

Toronto's Early Years and Child Care Service Plan, 2025-2030

Date: June 24, 2025

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Children's Services

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report seeks approval of Toronto's Early Years and Child Care Service Plan, 2025-2030 ("Service Plan"). The Service Plan guides Toronto's approach, in collaboration with sector partners, to planning and managing the early years and child care system over the next five years.

As the early years and child care sector responds to new realities resulting from the implementation of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system and changes to the socioeconomic landscape, the Service Plan provides a responsive, strategic framework with clear actions to support the sector as it navigates these changes. The Service Plan was developed through comprehensive stakeholder engagement involving families, early years and child care staff, service providers and operators, school boards, and community organizations, including Indigenous leaders in the sector. This ensures that the Service Plan is grounded in the lived realities and insights of Toronto's diverse families, whose experiences are at the heart of this work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Children's Services recommends that:

1. City Council direct the General Manager, Children's Services to follow guidance from local Indigenous-led organizations and associations to co-develop and implement an Indigenous-led Early Years and Child Care Service Plan, ensuring clear roles in shared decision-making, implementation, and ongoing oversight.
2. City Council request the Province of Ontario and Government of Canada to recognize Indigenous rights, governance systems, and holistic approaches to early learning and child care and ensure legislation, policy, and funding frameworks respond accordingly.

3. City Council approve Toronto's Early Years and Child Care Service Plan 2025-2030, included as Attachment 1 to this report.
4. City Council instruct the General Manager, Children's Services, to forward the approved Service Plan to the Ministry of Education and Toronto school boards for their information and reference.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial implications resulting from the recommendations included in this report. The 2025-2030 Service Plan will guide Children's Services in the allocation of resources and the planning and delivery of services over the next five years.

The co-development of an Indigenous-led Early Years and Child Care Service Plan will be supported through existing resources approved through the 2025 Operating Budget for Children's Services.

Successful implementation and achievement of the 2025-2030 Service Plan will depend on sufficient, ongoing, and predictable funding from provincial and federal levels of government.

Any financial impacts arising from actions undertaken to advance the identified Strategic Priorities in the 2025-2030 Service Plan will be treated as a new investment or enhancement to an existing program to be considered against other City's competing priorities during future year budget processes, as required.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

EQUITY IMPACT

The 2025–2030 Service Plan is a significant step toward building a more equitable, inclusive, and accessible early years and child care system. It is grounded in Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework for the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care system and the City's Corporate Strategies, including the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism (CABR), Two-Spirit, Trans, and Non-Binary (2STNB) Access Plan, the Multi-Year Accessibility Plan, Poverty Reduction Strategy, Newcomer Strategy, and the Data for Equity Strategy, among others.

An initial equity assessment was informed by more than 4,000 parents and caregivers, staff, supervisors, operators, and sector leaders. This included those not currently accessing licensed care; Indigenous, Black, racialized, newcomer, 2SLGBTQ+ and low-income families; and families of children with disabilities. This engagement, along with internal data and sector analysis, identified key equity gaps, including inequities in

accessing child care, barriers to inclusion for children with disabilities, and gaps in supporting the sector's workforce, which is predominantly composed of women. These findings helped to shape the Service Plan's priorities and actions in responding to long-standing inequities in the system by moving towards an equitable, high-quality, affordable, flexible, and inclusive early years and child care system in Toronto.

The Service Plan supports Indigenous self-determination by proposing the co-development of an Indigenous Service Plan in partnership with Indigenous communities in Toronto. It also responds to socio-demographic factors shaping access and addresses equity gaps through targeted growth to underserved areas, culturally responsive and inclusive programming, and improved system navigation. The Service Plan responds to the impacts of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care system, including emerging issues surrounding access, affordability, and availability. The Service Plan includes system-level indicators and a commitment to equity-focused monitoring and evaluation, supported by the City's Data for Equity Strategy. The equity impact analysis will continue through implementation to assess progress, revisit priorities, and ensure accountability and responsiveness to the needs of children and families.

