

WILLIAMS LAKE Child Care Needs Assessment and Action Plan

Prepared for the City of Williams Lake

by:

SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL OF WILLIAMS LAKE & AREA

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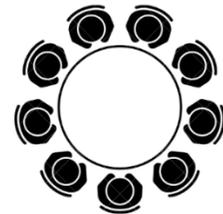
Executive Summary

This project was undertaken by the Social Planning Council on behalf of the City of Williams Lake. The focus was to gather local information about the state of child care in the community, the impact of the child care shortage and the current and future needs for the community of Williams Lake.

What we heard from everyone we spoke to reinforced the anecdotal evidence and data we reviewed – there is a crisis in the child care sector and it is affecting individuals, families, and the community in a wide range of ways. The intention of this project, and the hope for this report is that it will elevate the issues to the awareness of the community and decision makers, and will spur action that can make a difference for the many families affected.

Methodology

3 Roundtable focus groups



7 Key Informant Interviews

2 Community events



Surveys: 33 Child Care Providers
224 Parents

FINDINGS

- 97% of parents needed childcare in order to work
- 30% of families regularly rely on grandparents/family/friends for child care
- 73% of families are worried about losing employment due to child care crisis
- 68% of families worry about their ability to pay household bills due to child care issues

Child care shortages are affecting the community broadly,
& impacting many economic sectors because

Parents can't return to work without child care

- Shortage of Early Childhood Educators means many licensed child care facilities not operating at capacity
- Child Care staff are often overworked and have high stress levels as a result
- Wages in the child care sector are still too low - this undervalues the work and makes it difficult to attract people to work in the field

22 vacant ECE positions in Williams Lake

621 child care spaces
but only **537** in use

800+
MORE child care spaces needed

137 spaces needed for  children under 3



as many as **500**
after-school spaces

Introduction

The focus of this project was to gather information about the current state of child care in the community of Williams Lake, and to determine what the current and future needs are for child care. The project was undertaken by Social Planning Council of Williams Lake on behalf of the City of Williams Lake. The project spanned the fall and winter of 2019-2020 and this report strives to capture the voices of both families and child care providers to inform both the findings and the recommendations.

Williams Lake Context

Williams Lake is located in the centre of the Cariboo-Chilcotin region of the interior of British Columbia. While the population within city limits is just over 10,000, it is the direct service centre for a population of over 18,000¹ who live in neighbourhoods within a 20-minute drive of the city centre. It is this population that uses schools and child care facilities in the community.

There are 3,050 children ages 0-14 years living in the census agglomeration area. This equals approximately 200 children in each year of age.

Community Landscape/Background

For more than the last decade, Williams Lake and area have been on the Province's radar for many reasons. The City has held the number one crime ranking across Canada, there was the devastating Mount Polly Mine disaster, the 2017 wildfires and evacuation, and the dismal reality of a local residential school that was in operation until 198. These are just some of the influences that have impacted this community in recent years. Children and youth in Williams Lake are at greater risk of poverty and hunger than the national and provincial averages, and due to rural isolation and trauma, many are also quite vulnerable to human trafficking, addictions, and gang life. All in all, the population of Williams Lake has been through an immense amount. This context contributes to the children and youth of this community being some of the most vulnerable in the Province of BC.

Importance of Early Child Development and Child Care

The importance and value of early child development programs and quality child care are well-established in research. Children who have experienced early learning programs have advanced generally over their peers when they enter kindergarten, and do much better overall in all these categories than those who have had no early learning experiences outside the home.

Data gathered from the Early Development Instrument (a questionnaire used in all provinces and territories in Canada, and internationally) is used to better understand the developmental trends of children in kindergarten. This data helps cities and communities assess developmental differences and trends in its children. The Human Early Learning Partnership at the University of British Columbia has been collecting EDI data since 2001. This data is collected on a three year "wave" in February, to capture data in all school districts in the province. The most recent wave years were 2016-2019. There are 5 different areas measured in the EDI questionnaire: Physical Health and Well-Being, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language and Cognitive Development, Communication Skills and General

¹ Statistics Canada Williams Lake Census Agglomeration Area, 2016 Census

Knowledge. Vulnerability is determined using a cut off for each EDI scale, as well as the number of children who are considered vulnerable on one or more scales. The current vulnerability rate of the province is 33.4%, which is considered to be three times higher than is considered acceptable. Williams Lake (Cariboo-Chilcotin) is currently at a rate of 40% vulnerability.

