as weekends, evenings and part-time care, are offered at just one per cent of child care centres. Licensed home child care offers more flexibility, with four per cent providing evening care, five per cent offering weekend care, and seven per cent offering part-time care (less than five days a week or part-days).[79]

Figure 8: Preferred Flexible Care Options by Parents[82]



There is a strong demand for more flexible child care options among families. While only 12 per cent of online family survey respondents indicated that they use flexible child care, 42 per cent expressed a need for it, with preferences including drop-in care without a fixed schedule, early morning or evening care, and weekend availability (Figure 8).[80]

Child care service providers recognize the sector's challenges in meeting these needs, with 74 per cent of online provider survey respondents rating the sector's ability to provide flexible care as poor or fair.[81]

EarlyON Child and Family Centres

EarlyON Child and Family Centres were established across Ontario following Provincial direction to integrate existing Ministry-funded child and family programs under one brand.

An equity lens was used to create three service streams – Main services, Indigenous-led services, and Francophone services – each offering programs tailored to the diverse abilities, cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds of children and families based on local needs. In total, 95 active EarlyON Child and Family Centres provide free programs and services to approximately 20,000 children 0 to 6 years old and their families.[83]

EarlyON Child and Family Centres[84]

25 EarlyON service providers

95 permanent locations (main sites and outreach sites)

*Mobile Services

Mainstream EarlyON

11 main sites

66 outreach sites

*Mobile services

Indigenous-Led EarlyON

5 permanent sites

3 temporary sites

*Mobile services

Francophone EarlyON

2 main sites

8 outreach sites

*Mobile services

*Mobile services are programs offered outside of EarlyON permanent locations to further integrate within the broader community and enhance service access (e.g. a program in a park).

EarlyON by the Numbers – 2023[85]

95
active EarlyON main and outreach sites

135,324
visits by children at EarlyON sites

85
full-time RECE* EarlyON program staff

20,550
Children served at EarlyON sites

16
virtual EarlyON programming

*RECEs are Registered Early Childhood Educators who are members of the College of Early Childhood Educators in Ontario.

Satisfaction with EarlyON Services

Families who currently use, or have previously used, EarlyON services report high satisfaction levels. According to the online family survey, 85 per cent of families who accessed EarlyON programs are "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the services provided.[86]

Many parents expressed gratitude for EarlyON programs, highlighting benefits such as improving children's social skills, learning about their children's development, connecting with other parents, and receiving support in navigating community services.[87]

EarlyON services help preserve culture and language for children and families. Francophone and Indigenous families highlighted the importance of these programs in supporting language and culture development. Families from diverse backgrounds, including racialized families, also value population-specific services that connect children to their heritage, such as playgroups offered in Mandarin and Arabic.

> **"Brings me back to all the things I love about being Inuit"**
> **"Helps me stay connected to our culture and language"**
>
> — Indigenous family focus group participant

> **[EarlyON] provides a place to go for those who don't have a place to go.**
>
> — Parent, focus group participant

> **We make friends here, my child feels safe here. He tries to socialize with people now, because he comes here. He's meeting a lot of kids and people here and he's much better now. It's a great first step of being social.**
>
> — Parent, focus group participant

Access to EarlyON Services

EarlyON Child and Family Centres (main and outreach sites) are distributed across Ottawa in each service area, including all rural areas (Map 9).[88] The distribution of EarlyON sites considers the socio-economic conditions and demographic makeup of service areas. Main sites tend to be located more centrally and in suburban areas, while there are outreach sites across the city.

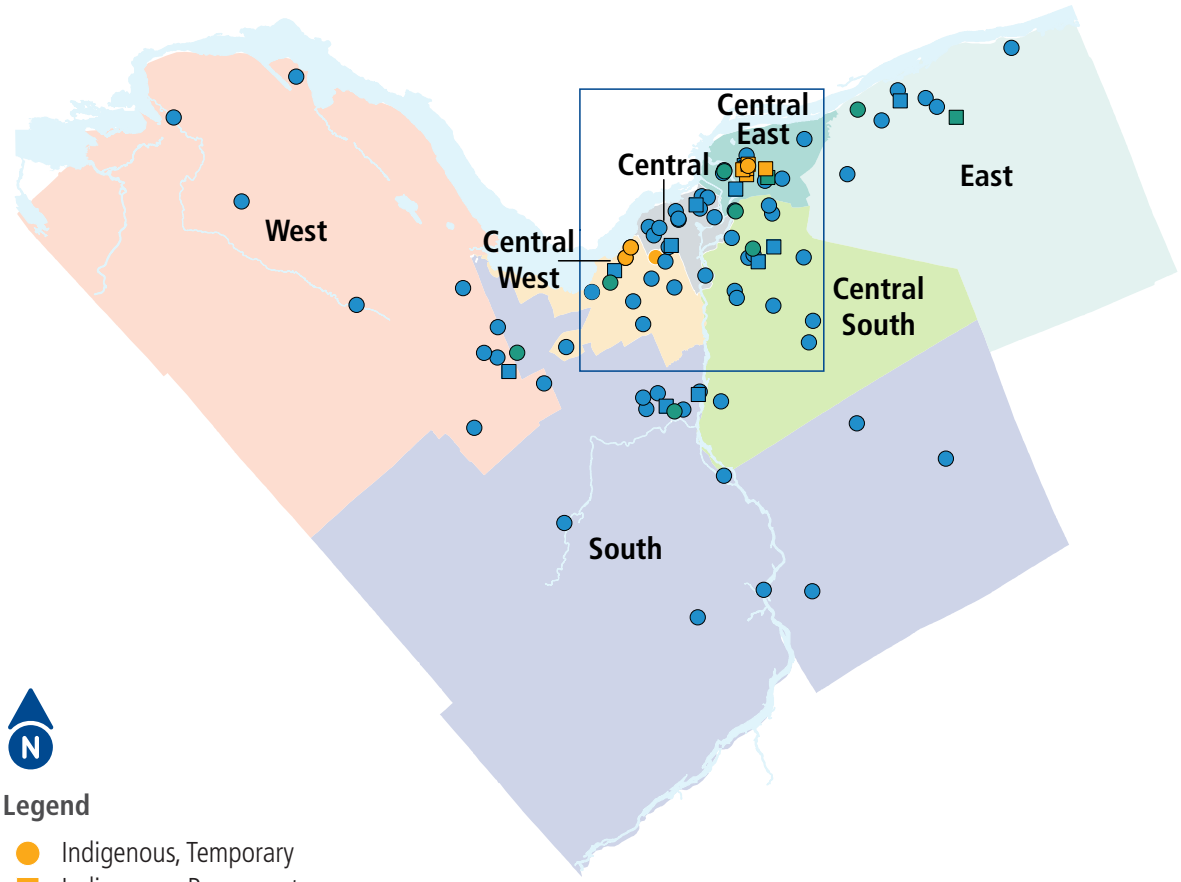
When local EarlyON Child and Family Centres were launched in 2019, an access target was set to ensure families could reach an EarlyON site within a 10-minute drive from their home, or 20 minutes for those living in rural areas.

