



**Region of Waterloo Children's Services
Early Years and Child Care
Service System Plan 2022-2026
Executive Summary**



Region of Waterloo
COMMUNITY SERVICES

Executive summary

Early Years and Child Care Services System Plan Overview

The Early Years and Child Care (EYCC) Service System Plan is a multi-year plan designed to support the creation of a vibrant, inclusive, and high-quality EYCC system and world-class community for children and families.

As the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM), the Region of Waterloo, Children's Services is required to engage in system-wide planning for all licensed EYCC programs serving children birth to 12 years old, to ensure services align with community needs. To develop this System Plan, Children's Services engaged with over 3,000 parents, EYCC organizations, and community partners in Waterloo Region to gather their feedback and ideas to improve the system. In addition to extensive consultation, an environmental scan of community socio-economic trends, analysis of EYCC program level data, and synthesis of relevant policy and early learning research were all completed.

The System Plan is organized according to four pillars that are needed in a strong EYCC system - access, affordability, quality, and equity and responsiveness. These four components are closely interconnected and coordinated action is needed across each pillar in order to create an equitable EYCC system.

The System Plan includes seven strategic priorities supported by twenty-nine actions, developed based on the consultation feedback and environmental scan. In the coming months, an implementation plan and performance measurement framework (including targets) will be developed to guide the implementation of the System Plan.

Access

Key Trends and Gaps

- Only 26% of children between 0 to 4 years old in Waterloo Region have access to a licensed child care space.
- Waitlists for child care are significant, and families report that the application and waitlist process is unclear and lacks transparency.
- Child care spaces are not equitably distributed across Waterloo Region.
- Parents with higher income and born in Canada reported greater access to licensed child care than parents with lower income or born outside of Canada.
- The viability of many EYCC programs has been negatively impacted by the pandemic.
- EarlyON child and family programs served 4,629 unique children ages 0 to 6 years old in Waterloo Region in 2020.
- 21% of Black parents surveyed indicated they did not feel comfortable accessing EYCC programs and services.

Planning Considerations

- At least 3,000 new licensed child care spaces are needed to provide access for 40% of children ages 0 to 4 years.
- Demand for child care will grow with the potential Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan, and new strategies are needed to support equitable access to child care or there is a risk that marginalized families will be further excluded from the system.

- New high-quality licensed child care spaces should be strategically located to increase equity of access to child care.
- To ensure a strong EYCC system, expansion must be balanced with sustaining the existing system.
- Improvements to the child care application and waitlist processes need to be designed with a focus on equity (to ensure the systems do not disadvantage some families), and balancing of family and child care operator needs and preferences.
- Locations of EarlyON mobile programs should be reviewed regularly to ensure they continue to support equitable access to EarlyON.

Affordability

Key Trends and Gaps

- Approximately 50% of families surveyed identified that child care was not affordable, which aligns with research that finds a family would need an after-tax income of at least \$160,000 for licensed child care centre fees for one infant in Waterloo Region to be affordable.
- Child care fees in Waterloo Region increased faster than inflation, by an average of 10% between 2017 and 2020.
- Fees for full-time licensed child care (0 to 4 years) are between \$9,012 to \$23,939 annually per child.
- An average of 2,745 children each month receive child care subsidy, which supports low-income parents (most earning less than \$40,000) to work (69%) and attend school (14%).

Planning Considerations

- Without new ongoing funding, there is limited ability to reduce fees to established affordability thresholds. Significant new investments, such as the announced Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan, are critical to supporting affordability.
- Child care fee subsidy will continue to be essential in supporting equity within the EYCC system after the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan is implemented, given that the majority of families receiving fee subsidy currently pay less than \$10 per day.
- Funding to support significant reductions in child care fees must be indexed to inflation or otherwise increased annually to ensure that affordability is maintained over time.
- To maximize impacts of new affordability investments, the funding approach for implementing system-wide fee reductions should prioritize operating expenses related to quality (e.g., educator compensation) and addressing system and family needs (e.g., serving younger age groups, locations in underserved neighbourhoods). New accountability mechanisms are needed to ensure investments achieve intended goals.



Quality

Key Trends and Gaps

- The cumulative impacts of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified EYCC workforce challenges including: educator stress and burnout, high educator turnover, labour shortages, difficulty recruiting qualified educators, and educators leaving the sector in greater numbers.
 - The median wage for Registered Early Childhood Educators in licensed child care programs in Waterloo Region is \$21.14 per hour.
 - Two-thirds of parents and just under half of child care operators reported that quality is inconsistent across the EYCC system, which results in some children receiving higher quality care than others.
 - Child care operators and families identified opportunities for the current continuous quality improvement program to improve its impact. The program is currently being redesigned to address feedback.
- Quality benchmarks and supports must address both structural quality (e.g., child care environments) and process quality (e.g., the relationships between children, educators, and families).