Early Childhood Educators are trained to implement play-based learning within their classrooms that address each of the 5 categories listed above (ie. physical health and well-being, social/ emotional competence, language and cognitive development, etc.). Within any ECE setting whether it be daycare, preschool, strong start, ready set learn program, children are provided with strategic invitations to play that promote development in these specific areas. When children are playing at home, they experience many learning opportunities, but when they attend a regulated education setting, they are encouraged to enhance their skills in each of the different domains and opportunities are purposely provided and organic opportunities are encouraged and extended to achieve maximum learning opportunities. Children gain competence and confidence in routines, self-regulation, inclusion, participation, problem solving, and development of gross and fine motor skills with targeted activities to support areas requiring extra practice.

Project Methodology:

Information gathering for this project utilized multiple methods including round table focus group sessions, community engagement events, key informant interviews, and online surveys. In early October we began with a round table discussion with an advisory group which consisted of members from the Cariboo Chilcotin Partners for Literacy, Social Planning Council, Child Development Centre, School District 27, Women's Contact Society, Social Planning Council and the City of Williams Lake's Economic Development Officer.

We utilized two community events to engage parents and providers directly. The first was an education session for child care providers hosted by Women's Contact Society's Child Care Resource and Referral program. Attendees were given information about the Child Care Needs Assessment we were conducting and provided paper surveys to complete during the day. Second was Baby Fest, which is a community wide event that welcomes any baby (and additional family members) born in 2019. Held yearly, and hosted by Women's Contact Society, Baby Fest was a great way to connect with families with babies and young children, to discuss our work on the child care plan and to talk about imminent issues affecting them regarding child care.

From October through December we conducted online surveys with two components; one for parents and guardians, and one for child care providers. Paper surveys completed at the child care education session in October were entered manually into the survey system. Invitations to participate in the online surveys were distributed through community events, child care centres, social media streams, and local media (newspaper and radio advertisements).

During this time, we also conducted key informant interviews with parents, and also with child care center managers/owners. In November of 2019, we attended Baby Fest and talked to parents of infants and older children about their experiences with childcare, in particular, those trying to secure child care once off of Maternity Leave. We met individually with seven individuals who are childcare providers and

well as the Licencing Officer for Interior Health, who is responsible for licencing child care facilities. We assured all participants that information we collected would be kept strictly anonymous to protect the identity of those who participated, which we feel allowed all our participants to speak freely.

On January 16th 2020, we held a Round Table discussion, and invited all Child Care Providers in Williams Lake to join us for conversations around issues pertaining to child care services affecting Early Childhood Educators, and to Early Childhood Assistants in our community. We looked at policy in our community for child care licencing, and reviewed city bylaws that may impact future growth in the child care sector.

We utilized the Community Child Care Planning Inventory Spreadsheet to pre-populate licenced facilities in the community and then cross-referenced that with the list provided by Interior Health Facilities Licencing. In addition, we contacted every licenced child care provider by phone to verify the number of spaces available and utilized, as well as wait list numbers for each facility.

Surveys

Our **Child Care Provider Survey** focused on child care setting information, staffing information, building and facility space, financial information, the ability to support children, location, stresses of the job, capacity information, and room to give input to provide recommendations for the City of Williams Lake going forward. We received 33 surveys from childcare providers. We estimate that there are forty-three individuals working in child care in our community, so this represents a response rate of 77%.

Our **Parent / Guardian Survey** focused on participants child care needs (present and future), current access to child care services and programming, impacts of any lack of child care services, preferences for type of child care setting (eg. licensed vs. unlicensed), and thoughts on ways that child care can be improved in the City of Williams Lake. We received 224 parent survey responses. While this is not a representative sample, it is an excellent response rate for an online survey targeting a specific audience in a small community. Of the responses, 91.96% identified as female and only 7.59% of responses from those identifying as male, with 62% of female respondents indicating that they are the ones primarily responsible for child care arrangements. This shows us that men were underrepresented in all responses and points to the fact that responsibility for child care is still largely the responsibility of mothers even in 2020. We worked hard to encourage more fathers/male participants but our numbers show resoundingly that participation in security and planning of childcare is falling on women's shoulders.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with seven individuals, all of whom we felt represented a larger group of individuals in our community regarding all aspects of child care. Our interviews ranged from 30 – 60 minutes. Our interviews included questions about informants' roles, their back ground with either child care provision or engagement in the child care system, key issues and perceptions impacting child care in the city of Williams Lake, and insights into how we can make things better in the future for both families and child care providers.

Roundtable Focus Groups

We held three roundtable focus group sessions. The first was an initial advisory roundtable to gather information about the general state of childcare in the community and to provide input to the engagement and information gathering process. Our second event was a round table with child care

providers and facility staff, hosted by Social Planning Council, the City of Williams Lake, and the Williams Lake Hiring Initiative. In this three-hour evening session, we engaged with participants to discuss issues pertinent to child care providers across many different settings, as well as working in small groups to come up with solutions to some of the challenges we are currently facing. Thirdly, we brought our findings, results and recommendations back to participants from the first two sessions to ensure that we had captured their input and that recommendation reflected the needs they saw in the community.