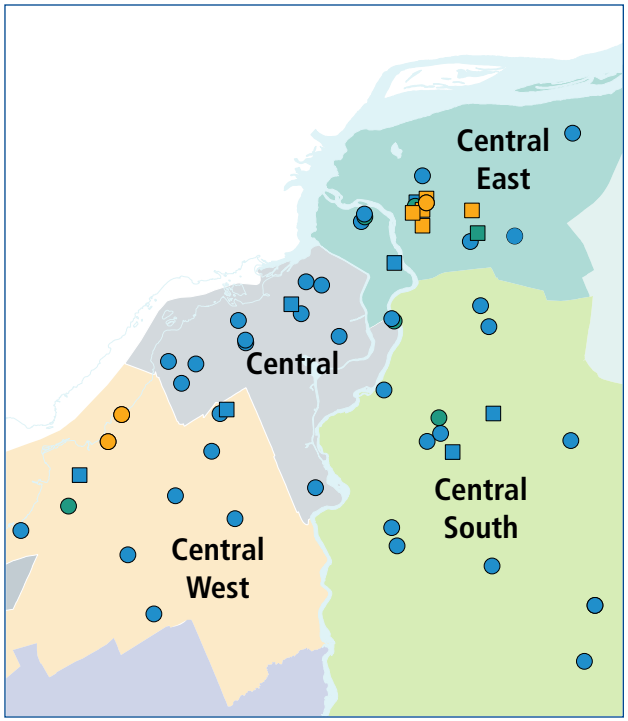
The majority of neighbourhoods meet or nearly meet the access targets for EarlyON main sites.[89] In 42 out of 51 neighbourhoods, 100 per cent of children 0 to 6 years old have access to an EarlyON main site within a 10-minute drive (urban areas) or 20-minutes (rural areas). The four rural neighbourhoods with the lowest access include Metcalfe/Osgoode/Greely (73 per cent of children have access within 20-minutes), Carlsbad Springs/Findlay Creek (66 per cent), Carp/Fitzroy/Kinburn (68 per cent), and Constance Bay/Dunrobin (43 per cent).[90]

Source: Alex S, Google Maps

The City of Ottawa's New Official Plan sets ambitious thresholds for making it easy for everyone to get around by transit, foot or bicycle and access their daily needs within a 15-minute walk. Aligning with the more ambitious thresholds for planning of new or relocation of EarlyON sites would help advance multiple City priorities and ensure access is more equitable (e.g. services are not equitable when people need a car for easy access).[91]

Map 9: Locations of EarlyON Child and Family Centres, Ottawa[92]





Distribution of Indigenous-Led and Francophone EarlyON sites

The distribution of Indigenous-led and Francophone EarlyON sites varies across service areas. Indigenous-led EarlyON programs are available at eight locations.

- ✔ Six locations in the Central East service area, including five permanent sites and one temporary site, in the Vanier and Ottawa North East neighborhoods.
- ✔ Two temporary locations in the Central West service area, in the Pinecrest/Queensway and Copeland neighbourhoods.[93]

This leaves five service areas without access to Indigenous-led EarlyON programs, including the West service area which has the highest number of Indigenous children 0 to 6 years old.

Francophone EarlyON programs are offered in all seven service areas. The East and Central East service areas, which have the highest numbers of Francophone children 0 to 6 years old, are well served with two and three sites, respectively. There is one Francophone EarlyON site in each of the other five service areas, including Central South which has the third-highest number of Francophone children 0 to 6 years old.[94]

Families in underserved areas face long travel times to access Indigenous-led or Francophone EarlyON programs. Some service providers address these gaps by offering mobile programs in areas lacking permanent programs. Despite these efforts, many Indigenous and Francophone families shared in family focus groups that long travel times and other barriers make it harder to access culturally-appropriate EarlyON programs.[95]

A major concern raised by families was the challenge of accessing timely and comprehensive information about EarlyON programs.

Many participants in the family focus groups reported hearing about EarlyON programs through word of mouth, struggling to find up-to-date details on program locations and hours, and expressed a desire for earlier awareness of these programs.[96] When respondents to the online family survey were asked why they did not use EarlyON programs, 37 per cent indicated lack of awareness as the main reason for not participating.[97]

Families are concerned about the limited availability of program times. While most EarlyON service providers who participated in the online provider survey believe the sector is meeting demand for various programs and services, they recognize a gap in offering flexible hours, such as evenings, weekends, or early/late program times.

Nearly all (92 per cent) of EarlyON service providers reported reaching full capacity in their programs at least once a week in 2023,[98] causing disappointment for families. Many families in the family focus groups shared experiences of being turned away from programs that were full, which limited their access to programs and support.

