

REPORT TO COUNTY COUNCIL

Child Care and Early Years System Plan 2025-2029

To: Warden and Members of County Council

From: Acting Director of Human Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. That County Council adopt the Child Care and Early Years System Plan 2025-2029, as provided in Attachment 1 of Report HS 2025-07, entitled “Child Care and Early Years System Plan 2025-2029”, and that the priorities and recommended actions assist to guide the County’s efforts in supporting the needs of children and families.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- This report is intended to present the final Child Care and Early Years System Plan 2025-2029, developed through strategic collaboration to underscore the critical importance of early childhood development.
- To drive success in achieving the priorities of the Plan, staff are seeking Council's support to lead a number of initiatives in relation to the County's role as the Service System Manager (SSM) for Child Care and Early Years.
- The Plan provides an illustration of the importance of early childhood experiences as essential for fostering cognitive, social and emotional development for children and families, as well as the important benefits of building and sustaining a robust child care and early years system that fosters community growth and economic stability.

IMPLEMENTATION POINTS

With Council’s approval, staff will present the Plan to the children’s services sector, as well as the broader community, to engage leadership and support toward achieving outcomes for children and families. Starting with the Oxford Children’s Services Planning Table, working groups will be established to address the priorities within the Plan.

In addition, staff will work with the Ministry of Education and child care operators to explore opportunities to increase access to affordable licensed child care programs under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program.

Staff will also conduct a comprehensive review of the special needs resourcing support model, leverage community strengths to develop care pathways for effective referrals, and implement consistent developmental screening and early intervention, for children up to the age of six with early mental health concerns.

Further, staff will collaborate with community services, municipal partners and families, to enhance the programs and services currently provided through the EarlyON Child and Family Centres, by focusing on creating family support hubs that are responsive to the needs of children and families across the community.

Financial Impact

The recommendations contained in this report will have no financial impact beyond what was approved in the 2025 budget. Any future financial impacts will be considered through the annual budget process, with consideration for federal and provincial funding commitments.

Communications

County staff, with the support of a consultant, engaged with the broader community to develop the Plan. This consultation included:

- Over 900 responses to a parent/caregiver survey.
- In person session with 300 educators and child care operators in the licensed child care system, as well as a follow-up survey that received additional feedback from 102 respondents.
- Co-design sessions with municipal leaders, child care operators and broader children's services providers.
- Jurisdictional research to review priorities, best practices and innovative approaches of ten other regions.
- An online survey of unlicensed home child care providers.




Once approved, the Plan will be posted to the County website for public access.

2023-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN

Oxford County Council approved the **2023-2026 Strategic Plan** on September 13, 2023. The Plan outlines 39 goals across three strategic pillars that advance Council's vision of "Working together for a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable future." These pillars are: (1) *Promoting community vitality*, (2) *Enhancing environmental sustainability*, and (3) *Fostering progressive government*.

The recommendation in this report supports the following strategic goals.

Strategic Plan Pillars and Goals

PILLAR 1	PILLAR 2	PILLAR 3
		
Promoting community vitality	Enhancing environmental sustainability	Fostering progressive government
Goal 1.3 – Community health, safety and well-being		Goal 3.1 – Continuous improvement and results-driven solutions Goal 3.2 – Collaborate with our partners and communities

See: [Oxford County 2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#)

DISCUSSION

Background

The *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014* (CCEYA) is the legislative framework that guides the planning and delivery of child care and early years programs and services in Ontario. The CCEYA designates the County as the SSM for Child Care and Early Years in our region.

Under the CCEYA, the County is responsible for shaping the landscape of child care and early years services to support provincial interests. In doing so, the County is responsible for developing an updated service system plan every five years, to provide a structured approach to planning, funding, administering and delivering responsive child care and early years programs and services.

The renewed Child Care and Early Years System Plan 2025-2029 was developed with extensive community consultation, to support the Province's vision for accessible, affordable, responsive and high-quality child care and early years programs, and in alignment with the County's strategic direction to improve community health, safety and well-being.

The County plays a central role in ensuring the local child care and early years system is able to meet the unique needs of our community, by:

- Managing service contracts and funding agreements with child care operators to deliver licensed centre-based care, licensed home child care, and before and after school programs;

- Implementing and managing the CWELCC system, including the new cost-based funding approach and directed growth targets as identified by the Ministry of Education, for children aged 0 to 5 years;
- Coordinating and administering the delivery of the Child Care Fee Subsidy program;
- Overseeing a centralized waitlist for licensed child care services in the community;
- Administering responsive and inclusive Special Needs Resourcing (SNR) supports;
- Planning and managing EarlyON Child and Family Centres;
- Supporting professional learning and capacity building for the child care and early years system; and,
- Strategic planning for funding, delivery, monitoring and reporting of child care and early years programs and services.

In consideration of the County's responsibilities as the SSM, this report seeks to present the Child Care and Early Years Plan 2025-2029 as the guiding framework for how the County will respond to these responsibilities through five priority areas and corresponding action items, as detailed in the following section of this report.