Findings

Child population

In the Williams Lake census area, based on 2016 census data, there are 995 children age 0 to 4, 1030 children ages 5 to 9 years, and approximately 600 children 10-12 years old. This corroborates with a birth rate of just over 200 annually in our local hospital.

Parent needs

In our online survey, 70% of respondents were employed full or part-time, while 19% were on parental/maternity leave and 11% were stay at home parents. 88% of respondents have lived in Williams Lake at least three years and 73% live in the city core, south lakeside, or westside areas while 27% live in residential neighbourhoods north or east of the city. Of the total respondents, 88% work or attend school in the city core, and 6% commute out of the city for shift work.

Two-thirds of respondents had accessed some type of child care services, and 97% indicated their primary reason for seeking child care was to work. Affordability of child care also continues to be a challenge for many families, despite subsidy programs. Over 80 of our survey respondents included comments about the high cost of childcare and the impact on them financially.

One third of respondents have a family member or friend who provides regular child care for their children, with 40% of those being grandparents. Those relying on grandparents or other personal caregivers resoundingly would choose licensed childcare over these arrangements: 73% of parents who rely on family and friends would prefer to have paid/formal child care. Many parent survey respondents felt there were a lot of benefits to structured settings where other children of similar ages attended as well. Training and professionalism were also noted among our respondents as reasons to use licensed care. Parents in our community feel that licensed care provides socialization and reliability, helps children be more adaptive, work on social skills and problem solve with other children.

The majority of parents who responded to the survey require care during regular business hours Monday through Friday. Just over 35% require after-school care and 10% needed care outside regular hours (evenings, overnight, and/or weekends) or to accommodate a variety of shift work schedules.

Overall, 95% of survey respondents feel we do not have enough child care to meet the demand. The spots in the most demand are for infants and toddlers, with parents and child care providers alike expressing that it takes a minimum of 2-3 years to secure a spot for an infant or toddler, putting incredible pressure on women (or their partners) who are wanting to return to the workplace after their maternity leave. 43% of survey respondents who are needing infant toddler care are currently on waitlists at more than one facility, and 18% parents of children in group care age 2-5 are on waitlists as

well. Even parents looking for and needing afterschool care report needing to book 3 months in advance, while paying for those spots at the time of booking to secure them, which is a financial strain for many.

This desire for women to return to work after having a child is financial, but also in many conversations we learned that many women who are attaining higher levels of education and employment are concerned about losing their careers, or having long gaps in employment, which is what the current child care situation is forcing them to accept.

Child Care Facilities and Providers

Currently we have 621 child care spaces available in the city, with only 537 being filled due to staff shortages related to lack of Early Childhood Educators’ (including Infant Toddler Specialization) and Early Childhood Education Assistants. All facilities and spaces are currently filled to capacity based on licencing requirements and staffing availability.

	# of Facilities	# of Licenced Spaces	# of Spaces In Operation
Group Care – Birth -36 months	3	36	19
Group Care – 30 months – School	6	98	91
Licensed Preschool	4	156 ²	124
Group – School Age	9	189 ³	189
Multi-Age	3	48	48
Licensed In-home Family Care	11	78	66
Evening/Weekend/Overnight Care	1	16	0
Total Licenced Care Spaces		621	537

Thirty-three individuals participated in our online survey and we had 7 key informant interviews with child care providers, along with our three focus group sessions. Of the survey respondents, 66% were staff at a child care facility and 30% were either managers or owners of the facility. Most child care centres are well-established, long-standing facilities in our community. Respondents included a variety of types of care including group, family, preschool and after school care. Only two respondents indicated that they provide care on weekends, and there is no formal care before school hours.

Staffing

One of the biggest, if not the biggest issue facing our City is lack of qualified Early Childhood Educators, and even Early Childhood Assistants. Most childcare centers reported having available spaces they could be providing to the community, even in the infant toddler category (which is of highest demand in Williams Lake), but that they are unable to staff the positions needed to run at full licence capacity. 80% of child care provider survey respondents expressed difficulty finding qualified staff, and 40% indicated

² There is a discrepancy with the Child Care Planning Inventory Spreadsheet because the spreadsheet counts only the licenced space, and most preschool programs run a separate program in the morning and the afternoon, accommodating twice the number of children in doing so.

³ There is a discrepancy with the Child Care Planning Inventory Spreadsheet because the spreadsheet includes one summer day camp that only operates 54 spots in July-August so does not constitute regular care.

that retention is challenging due to low wage scales and lack of access to benefits. The current wage range for Early Childhood Educators is \$18 – 20 per hour, while those with an Infant-Toddler or Special Needs Certificate make slightly more (up to \$23/hr). ECE Assistant wages are slightly lower at \$15 – 18 per hour. There are at least 22 vacant ECE positions currently in the community.