To address barriers to accessing EarlyON programs, service providers are implementing a range of tactics to promote equitable access, including establishing weekly visit limits, offering a variety of program times, and providing families with transportation support, such as taxi chits or bus fare.[99]

> **They only took the first ten parents and we had to wait for the next program. There was a sense of competition. The program lasts only one hour, it can take me half an hour to prep my kid and either I don't get a spot or I'm there for only an hour.**
>
> — Parent, mother, focus group participant

Inclusive Environments

One of the Provincially mandated guiding principles for EarlyON centres is that programs and services should be accessible and responsive to children, families, and caregivers with varying abilities, as well as cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, sexual orientation, and religious backgrounds.[100]

While many families reported high satisfaction with EarlyON programs, some families from diverse backgrounds, including lone parents, parents of children with special needs, and gender-diverse parents, shared that they did not feel a sense of belonging in certain EarlyON programs.[101] Similarly, EarlyON service providers identified inclusivity as an area for improvement, with 20 per cent of respondents to the online provider survey rating the sector as "fair" or "poor" in meeting the demand for welcoming and inclusive environments for all family compositions, sexual orientations, and gender identities.[102]

Complex Needs of Families and Children

EarlyON service providers feel they are supporting families with needs that are more complex now than they were before the COVID-19 pandemic, including an increased number of children with special needs, developmental and speech delays, and more families with mental health needs.

Nearly all (98 per cent) EarlyON service provider survey respondents "agree" or "strongly agree" that they are supporting parents in their role. However, only 45 per cent of respondents rated their ability to meet the needs of all children and families, including those with special needs, as "very good" or "excellent".[103] Many families, especially newcomer and racialized families, rely on EarlyON staff to help them navigate access to health and social services, including completing developmental assessments for their children, as well as guidance in understanding available child care options. Despite this, EarlyON staff feel they lack the scope, training and additional supports necessary to fully address the emotional and mental health needs of families.[104]

Data gaps within the EarlyON sector

There are currently gaps in the service data available for EarlyON programs, which limit the ability to fully understand the capacity and scope of programs offered, as well as the details about the families and children accessing the programs. The data gaps also hinder understanding of where programs are being accessed and how experiences with early learning programs may differ for various communities, such as families with children with special needs, Indigenous, Francophone, newcomer, Black, and other racialized communities.

Workforce

EarlyON service providers and staff are facing growing demand from families with increasingly complex needs, but with limited resources. Nearly half (48 per cent) of EarlyON service providers in the online provider survey rated working conditions (such as wages, benefits, hours of work) as "fair" or "poor".[105]

Additionally, 44 per cent of EarlyON service providers reported having to close a program at least once a week in 2023, mostly due to staff shortages.[106] These shortages lead to reduce supports for families, overcrowded programs, and increased pressure on staff. EarlyON service providers also noted that inconsistent and unpredictable funding makes it harder to recruit and retain staff.[107]

> **The needs are very high, and we can't expand, it's a matter of quality versus quantity.**
>
> — EarlyON service provider, facilitated discussion participant

Quality and Workforce

Children deserve access to high-quality early learning and child care services that provide safe and enriching environments that support their overall development and well-being.

High-quality early learning and child care has a positive impact on a range of child developmental outcomes. These include:[108]

- ✔ Enhancing cognitive development
- ✔ Improving academic performance
- ✔ Advancing language skills
- ✔ Strengthening emotional well-being
- ✔ Cultivating pro-social behaviour
- ✔ Reducing behavioural problems and aggression
- ✔ Fostering greater self-confidence

Additionally, quality ELCC programs serve as a powerful equalizer, particularly benefiting children with special needs and children from families living in low income who are more likely to be registered in ELCC settings that are generally of lower quality.[109]

> **She feels very welcome. The staff is a good representation of the multiculturalism that prevails among the children. The children recognize themselves in the accompanying adult. They have planned activities. They blossom during the day, are curious, participate and are cheerful. She has no complaints about the staff, who are welcoming and caring.**
>
> — Parent, focus group participant

Licensed home child care service providers generally offer higher quality care than unlicensed ones.

However, families with lower incomes, less education, or irregular work hours often rely on unlicensed care for its flexibility. As a result, children living in low income who could benefit most from high-quality care are often the least likely to access it.[110]

The environment in which child care professionals operate influences job satisfaction and personal fulfillment, as well as the quality of care professionals are able to provide. Employment conditions, such as a safe work environment, a fair income, and supportive workplace policies, must be met to support the well-being of both caregivers and children in their care. Workforce issues and funding were identified by the majority of online provider survey respondents as the top challenges in operating child care.

Child care service providers participating in the online provider survey rated their work place on various elements of quality child care services, using a scale from poor to excellent. The top five elements rated as "Excellent" are:[111]

- ✔ Positive interactions between educators and children/families (**45%**)
- ✔ Safety (environment, staff procedures, knowledge of first aid) (**43%**)
- ✔ Cleanliness and proper hygiene practices (**42%**)
- ✔ Qualifications of educators (**40%**)
- ✔ Healthy nutrition (**35%**)

Online provider survey responses highlighted opportunities for improvements in quality child care, particularly in meeting the needs of all children, including those with special needs, and improving educators' working conditions (e.g. wages, benefits, hours of work).[112]

There is high satisfaction with the quality of child care among families currently accessing licensed child care (88% of online family survey respondents).[113]

Children's Services initiated/participated in three surveys to learn more about Ottawa's child care and early years workforce:

- ☆ The Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey (City of Ottawa, 2022) **was completed by 1,255 individuals.**
- ☆ The Knowing our Numbers Survey (University of Toronto and City of Ottawa, 2023) **was completed by 332 individuals.**
- ☆ The CCEY Service System Plan online provider survey (City of Ottawa, 2024) **was completed by 152 individuals.**

Who are Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs)?

