



# Child Care and Early Years System Plan 2025-29

Oxford County

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# Executive Summary

A robust child care and early years system in Oxford County is critical. It underpins the healthy development of young children, supports the overall well-being of families, and helps to stimulate the local economy by unlocking workforce potential and attracting new people and businesses to the community.

Oxford County's five-year Child Care and Early Years Plan is 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.<sup>1</sup> In developing this Plan, the County has listened to valuable feedback from parents, caregivers, child care operators, educators, municipal leaders, and community service providers.

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 programs and services
- 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. Against this backdrop, the County will treat this Plan as a living document that is updated as required to meet the needs of children, families, and the broader community.

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford County 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, [https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/en/publications/2022-2024/OC\\_2023\\_2026\\_StrategicPlan\\_upd20230918\\_A\\_web.pdf](https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/en/publications/2022-2024/OC_2023_2026_StrategicPlan_upd20230918_A_web.pdf).

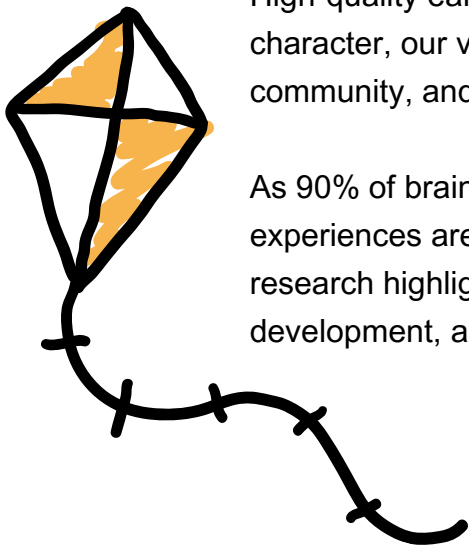
# Terms & Definitions

- **Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care System (CWELCC):** a federal initiative aimed at making child care more affordable and accessible for families across Canada by reducing fees and increasing the availability of spaces.
- **Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014:** Ontario legislation that sets standards for the licensing, operation, and regulation of child care services and early learning programs to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of children.
- **Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM):** a local government or regional authority responsible for planning, funding, and managing social services, including child care, early years programs, and other community services, in a specific geographic area, ensuring alignment with provincial policies and local needs.
- **Early Childcare Assistant (ECA):** a professional who supports ECEs and RECEs in providing care and educational activities for young children, assisting with daily routines, monitoring children's well-being, and helping to create a safe and nurturing learning environment.
- **Early Childhood Educator (ECE):** a professional who works with young children to support their development and learning.
- **Early Development Instrument (EDI):** a tool used to assess the developmental progress of children in their early years, typically in areas such as physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, and language skills, helping to identify community-level trends and inform early intervention programs.
- **"How Does Learning Happen?":** Ontario's pedagogy for early years education, which emphasizes a play-based, inquiry-driven approach to learning, recognizing that children learn best through relationships, exploration, and active engagement with their environment, while fostering a sense of belonging, well-being, expression, and engagement.

- **Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE):** an ECE who has met additional certification requirements and is officially registered with a regulatory body, ensuring they adhere to professional standards and ethical guidelines.
- **Special Needs Resourcing (SNR):** services and supports provided to children with special needs in early childhood settings, such as additional staffing, specialized equipment, and tailored programming, to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, can participate in and benefit from early learning experiences.

# Early Childhood Experiences Matter

Early childhood experiences and access to quality child care and early years programs are vital to our community, and play a pivotal role in shaping a person's future.



High-quality early years experiences lay the foundation upon which our character, our values, our relationships, our sense of belonging in our community, and our overall mental, physical and emotional health are built.<sup>2</sup>

As 90% of brain development happens in the first five years, these early experiences are key to shaping healthy, capable adults.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, research highlights a clear relationship between early childhood development, academic performance, and adult literacy competence.<sup>4 5</sup>

It is essential for Oxford County to lead and support initiatives that enhance early experiences. By doing so, the County can have a profound impact on the community at large, influencing economic outcomes, educational success and overall emotional well-being.

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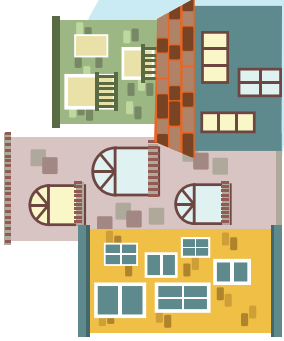
<sup>2</sup> Melhuish E, et al (2015). A Review of Research on the Effects of Early Childhood Education and Care on Child Development.

<sup>3</sup> Honourable Margaret Norrie McCain (2020). Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society. Toronto: Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.

<sup>4</sup> McCain M, Mustard F, Shanker S. Early Years Study 2: Putting Science into Action. Toronto: Council for Early Child Development; 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Mustard JF. Early child development and experience-based brain development: The scientific underpinnings of the importance of early child development in a globalized world. Washington: The Brookings Institution; 2006.

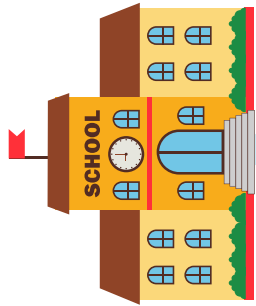
Lifts families out of poverty, provides support for solo parents, connects families within the community, helps to educate new parents, and serves as a gender equity tool for women who typically bear greater child care responsibilities



## A thriving child care and early years sector benefits the whole community



Prepares children for better academic outcomes



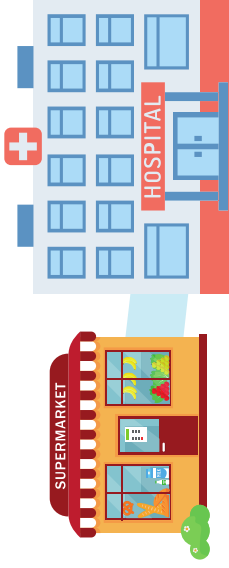
Frees up workers for key industries, stimulating the local economy



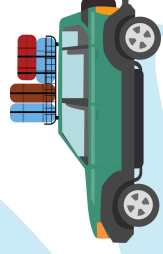
Enhances children's social, emotional, and cognitive development; provides early intervention for children with special needs; and provides a safe space for play and exploration