In our focus group sessions, Early Childhood Educators (ECE's) stated they feel more undervalued than ever, while they all expressed feeling overworked. Child Care providers also voiced that they want to be seen as the important professionals they are, and until their wages and training opportunities improve, they feel this will not happen in the eyes of parents and the community as a whole. Many child care providers expressed scenarios where they rarely, if ever, get breaks during the day and are not able to properly take care of themselves even when they are sick, due to lack of staff to cover for them. Although the wage enhancement initiatives do help, in our key informant interviews and focus groups, managers and supervisors all expressed this is not enough to entice people to stay in the field. Since 63% of survey respondents indicated they have considered leaving this field of work due to high stress and/or low wages, this is of considerable concern. The ability to offer opportunities for ECE's and ECE assistants to maintain or advance their education is also cited as a challenge. Since there is no local ECE training available, bringing new professionals into this field in the community is extremely challenging.

Child care providers who participated in our roundtable focus groups indicated that they finally felt heard, enjoyed being able to discuss these issues, and that this helped them to not feel 'so alone' with the issues they are all facing.

Current State of Child Care

Availability

Currently we have a total of 621 child care spaces licenced in our community. Infant and toddler care for children under age three is essentially impossible to find or secure as there are only 36 licenced spots in group centres and half of them are not available due to staffing shortages, leaving just 19 infant-toddler spaces functioning. Family child care providers are all maxed out for infant spots as well. Out of the total 605 licenced spaces, only 537 spaces are currently being utilized with 84 un-utilized spaces due to shortages of qualified staff. There are an additional four licence-not-required family child care businesses who provide care for a maximum of two children each. The licenced group centres reported having between 150 and 300 children on their waitlists, and most family day cares no longer maintain waitlists because spaces rarely become available and waitlists are challenging and time-consuming to manage. Although we recognize children are often on more than one wait-list, we estimate that there may be as many as 600+ children on wait lists who need care and cannot access it. We have a new licenced group centre set to open in a few months, which will provide an additional 24 spaces; however, this centre already has a significant waitlist far beyond the available spaces and may draw staff from other centres. The impact on availability of spaces is

"There are no spots available in child care centers. My now almost 3-year-old was put on waitlists for all the daycare centers when she was 6 months old. Despite checking in with all of them a few times she has still not been offered a spot."



unknown at this time, and if no additional staff are recruited to the community, it is likely to result in simply shifting the landscape rather than increasing availability.

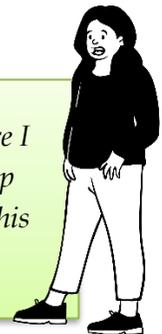
In our parent surveys, 95% of respondents felt we do not have enough child care to meet the demand. Currently those that have not secured paid child care are using family or friends, and of those 40% are using grandparents. Those relying on family and friends would resoundingly choose licensed child care over these arrangements. The highest demand is for infant-toddler, with parents and child care providers alike expressing that it takes a minimum of 2-3 years to secure a spot for an infant or toddler, putting incredible pressure on women (or their partners) who are wanting to return to the workplace after their maternity leave. 43% of parents needing infant toddler care from our survey respondents, are currently on waitlists at more than one facility, and 18% parents of children in group care age (2-5) are on waitlists as well. Even parents looking for and needing afterschool care are needing to book 3 months in advance, while paying for those spots at the time of booking, to secure them.

Half of the parents who completed our survey indicated their child was on a wait list for child care. Additionally, we have multiple anecdotal reports of parents searching for in-home care for children via social media such as Facebook. This raises grave concerns, particularly the desperation which these requests demonstrate. Generally, it is mothers who are unable to find formal or even family care, and who are required to return to work in order to meet financial obligations to support their family.

Child Care Facility Location and Hours

As a relatively small community, the majority of work, residential, and education facilities are located in the city core. Most parents reported in surveys and conversations that the currently facilities available are conveniently located as most parents that answered our survey live in the core of the City (47.96%) or work in the core of the City (88.48%). The furthest drive reported by our survey respondents was 15 minutes. Most child care is located in a reasonable distance between where people live and work. Access to after-school spaces may be the exception to this. While many after-school programs are located at schools, all are full and parents then may have to pick children up and deliver them to family or other care, which may disrupt their work day.

I took my lunch break an hour before I was off work in order to pick her up and drive her to after school care. This was all done in half an hour."



Additionally, there may be challenges for parents on low-incomes who do not have reliable access to transportation, as distances between child care facilities and some low-wage employment can be significant if you are walking, and public transportation rarely meets the needs of these families to get a child to day care and then themselves to work.

