

# Interim Evaluation Report for Early Local Registration

Policy and Strategic Planning  
Parks and Recreation Division

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# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In response to City Council direction, Parks and Recreation implemented Early Local Registration (ELR) at the City's free community recreation centres (Free Centres) to address local registration barriers in lower income neighbourhoods. Free Centres are designated as such because of a high proportion of lower-income residents living in the surrounding area. ELR allows people living in a designated catchment area surrounding Free Centres to register for programs at their local centre one week before other residents. The ELR program is guided by data-driven, evidence-based design and ongoing evaluation. This report documents findings from the evaluation of ELR to date. It focuses on the Spring 2026 registration session when 24 Free Centres had been onboarded to the ELR program.

## Key Findings from the Spring Evaluation

**Local and lower-income participation in recreation:** Overall, ELR successfully enhanced access to free recreation programs for local residents, defined as those living in the Free Centre catchment area, and residents from lower-income areas. In Spring 2026, local registered clients at ELR Free Centres increased from 36 to 65 per cent overall. Clients from lower-income areas increased from 57 to 65 per cent overall.

**Non-local participation in recreation:** The number of clients registered at ELR Free Centres who live outside of the catchment areas (i.e. non-local residents) declined from 63 to 35 per cent in Spring 2026. This decline can be attributed to programs filling with local clients through ELR in the week ahead of general registration.

While displaced non-local clients had to look elsewhere for recreation programs, non-local clients who previously attended ELR Free Centres returned to City-wide programs at the same rate as before ELR. This indicates that many displaced non-local clients registered at paid City recreation centres instead, rather than leaving City programs. Survey findings indicate that displaced non-local clients who registered elsewhere were still impacted in several ways including the need to travel further, affordability challenges, a lack of preferred programs, and a loss of familiarity and sense of community.

**Implementation considerations:** 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. Clients changing their postal codes into ELR catchments had a relatively minor impact on participation in the program at most locations. However, at 9 ELR Free Centres, at least 10 per cent of local registrants had changed their postal code recently. This is higher than would be expected based on normal household moves alone.

Most local clients were aware of ELR (84 per cent) and satisfied with the program (78 per cent). Awareness and satisfaction were lower among non-local clients (74 and 8 per cent, respectively). General support for ELR was correlated with eligibility: 89 and 29 per cent of local and non-local clients are supportive of the program, respectively. Direct feedback from clients reflected this division: many local clients were thrilled with having the opportunity to register early at their local Free Centre, whereas most of those who were not eligible felt that the program was unfair. Across the City, 54 per cent of clients support the idea of ELR.

## 2 EVALUATION SCOPE AND METHODS

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ELR aims to improve access to free registered recreation programs for local and lower-income residents. These objectives comprise the primary indicators of success for the evaluation. The evaluation also explored other potential outcomes, including displacement of clients who didn't qualify, and considerations for implementation. The evaluation integrated data from several sources:

1. ACTIVENet and CLASS Registration and Booking Systems
2. T1FF Tax File for census tract-level prevalence of lower-income individuals
3. Client experience surveys
4. Discussions with clients and staff, feedback from emails, community meetings and other ELR events

Results were analyzed overall (i.e., data was aggregated across ELR Free Centres), and for each centre individually where available. This interim report focuses primarily on overall findings but identifies notable centre-specific results where relevant.

A wide range of indicators using registration data were analyzed. To measure the impact of ELR, indicators were compared with baseline data from the same seasons in years prior to the introduction of ELR. This report focuses on Spring 2026 registration data as most Free Centres (24) had been onboarded to ELR by this time and results have not differed significantly between seasons.

Online client surveys gathered insight on how clients experienced and were impacted by ELR. A total of 5,434 respondents completed an ELR experience survey and responses were aggregated across the surveys. Data from two other Parks and Recreation surveys was also incorporated into this evaluation.