Boosts the local workforce so small businesses can thrive



Frees up essential workers so that residents can access critical services



Attracts new families to the community

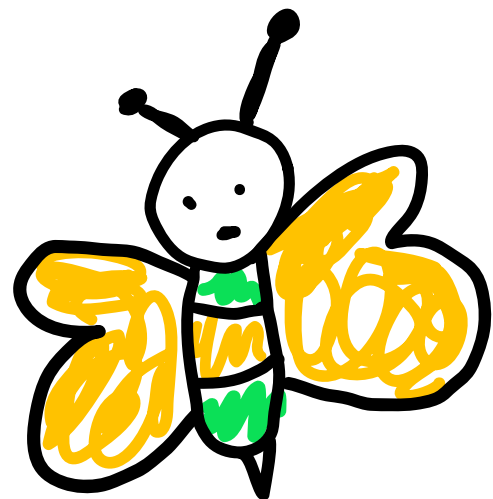
## Economic impact

Investing in early childhood experiences is not just beneficial for individual children and families, but also for the larger economy. Quality child care and early years programs can lead to a more educated and skilled workforce in the future. A strong child care and early years system supports the local economy by enabling more parents to work and attracting skilled workers to the area, while creating jobs within the system itself. Research suggests that for every dollar invested in early childhood programs, there is a significant return on investment, with estimates suggesting returns as high as \$5.80 per dollar spent.<sup>6</sup>

*Early childhood education is an efficient and effective investment for economic and workforce development. The earlier the investment, the greater the return on investment.<sup>7</sup>*

## Early childhood intervention

Research highlights that the first 2,000 days in a person's life, during infancy and early childhood, are critical for the development of thinking skills, language, and well-being.<sup>8</sup> Early childhood intervention is therefore essential, as it provides



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<sup>6</sup> Alexander, C., Beckman, K., Macdonald, A., Renner, C., & Stewart, M. (2017). Ready for Life: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Early Childhood Education and Care. P. 19. The Conference Board of Canada.

<sup>7</sup> Heckman, University of Chicago Center for the Economics of Human Development, available at <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>.

<sup>8</sup> Honourable Margaret Norrie McCain (2020). Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society. Toronto: Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc.

support and resources to children and families during these formative years. This intervention can have long-lasting positive effects on cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Early intervention can also ensure timely identification of developmental delays or social-emotional challenges, and ensure that children are provided with the specialized supports they need to thrive.



### **Improved developmental outcomes**

By providing timely support, children can overcome developmental delays and improve their cognitive and motor skills



### **Enhanced social skills**

Early intervention helps children develop better communication and social interaction skills, which are crucial for success in school and beyond



### **Increased academic success**

Children who participate in early intervention programs often perform better academically, as they enter school more prepared and confident



### **Reduced need for special needs resourcing**

By addressing potential issues early, the need for special needs resourcing services later in life can be minimized



### **Empowered families**

Families gain knowledge and skills to support their child's development fostering a more supportive home environment

# Access to high-quality early learning programs

High-quality early learning programs require knowledgeable educators who develop positive, responsive relationships with children and their families. They provide safe, inclusive, fun environments and opportunities for children to actively explore new ideas and activities, create new connections with others and develop complex communication, thinking and problem-solving skills. These programs, developed in partnership with families, play a pivotal role in setting a strong developmental foundation and fostering a love of learning and curiosity.

Characteristics of a high-quality early learning program include:

- **Qualified educators** – staff who are well-trained and passionate about early childhood education.
- **Safe and nurturing environments** – facilities that provide a secure and engaging space for children to learn and explore.
- **Inclusive practices** – programs that accommodate and celebrate diversity, ensuring all children have access to learning opportunities.
- **Responsive curriculum** – a balanced approach that includes play-based learning, structured activities and opportunities for creative expression, based on observation and reflection.
- **Family involvement** – encouraging families to contribute ideas and be engaged in enhancing learning experiences and outcomes.



## Strategic planning

To maximize the impact of child care and early years programs, it is important for service system managers to collaborate with key partners across the community. Sharing best practices, combining resources, and leaning on one another for support helps to create a future where every child can reach their full potential. Through collaboration, innovation, and dedication, a supportive network of services can be built to nurture children and families in Oxford County and neighbouring communities.



# About Us

Oxford County is a two-tier municipal government made up of eight area municipalities, with a mix of urban and rural communities.

As the service system manager for child care and early years in our 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.

The County's mission is to deliver responsible and responsive services that improve the community's social, environmental, and economic well-being. Its vision is focused on working together for a healthy, vibrant and sustainable future.<sup>9</sup>

Our key values are:



**Excellence** – demonstrated organizational and individual leadership, responsive, cooperative and professional service.



**Accountability** – willing acceptance of responsibility, demonstrated commitment to issue resolution, the courage to persevere, and the confidence to embrace change.



**Innovation** – solutions-oriented, forward-thinking and committed to continuous improvement.



**Integrity** – beyond reproach and operating to the highest ethical standard – open, honest and fair.



**Teamwork** – respectful relationships characterized by valuing diversity and the views and contributions of others – a demonstrated commitment to coordination, open communication, and knowledge transfer.

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<sup>9</sup> Oxford County 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, [https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/en/publications/2022-2024/OC\\_2023\\_2026\\_StrategicPlan\\_upd20230918\\_A\\_web.pdf](https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/en/publications/2022-2024/OC_2023_2026_StrategicPlan_upd20230918_A_web.pdf).



**Sustainability** – conscious and proactive effort to ensure the long-term viability of the County, its environment and everything that makes it a great place to live.



**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion** – fostering a culture where everyone is welcomed, valued and celebrated.

In Ontario, service system managers are designated under the Child Care and Early Years Act (2014) to manage child care services and early years programs. The Human Services Department at Oxford County delivers on the roles and responsibilities of the service system manager for child care and early years, including:



System planning

Capacity building

Policy development

Special needs resourcing

Funding and resource allocation

Accountability for public investment

Child care system expansion initiatives

Direct delivery of the child care fee subsidy program

Direct delivery of the EarlyON Child & Family program

# Child Care & Early Years in Oxford County

The child care and early years system in Oxford County works collaboratively to provide a quality early learning experience for children aged 0-12 years across the community.

## Licensed child care

Licensed child care is regulated by the Ministry of Education and adheres to the minimum standards of the Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014. Programs are available for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarten and school-age children in both centre-based and home-based care settings.



At the close of 2024, licensed child care programs were provided through:

13

**centre-based locations** across Oxford County, located in each of Ingersoll, Norwich, Tavistock, Thamesford, Tillsonburg and Woodstock. These centres account for 50 infant spaces, 155 toddler spaces, and 510 preschool spaces.

32

**home-based child care providers** that have been licensed by one of two licensed home child care agencies in Oxford County, providing care for up to 192 children.

33

**before and after school programs** located in Drumbo, Embro, Hickson, Ingersoll, Innerkip, Norwich, Plattsville, Tavistock, Tillsonburg and Woodstock.

In total, at the end of 2024, there were approximately 3,036 licensed child care spaces in Oxford County.

