



Region of Waterloo Children's Services

Early Learning and Child Care Service Plan

2016-2020

Executive Summary



Region of Waterloo
COMMUNITY SERVICES



Letter from the Director of Children's Services

I am excited to share our new Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Service Plan with you. This plan is a multi-year plan that will act as our road map for the next four years. As the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM), the Region of Waterloo, Children's Services has a mandate and directive from the Province to engage in system wide planning for licensed early learning and child care services.

Our new plan builds upon the work that was listed in our previous ELCC Service Plan 2010-2015. Much has changed in the past five years as we now have full implementation of full day kindergarten, expansion of before and after school programs, capital funding for construction of new child care collocated with new schools and the rollout of a new Provincial wage enhancement program to name a few.

This new plan provides a picture of our current services and challenges in Waterloo Region, which is based on input and feedback from parents, service providers and child care operators. Licensed early learning and child care which occurs in the infant, toddler, preschool and school age years is the first stage in a continuum of lifelong learning opportunities for children. The early years are critical to supporting positive outcomes for children as they grow towards adulthood. Nobel Laureate James Heckman notes: *"Investment in early education for disadvantaged children from birth to age five helps to reduce the achievement gap, reduce the need for special education, increase the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lower the crime rate, and reduce overall social costs."*

Access to licensed early learning and child care is critical to support healthy outcomes. Continued investment is required to support and build a system of licensed early learning and care that is of high quality, affordable and available to families when they need it. Access to high quality early childhood education also contributes to local economies by creating jobs and supporting employment opportunities for parents. *"Early Learning and Child Care is the most overlooked economic development opportunity... If we are trying to entice businesses and skilled workers, then we must address their child care needs."* (New Westminster, Child Care Needs Assessment.)

There is no doubt that the world of licensed ELCC is in a period of transformative change. A number of Provincial and legislative changes are driving a movement to modernize child care as we have known it. We have done our best to anticipate and predict the impact of what we know, however we are aware that the approaches and strategies identified in this document may need to be modified along the way. We are excited however to continue our journey towards a vibrant, high quality, inclusive service system of early years services and supports. We want to ensure that Waterloo Region is a community where children thrive. We will do this by taking a planned and strategic approach in collaboration with our community partners.

Nancy Dickieson,
Director, Children's Services



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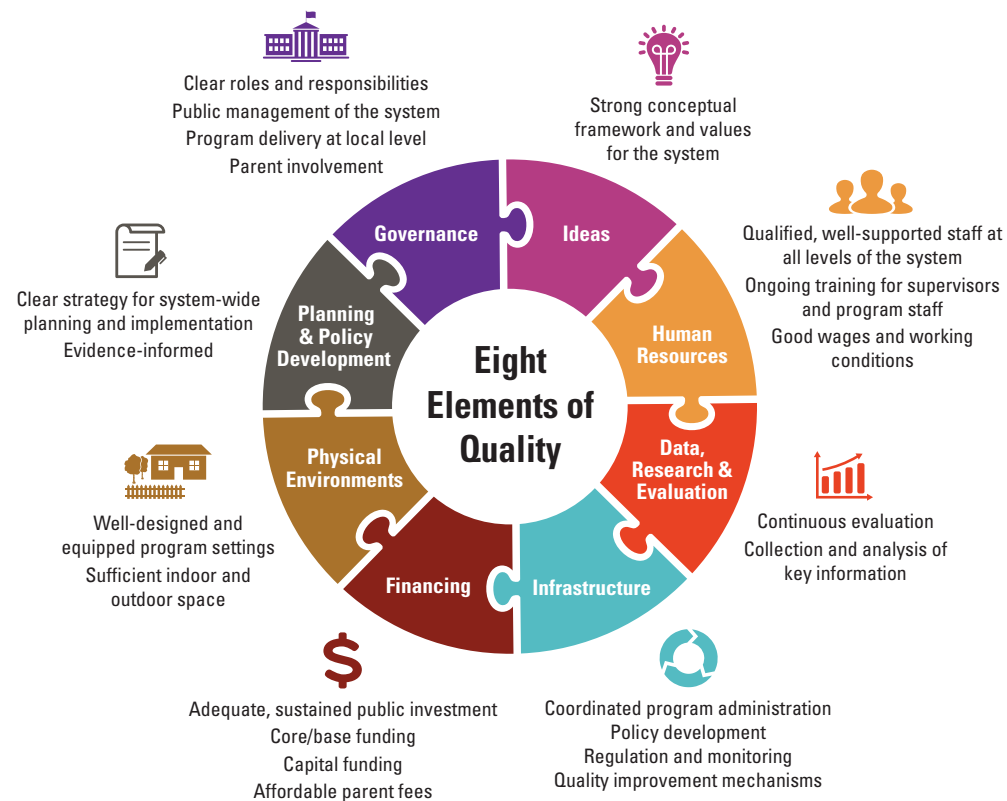
The Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Service Plan is a multi-year plan that will act as our road map for the next four years. As the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM), the Region of Waterloo, Children’s Services has a mandate and directive from the Province to engage in system wide planning for licensed ELCC services.