## 3 SPRING EVALUATION FINDINGS

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### 3.1 LOCAL AND LOWER-INCOME PARTICIPATION IN RECREATION

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In Spring 2026, local registered clients at ELR Free Centres increased from 36 to 65 per cent overall and at all 24 sites. Local registered clients increased across all activity types and age groups. ELR enhanced the likelihood of local clients registering for programs with friends.

Registered clients from lower-income areas increased from 57 to 65 per cent overall in Spring 2026 and increased or stayed the same at all but 1 ELR site. A decline (-7 percentage points) in clients from lower-income areas occurred at one site, likely related to the mixed-income community surrounding it.

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#### Local access to recreation

Across the 24 ELR Free Centres, the proportion of registrants from the local community increased from 36 to 65 per cent from Spring 2025 to Spring 2026 (Figure 1). Local registered clients increased at all ELR sites and across all activity types and age groups. Skate and swim programs saw the most growth in local clients. Early years and leadership programs had the smallest increase. Local registered clients in adult and children's programs increased substantially, while older adult programs saw a smaller increase.

Eighty-seven per cent of local survey respondents said that visiting their local ELR Free Centre was an important part of their social wellbeing. Through increasing local registration at these Free Centres, ELR enhanced local access to these benefits. For example, a local survey respondent said: *"It is so helpful because my kids were able to meet with friends from their school for the very first time"*. Another respondent described how: *"it was great for us and friends because now we all got the opportunity to enroll together."* Additional survey results further support these statements: 59 per cent of local respondents said that most of the friends they planned to attend programs with were able to register compared to 34 per cent of non-local clients. Survey results indicate that there was no change in broad measures of community connectedness at the six original ELR Free Centres. However, community connectedness develops gradually and can take a long time to build. As such, we may not expect to see meaningful changes so soon after the program's implementation.

There were approximately 3,000 more clients who live in the catchment areas registered for City-wide programs after ELR. This indicates that many local clients would not have been able to access City recreation programs without ELR and are now receiving the associated health and wellbeing benefits. For example, a local survey respondent said: *"I am caregiver for my elderly mother and am unable to leave her unattended for more than an hour, so being able to access fitness classes close to home is essential. I am also a senior with limited income, so being able to access free programs is also important. Without early registration, I doubt I would have been able to attend."* Another local respondent described: *"It gave an opportunity for us to get into the programs at a center close to home. I would not have enrolled if I wasn't able to get a spot here because my child is so young and I cannot travel far. It gave us an opportunity to participate in the program"*.

Figure 1: Change in the number of registrations at ELR Free Centres from each Toronto Census tract after implementing ELR (Spring 2025 versus 2026).