DECISION HISTORY

On December 17 and 18, 2024, City Council requested the General Manager, Children's Services in consultation with the Chair, Economic and Community Development Committee to convene a roundtable meeting of Indigenous partners; City and School Board staff; organizations representing families, educators, and supervisors; unions; experts, and other community stakeholders and partners for the purpose of information sharing and community advocacy in support of a high-quality, affordable and sustainable child care system in Toronto; as well as make submissions to the Ministry of Education to provide Toronto's position on the renewed Canada-Ontario Action Plan and child care funding in the 2025 provincial budget.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EC17.5>

On May 5, 6 and 7, 2015, City Council adopted the Children's Services' 2015-2019 Service Plan and requested the General Manager, Children's Services to develop a multi-year growth strategy for the City of Toronto child care system that would be consistent with Service Plan principles.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2015.CD3.3>

On May 11 and 12, 2010, City Council approved the 2010-2014 Child Care Service Plan and instructed the General Manager, Children's Services to use the Plan to "direct the planning, development, management and delivery of programs in a system of services for children during the next five years.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2010.CD32.3>

COMMENTS

About the Service Plan

As the service system manager, Children's Services is responsible for planning, managing, and overseeing a continuum of licensed early years and child care programs and services for children up to 12 years of age. This role includes addressing equity gaps, providing strategic advice for system-level change, and ensuring that the most underserved communities have access to quality services. Children's Services continues to work towards a vision of an accessible system that supports healthy child development and family well-being while considering the key factors affecting children and their families in Toronto.

Through the *Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA)*, 2014, all service system managers are required to develop and implement service plans in consultation with school boards and other sector partners. These plans are meant to address key priorities in alignment with provincial guidance but tailored to suit local community needs. Per provincial direction, the Service Plan also outlines the City's Directed Growth Plan to support the implementation of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care system in Toronto. The development of service plans has been part of Children's Services' practice since 1992.

Toronto's Early Years and Child Care Service Plan 2025-2030 outlines strategic priorities and actions aimed at addressing the growing demand for high quality services, supporting the workforce, improving service delivery, and meeting the diverse needs of the population to ensure children and families have the supports they need to thrive. These priorities continue to build on the 2015-2019 Service Plan, ensuring continuity while also responding to current challenges that impact multiple facets of the early years and child care sector. The priorities are data-informed and reflect findings from community engagement. They also represent ambitious long-term outcomes for the sector.

In 2018 and 2019, Children's Services held engagement sessions with children and families, early years and child care operators, school boards, and the workforce to inform the development of the Service Plan. Following this engagement, the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement led to a shift in operational priorities. Like many other service system managers, work on the Service Plan was paused to reallocate resources towards emergency child care, COVID-19 recovery, and CWELCC implementation. The information gathered in the 2018 and 2019 consultations were valuable in identifying challenges and opportunities and new engagement was conducted to build on previous findings and to ensure the Service Plan reflected evolving family needs, changing policy directions, and operator and agency experiences given the significant impacts to the sector.

Service Plan development also aligns with the City of Toronto's commitments to reconciliation, equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (REDIA), and Ontario's

Access and Inclusion Framework. It is guided by several corporate strategies that collectively seek to dismantle systemic barriers and create a more accessible, responsive, and inclusive service system. These include the Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism (CABR), Two-Spirit, Trans, and Non-Binary (2STNB) Youth Access Plan, the Multi-Year Accessibility Plan, Poverty Reduction Strategy, Newcomer Strategy, and the Data for Equity Strategy, among others. Many of these corporate strategies also recognize the important role of early years and child care in advancing equity, reducing poverty, supporting the social determinants of health, and improving child and family well-being. They emphasize the importance of inclusive, culturally responsive programming, representation, and centring the voices of Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, persons with disabilities, newcomer, and additional equity-denied communities.

Service Plan Principles

The development and implementation of the Service Plan is guided by a set of eight principles. These principles convey the values that have underpinned this work at Children's Services. They are referenced in the design and decision-making for the Service Plan and will support implementation of the strategic priorities and actions. The principles are as follows:

- **Truth, Reconciliation, and Justice:** Respect Indigenous communities' inherent right to self-determination and advance commitments to Truth, Reconciliation and Justice.
- **Inclusive:** Build safe and welcoming spaces for families, with attention to supporting Indigenous, Black, and equity-denied communities.
- **Child-centred:** Prioritize positive child and family outcomes.
- **Equitable:** Instil equity in the planning and delivery of all programs and services.
- **Responsible:** Act as responsible, accountable, and transparent stewards of public funds and resources.
- **Evidence-informed:** Embed evidence- and data-informed approaches to decision-making, monitoring, and evaluation.
- **Collaborative:** Foster partnerships and collaboration across the continuum of early years and child care services.
- **Innovative:** Strive for excellence in the early years and child care sector and respond to emerging needs.

