

Municipality of Chatham-Kent

Child Care & Early Years

Service System Plan 2024-2029



Land Acknowledgement

The land that is known as Chatham-Kent today was established as part of Treaty #2, the McKee Purchase Treaty of 1790. At that time the land was also inhabited by the Three Fires Confederacy: the Odawa, Potawatomi and Ojibwe. The Lunaapeew also lived in the area at the time, stewarding the land. The People of the Three Fires Confederacy, also known as the Anishinaabeg, and Lunaapeew Peoples agreed to the mutual sharing of the land, with obligations and responsibilities to the environment. Today, Chatham-Kent neighbours the Lunaapeew at Eelūnaapèewi Lahkèewiit which is part of the McKee Purchase Treaty, as well as the unceded territory of the Bkejwanong Walpole Island First Nation. Chatham-Kent continues to be home to diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples. As beneficiaries of the treaty, we recognize all Peoples have responsibilities, including collective responsibilities to the land and water.

In our continued effort for truth and reconciliation, the Child Care and Early Years Department recognizes that it is important to not historicize the struggles of Indigenous Peoples. We are committed to moving forward with hope and solidarity and believe in the right of Indigenous families to live with dignity and respect, honouring their truth through active engagement.

We keep in our hearts that the land has been giving to all children's healthy development since time immemorial. We share a collective responsibility to care for the land on which our children learn and grow. It has, and continues to, nourish young minds to authentically bloom and we will remain connected to its ongoing presence as we move through our work.



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Executive Summary

Overview of this Plan

Child care and early years is a foundational pillar of our community in Chatham-Kent. A high-quality, accessible, responsive system benefits children as they develop core life skills, families as they connect with others, and the local economy by allowing parents and caregivers to study or participate in the workforce.

This plan outlines how we, as the service system manager for child care and early years programs in Chatham-Kent, will meet the needs of children and families from 2024-2029.

Our plan identifies four priority areas, each with a range of specific goals and activities:

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
|  | Recruit and retain quality registered early childhood educators (RECEs) | Grow the RECE workforce in Chatham-Kent; build capacity, knowledge and skills in existing RECEs; and improve system management to increase capacity at the child care operator level |
|  | Provide affordable child care for families | Invest in child care staff and operations; develop strategies to make quality child care available to all Chatham-Kent children; and roll out the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system in Chatham-Kent |
|  | Support accessible early years child and family programs | Support child care access for low-income children, vulnerable children, children from diverse communities, children with special needs, Francophone, and Indigenous children |
|  | Engage responsively with the community | Collaborate and gather data for responsive planning; and connect neighbourhoods to strengthen capacity for localized solutions |
-

Each of these priorities has been carefully selected based on the Ontario Government's Access and Inclusion Framework, which aims to provide all families with child care and early years programs that are accessible, affordable, responsive, and high-quality.

Community engagement was a key component in developing this plan. We conducted a survey with parents and caregivers, facilitated working sessions with child care and early years service providers, and held a workshop with key community partners.

This plan was also informed by comprehensive data analysis, revealing priority neighbourhoods and service gaps to focus on over the next five years. We will continue to gather and monitor community data to ensure the services and programs we offer in Chatham-Kent remain responsive to local needs.

Survey comments from CK parents and caregivers

"Please know how **valuable** these programs are!"

"Keep doing the **amazing work** ladies and gentlemen"

"The **staff** are incredible!"

"I **loved** [the EarlyON] program!! My grandchildren enjoyed going."

"It has truly **helped me and my son** as I am a single mother"

"We are so lucky to have so many **fantastic daycare options** in CK."

"Because we received subsidy, mom and dad are both able to work with the knowledge that our children are **safe and in good hands** while we make a living to give our children a good life."

"The ladies are all awesome! They're **welcoming and caring** and treat you like family, I enjoyed attending with my daughter when she was an infant!"

"I think [EarlyON] is a great place for mothers to **share ideas and strategies** for meeting the everyday challenges of motherhood. Having early childhood educators to suggest simple ways of **encouraging development through playful actions** is also a very positive thing."

Introduction

About Us

Chatham-Kent Child Care and Early Years is one of five divisions within the Health and Human Services Department of the Municipality of Chatham-Kent. Our team is comprised of professionals who are deeply passionate about supporting the families and children of Chatham-Kent. As the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager (CMSM), we are responsible for the planning, funding, and management of licensed child care and early years programs and services in our community. We coordinate and integrate initiatives with our municipality and other community partners, focusing on the improvement and/or development of programs and services with a collaborative approach to problem solving.