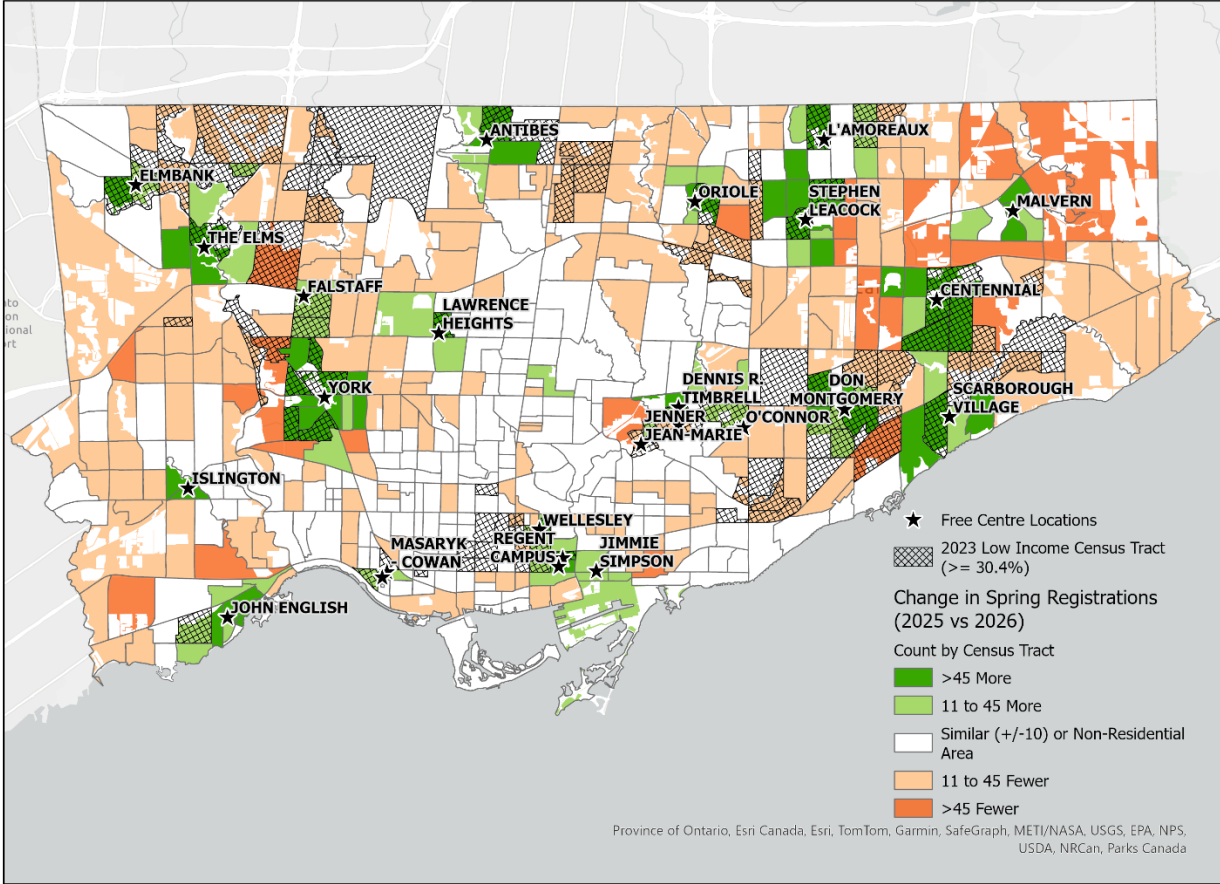


Figure 1 shows change in the number of registrations at ELR Free Centres between Spring 2025 (before ELR) and Spring 2026 (after ELR) across the city. It illustrates that ELR increased local participation across all ELR sites. The dark green areas on the map, which include or are nearby to ELR Free Centres, had an increase of more than 45 registrations in 2026, and the light green areas had an increase of between 11 and 45 registrations. Conversely, the dark orange areas, which are farther away from ELR Free Centres, had a decrease of 45 or more registrants in 2026, and the light orange areas had a decrease of between 11 and 45 registrants. The map also shows that many of the dark green areas where there was an increase in participation are also low-income areas.

**Access to recreation for lower-income residents**

Registered clients from lower-income areas increased from 57 to 65 per cent from Spring 2025 to Spring 2026 across the 24 ELR Free Centres. Registered clients from lower-income areas increased by more than 5 percentage points at 15 sites. A decline occurred at 1 site, Jimmie Simpson Recreation Centre (-7 percentage points), likely linked to this centre being in a more mixed income community.

Overall, registered clients from *local* lower-income areas increased by 22 percentage points at ELR Free Centres in Spring 2026. At the same time, registered clients from *non-local* lower-income areas declined by 14 percentage points at ELR sites. As such, increases in clients from local lower-income areas compensated for the loss of clients from non-local lower-income areas.

## 3.2 NON-LOCAL PARTICIPATION IN RECREATION

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In Spring 2026, non-local clients registered at ELR Free Centres declined from 63 to 35 per cent. This decline is attributable to programs filling with local clients through ELR before general registration.

