

Early Local Registration Expansion Update and Outcomes

Date: April 20, 2026

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Parks and Recreation

Wards: All

SUMMARY

Early Local Registration (ELR) was directed by Toronto City Council in October 2024 to improve local access to high-demand, free registered recreation programs at the City's Free Centres, particularly for residents living nearby and in lower-income neighbourhoods. ELR allows eligible residents living within a defined catchment area near a Free Centre to register for programs one week in advance of general registration.

Parks and Recreation implemented ELR using a phased approach beginning in Summer 2025, initially at six Free Centre locations, with gradual expansion over successive registration sessions. ELR will be fully implemented at all 37 Free Centre locations with registered programming by Fall 2026.

Implementation of ELR has been supported by extensive community and Councillor engagement, local outreach, and targeted promotion. Over the past year, more than 3,600 residents have been directly engaged through in-person, virtual, and pop-up sessions, alongside hyper-local communications and partnership with community agencies and City divisions.

ELR is guided by a data-driven program design and ongoing evaluation. Findings to date indicate that ELR has improved access to registered programs for local residents and residents from lower-income areas at participating Free Centres, while resulting in an expected reduction in access for some non-local clients. The impacts of this displacement have been closely monitored and mitigation measures, including individualized client support, promotion of the Welcome Policy, and service planning adjustments where possible, have been implemented to help address identified challenges.

The purpose of this report is to provide City Council with an update on the implementation of Early Local Registration, summarize evaluation findings and

outcomes to date, and outline the approved sustainment approach to support the ongoing delivery of the program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Parks and Recreation recommends that:

1. The Economic and Community Development Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Funding to support the expansion and sustainment of ELR was approved through the City's 2026 budget process. This includes \$2.18 million in 2026, \$0.85 million in 2027, and \$0.70 million in 2028, for a total investment of \$3.73 million over the 2026–2028 period. This funding supports the full implementation of ELR across all 37 Free Centre locations with registered programming.

Beginning 2029 and onward, ongoing sustainment costs are estimated at \$0.70 million annually. These costs would be requested through the 2029 Operating Budget submission, subject to Council approval, to ensure continued support for staffing, outreach and promotion, communications, technology and system support, and site-level operational support necessary to maintain the successful delivery of the Early Local Registration initiative.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact section.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The Parks and Recreation Division is committed to advancing the principles of inclusion, equity, and accessibility, and to improving quality of life for Toronto residents through the provision of recreation programs and services that are affordable and responsive to community need.

Early Local Registration (ELR) was designed to address long-standing access challenges experienced by residents living near Free Centres, particularly in lower-income neighbourhoods, where high demand for free registered programs has historically limited local participation.

Evaluation findings to date indicate that ELR has contributed to a higher proportion of registration by local residents and residents from lower-income areas at Free Centres. At the same time, ELR has resulted in reduced access for some non-local clients, which has equity implications that are being actively monitored and addressed.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on October 9 and 10, 2024, Toronto City Council provided direction to the Parks & Recreation Division to address local registration barriers in lower income neighbourhoods by developing a data-driven, community supports-based approach to implement ELR at all 37 Free Centres and to report to the Economic and Community Development Committee by the second quarter of 2026 on program outcomes and resources to sustain the model.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MM22.18>

COMMENTS

Background:

Parks and Recreation (PR) Division aims to reduce financial barriers to recreation for low-income Torontonians through a cohesive, integrated approach. This includes the designation of Free Centres in areas of the City with higher concentrations of low-income residents, as well as Welcome Policy, an application-based recreation fee subsidy that can be used by eligible residents towards the cost of all paid registered recreation programs, memberships and multi-use passes at paid locations.

Free Centres consistently experience high demand for registered programs, and some local communities have historically faced challenges accessing available spaces. In response, Toronto City Council directed PR to address local registration barriers in lower-income neighbourhoods by implementing Early Local Registration (ELR) at the City's Free Centres.

ELR provides eligible residents living within a defined local catchment area the opportunity to register for programs at their local Free Centre one week prior to general registration.

Program Implementation:

Phased Implementation

Early Local Registration was implemented using a phased approach, beginning with six Free Centre locations for Summer 2025 registration and expanding to 10 locations for Winter 2026. Further expansion occurred during Spring 2026 and CampTO registration, ensuring onboarding of all Free Centre locations offering summer camp. All Free Centre locations with registered programming (37) will be fully onboarded by Fall 2026 registration.

Program Model

ELR leverages the City's registration and booking system to enable eligible residents to register one week in advance of general registration. A web-based address lookup tool was developed to help residents determine their eligibility for ELR through toronto.ca.

Clients may register using their preferred method: online, in person, or by telephone. Drop-in programs are excluded from ELR, as are certain program types including Adapted and Inclusive Services, After-School Recreation Care, Aquatic Leadership programs, and specific pre-existing local initiatives for swimming and hockey.

Eligibility Catchment Areas:

Eligibility catchment areas were established using a consistent, data-informed approach across all Free Centre locations. Population size was the primary driver, with a target catchment of approximately 34,000 residents, aligned with the average provision target in the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan. The approach also considered physical and natural barriers such as arterial roads, ravines, waterways, and travel corridors and prioritized nearby lower-income areas and community or subsidized housing.

Community and Councillor Engagement:

An extensive community-based public engagement process supported the phased implementation of ELR over the past year. Approximately 3,600 residents have been directly engaged through in-person meetings, virtual sessions, and pop-up activities.