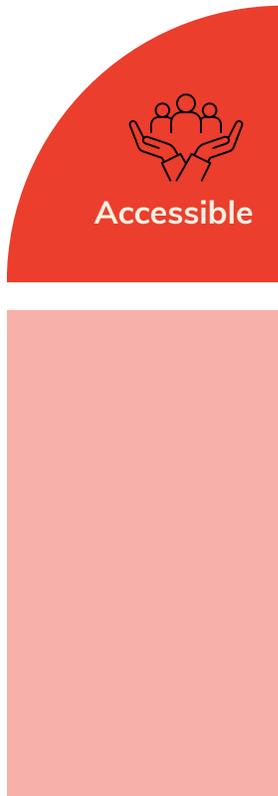
As the CMSM, we play a critical role in soliciting and maintaining in-depth knowledge about the Chatham-Kent community's needs, planning and managing the system, identifying and addressing service gaps, and supporting service coordination.

Implementing Key Provincial Goals

Under the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014*, the Province requires CMSMs to establish a child care and early years service system plan. This plan will guide the next five years of work across key programs – including licensed child care (centre-based and home-based), EarlyON programs, and special needs resourcing.

Our commitments under this plan will help to implement the Ontario Government's vision for all families to have access to child care and early years programs that are accessible, affordable, responsive, and high-quality.





Accessible

- Community programs and service providers are increasingly aware of families' needs for child care and early years services within the community.
- Programs address service gaps throughout the community to provide high impact child care and early years services that can be easily accessed by children and families.
- Municipal by-laws are addressed and examined in cases where they may limit access to early years and child care services.
- Inclusive programming is provided for children with special needs and/or other vulnerable communities, is culturally responsive to the needs of newcomer communities, is delivered by First Nation, Metis, Inuit, urban Indigenous, Francophone partners and other populations within the community.

Affordable

- Community service providers enhance engagement and collaboration with broader community service providers, school boards, early years partners, primary care providers, parents and caregivers.
- Early years partners collaborate to improve affordability of child care and early years services in the community; policies support families in need through fee subsidies.
- Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiatives will continue to address affordability by lowering parent fees in the licensed child care sector to child care centres and home care agencies that are CWELCC participants.



Responsive

- Programs and services reflect diverse needs of children and families in the community, and provide families with more choice and flexibility for their child care options.
- Programs and services reflect cultural and/or linguistic diversity, geographical spread and address demand or gaps in programs and services.



Responsive



High quality

High quality

- Programs and services align with health and safety requirements set out in the Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014.
- Programming and pedagogy are consistent with *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*, and reflects the view of children as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential.
- Programs and services are staffed by a highly skilled workforce such as registered early childhood educators or other certified professionals.
- Community service providers offer capacity building opportunities to engage child care and early years staff in ongoing professional learning and development needs.



Guiding Principles

In developing and implementing this service system plan, we are guided by the following principles:

- Child and family-centred approach**
We put the well-being of the child and their families at the heart of our decisions, as we continue to use a human-centred design approach in our planning.
- Data-driven decision-making**
We focus on the community's involvement in local data collection and sharing to make informed decisions on program planning and development.
- A community of partnerships**
We work together as a cohesive system, supporting children and families to reach their full potential.
- Community capacity building**
We remain committed to building community capacity so that more parents, caregivers and early learning professionals can best support Chatham-Kent's children in their growth and development.
- Ongoing responsiveness to evolving needs**
We adapt and evolve in response to our community's changing needs, ensuring the supports we provide are effective and relevant.

In addition, we continue to align our planning with the Municipality's strategic focus and guiding principles.

This includes how child care and early years can support Chatham-Kent to become a welcoming, healthy, prosperous community that is culturally rich and naturally innovative.



Three priorities in collaborative planning with other Service System Managers

- 1 New allies** – strengthening alignment with our economic development colleagues, we raise awareness about the importance of quality child care as economic development infrastructure.
- 2 New models** – uncovering and assessing options that improve the ECE employee package (e.g. benefits, pension, and other 'shared service' advantages), we promote ECE as a valued, 'sought-after' career.
- 3 New narratives** – co-creating innovative messaging around the ECE profession, we promote early years and ECE among targeted audiences.



The Importance of Quality Child Care

Child care and early years is a foundational pillar of our community. The benefits of a strong sector are broad, deep, and inter-generational.



Benefits to children

High-quality child care programs delivered by trained early childhood educators have a positive impact on children's social development, school readiness and academic achievement. With an estimated 90 percent of brain growth and development occurring between birth and age five, this is the greatest opportunity to build connections that enable them to be healthy, capable and successful adults.¹

Early years programs also allow children to spend quality time with their parents and caregivers. These supportive environments help children and families to build confidence, have fun, make connections, and learn new skills.



Benefits to families

Access to affordable, flexible child care makes it easier for parents to work or focus on their education, and is particularly important for more vulnerable families, such as sole-support parents and those living in low income. Participating in the workforce increases household incomes and improves socio-economic status.

Early years programs, like parenting workshops and post-natal supports, assist parents in their role as caregivers. These services often connect parents with each other and with specialized community-based services if needed.