While displaced non-local clients had to look elsewhere for recreation programs, non-local clients who previously attended ELR Free Centres returned to City-wide programs at the same rate as before ELR. This indicates that many displaced non-local clients registered at paid City recreation centres instead, rather than leaving City programs. Survey results indicate that displaced non-local clients who were able to register elsewhere were still impacted in several ways including needing to travel further, affordability challenges, a lack of preferred programs, and a loss of familiarity and sense of community.

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### Non-local access to ELR Free Centres

Non-local clients registered at ELR Free Centres declined from 63 to 35 per cent from Spring 2025 to Spring 2026. This is attributable to programs filling with local clients through ELR before general registration. Non-local clients' access was particularly limited at a few sites where over 70 per cent of programs were full by general registration: Oriole Community Recreation Centre, Centennial Recreation Centre – Scarborough, and Antibes Community Centre. Conversely, less than 30 per cent of programs were full at Falstaff Community Recreation Centre, Scarborough Village Recreation Centre, and Malvern Recreation Centre.

Many non-local clients were concerned about the impact that displacement from ELR Free Centres would have on their social lives, with survey results indicating that for most non-local clients (85 per cent), visiting these Free Centres prior to ELR has been important to their social wellbeing. For example, one non-local survey respondent described how they *“have been going to classes for years and have built friendships which are extremely important to widowed seniors.”* Another responded said: *“I register my mom for older adult programs. While my mom lives really close to Islington Community School and it is the right location for her in terms of where she shops, spends her time, etc., she was not eligible for early registration.[...] the benefit of these older adult programs is both the fitness but also the social connection as loneliness is dangerous for older adults. She typically registers with a friend and was not able to do that as a result of this early local registration policy.”*

### Non-local access to City-wide recreation programs

While non-local clients who were displaced from ELR Free Centres had to look elsewhere for recreation programs, non-local clients who previously attended ELR Free Centres returned to City-wide programs (free or paid) at the same rate as before ELR. Half (50 per cent) of the non-local clients who attended ELR sites in Spring 2025 returned to City-wide recreation programs (at any centre) in Spring 2026. This year-over-year seasonal return rate was equivalent to previous years: 50 per cent of non-local clients who attended ELR sites in Spring 2023 returned to City-wide programs in Spring 2024. This indicates that many displaced non-local clients registered at paid City locations instead of ELR Free Centres, rather than

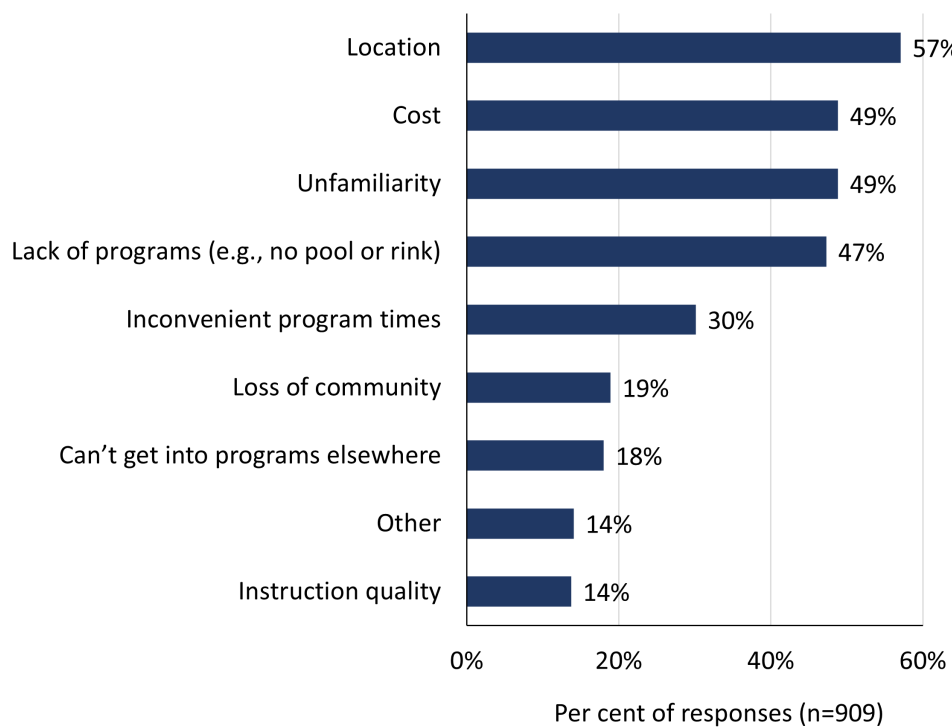
leaving City programs altogether. The return rate of non-local clients from lower-income areas was not disproportionately impacted.

