

Appendix A: Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care System Directed Growth Strategy 2025-2026

Background

As the service system manager for child care and early years in the region, Oxford County is responsible for planning, monitoring and managing licensed child care and early years programs and services for children aged 0-12 years at the local level.

Oxford County's five-year Child Care and Early Years Plan was developed with a focus on the Ontario Government's vision for accessible, affordable, responsive, and high-quality child care, as well as the County's mission to improve social, environmental, and economic well-being.¹

The Plan centres on five key priorities:

1. Increase access to child care and early years programs and services.
2. Support inclusive and responsive programs and services.
3. Enhance the quality of child care and early years programs and services.
4. Provide more affordable child care and early years.
5. Use evidence to improve outcomes for children and families.

As the County plans for the next five years, it acknowledges that family and community needs evolve, and that provincial and federal priorities can shift.

On March 27, 2022, the federal and provincial governments signed the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement, aimed at lowering child care costs and improving access, quality and inclusion across Ontario's child care and early years sector. This approach shifted child care expansion from open enrolment to a directed growth plan, ensuring new child care spaces are created in communities that need them most. Ontario's vision for the CWELCC system is to ensure more children of all abilities and socio-economic backgrounds can actively and meaningfully participate in child care, while being supported in forming authentic, caring relationships with their peers and educators.

In alignment with Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework², developed by the Ministry of Education to support service system planning with an increased focus on access as it relates to inclusion, Oxford County has developed this Directed Growth Strategy to support access to child care spaces based on priority community needs such as:

- Children living in low-income families;
- Vulnerable children;
- Children with special needs;
- Francophone families;
- Indigenous families;
- Children from diverse communities;

¹ Oxford County 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, <https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/Your-Government/Corporate-performance/Strategic-plan>

² Ontario Ministry of Education. (2023, June). Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework 2023: Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care System.

- Newcomer families;
- Families needing more flexible models of care, including evening, weekend and overnight care; and,
- Neighbourhoods with less than a 37% access rate (underserved communities).

By prioritizing communities with limited access to child care spaces, Oxford County aims to leverage Ministry growth targets and associated funding allocations to support the creation of new spaces in identified priority communities.

Ontario's Child Care Vision

Ontario's vision for the CWELCC system is to ensure that more families have access to high quality, affordable, flexible and inclusive early learning and child care, regardless of where they live. Under the CWELCC agreement, Ontario will support the creation of 86,000 new CWELCC licensed child care spaces by the end of 2026 (relative to 2019).

Supporting Ontario's child care vision, the CWELCC system is providing the following benefits to families and licensed child care staff:

- Families accessing care through a participating program have experienced significant reductions in child care fees for children under 6 years. As of January 1, 2025, families with children in programs enrolled in the CWELCC system have seen child care base fees capped at \$22 per day.
 - Child care fees are expected to reach an average of \$10 per day by the end of 2026.
- Low earning Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) working in a participating program are now receiving a minimum wage of \$24.86 per hour.
 - In 2026, this minimum wage for RECEs will increase to \$25.86 per hour.

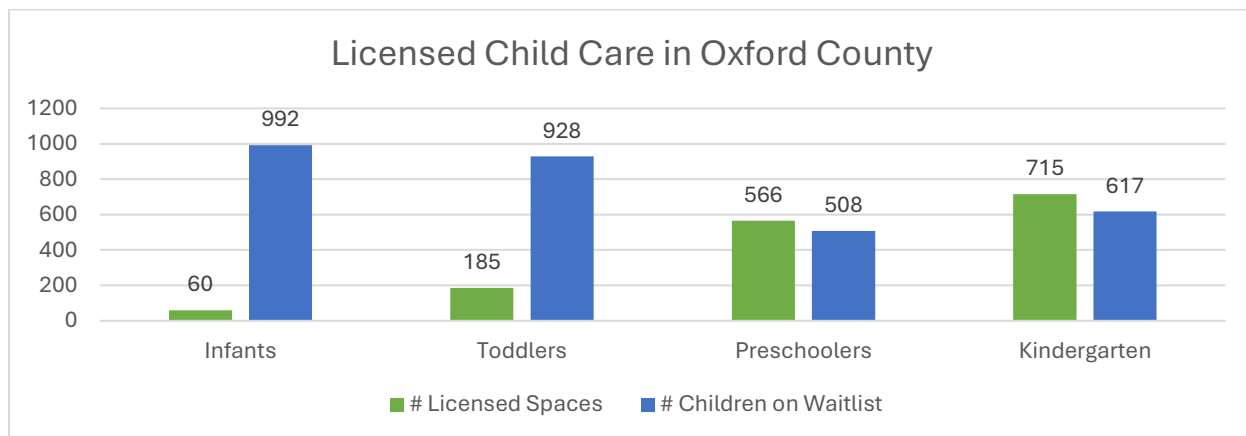
Beginning in 2025, the Ministry of Education implemented a new cost-based funding formula for CWELCC-enrolled child care operators serving children aged 0-5 age. Cost-based funding provides operating support to licensees participating in the CWELCC system to deliver affordable child care to eligible children.

Oxford County Human Services is responsible for planning, managing and overseeing licensed child care and early years programs and services across the County. This includes managing and directing the CWELCC system at a local level.