## Special needs resourcing

Providing adequate resources for children with special needs in child care and early years settings is crucial to supporting positive outcomes for capacity within the educators supporting children in early learning environments, resources and supports can be implemented to achieve developmental milestones that are unique to each child's potential.



# EarlyON Child & Family Centres



Oxford EarlyON Child and Family Centres are 100% provincially funded programs that offer free, high-quality, inclusive programs for parents and caregivers with children aged 0-6 years to participate in early learning experiences together. Facilitators trained in early childhood development are available to provide guidance and make connections to broader community services, many of whom use the EarlyON spaces to connect with families and provide much-needed services or consultations.

With permanent spaces in each of Ingersoll, Tillsonburg and Woodstock, and additional weekly community spaces in each of Embro, Innerkip, Mount Elgin, Norwich, Otterville, Plattsville, Princeton, Tavistock and Thamesford, EarlyON programs provided an average of 284 hours of programming each month in 2024 to 4,367 unique individuals for 32,822 visits at programs across the community.

In 2021, Oxford County began directly operating the EarlyON programs. The County has seen a significant increase in the number of parents, caregivers and children accessing these programs since then.

Year	Visits by children	Year-on-year increase	Visits by parents / caregivers	Year-on-year increase
2021*	981		768	
2022	5,674	+ 478%	4,341	+ 465%
2023	15,530	+ 174%	11,645	+ 168%
2024	18,891	+ 22%	13,931	+ 20%

\*Programs limited by COVID-19 precautions.

# Child care fee subsidy

Even with the reduced parent fees for eligible children aged 0-5 years resulting from the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care system (CWELCC),<sup>10</sup> the cost of care remains out of reach for some families. Child care fee subsidy provides financial assistance to help parents pay for licensed child care so they can go to work or school. Financial eligibility is based on household income and the cost of child care. On average, in 2024, there were 126 families in Oxford County accessing supports through child care fee subsidy each month.

# Child care waitlist

The centralized Oxford County Child Care Waitlist is supported by a third-party agency and provides an online registry for licensed child care spaces in the County. Each licensed child care operator manages their own waitlist and accepts children as space becomes available in their program. The purpose of the centralized waitlist is to eliminate the need for families to contact multiple child care operators to complete separate applications.

At the end of 2024, the number of children on the County Child Care Waitlist, with a preferred start date of 2025 or later, was 1,342. Of those, the type of care being sought: <sup>11</sup>



- 653 infants
- 484 toddlers
- 201 preschool-aged children
- 293 kindergarten-aged children
- 73 school-aged children



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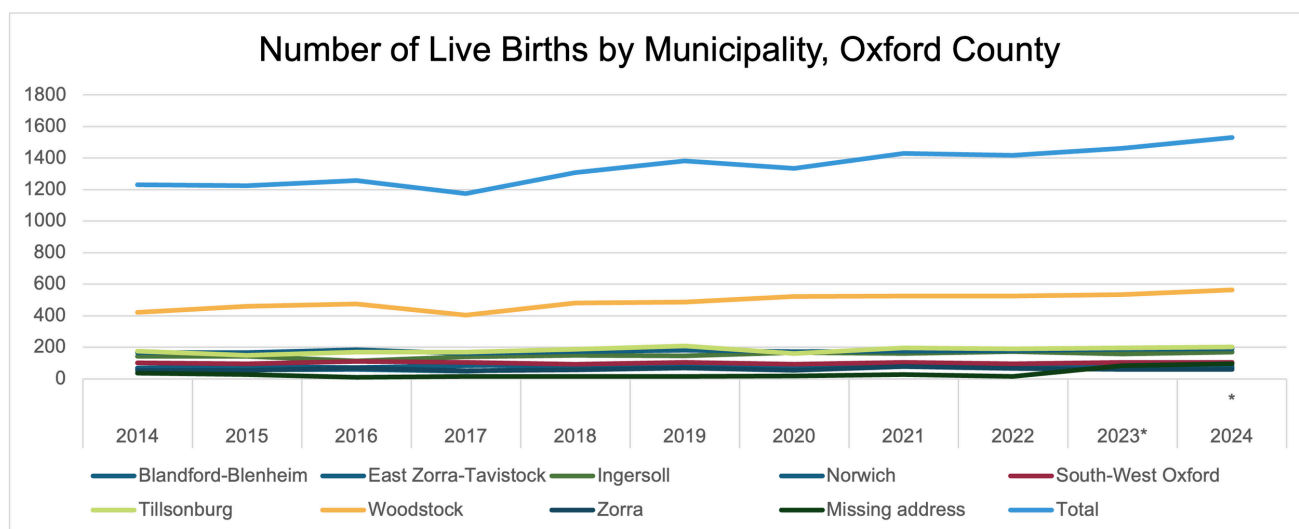
<sup>10</sup> CWELCC, a federal-provincial agreement, aims to provide more accessible child care options and lower fees. This includes reducing fees to an average of \$10 per day for children under the age of 6 in participating licensed child care programs by March 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Note: the same child may be represented in more than one category.

# Oxford County's Demographic Context

Oxford County's population increased by 10% from 110,846 in 2016 to 121,781 in 2021.<sup>12</sup> By 2021, there were 7,200 children aged 0-4 years in the County, representing approximately 6% of the total population. The number of children aged 0-4 years in the County has grown by more than 3% per year, higher than the overall population growth rate of less than 2% per year. Children aged 0-14 years make up 18% of the population, with 22,015 individuals in this age group.

As shown below, the birth rate in Oxford County is increasing steadily, with the highest number of births in Woodstock. The increase in infants and young children emphasizes the need for child care and early years programming in the County. Further details are included in the appendix.