In Williams Lake we do have some child care services co-located with other types of family supports. These include Child Development Center (36 preschool spaces), the Cariboo Memorial Complex (35 after school spaces), and the Boys and Girls Club (21 after school spaces). The Child Development Center provides assessments, treatment, education and assistance to children in with special needs and their families. The Child Development Center currently only has a preschool program with morning and

afternoon spots available. They do not offer all day preschool or any day care options. CDC's preschool program is full for both classes and they are carrying waitlists. The Boys and Girls Club of Williams Lake offers many programs to the community. They offer an afterschool program, and this year, due to the need in the community, expanded to now offer 21 spaces. All of Boys and Girls Club's spots are full and waitlisted. The Cariboo Memorial Complex in Williams Lake offers many programs to the Community. Williams Lake's swimming pool, ice rinks and a gym facility are all conveniently located there. The Cariboo Memorial Complex Offers an after-school program but they have a long wait list as well. Many parents expressed in our survey that this program has been harder and harder for them to access and afford, as due to their demand growing and current waitlists, parents have to pay several months in advance in order to secure their children's spots which creates a heavy financial strain, especially when the spots have to be paid for ahead of time whether they end up using them or not.

Our survey results suggest that currently the need for Monday to Friday daytime care is the primary need. Anecdotally during the process, there was much feedback received that more parents would work shift work, and or on call if there were flexible, drop in spaces available. Several respondents indicated that they have hired in-home nannies or used family care because licenced care for evenings, weekends or overnight care is not available. We heard from a number of child care centers that one of the professions most affected by lack of child care are nurses, who work on call with schedules that are not consistent. These much in demand professionals cannot pay for a full time child care spot to take sporadic use of it when needed, and often times have to rely on unconventional methods such as last minute child care accommodations by friends and family (if any are available). We have also had daycare centers tell us of physicians wanting to move to the community, and have stated they will not move into the community if they cannot secure childcare before a move. This alone is an issue to warrant immediate attention as all health authorities, especially those in northern communities, are working hard to secure more physicians.

Additional supports for underserved populations

In our parent survey, 7% of respondents indicated that their child required additional supports in their child care setting due to developmental delays or disability. Among child care providers, we asked how able providers were to meet the development needs of children in a range of developmental areas (social, emotional, physical, communication, etc.). Respondents felt least able to support the healthy development of children with special or extra support needs.

In Williams Lake there is currently Supported Child Development offered through the Child Development Center (CDC) for children with special needs, including behavioural support needs. The CDC's Supported Child Development program is an *outreach* program that provides supports to children within existing child care settings (support is available to all care providers). Additionally, two other organizations provide Aboriginal supported child development services.

In the City of Williams Lake 21% of the population is Aboriginal, which suggests that there is a clear need for childcare providers to have cultural awareness and sensitivity training. However, while 72% of child care survey respondents indicated they have Indigenous children enrolled, only 32% had taken cultural safety training. In Williams Lake we have two centers focused on the care of Indigenous children. The Cariboo Friendship Center in Williams Lake currently runs the Little Moccasins Preschool, which provides

40 preschool spaces. Many of the current staff identify as Indigenous themselves. Little Moccasins has the ability to refer families to their various programs, such as the Pregnancy Outreach Program, aboriginal housing, emergency shelter, counsellors, and outreach workers. In the near future, the Cariboo Friendship Society plans to open another child care center, this one being a multi age day care for infants to school age children. A percentage of their staff are likely to be Indigenous. There is also a licensed group centre located at the Williams Lake Indian Band, which has 16 spaces for children age 30 months to school age.

Williams Lake currently has no childcare programs offering any languages other than English.

Kid Care Daycare is the only center in the City of Williams Lake with a young parent program. Kid Care currently holds 13 combined spots for youth who have become parents before the age of 20, have not yet graduated from high school, and are attending a school program, as well as for Ministry of Children and Families clients who are prioritized by their social workers for day care support. Kid Care provides all meals for all children who are attending their day care programs during their daycare attendance. Kid Care also will also provide some food, if needed, to breastfeeding moms who visit the program to breastfeed their children on breaks from school. They provide referrals for anyone needing assistance connecting with a counsellor, housing, or any other programs staff feel may be of assistance. They also provide transportation for clients of the young parent/MCFD programs if needed.

Affordability of Care

The Women's Contact Society in Williams Lake manages the Child Care Resource and Referral program which has staff who assist families to apply for subsidy and navigate the subsidy system. Their staff is very knowledgeable about preparing parents/guardians about the paperwork they need to start the process of applications, and also available to help parents/ guardians apply for subsidy.