This Service Plan provides a picture of our current services and challenges in Waterloo Region, based on input and feedback from over 1,100 parents, as well as service providers and child care operators, and builds on the work completed as part of the 2010-2015 Service Plan. Since that time, licensed ELCC has changed significantly with the implementation of full-day kindergarten, expansion of before and after school programs, the role out of a new Provincial wage enhancement program, and the implementation of the new *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014* (CCEYA).

We are excited to continue our journey towards a vibrant, high quality, inclusive ELCC system by taking a planned and strategic approach in collaboration with our community partners. Together, we want to ensure that Waterloo Region is a community where all children thrive.

ELCC Service Plan Framework

A focus on quality ELCC is at the core of the Service Plan. The eight elements of a quality ELCC system are used by Children’s Services as a framework to guide system planning. These elements are highly interconnected and all are essential in supporting an ELCC system with high quality ELCC programs.



(Source: Martha Friendly and Jane Beach, (2005). Elements of a high quality early learning and child care system. Childcare Resource and Research Unit.)

4 'A' Lens

Children’s Services views and understands the ELCC system through a 4 'A' lens of **Availability**, **Affordability**, **Accessibility** and **Accountability**. This lens provides a framework for organizing the Service Plan, including data, feedback and actions. Each section also provides information specific to a key area in the local ELCC system.



Owl Child Care

Availability

There are several options for quality, licensed ELCC programs in Waterloo Region. While the number of ELCC programs has increased in recent years there are still many children unable to access licensed care due to a lack of available space.

What we heard from families and ELCC partners...

- Location of child care was the most frequently identified influence on child care choices by parents.
- Many parents identified a need for more licensed spaces available in their neighbourhood.
- Parents identified a lack of infant spaces as a major challenge in the region.
- Operators identified cost of infant and toddler care as their second highest viability challenge; this has been constant since 2012.
- Service providers, educators and operators identified a need for more licensed spaces overall.
- Community partners noted a need for more licensed care within close proximity to public transit.

Affordability

High quality licensed early learning and child care comes at a significant financial cost to families. While Child Care Fee Subsidy may reduce the cost barrier for families who meet set income and other eligibility criteria, the high cost of child care remains the number one factor local parents reported they would change about their child care experience.

What we heard from families and ELCC partners...

- Many parents have identified cost as the top factor they would change about their child care experience.
- Local licensed ELCC operators identified wages, operating costs associated with ELCC, and insufficient public funding as the main barriers to reducing parent fees.
- Wages for current staff and parent fees not reflecting the true cost of ELCC were identified as two of the top three viability challenges for licensed ELCC operators.
- Community partners and educators identified affordability of licensed child care as one of the top barriers to accessing licensed ELCC.

“Start looking [for child care] early because there are not enough spaces.” – Advice from a parent

“When you have two kids in daycare it is about as much as a mortgage payment.” – Parent



Accessibility

All children have the right to fully participate in a quality licensed early learning and care child program. Unfortunately, not all children have access to high quality, licensed ELCC for a variety of reasons including cost, availability, cultural barriers and/or special needs.

What we heard from families and ELCC partners...

- The child care system is complex to navigate and requires significant advance planning – start searching early was the most frequent advice that parents offered to someone new to the system.
- Community partners, staff and child care operators identified challenges and inconsistencies with the use of OneList.
- ELCC programs need to be more responsive in meeting the unique and changing needs of children with special needs.
- Educators require more support and training to ensure full participation of children with special needs in ELCC programs.
- The inclusion of children with special needs into child care programs is beneficial for children with special needs, their families and all other children in the program.
- Community partners and educators identified a need to be more accessible to non-English speaking families, newcomers, and First Nations, Inuit and Metis families.

Accountability

Research shows the developmental benefits of high quality ELCC programs. High quality ELCC is linked with short- and long-term positive impacts in areas such as cognitive and emotional development, social competence and positive behaviour. Beyond the benefits for children, there is increasing evidence that high quality ELCC yields economic and social returns both in the short and long term.

What we heard from families and ELCC partners...

- Providing licensed ELCC that is of the highest quality is the top priority for Children's Services and ELCC operators so that children in Waterloo Region thrive and achieve optimal development health.
- Many parents identified the staff or caregiver as one of the most important influences on their child care choices.
- Staff retention was identified as one of the top challenges facing licensed ELCC operators.
- Staff wage was the highest viability challenge facing ELCC operators, followed by cost of providing infant/toddler care, parent fees not true cost, and lack of RECE supply staff.

Actions for 2016-2020

1. Develop a master plan for development of licensed, high quality ELCC in Waterloo Region.
2. Improve access to affordable, high quality, licensed early learning and child care services and experiences for all families.
3. Build capacity to support inclusion of all children in high quality, early learning and child care experiences.
4. Address the service experience for families with early years services.
5. Mobilize a renewed approach to continuous quality improvement for all early years services that is responsive, effective and measurable.



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