- RECEs are members of the College of Early Childhood Educators
- RECEs adhere to a *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practices* which outlines expected professional skills, knowledge, practice, and values
- RECEs engage in continuous professional learning as an ethical and professional responsibility

According to the College of ECEs, "research has demonstrated that qualified and accountable professionals are key to the delivery of high-quality early years programs, which include both learning and care. Qualified educators bring expert knowledge and experience in early childhood development and learning as well as accountability through regulatory oversight."[114]

RECE Profile—Ottawa, 2023[115]

Number of RECEs
4,366

Gender distribution
97%
are women

Age average
42
years old

Type of employment

- **52%**—Licensed child care (centre-based, home-based child care)
- **38%**—Education (public or private school, school board)
- **7%**—Other types of child care employment (i.e., unlicensed child care, family support programs, special needs resourcing, post-secondary institution, government, or professional association)
- **2%**—Other

Employment status

- **80%**—Full-time
- **13%**—Part-time/Casual
- **2%**—Self-employed
- **<1%**—Retired
- **4%**—Not currently employed
- **1%**—Other

Identity

Almost **15%** self-identify as Francophone

Less than **1%** self-identify as Indigenous

Language

21%
identify French as their preferred language

Recruitment and Retention

60 per cent of the CCEY online provider survey respondents identified workforce recruitment and retention as a top priority for improving the early learning and child care system.[116]

Addressing the issue of recruitment and retention of RECEs is essential to meet the current and growing demand for affordable child care. The Ministry of Education estimates a need for 8,500 additional RECEs and child care workers by 2026 to meet CWELCC expansion targets across Ontario.[117]

Short tenures and high turnover within the early learning and child care sector create a high level of uncertainty and significantly impact the stability and sustainability of programs. Despite increased graduation rates, the College of Early Childhood Education (CECE) reports declining enrollment in the profession, highlighting compensation and working conditions as key factors.[118]

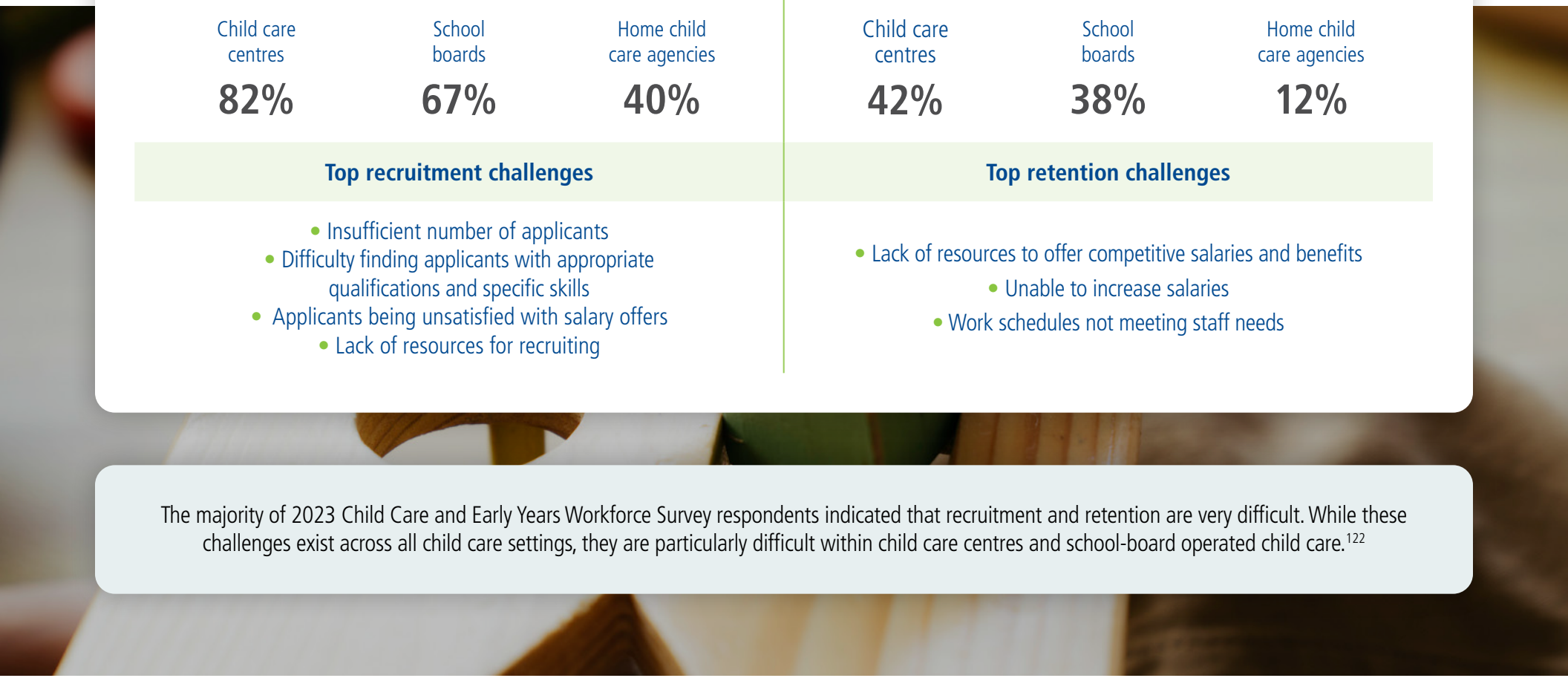
In Ontario, a lack of decent work for RECEs and child care workers has led to a child care workforce shortage. This situation has worsened to the point that it now presents a major roadblock to CWELCC's successful implementation. Understanding the root causes of the current workforce shortages is critical to developing appropriate and effective policy responses.[119]

Registered Early Childhood Educators in Ottawa (respondents to the 2023 Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey)[120]

	Educators	Management
Have worked in the sector for five years or less	32%	5%
Have worked in the sector for over 15 years	28%	63%
Have changed workplaces in the last five years	40%	27%
Either do not plan to stay in the sector for the next five years or are uncertain about future intentions	48%	45%

Recruitment and Retention Challenges[121]

Recruitment			Retention		
Management respondents who feel that recruitment is difficult (by child care settings)			**Management respondents who feel that retention is difficult (by child care settings)**		
Child care centres	School boards	Home child care agencies	Child care centres	School boards	Home child care agencies
82%	67%	40%	42%	38%	12%
Top recruitment challenges			**Top retention challenges**		
• Insufficient number of applicants • Difficulty finding applicants with appropriate qualifications and specific skills • Applicants being unsatisfied with salary offers • Lack of resources for recruiting			• Lack of resources to offer competitive salaries and benefits • Unable to increase salaries • Work schedules not meeting staff needs		