Costs for child care are complex. Child care providers reported fees ranging from \$37.50 per day to \$62.50 per day for full time care. There are a variety of circumstances that might reduce the cost to parents, including the Child Care Fee Reduction Initiative and the Affordable Child Care Benefit or local program supports that provide access to free programming for specific target groups. In our parent survey, only 22% of respondents access the subsidy program and 10% were unsure of what this program is. Many parents reported that their child care was unaffordable or placed a financial strain on their family. We heard anecdotal reports that there is a lack of clarity about the qualifications for child care subsidy programs and that it is unclear why a family is approved or not approved for the Affordable Child Care Benefit.

"I pay my mom a daycare rate and it is almost half my pay check."



Impact of child care shortages on the community

The challenges for both care providers and families are significant. With staff shortages already critical, and with 63% of child care providers who indicated they have considered leaving the field, the current child care space crisis is likely to worsen without some intervention to relieve the current pressure on early childhood educators.

Child Care Providers

Child care providers report increased workloads and stress due primarily to staff shortages and constant juggling to meet staff to child ratios required by licensing. Often the result is reduced preparation time for lessons, food, and cleaning as well as additional sick time as a result of the increased stress. With a lack of qualified ECE or ECEA staff, meeting adult-child ratios is sometimes impossible, or results in having lower qualified staff ('responsible adult') assisting, who are unable to provide the same level of direct care for children. Care providers also often work while they are ill as the alternative is closing the program for the day and turning away families who depend on their services. Child care employers report they are faced with hiring or retaining staff that are not the best fit simply because they are qualified under the licensing regulations. They also report that children with extra support needs sometimes don't get the attention they need due to shortages of qualified staff.

Children

Among all parent survey respondents, over 42% indicated they would seek formal child care in order to support their child's development. Additionally, many parents shared comments about the value of formal child care to support social interaction and development skills. Families also spoke about the impact of the cost of care reducing their ability to pay for other things, including extra-curricular activities such as sports, music lessons, and other experiences. Children with special needs may be particularly impacted by staff shortages as this limits opportunities for additional attention to those children's needs. More than one parent reported that their child care had been disrupted because staff were unable to meet their special needs' child's support needs due to staff shortages in the facility.

The Early Child Development Instrument (EDI) measures child vulnerability at kindergarten. In Williams Lake, data demonstrates that 40% of children in Williams Lake are vulnerable on one or more vulnerability scales at kindergarten entry. This is significantly higher than the provincial average of 33% of children, and further supports the need for access to quality child care.

Families

The shortage of child care spaces has important implications for families, both in terms of access to quality child care services as well as effects on financial stability and mental health. Families struggle to find care at all, let alone having a choice of child care providers or types of care. Parents who have a second child often have to continue to pay for care for their toddler in order to keep their child care space, despite having a parent at home on maternity leave who could, and wishes to care for both children at home until returning to work.

Parent comments from the survey also indicate that access to child care is important for the mental health of families, and particularly mothers.

In our parent survey, 73% of respondents indicated a fear of losing employment due to lack of child care availability. Further, 68% reported the inability to secure child care would affect their ability to pay household bills, including housing, and 84% worried about the impact on their ability to retain or advance in their career. These are not insignificant challenges. Additionally, many comments were submitted in surveys and key informant interviews that demonstrated the stress that the child care shortage has on parents and families.



“Not being able to secure childcare is one of the most stressful events in my life that I’ve gone through.”

...

“I was able to rest and take care of my mental health with child care. I had post partum depression that lead to suicidality and homicidality. Having secure consistent childcare has been life changing for my entire family.”

Gender roles, childcare and financial stability of families

The gendered nature of child care responsibilities is well established in research and this is substantiated by our survey data. Overall, 92% of survey respondents were women and over 62% of them indicated they are primarily responsible for securing child care. The income disparity between men and women in Williams Lake is substantial:



	Males	Females
Median Income of individuals 15 yrs and older	\$48,628	\$26,323
Average Income of individuals 15 yrs and older	\$54,950	\$32,256
Average after tax income of individuals 15 yrs and older	\$45,364	\$28,653

This issue is of particular concern in a community that is dependent on resource industries where the primary labour force and employment is geared toward males, while women are more likely to be employed in lower wage service sectors. Given the current state of the forest and mining industry disruption, the impact on families is significant where the male partner loses employment, experiences employment precariousness or has reduced income. This scenario generally results in women needing to re-enter the workforce, or increase employment, which often is dependent on access to child care.

Community and Economic Impacts

This issue also has a significant impact on the community at large, including a significant economic impact. We have labour shortages in many sectors, and particular challenges in recruiting and retaining professionals in a variety of fields. Many parents reported they have left jobs, and are considering leaving the community due to the inability to find child care. Health care needs in particular are growing and staff shortages in health care are impacting access to health care. Nursing shortages have resulted in several weeks of closure of maternity care,



“You will also be losing a nurse in the community due to childcare... we were unable to get a spot before her maternity and parental leaves were finished.”

and very nearly closed the Emergency department in our hospital. Several nurses completed our survey and indicated they have left their employment or moved to self-employment options because they were unable to find child care. Others reported they are facing the difficult decision of having to leave their jobs and career path because child care is not available once they complete their maternity leave.