Planning Considerations

- It is critical that all investments in new child care spaces, such as through the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan, are tied to meeting quality benchmarks to ensure that child care supports positive outcomes for children.
- The EYCC system is facing unprecedented workforce challenges, and new strategies to recruit and retain staff are necessary to maintain current capacity and create new capacity.
- Workforce strategies must address wages, the most significant root cause of workforce issues, to ensure long-term impacts to recruitment and retention.
- Increased consistency in quality across different programs is needed to ensure that the benefits of child care are experienced equitably.



Equity and Responsiveness

Key Trends and Gaps

- There are significant systemic barriers to fully participating in the EYCC system such as: a lack of culturally responsive EYCC programs, reliance on literacy and technology to access information about and register for EYCC programs, lack of diversity among EYCC staff, and lack of responsive care for some children with special needs.
- Indigenous, Black, and racialized families, families living in lower income, and families with children with special needs face the most significant systemic barriers in the EYCC system and reported lower levels of receiving fair and equitable treatment in the EYCC system when compared to other families.
- There is limited data to quantify and understand systemic issues in access to and experiences of the EYCC system for Indigenous, Black, and racialized, and other marginalized families in Waterloo Region.
- Approximately 1,500 children receive individualized special needs supports each year, but 27% of parents surveyed were not aware these supports exist.
- While 94% of child care operators identified taking significant actions to improve inclusion of children with special needs, they also identify challenges to being fully inclusive such as lack of funding for additional educator support.
- There was a 27% increase in French language child care spaces in Waterloo Region between 2018 and 2020.



Planning Considerations

- An equity lens must be applied to all EYCC system policies and practices to consider and address intended and unintended consequences for Indigenous, Black, and racialized families, and other marginalized families.
- All action to address systemic barriers and inequities must be guided by purposeful engagement with Indigenous, Black, and racialized families, and other marginalized families.
- To make the EYCC system more equitable, action and supports are required at system and program levels, and individual educators also require new professional learning opportunities and supports in the area of equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Improved data collection is needed to support disaggregation of data to better understand the experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized families and other marginalized families. While data is being collected and analyzed, action can still be taken to improve equity of the EYCC system - the lack of data should not be an additional barrier to improvement.





Strategic priorities for 2022-2026

1 Advocate for new investments

- a. Advocate for funding to increase affordability of licensed child care (including the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan)
- b. Advocate for capital and operating funding for new spaces
- c. Advocate to increase base funding levels and for implementation of a provincial wage scale for EYCC staff
- d. Advocate to expand the income threshold for child care fee subsidy

2 Address systemic inequities

- a. Engage with Indigenous, Black, and racialized families and other marginalized families to identify and address systemic barriers
- b. Work with Indigenous partners to further implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations
- c. Create and implement a data strategy that supports data disaggregation
- d. Support new equity and inclusion training and supports for EYCC operators
- e. Provide grants for child care programs to improve equity and inclusion
- f. Revise policies and provide funding to support parents with precarious employment to access licensed child care more equitably
- g. Increase access to child care fee subsidy for Indigenous, Black, and racialized families through providing new supports and funding

3 Grow and sustain the system

- a. Implement a child care growth strategy
- b. Support child care sustainability through new priorities and policies
- c. Support new child care centres and EarlyON programs in schools through key partnerships
- d. Update the EarlyON needs assessment to ensure continued responsiveness
- e. Implement a workforce recruitment and retention strategy



4

Evaluate outcomes of investments

- a. Implement a new quality measurement approach
- b. Implement new funding policies that include consistent fee standards and wage benchmarks
- c. Measure outcomes of special needs and capacity building supports and make changes based on results

5

Enhance stakeholder engagement

- a. Develop a framework that outlines an approach to stakeholder engagement
- b. Conduct ongoing engagement with parents
- c. Engage in ongoing collaborative system planning with community partners

6

Support continuous quality improvement

- a. Provide new quality improvement supports (e.g., coaching, training) to child care operators and EarlyON programs
- b. Implement new quality improvement grants for child care operators
- c. Implement a professional learning and development strategy
- d. Lead local knowledge mobilization initiatives

7

Improve service experiences

- a. Make accessing child care more transparent and equitable through OneList and other process changes
- b. Implement technological solutions to improve parent experiences with fee subsidy
- c. Increase awareness of the local early years and child care system through new strategies