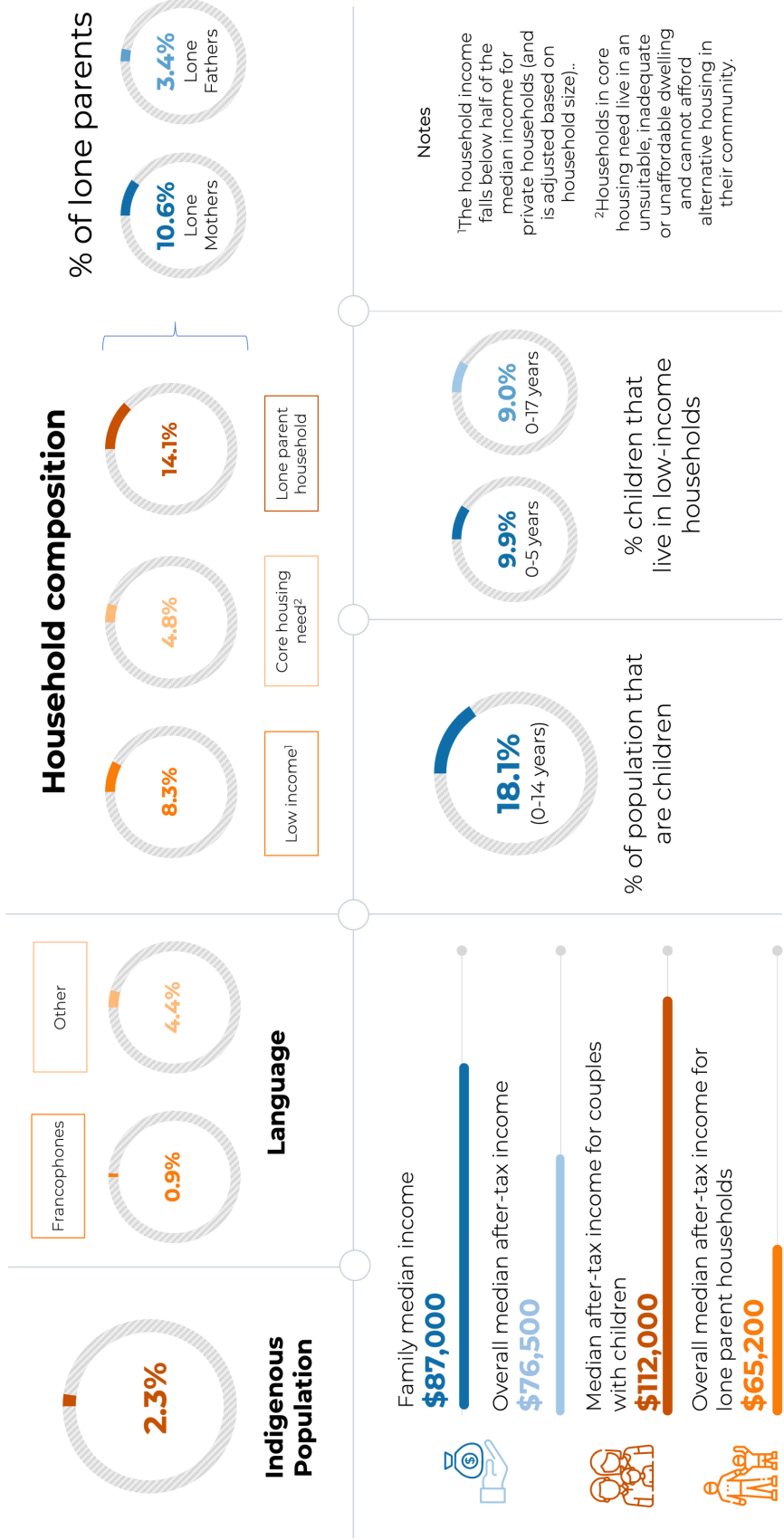


Source: BORN Information System (2014-2024), Date Extracted: February 14, 2025

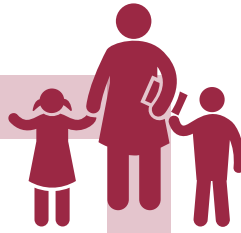
\*Counts from these years are more likely to change as additional records are added.

<sup>12</sup> The information in this section is primarily drawn from Statistics Canada. Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population. Available at <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&GENDERlist=1,2,3&STATISTIClist=1,4&HEADERlist=0&DGUIDlist=2021A00033532&SearchText=Oxford>. The latest reference year is 2021.

# Profile of Oxford County



On average, there are **1.9 children per family** in Oxford County



Approximately **14% are one-parent families**, with about 7% of all children living in single-parent households

**94% of Oxford County residents speak English most often at home**



- 2% speak **French**
- 4.4% speak another language - the most common of these languages include **Punjabi** (1.3%), **Slavic / Balto-Slavic** languages (0.6%), **German** (0.5%) and **Dutch** (0.3%)

**The median total household income** in Oxford County was **\$87,000** in 2020



This is slightly below the provincial average in Ontario of \$91,000.

17% of residents are spending **more than 30% on housing costs**

**The unemployment rate in 2021 was 10%**, consistent with the national unemployment rate



In 2021, 26% of males and 32% of females were working part-time

**9%**

the percentage of **children aged 0-17 years living below the low-income measure** (compared to 11.5% in Ontario)

**10%**

the percentage of **children aged 0-5 years living below the low-income measure** (compared to 12.4% in Ontario)

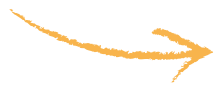
# Early Childhood Education Workforce Profile

In 2023, Oxford County took part in *Knowing Our Numbers*, a collaborative research initiative focused on understanding the challenges faced by the early years workforce in Ontario.

Across Ontario, 43 of 47 service managers participated in a province-wide study to evaluate the child care and early years sector. Data from Oxford County and Huron County were consolidated in consultation with the other regions.



A total of 133 individuals working in early years services in both the County of Huron and County of Oxford responded to the survey that this section addresses. Of these, 79% were Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) and 21% were not registered.



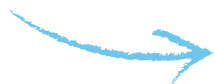
**Wages continue to be a challenge** with more than one quarter of respondents reporting the need to have additional employment to supplement their primary wages.<sup>14</sup>

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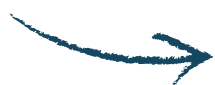
<sup>14</sup> The average reported hourly wage was \$26.



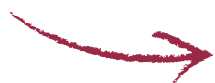
More than one third of respondents reported experiencing **workplace discrimination**, with bullying being a particular challenge.



Less than half of respondents are planning to **stay in the sector** over the next five years and only 45.5% of respondents would recommend a career in the early years.



The most common form of **professional learning** was online delivery (87%) followed by performance reviews (64%) and self-study (62%). Training has focused on a range of topics related to equity, diversity and inclusion – including anti-bias, anti-racism, and anti-oppression education, supporting children with disabilities and cultural diversity.



Respondents were most interested in **professional development** focused on supporting vulnerable families (47.4%) and children with disabilities (45.9%). Respondents also report wanting training in critical trauma-informed practice (40.6%), incorporating land-based learning (39.9%), and supporting newcomer families (38.4%).

# Vision

To build and strengthen Oxford County's child care and early years system to support the needs of children, families, and communities - collaborating to foster a stronger future for all.



# The Plan

Creating a robust child care and early years system is essential for the healthy growth and development of young children and the overall wellbeing of families in our community. A strong system not only provides quality care and early learning opportunities for children, but also fosters community growth and economic stability.

As the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM), Oxford County is required to complete a system-wide plan for all licensed child care and early years programs serving children aged 0-12 years, to ensure that services align with community needs.