The majority of 2023 Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey respondents indicated that recruitment and retention are very difficult. While these challenges exist across all child care settings, they are particularly difficult within child care centres and school-board operated child care.[122]

Working Conditions

In the online provider survey, respondents expressed significant concerns about the working conditions of child care educators, including wages, benefits, and hours of work. One-third (34 per cent) rated these conditions as poor.[123]

Parents in the online family survey also expressed their concern about the working conditions of early learning and child care professionals. Most (57 per cent) identified improving working conditions and increasing wages as the top priority for child care improvements.[124]

The Province currently supplements wages and benefits of eligible child care staff through a combination of funding initiatives. Despite these efforts, findings from the 2023 Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey revealed that:[125]

Only **24%** **of educator respondents,** and just **40%** **of management respondents, feel their pay is fair considering their background and skills**

Only **19%** **of educator respondents,** and just **32%** **of management respondents, believe their pay adequately reflects their daily work**

Table 5 presents the hourly wages of child care staff in Ottawa. Fair and adequate wages are essential to retain child care professionals, ensuring both the well-being of children and the workforce, and maintaining the quality and sustainability of the child care sector.

Table 5: Hourly Wage of Child Care Staff – Ottawa, 2023[126]

Hourly wage range	RECE Staff (%)	Non-RECE Staff (%)	Other Staff* (%)
$15.50 – $19.99	20.7	68.1	69.6
$20.00 – $25.00	58.3	27.4	20.6
$25.01 – $28.59	15.3	3.6	5.9
$28.60 – $29.99	1.6	0.2	1.0
$30.00 – $32.49	2.9	0.5	1.0
$32.50 – $34.99	0.5	0.1	1.0
$35.00 – $37.49	0.5	0.0	1.0
$37.50 – $39.99	0.0	0.1	0.0
$40.00+	0.3	0.0	0.0

*Other staff includes administration, cook, custodial, book keeper and summer student positions.

Child care and early years professionals and advocates have long called for better wages and working conditions. While challenges like access to professional learning and program planning time remain, research consistently shows that compensation and working conditions are key factors in employment decisions, especially for RECEs.[127]

The 2023 Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey asked respondents what would make the sector a more rewarding employment option. The top factor across all workplace settings was higher wages and salaries, with 94% of educators and 91% of management agreeing.[128]

The second factor varied depending on workplace settings, and included:[129]

- ☆ School board respondents emphasized the need for greater support in caring for children with special needs
- ☆ Centre-based respondents advocated for improved benefits
- ☆ Home child care respondents emphasized the importance of promoting or creating a culture of recognition and appreciation for the early childhood education sector

> **Affordability cannot come at the cost of reasonable and even enticing wages. Watching educators at the childcare centre are like a masterclass in empathy, community building, and modelling all the values we would ever wish for our children.**
>
> — Parent, focus group participant

Well-Being and Professional Development

Early learning and child care professionals continue to find fulfillment in their roles, even amid workforce challenges (2023 Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey). Highlights from respondents suggest that:[130]

- **79% -** Work gives them a sense of personal accomplishment.
- **88% -** They have fun doing the work they do.
- **77% -** Working at their workplace makes them proud.
- **78% -** Working at their workplace gives them a sense of purpose.

While child care service providers invest their energy and empathy to supporting children's growth and development, many also experience emotional exhaustion, burnout, and reduced compassion. The 2023 Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey revealed that: [131]

- **57%** of educator respondents and **61%** of management respondents report experiencing compassion fatigue; and
- **36%** of educator respondents and **30%** of management respondents report having a disability, with mental health issues and/or addictions being the most commonly mentioned challenges.[132]

Professional learning is pivotal to increasing the competencies and expertise of the workforce. Tailoring professional learning initiatives to meet the specific needs and workplace environments of the workforce is imperative for fostering continual growth and improvement.

Diversity within the Sector

Diversity within the early learning and child care sector shapes the experiences of both educators and the children they serve.

As Ottawa becomes increasingly multicultural and interconnected, understanding and embracing this diversity is essential for creating inclusive and enriching learning environments.

Significant differences in the demographic and linguistic profiles of educators and management exist. Educators are more racially and linguistically diverse and are more than twice as likely to have been born outside of Canada compared to management. In contrast, management demonstrates a higher level of bilingualism in official languages.

Over a third (36%) of respondents in the 2023 Knowing our Numbers Survey reported experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment at work, with one in five (20%) reporting daily occurrences.[133] This underscores the urgent need for the child care and early years sector to celebrate diversity while proactively addressing discrimination and promoting a culture of inclusivity.

Diversity of Educators and Managers (2023 Child Care and Early Years Workforce Survey):[134]

	Educators	Management
Identifies as belonging to a racialized group	23%	12%
Is bilingual in both official languages	17%	28%
Indicates they speak non-official languages	20%	9%
Was born outside of Canada	44%	20%
Immigrated within the past 5 years	16%	2%

6

Service System Plan 2025–2029

Service System Plan 2025–2029 Framework

Vision

Children and families have equitable access to a system of high-quality, culturally appropriate, inclusive, and affordable early learning and licensed child care services, where children are valued and nurtured to thrive.

Strategy Statement (2025–2029)

We will simplify access for children and families, reduce barriers and systemic inequities, come together for meaningful reconciliation, and strengthen the sector workforce towards a sustainable system of early learning and licensed child care services.