Key Factors Impacting Early Years and Child Care in Toronto

Population changes, shifting labour markets, the introduction of CWELCC, and many other interconnected factors all act as key drivers in the planning and management of the early years and child care system in Toronto. As demands on the sector and its workforce grow, there is a unique opportunity for system transformation and policy change to address workforce shortages, strengthen employment equity in the sector, and better support children and families from all backgrounds.

Some of the key factors that the Service Plan expands on and addresses, include:

- the importance of ensuring services for Indigenous children and families are based on self-determination;

- addressing instability caused by rising fees and declining spaces in the school age-system;
- recognizing that high costs of living and rates of poverty in Toronto mean that many families still need financial support with child care costs;
- understanding that precarious work and the rise of non-standard working hours require flexible hours of operation;
- recognizing that families have varying preferences for early years services and a particular desire for culturally appropriate and responsive services;
- supporting operators in navigating the uncertainty and instability that results from provincial changes to CWELCC guidelines and funding;
- addressing variability in quality across the child care system with the inclusion of for-profit operators in CWELCC expansion to ensure all families have access to high-quality care;
- promoting consistent experiences between families in receipt of fee subsidy and those paying CWELCC-reduced fees;
- advocating for improved wages and benefits to address recruitment and retention challenges in a workforce in urgent need of support;
- addressing an increased need to support inclusion for children with extra support needs and disabilities; and
- recognizing that the demand for child care in Toronto exceeds the supply.

Attachment 2 of this report provides further information on these key drivers within Toronto.

Development of the Service Plan

The engagement and research process were motivated by the guiding principles. Outreach for the Service Plan included engagement with families, service providers, and system partners, through a combination of surveys, focus groups, and consultation discussions.

With the support of various community organizations, engagement intentionally sought to hear from Indigenous, Black, Francophone, newcomer, undocumented, 2SLGBTQ+, and low-income parents and caregivers, as well as families of children with disabilities. Outreach focused on parents and caregivers of children aged 0 to 12 and included families using early years and child care services and those currently not accessing programs and services.

In addition, sector engagement included Indigenous-led organizations serving children and families, early years and child care staff, child care supervisors and operators, English- and French-language Toronto school boards, licensed home child care agencies, Every Child Belongs service providers, CWELCC Roundtable participants, and Children's Services staff. In total, over 4,000 people provided input at more than 28 different engagement opportunities over the course of the Service Plan development process.

Families, service providers, and partners named immediate and long-term opportunities and challenges for early years and child care in Toronto. The lessons learned from the

engagement process were vital to the development of the Service Plan strategic priorities and actions.

The strategic priorities were also informed by an environmental scan and analysis of sector research, census information, and internal data. This included a review of 29 recent Indigenous-led reports outlining actions and recommendations on early years and child care that had been previously called for by Indigenous communities. Key reports reviewed included the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Final Report, The Journey Together, and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, along with reports produced by local Indigenous communities.

Detailed findings of the engagement process and research analysis can be found in Attachment 2.

Strategic Priorities

The 2025-2030 Service Plan strategic priorities respond to important challenges that impact the early years and child care system in Toronto. They represent long-term objectives that address sector-wide needs. Through the service planning process, Children's Services has identified 7 strategic priorities and 47 accompanying actions. The strategic priorities are as follows:

1. Advance self-determination with Indigenous organizations and families in the early years and child care sector.

Indigenous parents, caregivers, and sector partners were engaged in the Service Plan and their insights strongly reflected long-standing research and community priorities. Indigenous sector leaders identified three key areas for immediate action: (1) revitalizing Indigenous languages through culturally grounded curricula, (2) ensuring safe, affirming spaces and programming for Two-Spirit children and families, and (3) addressing gaps in culturally specific, land-based, intergenerational programming for children aged 6–12.

Indigenous parents and caregivers have emphasized the importance of culturally specific programs led by Indigenous Peoples spanning multiple generations. They have called for greater representation, holistic family support, and accessible services, including transportation to overcome geographic barriers. Their voices highlight an ongoing lack of inclusion and a pressing need for culturally relevant services.