Non-local clients who were displaced from ELR Free Centres were still impacted in several ways, even if they were able to register elsewhere. Survey results indicate that impacts include increased travel, affordability challenges, a loss of familiarity, and a lack of preferred programs, in order of priority (Figure 2).

Amenities such as pools and rinks and the specific programs offered at each community recreation centre are not evenly distributed throughout Toronto. As such, non-local clients might not have alternative options nearby for the programs they're interested in. For example, a non-local survey respondent said that "skating programs are very limited in the summer, Centennial would be the closest to us even though it's more than 20 minutes away." ELR Free Centres are also the closest community recreation centres (free or paid) for some non-local clients.

Figure 2: Barriers preventing non-local clients from registering for alternative recreation options.

Q. What might stop you/your household from registering for programs elsewhere? Excludes barriers identified by less than 10% of participants.



### 3.3 IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

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Clients changing their postal codes into ELR catchments had a relatively minor impact on participation in the program at most locations. However, at 9 ELR Free Centres, at least 10 per cent of local registered clients changed their postal code recently, which is higher than would be expected based on normal household moves alone.

Most local clients were aware of ELR (84 per cent) and satisfied with the program (78 per cent). Awareness and satisfaction were lower among non-local clients (74 and 8 per cent respectively).

Support for ELR relates to eligibility: while around half of the City's recreation clients support the idea of ELR, 89 per cent of local clients support it versus 29 per cent of non-local clients.

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#### Address changes

ELR is designed to provide priority access to residents in a designated catchment area. As a result, address changes in 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 9 sites, at least 10 per cent of local registrants had changed their postal code recently. While some of these changes could be legitimate, the volume is higher than would be expected based on normal household moves alone. The per cent of registrants who had changed their postal code recently was highest at Centennial Recreation Centre – Scarborough (22 per cent), Don Montgomery Community Recreation Centre (16 per cent), and York Recreation Centre (15 per cent).

#### Client awareness and satisfaction

Most local clients were aware of ELR: Eighty-four per cent of local survey respondents agreed that they knew about ELR in time for registration. Awareness among non-local clients was lower, at 74 per cent. Most local survey respondents (78 per cent) were satisfied with ELR, with 11 per cent neutral and 11 per cent dissatisfied. Conversely, few non-local respondents (8 per cent) were satisfied with ELR.

#### Support for ELR

ELR support also correlates with eligibility: 89 per cent of local survey respondents indicated that they support the idea of ELR versus 29 per cent of non-local respondents. Feedback from clients reflected this division as well. Many local clients were thrilled with having the opportunity to register early at their local Free Centre. For example, local survey respondents said: *“I’m so thankful for this program because I haven’t been able to get in for two years to the hockey skills program”* and *“We love city programs but often cannot get into classes locally. The early local registration changed that and are wonderful for building community within the neighborhood. A+.”*

Conversely, most of those who were not eligible felt that the program was unfair. For example, survey responses included: *“Registration based on postal code is discriminatory. Everyone should have equal opportunity to register on the same day. I feel as though no one is listening or cares about us. I just don’t*

*get the need for this change” and “Granting residents who live closest to a program's location early registration access is inherently unfair.”*

In a City-wide survey of recreation clients, 54 per cent of respondents supported the idea of ELR.