Strategic Priorities

1. **Increase equitable access to affordable, high-quality ELCC services**
   Expand and optimize the availability and responsiveness of affordable ELCC programs, with a focus on underserved neighbourhoods and population groups.
2. **Strengthen the ELCC workforce**
   Support the development, recruitment, retention, and recognition of a diverse and stable workforce within the ELCC system.
3. **Reduce systemic inequities and barriers to access and inclusion**
   Promote equitable access and inclusion of all children and families by actively identifying and removing systemic inequities and barriers in ELCC.
4. **Enhance the ELCC system to better meet the needs of children with special needs and their families**
   Prioritize and address systemic inequities to better meet the needs of children with special needs and their families by supporting access to tailored, inclusive, and supportive services.
5. **Improve and simplify how families find and gain entry to ELCC services**
   Improve the service experience of families by providing clear, accurate information about the ELCC system, responsive supports, and simplified access to care.
6. **Nurture Indigenous wellness and community well-being through ELCC services**
   A commitment to nurture Indigenous wellness and community well-being by integrating holistic and diverse culturally-informed supports within Indigenous-led ELCC services that honour and uphold Indigenous knowledge and traditions.
7. **Enhance the sustainability of ELCC services**
   Ensure the stability and growth of local ELCC programs by simplifying administrative processes, ensuring clarity in both funding and processes, allocating funding equitably, and building capacity to meet the increasingly complex needs of families within a publicly funded system.
8. **Enhance the use and quality of data**
   Enhance data collection practices and analytics to increase understanding of the population and the ELCC system to inform planning, decision-making, monitoring and evaluation practices.

Children & Family Focused
We prioritize the well-being and inclusivity of children and families, ensuring their diverse voices are heard, and collaborative efforts are taken in planning and service delivery to meet the unique needs of children and families.
Engagement & Partnership
We build and sustain partnerships, actively listen to diverse views and lived experiences, and work together to plan and deliver responsive early learning and child care programs and services.
Equity & Inclusion
We identify, reduce, and remove systemic barriers, elevate diverse voices, and promote equitable early learning and child care environments where children, families and the workforce feel valued, respected, and can thrive.
Guiding Principles
These guiding principles are shared commitments among Children's Services, early learning and child care sector partners, and community partners working to plan and advance the priorities and actions in this Service System Plan. These principles influence all aspects of decision-making, planning, program, and service delivery.
Knowledge & Culture
We support programs and services that recognize and respect the diverse cultures, languages, backgrounds, and knowledge that each child and family bring, by weaving a philosophy of continuous holistic learning, cultural safety, and inclusivity
Workforce Well-being
We prioritize the well-being of the early learning and child care workforce, recognizing the quality of care is fundamentally tied to the health, satisfaction, and expertise of educators.
Accountability
We act with integrity and transparency, use the best evidence available, and collectively report on progress towards clear, measurable goals to achieve the best outcomes for children and families.

Actions, Outcomes, & Timelines

The Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan 2025–2029 outlines an ambitious vision supported by 55 actions aimed at driving significant system-level change in Ottawa.

Developed in collaboration with the System Planning Advisory Group, Indigenous Early Years Circle and Table Francophone partners, the plan identifies both sector-wide and distinct actions to address the unique needs of three program streams: Main stream, Indigenous-led stream, and French-language stream. This collaborative approach ensures that the actions reflect the priorities expressed by families and community partners, paving the way for meaningful improvements in the next five years.

Main Stream

Priority	Increase equitable access to affordable, high-quality ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Children have equitable access to child care programs, especially in priority neighbourhoods.	Implement reduced child care fees for families in licensed child care in collaboration with child care service providers enrolled in CWELCC.	✓	✓			
	Increase the number of affordable child care spaces for children 0 to 5 years old and optimize access to existing CWELCC-funded child care for priority populations, including persons living in poverty and in underserved neighbourhoods.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Assess need and develop opportunities to increase access to affordable summer care and before-and-after school care for children ages 4 to12 years old with special needs and for children living in low-income households.		✓	✓	✓	
	Support the creation of new ELCC programs, in areas with the greatest need, by leveraging policy and planning mechanisms with other City departments (e.g., Planning, Development and Building Services, Housing and Homelessness Services) and relationships with community organizations.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Review the licensed home child care (LHCC) sector and implement mechanisms to monitor, maintain, and support LHCC options for children and families.	✓	✓			

Priority	Increase equitable access to affordable, high-quality ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Families have access to responsive, high-quality EarlyON programs, close to home.	Conduct an EarlyON system review and implement recommendations to enhance accessibility and cultural responsiveness of high-quality EarlyON services.	✓	✓			

Priority	Strengthen the ELCC workforce					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Early learning and child care workforce have expanded their knowledge and capacity to meet the diverse and complex needs of children and families.	Develop and implement a coordinated professional learning strategy to strengthen the ELCC sector knowledge and capacity on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as inclusive pedagogical practices.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The early learning and child care sector is effective in attracting and retaining qualified RECEs and staff, reducing turnover, and promoting diversity.	Implement local recruitment and retention initiatives, based on the Provincial Workforce Strategy, with a focus on increasing representation within the workforce.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Formalize partnerships with ECE post-secondary institutions, professional colleges and associations to enhance curricula and integration of new graduates into the workforce.			✓	✓	✓
	Identify local workforce challenges and unique local needs to the Province to highlight the impacts of addressing salary inequities and supporting better working conditions for ELCC professionals.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Priority	Reduce systemic inequities and barriers to access and inclusion					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Affordable child care is prioritized for priority populations.	Complete an application and waitlist system review (i.e. CCRAW) and implement enhancements to simplify access, reduce systemic barriers for priority populations, and inform Provincial system modernization.	✓	✓	✓		
	Develop and implement prioritization criteria and processes to support equitable access to affordable child care for priority populations.	✓	✓	✓		
	Align and implement actions in support of anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion, including the implementation of commitments made by Children's Services in various City of Ottawa equity strategies.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
System planning is supported by strengthened relationships and the inclusion of diverse experiences.	Formalize partnerships, foster representation and co-develop solutions with community organizations serving Black and other racialized, low-income and newcomer communities.		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Engage and foster relationships with priority populations, specifically Black and other racialized, low-income and newcomer communities, to deepen understanding of diverse and lived experiences.			✓	✓	✓