Engagement tactics included social media, web, email, and print communications. The “Hey Neighbour” campaign applied a hyper-local outreach approach, focusing on awareness at the neighbourhood level. Targeted engagement was also undertaken with key community stakeholders, local schools, agencies and City divisions, including Toronto Community Housing, Toronto Public Library, Social Development, Employment and Social Services, and Children’s Services.

The ELR project team engaged all 18 Councillors representing wards with Free Centre locations. Councillor engagement included briefings on the program model, review of proposed catchment areas, and ongoing updates at each registration cycle. Resources were also developed to support local issues management.

Evaluation and Findings:

The ELR program is guided by a data-driven, evidence-based design and evaluation framework. The primary objectives of ELR are to improve access to free registered recreation programs for local residents and residents from lower-income areas. The evaluation also examined other potential outcomes, including displacement of non-local clients.

A multi-method evaluation approach was used, incorporating registration data analysis, client experience surveys, and focus groups with clients and staff. A detailed evaluation report is included as Attachment 1.

While evaluation occurs after each registration cycle, this report focuses on Spring 2026, when most Free Centres (24) were onboarded to ELR. CampTO outcomes are not included, as the summer camp season has not yet occurred.

Evaluation findings indicate that ELR has improved access for local residents and residents from lower-income areas. In Spring 2026, the proportion of local registered clients at ELR Free Centres increased from 36 per cent to 65 per cent, while registrations by residents from lower-income areas increased from 57 per cent to 65 per cent.

As expected, registrations by non-local clients declined from 63 per cent to 35 per cent, reflecting the early filling of program spaces by eligible local residents during the ELR period. While some non-local clients were displaced from Free Centres, non-local clients who previously attended ELR centres returned to City-wide recreation programs at rates comparable to those observed prior to ELR implementation. This indicates that many displaced non-local clients registered at paid City recreation centres instead, rather than leaving City programs. Survey feedback indicates that some displaced clients experienced impacts such as increased travel distance, affordability challenges, reduced access to preferred activities, and a loss of familiarity.

Awareness and satisfaction levels varied by eligibility status. Most local clients were aware of ELR (84 per cent), and most were satisfied with the program (78 per cent). Awareness and satisfaction were lower among non-local clients (74 per cent and eight per cent, respectively). Support for ELR was strongly linked to eligibility, with 89 per cent of local clients expressing support compared to 29 per cent of non-local clients. A recent City-wide recreation survey found that 54 per cent of respondents overall support the concept of Early Local Registration.

Response to Challenges:

Displacement

Parks and Recreation has provided direct, one-on-one support to clients affected by displacement, including assistance identifying alternative program opportunities at nearby locations. Welcome Policy has been actively promoted to support access to programs at paid centres for eligible residents. In addition, virtual registration preparation sessions were offered at each registration cycle to help residents navigate the registration and booking system.

To address ongoing demand at Free Centres, local service planning efforts have increased program capacity where possible, through additional drop-in opportunities, expanded registered programs, and increased program sizes, helping to mitigate displacement pressures.

Address Change

ELR is designed to provide priority access to residents in a designated catchment area. As a result, address changes to client accounts have been closely monitored as part of the evaluation. Following the rollout and expansion of the online eligibility lookup tool, clients changing their postal code into ELR catchments had a relatively minor impact on participation in the program at most locations. However, at nine ELR Free Centres, at least 10 per cent of local registered clients recently changed their postal code into the catchment area, which is higher than would be expected based on normal household moves alone.

This pattern suggests that some clients may have changed address information to access ELR, rather than because of a recent change in residence. To protect the integrity of the program while maintaining a client-centred approach, the ELR team introduced additional safeguards in Spring 2026.

Clients with a high frequency of address changes were proactively contacted to validate information and to provide clear education about ELR eligibility requirements. In parallel, Parks and Recreation is reviewing options for the registration and booking system to further limit self-serve address changes, while ensuring that legitimate address updates can continue to be accommodated. These measures are intended to support fair and consistent application of ELR, reinforce public confidence in the program, and ensure that early access is reserved for residents the program is designed to serve.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

Early Local Registration was implemented in Summer 2025 and expanded through a phased approach in 2026, resulting in full onboarding of all 37 Free Centre locations with registered programming by Fall 2026. Evaluation findings to date indicate that ELR has improved access to free registered programs for local and lower-income residents, while highlighting issues requiring ongoing monitoring and mitigation.

A sustainment plan is in place to ensure continued support for staffing, outreach and promotion, communications, technology support, issues management, and site-level operations.

As directed through Council-approved policy related to Free Centre expansion, Parks and Recreation will review Free Centre locations every five years using updated Census data to ensure continued relevance and fairness. The next review will occur in late 2027 when 2026 Census income data is available. Catchment areas will also be reviewed at that time to reflect changes in population and growth and align with the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan.

CONTACT

Aydin Sarrafzadeh, Director, Community Recreation, Parks and Recreation, 416-392-7252, Aydin.Sarrafzadeh@toronto.ca

Liz Corson, Interim Manager, Research and Analytics Unit, Policy and Strategic Planning, Parks and Recreation, 416-716-6916, Liz.Corson@toronto.ca

Cheryl MacDonald, Project Director, Strategic Initiatives and Programs, Business and Technology Transformation, Parks and Recreation, 416-873-6086, Cheryl.MacDonald@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Terry Ricketts
General Manager, Parks and Recreation

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Interim Evaluation Report for Early Local Registration