Child Care Needs

Space utilization and needs

Currently availability for all types of childcare are extremely limited. One group child care centre we spoke with has 300 children on their wait list, and report that it typically takes three years before a waitlisted child is offered a space. There are particular pressures on Infant/Toddler care and After School care. Infant/Toddler care is particularly impacted by staffing challenges as there are higher adult-child ratios in this age group, as well as requirements for Infant-toddler specialized ECE licences. One group centre reported they have 134 children on their waitlist, and 85 of those were children who required an infant-toddler spot (0-3 years). We currently have 36 licenced group care spaces for children under age 3 (infant/toddler), however there are currently at least 17 vacant spaces due to staffing shortages and demand is therefore nearly triple the current capacity. We have identified that across all types of care there are 68 unutilized spaces because there are no staff available to fill positions required to open those spaces.

Estimating the number of child care spaces needed in a community is extremely challenging as there is no standardized methodology for doing so, and the landscape is complex. Varmuza, Perlman and White (2019)⁴ reported early childhood utilization rates in Canada in their research on understanding implications for demand and oversight of early childhood education programs. They found that nationally 54% of all children regularly use some type of formal, regulated, early childhood education program, and for working families this rose to 76.5%. In BC, 49% of all children accessed early childhood education programs regularly and this rose to 75% of all children in families with full-time working parents.

The above research guided our estimations of need; however we recognize this is far from a standardized approach and many under or over-estimate the need in any particular community since demographic, economic and labour force considerations are complex and often drive demand for childcare. There are approximately 350 births per year in Williams Lake. However, women from surrounding communities in the region also give birth in our hospital. A review of the 2016 Census reports that in the Williams Lake Census Agglomeration Area^{5 6}, there are approximately 200 children in each age year (ie. 200 one-year old's) spread across the age categories below:

⁴ International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy. 2019. 13:7 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-019-0063-8>

⁵ <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CMACA&Code1=950&Geo2=PR&Code2=59&SearchText=williams+lake&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&TABID=1&type=0>

⁶ This area represents a total population of 18,275 and includes the City of Williams Lake plus residential areas north to McLeese Lake, west to the Fraser River and south through the communities encompassed by the Dog Creek Road area to Springhouse. It does not include the Hwy 97 corridor from the southeast edge of the City boundary through 150 Mile House or communities east of the highway (ie. Miocene, Horsefly, Likely).

995 children 0-4 years
 1030 children 5-9 years
 1025 children 10-14 years

Additionally, we have anecdotal reports of an increase in families with young children moving to the community in greater numbers, and this is supported by a slight gradual rise in kindergarten registration numbers of about 10% since 2014⁷. If we utilize the 2016 Census data and extend the BC average of 49% of all children requiring early childhood care to the number of children in Williams Lake, at minimum we would require the following number of spaces:

	Child Population Estimate	# Spaces needed if 49% of children need care	Current # of Licenced Spaces	Additional spaces needed
Infant Toddler Care – Birth - 36 months	398	195	58 ⁸	137
3-5-year-old care	398	195	202 ⁹	Limited
Preschool – 4-year olds only	200	98	156 ¹⁰	Limited
School Age – 5-12-year olds	1430	700	189	500+

We only have a total of 260 licenced daycare spaces for children 0-5 years (IF centers could fully staff all programs – currently only approximately 224 are in operation due to staffing shortages) and there are 995 children in this age category. If 49% of children require child care, this leaves a gap of 228 licenced spaces, even if all existing spaces were staffed.

For infants and toddlers (0-36 months), there are approximately 58 licenced spaces, with only 19 actually available due to staffing shortages. Most family daycares also have maximized their allowable infant numbers. Accommodating 49% of one- and two-year olds would require approximately 196 spaces. This leaves the community with a 168-space shortage for infants and toddlers.

With 1030 children in the 5-9-year-old category in Williams Lake, and only 190 after school spaces, this area of care is also severely lacking for number of spaces. While older children (11-13 years) may be left with older siblings or even home alone for short periods, a conservative estimate indicates a need for up to an additional 500 after-school spaces, which would require more than doubling our current spaces.

Preschool is the only type of care where the availability is closer to the demand, but even those spaces have significant wait lists – indicating that the demand for preschool is likely higher than the estimated demand.