Priority	Enhance the ELCC system to better meet the needs of children with special needs and their families					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Families with children with special needs have access to a responsive system that meets their early learning and child care needs.	Assess current Special Needs Resources (SNR) services and work with partners to enhance a coordinated SNR system.	✓	✓			
	Assess local needs required to sustain and enhance support for children with special needs and leverage available funding to respond to unique local needs.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Establish a unified system across all EarlyON centres to support early identification and connection to community resources for children with special needs and their families.		✓	✓	✓	
Early learning and child care workforce have expanded their knowledge and capacity to provide inclusive environments for children with special needs.	Develop and implement a professional learning and capacity building strategy, in collaboration with SNR partners, to increase the capacity of ELCC service providers.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Priority	Improve and simplify how families find and gain entry to ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Families, especially those facing systemic barriers, have the support and knowledge needed to navigate and find early learning and child care programs.	Develop and implement a comprehensive communications and engagement framework to increase family and community knowledge and awareness of ELCC services.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Implement an integrated first point of access with streamlined application forms and processes to simplify access to child care and fee subsidy for families, especially families facing systemic and additional barriers.	✓	✓			
	Coordinate and streamline ELCC system navigation supports for families, including families facing systemic and additional barriers, in collaboration with ELCC and community partners.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Priority	**Enhance the sustainability of ELCC services**					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
ELCC service providers have the knowledge, funding and support to sustain their services.	Implement and sustain a new cost-based funding approach as a foundational model for sustainable child care funding.	✓	✓			
	Develop and implement early intervention supports to enhance the viability of ELCC services and sustain families' access to services.	✓	✓	✓		
	Streamline administrative processes, enhance digital literacy, and build ELCC service providers' capacity to meet administrative requirements in a publicly-funded system.	✓	✓	✓		

Priority	Enhance the use and quality of data					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Collaborative planning and decision making is based on high-quality and comprehensive evidence and data.	Develop a data equity strategy to improve the collection of service data and address data gaps.		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Enhance the quality of data available in administrative systems (e.g. OCCMS, CCRAW).	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Improve data literacy and knowledge sharing among the ELCC sector.			✓	✓	✓
Early learning and child care programs consistently meet quality standards for responsive and inclusive services.	Adopt quality standards and implement a monitoring framework within the ELCC system.		✓	✓	✓	

Indigenous-Led Stream

Priority	Increase equitable access to affordable, high-quality ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Indigenous children have equitable access to child care programs, closer to home.	Increase the number of Indigenous-led affordable child care spaces for Indigenous children 0 to 5 years old in neighbourhoods across the city.	✓	✓			
	Increase access to affordable Indigenous-led summer care and before-and-after school care for Indigenous children 4 to 12 years old.		✓	✓	✓	

Priority	Strengthen the ELCC workforce					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Indigenous-led early learning and child care sector is effective in attracting, training and retaining qualified RECEs and staff.	Develop and implement a coordinated professional learning and workforce strategy aligned with the unique training and workforce needs of the Indigenous-led ELCC sector.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Formalize partnerships with ECE post-secondary institutions, professional colleges, and associations to grow and support the workforce for the Indigenous-led ELCC sector.			✓	✓	✓

Priority	Reduce systemic inequities and barriers to access and inclusion					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Indigenous-specific actions in the Service System Plan are implemented collaboratively and effectively through a trusted and coordinated approach.	Develop and implement a coordinated approach, in partnership with the Indigenous Early Years Circle, for the implementation of the Indigenous-specific actions within the Service System Plan.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Priority	Enhance the ELCC system to better meet the needs of children with special needs and their families					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Indigenous families and children with special needs have access to inclusive environments.	Develop and implement holistic, culturally-appropriate supports for Indigenous families with children with special needs.		✓	✓	✓	✓

Priority	Improve and simplify how families find and gain entry to ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Indigenous families have the support and knowledge needed to navigate, find and apply for Indigenous-led early learning and child care programs.	Develop and implement a communications plan to increase Indigenous families' knowledge of Indigenous-led child care and EarlyON services.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Apply an Indigenous-lens to simplify the fee subsidy application processes and local policies to better respond to the needs of Indigenous families.	✓	✓	✓		
	Enhance Indigenous-led system navigation supports for Indigenous families.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Priority	Nurture Indigenous wellness and community well-being through early learning and child care					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Indigenous families and children are confident and comfortable practicing their cultural practices and language and feel a sense of belonging in ELCC services.	Engage and collaborate with Indigenous families, service providers of Indigenous-led ELCC services, Elders, and knowledge keepers to co-develop, implement, and evaluate Indigenous-led ELCC services.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Identify and support the reductions of barriers to cultural practices in Indigenous-led ELCC settings (i.e. Access to land, sacred fires, smudging, country foods), by collaborating and leveraging relationships with other City departments and community.		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Develop and implement a holistic approach to Indigenous-led family supports in ELCC, focusing on seamless navigation from early childhood through school transitions (0 to 12 years old).		✓	✓	✓	✓

Priority	Enhance the sustainability of ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Indigenous-led ELCC service providers have the knowledge, funding and support to sustain their services.	Assess local needs required to sustain and enhance Indigenous-led ELCC and leverage available funding to meet unique local needs.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Priority	Enhance the use and quality of data					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Indigenous-led early learning and child care programs consistently meet quality standards for responsive and inclusive services.	Adopt quality standards and implement a monitoring framework within Indigenous-led ELCC, to ensure consistent evaluation of high-quality, responsive, and inclusive services.		✓	✓	✓	
A clearer understanding of the demand for affordable child care among older Indigenous children is achieved.	Enhance data collection to monitor demand for affordable child care among Indigenous children 4 to 12 years old.			✓	✓	✓
Indigenous partners have greater autonomy and trust in the use of data, enabling more effective and culturally relevant planning and decision-making.	Develop data collection processes and relationships aligned with Indigenous OCAP principles (ownership, control, access, and possession).			✓	✓	✓

French-Language Stream

Priority	Increase equitable access to affordable, high-quality ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Francophone children have equitable access to French-language child care programs close to home.	Increase the number of affordable French-language child care spaces for Francophone children 0 to 5 years old, in priority neighbourhoods.	✓	✓			
	Develop and implement a strategy, including defining French-language services and Francophone rights holders, in collaboration with the Table Francophone, to ensure Francophone children have priority access.	✓	✓	✓		