All levels of government must uphold Indigenous self-determination. Urban Indigenous service providers in Toronto have emphasized that Indigenous-led planning is essential for creating early years and child care systems that reflect their values, languages, and ways of knowing and being. A critical step forward is the creation of an Indigenous-led Service Plan for early years and child care in Toronto. This plan is a sovereign, community-defined framework essential to meaningful and lasting early years and child care transformation.

2. Expand the early years and child care system to meet the needs of children and their families.

This priority focuses on growing the system in an equitable way while focusing on expansion through the public and not-for-profit sector. This priority also encompasses increasing the availability of early years and child care services across the city, including EarlyON and Every Child Belongs services, especially in underserved areas.

3. Remove barriers to accessing child care and early years services.

Families continue to face systemic barriers to accessing early years and child care services. To address this, responses need to address the cost of care and enhancing culturally responsive service navigation supports for families, particularly lone parent, Black, newcomer, refugee, and Francophone households.

4. Support a thriving early years and child care workforce.

The early years and child care system relies on a well-supported workforce. Accordingly, this priority highlights the critical need for increased wages, public recognition, professional development opportunities, recruitment and retention supports, and positive working conditions for the workforce.

5. Champion a high-quality and well-managed early years and child care system.

This priority addresses the fundamental importance of program quality to child development and supporting clear and data-driven system planning. Quality can include safe and supportive learning environments, engaging learning experiences, and strong family and community connections. A high-quality system also depends on clear standards, policy frameworks, and data to advance evidence-informed planning. This priority also identifies the Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI) as a valuable tool that supports continuous quality improvement.

6. Enhance inclusion in the early years and child care sector for children, families, and staff.

Ensuring high quality inclusive experiences in programs and throughout the system remains a priority. It includes creating experiences of inclusion and belonging for all children and families, with an intentional focus on children with disabilities as well as Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, and Francophone children and families. This priority also aims to create a sense of belonging for staff in the sector, celebrating diversity among operators, and supporting diverse service providers, who in turn can deliver safe, inclusive, and culturally relevant services and learning environments.

7. Connect children and their families with essential support services.

Supporting children and their families also involves connections to other essential human services. In response, this priority is about advancing service integration and connecting families with programs and services to address diverse and holistic child and family needs. These supports encompass social determinants of health such as quality education, economic stability, food security, housing stability, community engagement, and culturally safe health care.

Implementation, Progress Monitoring, and Evaluation

Children's Services is committed to working with Indigenous partners, operators, agencies, English and French school boards, advocates, families, post-secondary institutions, other City divisions, and other sector and human services partners in developing implementation plans. These implementation plans will detail the deliverables and timelines associated with strategic actions over the term of the Service Plan. Successful implementation and achievement of the strategic actions will depend on sufficient, ongoing, and predictable funding from provincial and federal levels of government.

The Service Plan introduces select indicators designed to track systems-level trends related to the strategic priorities and their outcomes. By monitoring key headline indicators, Children's Services will be able to detect emerging issues in a timely manner, allowing for the appropriate dedication of resources to areas of need. Well-designed evaluations will also help assess the unique impacts of select policy and program changes on specific outcomes, separate from wider economic, political, and sector-level forces.

Monitoring and evaluation activities will approach data collection and analysis in a responsible and equity-focused manner, being mindful of the historic and current impacts of sociodemographic data collection and other research on communities made vulnerable by systemic and institutional oppression.

Moving Forward

This Service Plan sets a path forward for Children's Services, working together with sector partners, families, and communities to grow and support an early years and child care system that is inclusive, accessible, and responsive to current and future needs. Grounded in commitments to reconciliation, equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, quality, expansion, workforce wellbeing, and family support, the Service Plan aligns with key City of Toronto corporate strategies and reflects our collective responsibility to nurture a system where every child and family can thrive.

CONTACT

Sherry Kamali
Director, Service System Planning & Policy Development
Toronto Children's Services
Tel. 416-392-5605
Email sherry.kamali@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE



Shanley McNamee
General Manager, Toronto Children's Services

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Toronto Early Years and Child Care Service Plan 2025-2030
Attachment 2: Community Engagement, Literature Review, and Environmental Scan
Summary