⁷ Data provided by School District #27

⁸ Assumes that every Family Daycare has two children under age 3 in their care

⁹ This includes all multi-age and group care plus assumes each in-home family centre has 5 spaces for 3-5 year olds

¹⁰ Many families send their 3-year old to preschool, so there is likely significantly more demand than noted here



Child Care Access, Location and Inclusion

Williams Lake does not seem to have a significant challenge with current locations of childcare. Most of the population using child care reported getting to and from their child care center by personal vehicle. Currently in Williams Lake most facilities are accessible and parents report a no longer than 15-minute drive, or a short walk from their work or home, to their child care center, which leads to the conclusion that current facilities are located in the high need areas of the City.

The City of Williams Lake currently has no licensed child care that operates outside of a 7:30 am – 6:00 pm schedule. This is identified anecdotally as a need in the community. As well, 26% of parent survey respondents indicated they work shift work that affects their childcare needs, with 12+ hour shifts with a commute and/or swing shifts' coming in at a 5% need by survey respondents.

In the City of Williams Lake there is currently not enough child care to meet the needs of the general population, let alone the underserved population in the City. There are currently no designated 'wrap around' programs, except those attached to preschool programs. Even Kid Care Daycare, with designated spots for young parents and Ministry of Children and Family clients, they are only able to provide minimal supports as all staff are working ECE or ECE assistants in the program-and not counsellors or outreach workers.

Child care for Indigenous children and families is currently available in outlying First Nations communities, as well as an Aboriginal pre-school program and soon to open group day care with 25 spaces. No child care facilities exist for other language and cultural groups. This is not determined to be a significant priority at this time as the population of children in this group is small and very diverse.

Child Care Action Plan Recommendations

Immediate/Short-Term (1 year)

- Establish an implementation working group and plan to ensure recommendations from the Community Child Care Action Plan are actioned at the local level with input from local child care providers and leadership from the City of Williams Lake;
- Advocate for resources to support communities to implement Child Care Action Plans at the local level;
- Municipal advocacy for additional provincial funds to address wage lifts that will incentivize entry and retention of staff in the Early Childhood Education field;
- Municipal advocacy to release existing child care facilities from funding contracts that prevent fee increases that could support wage increases;
- Community wide/sector wide recruitment strategy to attract ECE certified staff from other regions – drawing on lifestyle and housing affordability incentives;
- Request that provincial government develop guidance or standard methodology for estimating child care space needs based on child population
- Pursue capital funding opportunities to immediately expand public spaces for after-school and school break child care needs;
 - Explore potential and build support for substantial expansion of the Rec and Roll program by building an expansion at the Cariboo Memorial Recreation Complex that would provide dedicated, co-located space for after school and school break programs. This could be City operated or contracted to a non-profit society to deliver services, but should include access to existing recreation facilities.

Intermediate Term (1-2 years)

- Establish increased local access to ECE training that meets the needs of the community and facilitates entry to this field by local people who are most likely to remain in the community
- Develop a strategy to increase access to training for Infant-Toddler and Special Needs specialization certificates locally and to increase wages for those who complete this training
- Prioritize new child care spaces development for infant-toddler care
- Community partners to work collaboratively to promote and support the development of new in-home licenced family daycares
 - Family daycare training
 - Licencing support
 - Business training
 - Development of a community grant program to support start-up costs

Long Term (2-5 years)

- Explore implications of a property tax based supplement to raise funds for child care services to address local community needs.
- Explore opportunities for further development of new publicly owned child care centres co-located with school re-development and new multi-unit housing developments in partnership with School District #27, Thompson Rivers University, and local non-profit organizations

Role of local government

We recognize that the City of Williams Lake does not have jurisdictional responsibility for provision of child care services or for addressing the current child care shortage. However, the reality of the impact of the childcare crisis is that there are significant short and long-term implications for the economic and social well-being of the local community. This should be of considerable concern and interest to local government as it affects economic stability in the short-medium term, as well as quality of life issues for residents. At the same time, local government resources are already stretched and the impact of perceived downloading of responsibility from other levels of government without associated resources is a real challenge for local governments.

A review of bylaws and policy related to zoning shows that there are few if any barriers to the development of new child care facilities. The City of Williams Lake currently operates an after-school program on location at the recreation centre, as well as a summer break day camp that serves large numbers of children. This should be seen as both a significant commitment to the child care needs, and an opportunity for future expansion of services. Initial conversations with City staff indicate an interest and willingness to explore possible future expansion of these programs. This would require the development of additional physical space, in particular a building expansion at the recreation complex. This is a complex undertaking as the building is owned by the Cariboo Regional District but operated by the City of Williams Lake, so there are two local government bodies that would be required to cooperate to achieve this. Utilization of the Child Care Capital Fund could support this expansion, and would contribute to addressing the substantial shortage of after-school spaces. City staff have limited resources for the planning and feasibility study, so external funds may be required to complete a feasibility study and business/concept plan.