Comments

A robust and responsive child care and early years plan is essential to ensuring the unique needs of children and families are met. Early childhood experiences, and access to child care and early years programs and services, are vital to the community and play a pivotal role in shaping a person's future, influencing economic outcomes, educational success and overall emotional well-being. Child care and early years programs are essential for:

- Providing supports for parents to enter and stay in the workforce;
- Attracting new families to the community;
- Freeing up workers for key industries, including health and manufacturing sectors;
- Providing supports for low-income families; and,
- Enhancing children's social, emotional and cognitive development to support their overall well-being – now and into adulthood.

In consideration of the above, the Child Care and Early Years Plan includes five priority areas and corresponding actions to support child care and early years in our community through to 2029. For Council's information, the five priority areas and corresponding actions are summarized in Table 1, with the fulsome list of actions starting on page 23 of Attachment 1.

Table 1. Child Care and Early Years Plan 2025-2029 – Transforming Priorities into Actions

Priority Area	Actions
1. Increase access to child care and early years programs and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand facilities and resources • Streamline enrollment processes • Collaborate with community partners
2. Support inclusive and responsive programs and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen professional development and capacity building • Promote inclusive environments • Support early intervention
3. Enhance the quality of child care and early years programs and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on workforce recruitment and retention • Support professional development • Provide ongoing system support
4. Provide more affordable child care and early years programs and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximize funding allocations • Prioritize spaces • Activate community support
5. Use evidence to improve outcomes for children and families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to research and data • Implement evidence-based practices • Monitor and evaluate progress

These priority areas have been used to inform the recommendation of this report, as well as the proposed initiatives that are highlighted as next steps in the following sections.

Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC)

The CWELCC system is driven by the 2025 Cost-Based Funding Guidelines, which reflect the integration of routine child care funding in respect of children aged 0 to 5 years. Under the new guidelines, daily parent fees have been reduced to \$22/day, with full realization of an average of \$10/day by 2026.

In addition, the Ministry has issued directed growth targets for expanding the CWELCC licensed child care system for children aged 0 to 5 years. For Council's information, as a result of a recent memo from the Ministry of Education, dated March 31, 2025, which highlights the results of a provincial recalibration of spaces, the County's directed growth strategy for 2025 and 2026 has been significantly reduced from 651 community-based spaces to 139 community-based spaces, which also needs to account for any spaces that were over-allocated in 2024, which also saw a reduction in spaces. This removes the opportunity to increase the number of licensed child care spaces beyond what has already been achieved to date. Should there be an update to the availability of spaces and funding, staff are prepared to move forward with projects that were set to be realized in 2025 and 2026, and if necessary, will issue a call for proposals for

any additional spaces beyond that. Staff continue to work with the Ministry to expand existing opportunities.

Special Needs Resourcing (SNR)

In developing the Child Care and Early Years Plan, parents and educators were asked for suggestions on how to make child care more accessible and inclusive. Consistent themes involving professional development, capacity building and early intervention strategies, were identified. As a result of this feedback, as well as ongoing conversations with child care operators and the contracted agency responsible for delivering SNR supports, the County is committed to conducting a review of the current service delivery model to ensure that the approach to supporting children with special needs is effective and inclusive. The review aims to assess and enhance the current resources available to children with special needs and the educators that support them.

Early Identification and Intervention

Early childhood intervention is essential to maximize the critical development period in early years. Timely early identification of developmental delays or social-emotional challenges are critical to ensuring children and families are connected with appropriate supports and services they need to thrive. In recognition of this, staff, in partnership with members of the Oxford Children's Services Planning Table, are proposing to support the development of an Infant and Early Mental Health Care Pathways resource and implement consistent developmental screening and early intervention for children aged 0 to 6 years, leveraging community strengths.

Child Care Fee Subsidy

The Child Care Fee Subsidy program provides financial assistance to families in situations where the cost of licensed child care remains out of reach, even with the reduced fees as a result of CWELCC. Staff will be working to update and better streamline the application and annual review process for fee subsidy. Additionally, staff will work with child care operators to implement a fee subsidy strategy that would see up to 20% of all licensed child care spaces reserved for families requiring additional financial support as a response to Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework, which identifies children living in low-income families as one of the priority community needs.

EarlyON Child and Family Centres

EarlyON Child and Family Centre programs and services are directly delivered by the County, including free drop-in programs for families with children aged 0 to 6 years, with collaborative partnerships across many sectors serving children and families. With three permanent locations in Woodstock, Ingersoll and Tillsonburg and an additional nine locations offering weekly programs in Embro, Innerkip, Mount Elgin, Norwich, Otterville, Plattsville, Princeton, Tavistock, and Thamesford, EarlyON programs are well-positioned to enhance family support programs that increase access to community supports and services, while continuing to provide meaningful early learning opportunities for children and their caring adults to participate in together. Staff will continue to explore additional opportunities to expand programming at these locations.

CONCLUSIONS

The Child Care and Early Years Plan is designed to enhance and expand services, supports and initiatives that will improve outcomes for children and families in the community. The Plan highlights the critical importance of early childhood experiences, which lay the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health. High-quality early childhood programs and services are essential for fostering cognitive, social and emotional development.

By focussing on the five priorities within the Plan, the County aims to improve outcomes for children and families, making our community a more nurturing and supportive environment for early childhood development and a place where parents can participate more fully in the workforce.

SIGNATURES

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ATTACHMENT

Attachment 1: Child Care and Early Years System Plan 2025-2029