The County's five-year Child Care and Early Years Plan reflects the following:

1

**The Ontario Government's vision** for all families to have quality child care and early years programs and services that are accessible, affordable, responsive and high-quality.

2

**Oxford County's mission** to “deliver responsive services that improve the community's social, environmental and economic well-being.”<sup>15</sup>

3

**Feedback** from parents and caregivers, child care operators, educators, local municipal leaders and community services providers.

Creating a dynamic and adaptable child care and early years plan should consider the evolving needs of the community and align with provincial and local directives. This plan will serve as a living document that will be reviewed regularly and updated to ensure it remains relevant and effective.

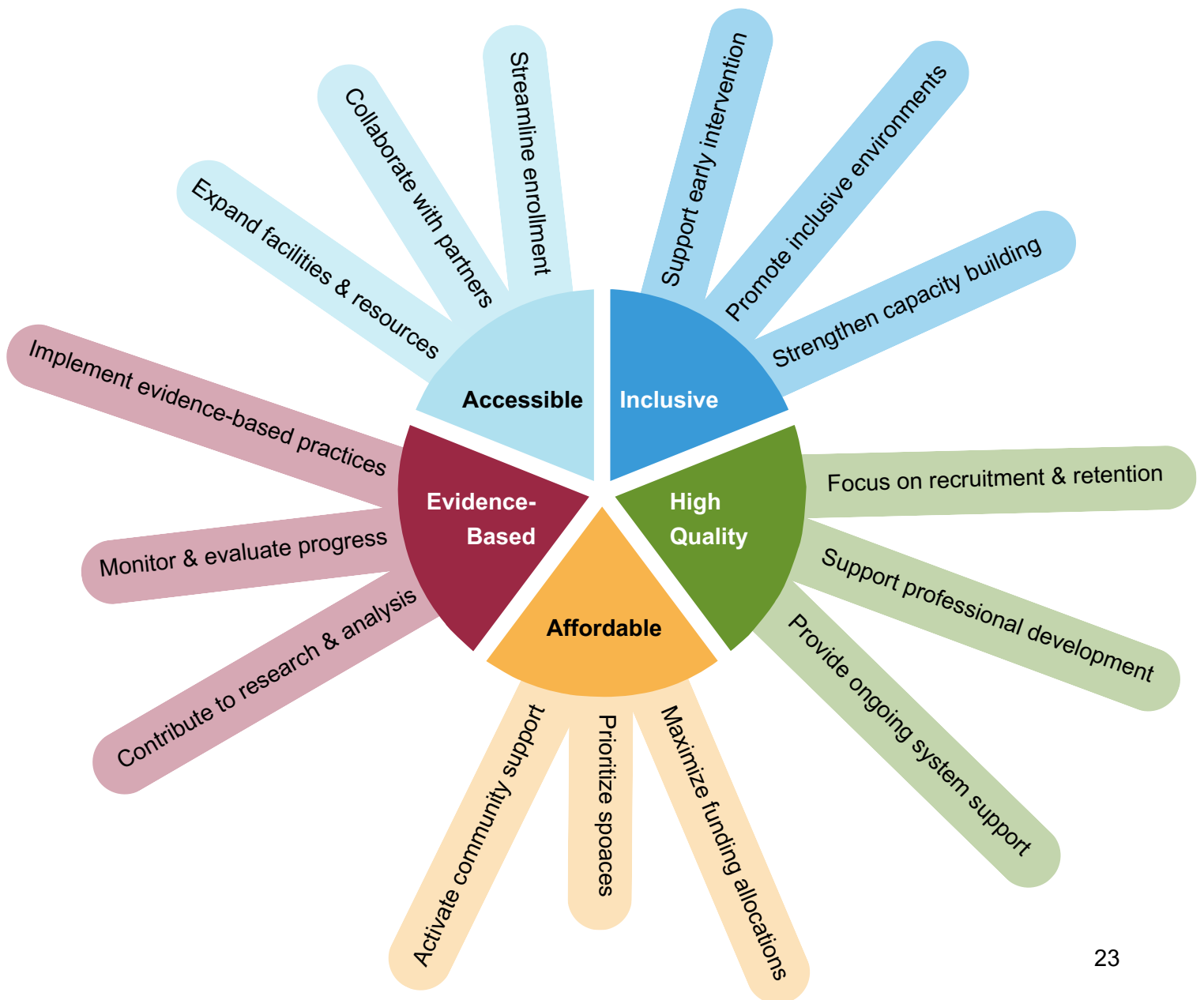
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<sup>15</sup> Oxford County 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, [https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/en/publications/2022-2024/OC\\_2023\\_2026\\_StrategicPlan\\_upd20230918\\_A\\_web.pdf](https://www.oxfordcounty.ca/en/publications/2022-2024/OC_2023_2026_StrategicPlan_upd20230918_A_web.pdf).

# Transforming priorities into actions

This Plan includes five priorities. Each of these includes a set of corresponding action items that the County commits to undertaking, as well as measures for monitoring progress:

- 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 programs and services
- 5 Use **evidence** to improve outcomes for children and families



## Priority 1: Increase access to child care and early years programs

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Ensuring that families have access to child care and early years programs is essential for supporting children’s development, enabling parental workforce participation, and fostering community well-being.

Oxford County will increase access in the following ways:

### Expand facilities and resources



- Implement a directed growth strategy to open new centre-based and licensed home-based child care services in underserved areas, using local data and evidence.
- Increase the number RECEs working in Oxford County by supporting local and provincial recruitment and retention strategies.
- Work with child care operators to explore additional opportunities for increasing flexible care options.
- Create partnerships to provide additional programs and services, based on community need.

### Streamline enrollment processes

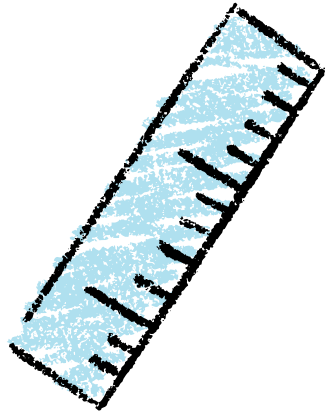


- Improve the service experience for families with clear pathways to accessing the child care waitlist and fee subsidy applications.
- Increase public awareness of child care and early years programs and services so that families can easily find information about the range of programs and services that are available to them.

## Collaborate with community partners



- Establish referral pathways and clear access points to community services that support children and families.
- Create and sustain community partnerships to share leading practices, resources, and supports.