Licensed Child Care

Oxford County works with child care operators to provide community-based and school-based child care centres, as well as licensed home child care options throughout the County. The availability of child care spaces varies across the County, as does the demand for care. Overall, the demand for child care in Oxford County has resulted in significant waitlists, particularly for infants and toddlers. Table 1 highlights the number of centre-based spaces, by age group, as well as the waitlist information for children seeking care in 2025 or later (as of June 30, 2025).

Table 1: Licensed Child Care Spaces and Waitlist (by age group)

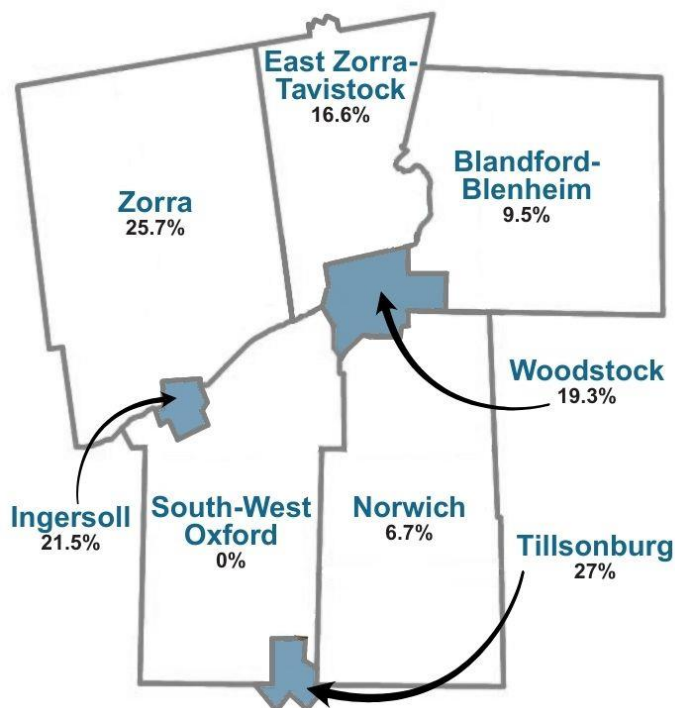


Additionally, as of June 2025, there were 52 licensed home child care providers across the County, providing support with up to 6 spaces per home for children aged 0-12.

Identifying Priority Areas for Child Care Growth

Oxford County’s directed growth plan identifies regions with insufficient access to licensed child care to meet the provincial target access rate of 37%. This information has been determined based on the number of children aged 5 and under in each municipality, as well as the number of licensed child care spaces available in that municipality. Graphic 1 illustrates the access rate to licensed centre-based spaces for children aged 5 and under within each of the County’s eight area municipalities.

Graphic 1: Access Rate for Children 5 and Under (by municipality)



With an overall average access rate of 17.5% to licensed centre-based child care, for children aged 5 and under, the County falls well below the provincial target of 37%, with some communities further below that target.

Notwithstanding the above, as approximately 5 of every 6 licensed home child care spaces are being utilized by CWELCC-eligible children, there are an additional 260 spaces available in the County, improving the overall access rate to 20.5% for children aged 5 and under.

Note: by removing centre-based Kindergarten spaces that are historically over-licensed, and underutilized, the access rate for children 0-4 falls to 14.9% for licensed centre-based and home-based child care spaces in the County (assuming 5 spaces at each licensed home is used by a child aged 0-4).

Child Care Expansion 2025-2026

On March 31, 2025, the Ministry of Education provided an update to municipalities across the province for CWELCC-funded space targets. Table 2 outlines the changes to the CWELCC expansion spaces for 2024-2026 in Oxford County.

Table 2: Changes to Spaces Allocated for Expansion in Oxford County

	Initial Allocation (May 2023)			Updated Allocation (March 2025)		
	2024	2025	2026	2024	2025	2026
Total Spaces	528	414	829	130	184	131
School-based	88	88	0	0	88	88
Community-based	440	326	829	130	96	43

In 2024, Oxford County increased the number of CWELCC spaces by 176 spaces, including a new child care centre in Zorra, increased spaces at a preschool program, and additional licensed home child care spaces. As this expansion work exceeds the revised 2024 allocation of spaces (130), 46 spaces have been taken from the already reduced 2025 allocation, being 184 (as approved by the Ministry of Education), leaving 138 spaces for 2025.

Although there are 138 remaining directed growth spaces available in 2025, with the conversion of two previously non-participating programs into the CWELCC system, and the addition of new licensed home child care spaces, the 2025 allocation has been achieved.

Looking forward to 2026, Oxford County will realize growth through a school-based project, which will see an 88-space child care centre at Turtle Island School in Woodstock, as well as 26 spaces for kindergarten. An additional school-based project is also anticipated.

The updated projected total number of spaces for children aged 0 to 5 years in the County by the end of 2026 is 1,972. This is expected to improve the access rate to 22.5% for children aged 0 to 5.

Directed Growth Strategy

As new CWELCC spaces and associated funding is provided to the County, and to ensure a fair and transparent process for the awarding of future child care spaces, a competitive procurement process will be initiated through a Request for Proposal to achieve targets. Efforts will focus on addressing gaps in child care spaces across the County to improve access for children aged 0 to 5, with a focus on those communities with limited access to existing child care services (ie. below the County average of 17.5%) being:

- Township of South-West Oxford
- Township of Norwich
- Township of Blandford-Blenheim
- Township of East Zorra-Tavistock

Through collaboration, innovation, dedication, a supportive network of services can be built to nurture children and families in Oxford County.