Priority	Strengthen the ELCC workforce					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
French-language early learning and child care workforce have expanded their knowledge and capacity to meet the needs of Francophone children and families.	Develop and implement a coordinated system of professional learning to respond to the training needs of the French-language ELCC sector.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
The French-language early learning and child care sector is effective in attracting and retaining qualified RECEs and staff and reducing turnover.	Develop and implement local recruitment and retention initiatives to support the unique workforce needs of the French-language ELCC sector.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Formalize partnerships with ECE post-secondary institutions, professional colleges, and associations to grow and support the workforce for the French-language ELCC sector.			✓	✓	✓

Priority	Reduce systemic inequities and barriers to access and inclusion					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Francophone families can easily navigate and choose French-language child care programs.	Implement improvements to the application and waitlist system (i.e. CCRAW) that will facilitate the search for culturally-relevant French-language ELCC services for Francophone families.		✓	✓		

Priority	**Enhance the ELCC system to better meet the needs of children with special needs and their families**					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Francophone families and children with special needs have equitable access to support services.	Ensure that support services for organizations that include Francophone children with special needs are equitable, proportional, and based on need.	✓	✓	✓		

Priority	Improve and simplify how families find and gain entry to ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
Francophone families have the support and knowledge needed to navigate and find French-language early learning and child care programs.	Develop and implement a communications plan to increase knowledge of French-language child care and EarlyON services.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Coordinate and streamline ELCC system navigation supports for Francophone families to access French-language services.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Priority	Enhance the sustainability of ELCC services					
Outcome	**Actions**	**2025**	**2026**	**2027**	**2028**	**2029**
French-language ELCC service providers have the knowledge, funding and support to sustain their services.	Assess local needs required to sustain and enhance French-language ELCC and leverage available funding to meet unique local needs.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Looking Forward: Pathway to Action

The Child Care and Early Years Service System Plan 2025–2029 sets a clear path for meaningful transformation within Ottawa's early learning and child care system to meet the diverse needs of children families. Designed with flexibility, the plan can evolve alongside the changing needs of families and shifts in Provincial priorities. This adaptability ensures the system remains responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities, maintaining its long-term relevance and impact.

As we move forward, the next steps include:

1. **Implementation of Actions:** Over the next five years, Children's Services will develop annual implementation plans and coordinate the implementation of the actions outlined in the Service System Plan, in collaboration with sector partners.

2. **Ongoing Engagement and Partnerships:** Engagement with families and sector partners will remain central to service system planning, fostering a responsive and inclusive approach to meet community needs.

3. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Children's Services will establish mechanisms to track progress, measure outcomes, and adjust strategies as needed. Regular updates will be shared with the System Planning Advisory Group, Indigenous Early Years Circle, and the Table Francophone for feedback and guidance.

4. **Advancing Equity and Inclusion:** Children's Services will continue to prioritize populations facing barriers, ensuring all children and families have equitable access to high-quality early learning and child care services.

This plan reflects a collaborative and forward-looking commitment to building a stronger, more inclusive early learning and child care system that supports all children's growth, well-being, and potential.

7

Appendices

Appendix A – Acronyms

2SLGBTQQIA+: Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer, Questioning, Intersex and Asexual plus other identities

CanNECD: Canadian Neighbourhoods and Early Child Development Index

CCEY: Child Care and Early Years

CCEYA: Child Care and Early Years Act

CECE: College of Early Childhood Educators

CWELCC: Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care System

ECE: Early Childhood Educator

EDI: Early Development Instrument

EDIB: Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging

EDU: Ontario Ministry of Education

ELCC: Early Learning and Child Care

IEYC: Indigenous Early Years Circle

JK/SK: Junior Kindergarten/Senior Kindergarten

LHCC: Licensed Home Child Care

OCAP: Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession

OCCMS: Ontario Child Care Management System

RECE: Registered Early Childhood Educator

SNR: Special Needs Resourcing

SPAG: System Planning Advisory Group

SSM: Service System Manager

Appendix B – Service Areas & Neighbourhoods

Service Area	Neighbourhoods	
West	• Beaverbrook/Marchwood • Bridlewood • Glen Cairn • Stittsville	• Katimavik/Hazeldean • South March • Constance Bay/Dunrobin • Carp/Fitzroy/Kinburn
Central West	• Carlington • Copeland • Nepean East • Nepean Central	• Bayshore/Crystal Bay • Pinecrest/Queensway • Bells Corners
South	• Chapman Mills/Rideau Crest • Old Barrhaven • Half Moon Bay/Stonebridge	• Metcalfe/Osgoode/Greely • Rideau • Goulbourn/Munster/Richmond
Central	• Carleton Heights • Centretown • Dalhousie • Glebe	• Ottawa West • Westboro • Ottawa South

Service Area	Neighbourhoods	
Central East	• Cyrville • Lower Town • New Edinburgh/Rockcliffe Park • Ottawa East/Sandy Hill	• Ottawa North East • Overbrook • Vanier • Beacon Hill
Central South	• Alta Vista • Blossom Park • Clementine/Riverside Park • Riverside South	• Carlsbad Springs/Findlay Creek • Hunt Club East • Hunt Club West • Hawthorne Meadows/Riverview
East	• Blackburn Hamlet/Mer Bleue • Chatelaine/Convent Glen • Cumberland/Navan/Vars	• Portobello South • Orléans South • Cardinal Creek/Fallingbrook • Queenswood Heights

Appendix C – Endnotes and Sources

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Children's Services
Services à l'enfance

To reach Children's Services:

Email: ChildrensServices@ottawa.ca

For information about licensed child care, including registering for child care or applying for a child care fee subsidy:

Visit ottawa.ca/childcare

Call 3-1-1

For information about EarlyON programs and services, including free playgroups for children ages 0 to 6 years old and workshops for parents:

Visit ottawa.ca/earlyon