### Measuring progress

- Number of new spaces created.
- Number of licensed and operating spaces in child care.
- Proportion of children who have access to a licensed child care space.
- Number of RECEs.
- Number of children on waitlist.
- Number of parents and caregivers and children attending EarlyON programs.
- Number of families accessing the fee subsidy program.
- Referrals to community services.
- Greater community awareness and participation in available services.

## Priority 2: Support inclusive and responsive programs and services

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Creating inclusive and responsive programs and services in the early years is crucial for promoting a supportive environment for all children to thrive.

Oxford County will support inclusion and responsiveness in the following ways:

### Strengthen professional development and capacity building



- Offer ongoing training and development opportunities for child care and early years professionals to equip them with the skills to support diverse learning needs.
- Build cultural awareness and confidence, enabling early learning professionals to engage with children and families from diverse backgrounds.
- Support strong partnerships between families and child care and early years programs and services to encourage open communication and shared decision-making.

### Promote inclusive environments

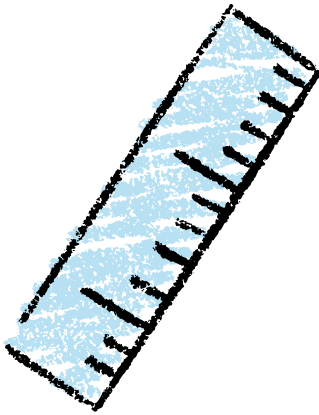


- Ensure physical spaces are accessible to all children.
- Increase the availability of diverse educational materials and resources that reflect the diversity of the community.
- Provide families with information and resources to empower them to support their child's learning and development at home and to support transition to school plans.

## Support early intervention



- Support community-based educational initiatives about a child's development.
- Evaluate current special needs resourcing services and policies to ensure that the child care and early years system is responsive to the needs of children, families and programs.
- Collaborate with community partners to strengthen referral pathways to programs and services that can further support children and families, in sectors related to health, mental health, education, employment, immigration, social services and early intervention supports.



### Measuring progress

- Number of children being supported through special needs resourcing in licensed child care settings.
- Number of professional learning opportunities provided.
- Feedback about implementation of strategies following professional learning opportunities.
- Number of child care and early years professionals participating in professional learning opportunities.
- Data collected through broader system research (including, but not limited to, the Early Development Instrument and the Canadian Database of Development, Infancy to Six)

## Priority 3: Enhance the quality of child care and early years programs and services

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Enhancing the quality of child care and early years programs is essential for fostering a strong foundation for children’s development. Supporting child care and early years professionals is vital to achieving these improvements and advancing quality initiatives.

Oxford County will enhance the quality of child care and early years programs and services in the following ways:

### Focus on workforce recruitment and retention



- Develop and implement a workforce recruitment and retention strategy to sustain the current workforce and increase the number of qualified educators in the community.
- Advocate at provincial tables for equitable and competitive salaries that reflect educators’ qualifications and contributions.

### Support professional development

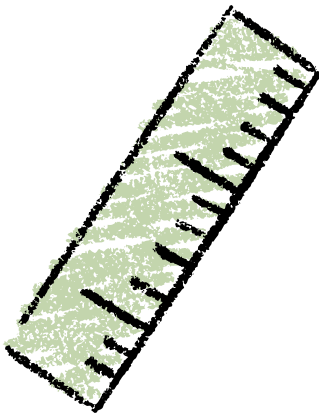


- Support professional practices using *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years* as the framework that guides child care and early years programming to promote social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development.
- Support ongoing professional development opportunities related to child development, mental health awareness, cultural competency and family engagement.
- Collaborate with child care and early years partners to establish mentorship programs that connect experienced educators with those who are entering the field, both within individual organizations and through communities of practice.

## Provide ongoing system support



- Ensure all child care and early years programs meet or exceed provincial standards for health, safety and educational outcomes.
- Collaborate with educational organizations and stakeholders to influence policies and training needs to support new educator learning, placements, and employment.
- Stay informed of changes in provincial guidelines to provide responsive leadership and guidance for planning, managing and allocating resources to the child care and early years system according to legislation, regulations, policies, procedures and practices.



### Measuring progress

- Workforce Recruitment and Retention Strategy implementation.
- Licensed child care programs are fully operational.
- Improved educator satisfaction and retention rates.
- Child Care Operators are well-supported.
- Coordinated initiatives launched through the Children's Services Planning Table.
- Children have access to high-quality learning environments where they thrive.

## Priority 4: Provide more affordable child care

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Affordable child care allows more parents to participate in the workforce, leading to increased family income and economic stability. When more families have access to affordable child care, more children have access to high-quality early childhood learning experiences.

The actions below outline the approach the County will take to optimize the child care and early years resource allocation:

### Maximize funding allocations



- Leverage Provincial and Federal funding to support parent fee reductions.
- Administer child care fee subsidy programs, including cross-jurisdictional agreements with neighbouring municipalities to support child care placements.

### Prioritize spaces

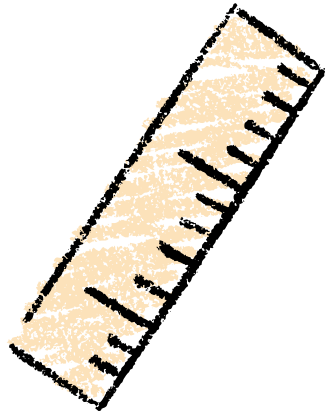


- Explore opportunities to prioritize spaces for families accessing fee subsidy supports.

### Activate community support



- Promote the use of the EarlyON Child and Family Centres as a meaningful and important opportunity to access quality programming as families wait for child care spaces to become available.



## Measuring progress

- Reduction of daily child care fees.
- Child care fee subsidy is available for qualified families requiring additional reductions.
- Parents report increased knowledge of local resources and networks.

## Priority 5: Use evidence to improve outcomes for children and families

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The County is committed to using local data and evidence to improve outcomes for children and families. By regularly gathering and analyzing community data, the County will create actionable insights that directly impact the well-being and development of children and families.

Oxford County will use evidence to improve outcomes in the following ways:

### Contribute to research and data analysis



- Analyze existing data to identify trends and areas for improvement.
- Collaborate with system leaders and community partners to support studies on effective practices, develop policies and procedures, and advocate for a strengthened child care and early years system.
- Collect feedback from families, service providers and stakeholders to support our understanding of the needs of our community.

### Implement evidence-based practices

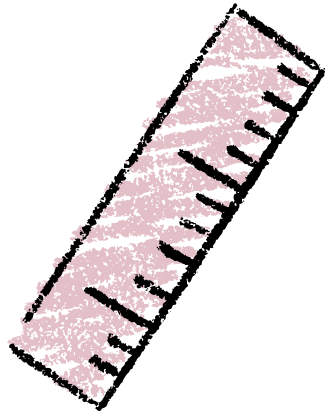


- Develop guidelines and toolkits for implementing research findings into practice.
- Provide training and professional development opportunities for local early learning professionals and community partners to support the Child Care and Early Years Plan priorities.

### Monitor and evaluate progress



- Develop and monitor performance indicators for the Child Care and Early Years Plan.
- Regularly review and adjust local practices and guidelines based on local data analysis.
- Explore opportunities for shared data across the child care and early years system in Oxford County.



## Measuring progress

- Increased use of data-driven decision-making in program development and system expansion.
- Documented improvements in child and family well-being metrics.
- Feedback from families, service providers, community partners and comparable municipalities.

# Community Engagement to Build this Plan

This plan was developed by listening to the Oxford County community.

The County engaged with parents and caregivers, educators, child care operators, local municipal leaders, and key partners delivering services to children, youth and families. The County has also gathered research to understand what other service system managers are doing well – to learn from their successes and apply leading practices here in Oxford.

This section outlines how this important information was gathered to develop the system plan.

## Parent & caregiver survey

An online survey was conducted to gather the perspectives of parents and caregivers in Oxford County. The County was thrilled to receive a total of 900 responses between April 29 and July 1, 2024.

The survey included 42 questions, which examined the following areas:

- Information about the survey respondent, including demographic and household considerations
- The types of child care and early years services accessed, for example licensed child care



(centre-based and home-based care) and EarlyON Child and Family Centres

- Program satisfaction, focusing on what parents and caregivers feel is working well and where there are opportunities for improvement

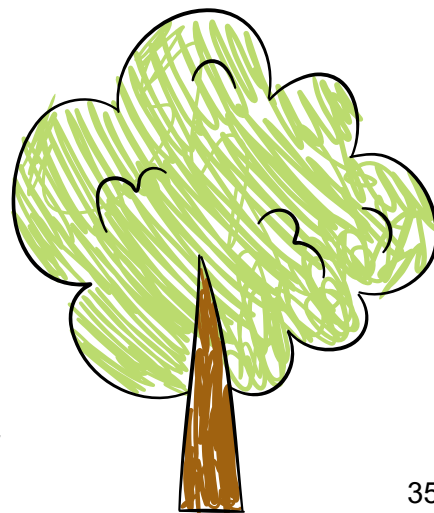
Key themes from the parent and caregiver survey are listed below by service area, and were used to develop the priorities in this plan.

## Child care

- Parents and caregivers are satisfied with the quality of centre-based programming overall. In particular, survey respondents feel that their child is safe, are comfortable addressing concerns with child care operators, and feel that staff communicate well.
- Parents and caregivers would like to see the addition of more child care spaces, more flexible hours to meet their needs, and additional training for educators. Some also feel that the cost of child care is too expensive.
- Parents and caregivers are also satisfied with the quality of licensed home-based programming overall. As with centre-based services, respondents feel that their child is safe, are comfortable addressing concerns with providers, and feel staff communicate well.
- Parents and caregivers would like to see more regulation of home child care options, enhanced fee subsidy options and additional hours for flexibility – including availability during evenings and weekends.

## EarlyON Child & Family Centres

- 89% of parents and caregivers who responded to the survey are either satisfied or very satisfied with EarlyON programming in Oxford County. In particular, respondents feel staff are knowledgeable and helpful, that the programs support their child's healthy growth and development, and their child has opportunities to participate in play-based exploration.
- Parents and caregivers would like to see increased hours, additional programming, and new locations for EarlyON Child and Family Centres.



## Service system delivery

- 83% of survey respondents who accessed the fee subsidy program had applied for it online. Of these, 44% found the application process very easy or somewhat easy. Suggestions for improving the application process included improving communication and supports for navigating the process.
- Respondents who accessed the fee subsidy program were divided on whether the amount is adequate – 51% feel it is insufficient and 49% feel it is enough to meet their needs.
- 30% of families on the child care waitlist face employment and financial hardship. In addition, 30% have made arrangements for a family member to care for their child, and 39% have turned to unlicensed care options.
- Being on the waitlist has a range of negative impacts on families – including on their employment and mental health. Survey respondents on the child care waitlist advocated for additional transparency regarding their placement on the waitlist and when their child may be eligible for a licensed space in Oxford County.
- In addition, parents and caregivers called for additional training for educators on how to support children with special needs. Survey respondents suggested purchasing specialized equipment and toys that are designed for children with special needs, more assistance for families with children with special needs to support the transition from child care to school, and the addition of EarlyON drop-in sessions for children with special needs.

## Educator & child care operator engagement

Oxford County hosted a full-day professional learning opportunity for educators across the community in April 2024. In addition to engaging with nearly 300 early learning professionals during the event, an online survey for all educators and child care operators was also made available to gather feedback.



The survey included 49 questions focused on the following areas:

- Information about the survey respondent, including their role, where they work, and the types of child care and early years services they provide
- Work experience, including job satisfaction and meaningfulness challenges, for example where there might be opportunities for improvement in child care and early years programs

In total, 102 individuals responded to the licensed child care survey between April 19, 2024 and May 24, 2024. The key themes from the survey are highlighted below.

## Child care

- Survey respondents were typically RECEs, Early Childhood Assistants (ECAs), Special Needs Resource (SNR) consultants, and other educators. Survey respondents feel the ideal child care program is inclusive, welcoming, engaging, and high-quality. 55% of respondents feel that current centre-based licensed programming is somewhat or very close to the ideal, indicating that there is some room for improvement.
- Educators who responded to the survey highlighted the need for more accessible child care. Less than 50% of respondents agreed that the system is accessible to parents in Oxford County.
- Educators identified challenges faced by licensed home-based providers, including inadequate wages, insufficient spaces, regulatory hurdles such as accessing business licensing, and complexities providing supports to children with higher needs or behavioural issues.
- Educators have mixed opinions on how close licensed home child care is to the ideal, which they consider should include sufficient funding and availability of spaces, flexible scheduling, and access to professional development opportunities for staff.
- Educators who responded to the survey feel the ideal school age program should be safe, delivered by quality staff, inclusive, interactive and provide adequate space and resources. 47% feel the current program is very close or somewhat close to the ideal.
- Survey respondents proposed a range of solutions to improve school age programs, including additional policy guidance and support for supporting children with behavioural challenges, more dedicated space, more inclusive services and more staff.

## EarlyON Child and Family Centres

- Educators who responded to the survey highlighted the importance of creating engaging, accessible and community-based EarlyON programming.
- 78% of respondents believe that the EarlyON program is very close to the ideal, although some see room to improve inclusivity.

## Service system delivery

- Educators highlighted the need for special needs resourcing that is individualized, collaborative and inclusive. Respondents are divided on how far current programming is from the ideal.
- Operational challenges for special needs resourcing staff include funding and wages, system-level planning and staffing and staff burnout.

## Unlicensed home child care provider survey



Unlicensed home child care providers in the community were invited to participate in an online survey. This survey generated only three responses. At the time of the survey, all three respondents were offering child care in their homes, with two having no plans to become licensed through an agency, and one seeking out support from one of the County's licensed child care agencies.

Each of the three unlicensed respondents felt that home-based child care is affordable and high quality, while accessibility could be improved.

The unlicensed home child care providers stated that they are not involved with the licensed sector because they feel there are too many requirements to adhere to, they do not see the value in becoming licensed under an agency, and they wanted to maintain their independence as “their own boss.”

# Co-design sessions with municipal leaders and community partners

Four in-person co-design sessions were held with County staff, Municipal Councilors, and community partners delivering services for children across Oxford County. Key sectors represented at the sessions included education, public health, primary care, children’s mental health, children’s welfare, special needs resourcing, early intervention services, and community services.

Initial sessions, held in the Spring of 2024, focused on what is working well across the system, where there are challenges and brainstorming ideas to address the needs of the community.

In the Fall of 2024, two further sessions were held to discuss specific activities that might be included in the plan. Feedback was gathered on which of these had the highest potential impact and used to finalize the priorities in this plan.



## Jurisdictional research

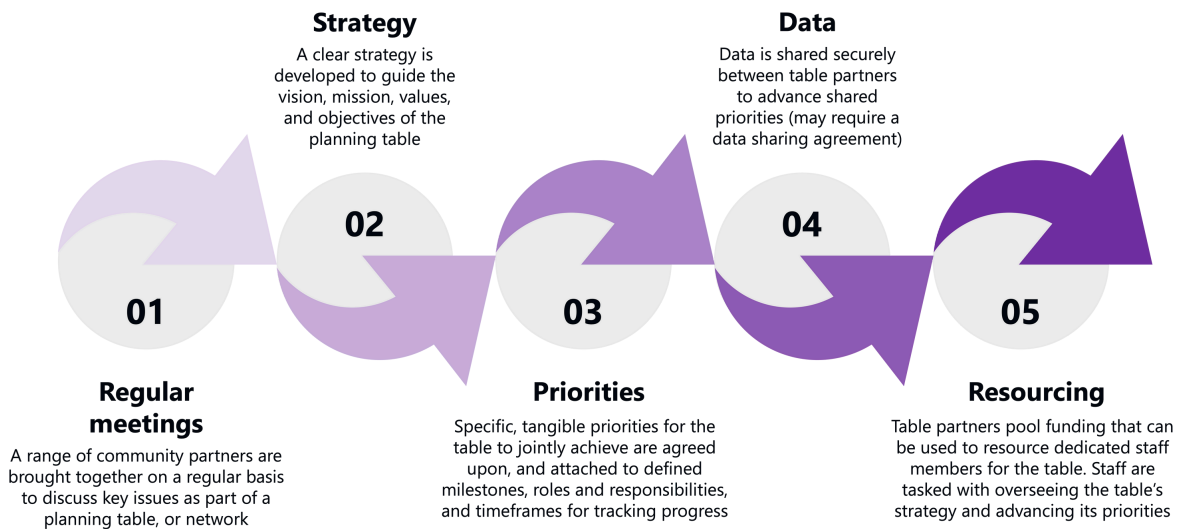
Ten other service system plans were reviewed, prioritizing comparable population profiles (mid-sized regions with both rural and urban centres) to Oxford County and a range of provider models. Several key trends were identified:

- All service system managers are working hard to address educator recruitment and retention challenges
- Workforce shortages are limiting service system managers’ ability to meet CWELCC targets
- Many vulnerable families are experiencing a lack of access to licensed child care spaces caused by increased demand for child care and lower parent fees, without

proportional increases in capacity

- There is an increased demand for supporting children with complex needs<sup>16</sup>
- Transportation remains a key issue for rural and remote providers
- Service system managers have developed key partnerships with community partners to consider the holistic needs of children and families in their communities through strategic planning tables

## System planning continuum



<sup>16</sup> Ontario data suggests that in recent years there has been an increase in children who experience social-emotional vulnerability upon entry into kindergarten (Early Development Instrument, 2016).

# Conclusion

Through this Plan, Oxford County commits to making child care more accessible, inclusive, responsive, high-quality, and affordable – and to improving outcomes for children and families.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the development of this Plan by providing feedback on what's working well and where child care and early years in Oxford County has room to grow. This Plan will be treated as a living document, and the County welcomes ongoing feedback from parents, caregivers, educators, operators, community partners, and other members of the community.

Together, we can set the foundation for Oxford children to thrive.



# Appendix

## Number of live births by municipality

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*	2024*
<b>Blandford-Blenheim</b>	67	77	72	84	90	101	87	82	89	71	78
<b>East Zorra-Tavistock</b>	65	56	59	49	67	71	65	84	85	71	71
<b>Ingersoll</b>	143	143	113	140	147	144	166	161	172	158	170
<b>Norwich</b>	167	165	185	161	172	182	171	174	177	187	190
<b>South-West Oxford</b>	102	96	111	103	93	105	92	103	94	103	103
<b>Tillsonburg</b>	174	147	168	169	188	207	161	195	191	197	202
<b>Woodstock</b>	422	460	473	402	481	487	522	526	526	533	564
<b>Zorra</b>	54	52	67	50	55	68	52	78	66	59	58
<b>Missing address</b>	36	27	10	16	15	16	17	26	16	82	94
<b>Total</b>	<b>1230</b>	<b>1223</b>	<b>1258</b>	<b>1178</b>	<b>1308</b>	<b>1381</b>	<b>1333</b>	<b>1429</b>	<b>1416</b>	<b>1461</b>	<b>1530</b>

Source: BORN Information System (2014-2024), Date Extracted: February 14, 2025

\*Counts from these years are more likely to change as additional records are added.

## Definitions and Limitations

- A live birth is not necessarily a viable birth.
- BORN is currently considered to be the most comprehensive data source for reproductive health indicators as it includes data from hospitals and midwifery practice groups in Ontario.
- Hospital data is entered in near real time with a one-month lag time for validation. However, data in BORN may not be complete for up to 15 months.
- BORN allocates births to dissemination areas using the Postal Code Conversion File (PCCF) and the Single Link Indicator (SLI). Dissemination area was converted to municipality using the 2021 Census dissemination area boundary file. For previous data requests, the 2016 boundary file was used, creating differences between this data request and previous requests regarding historical live birth data.

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**Oxford County**

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