¹ First Things First, The First Five Years, 2018.



Social benefits

High-quality child care and early years programs can positively contribute to overall social well-being in Chatham-Kent by reducing poverty and gender inequalities and fostering a sense of belonging. Families facing various barriers, such as newcomers and sole-support parents, can be supported to access local resources. Inclusive programs can facilitate the integration of children with special needs or those with other unique backgrounds. These programs allow families to participate in the social and economic life of Chatham-Kent, which in turn enhances the well-being of the entire community.



Economic benefits

A strong child care sector enables parents to participate in the workforce, which supports local businesses to attract and retain staff and helps to stimulate the local economy. Studies show that for every dollar invested in Early Years and Child Care Programs, the broader economy receives between \$1.50 to \$6.00.²

The child care and early years sector also provides employment opportunities for many individuals, primarily women, by allowing them to join or re-enter the workforce.

² Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation Inc., Early Years Study 4: Thriving Kids, Thriving Society, 2020.

Our Unique Community

Defining the Landscape

Chatham-Kent is the twelfth largest municipality in Canada, with the sixth largest landmass in Ontario, covering 2,470 square kilometers. This geographic area includes fertile farmland, shorelines, villages, towns and waterways. The vast distances between some residences and the services we provide means that transportation and accessibility are necessary considerations. We collaborate with community partners to find solutions that help families reach the services and programs they need – and we make every effort to “go where the people are”.



Valuing Our Diversity

Chatham-Kent is fortunate to have a growing population that is increasingly multicultural. We are a Francophone designated community with a large Low German-speaking population and an influx of many other cultures.

We are also home to Eelūnaapéewi Lahkéewiit (Delaware Nation at Moraviantown), and neighbour to Bkejwanong First Nation (Walpole Island).

Indigenous and Francophone population ³

Age	All of CK	Indigenous	Francophone
Under 1 year	1,050	80	40
1 year	895	60	15
2 years	1,105	45	20
3 years	1,025	80	20
4 years	975	50	55
5 years	1,220	90	90
6-12 years	7,930	530	1,220
13-18 years	6,935	475	945

³ Statistics Canada, 2021.

People born outside of Canada ⁴

Chatham-Kent	9.1%
Canada	30.0%
Top 5 places of birth for recent immigrants to Chatham-Kent (2015-2021)	
1. India (170)	
2. Mexico (115)	
3. Syria (85)	
4. USA (80)	
5. Jamaica (70)	

Racialized population by SWO Region ⁵

Ontario	4,800,000	30.0%
London-Middlesex	122,010	24.7%
Windsor-Essex	98,220	23.6%
Chatham-Kent	6,690	6.6%
Sarnia-Lambton	6,705	6.4%

Top 5 non-official languages most often spoken at home in Chatham-Kent ⁶

German	740
Punjabi	270
Portuguese	245
Low German	185
Vietnamese	165

⁴ Statistics Canada, 2021.

⁵ Statistics Canada, 2021.

⁶ Statistics Canada, 2021.

Key facts

Children aged 0-12 in Chatham-Kent:

- 2006: 16,823
- 2016: 14,260
- 2021: 14,200
- 2023: 14,559



In 2021, 12% of children aged 0-17 were **living in low income** - a decrease of 10% from 2016.



52% of children 0-12 **live in three neighborhoods**: Central Chatham, North Chatham, and Tilbury/Wheatley.

Our families

16.9% (5,121) families in Chatham-Kent are single-parent families.

78.5% (4,021) are led by a female, and 21.5% (1,100) are led by a male.

The median after-tax income of one-parent families is \$58,400 - a 44% increase from \$40,560 since 2016.



The number of **Francophone children** increased by 54.6% from 2006 to 2021 - from 2,500 to 3,865.

The number of **Indigenous children** aged 0-12 in Chatham-Kent increased by 26.9% from 2011 to 2021 - from 737 to 935.



The number of **children entering licensed child care** has largely recovered from the effects of the Pandemic.

2019: 3,535 **2020:** 3,217 **2021:** 2,854 **2022:** 3,654 **2023:** 3,561

The number of **children receiving fee subsidy** has decreased by 54.3% since 2019.

2019: 2,209 **2020:** 1,575 **2021:** 1,170 **2022:** 1,100 **2023:** 1,008

The Early Development Instrument

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) measures kindergarten children's developmental health and readiness for the transition from early years to school age in five domains, shown below.⁷ We use the EDI to ensure our programming is data-informed to meet developmental needs within our communities.

1. **Physical** health and well-being
2. **Social** competence
3. **Emotional** maturity
4. **Language and cognitive** development
5. **Communication** skills and general knowledge

In Ontario, the EDI is completed every four years, with the most recent collection in 2023. The graphs below illustrate the percentage of children in Chatham-Kent who fell into the following three categories for each domain in 2023:

Vulnerable

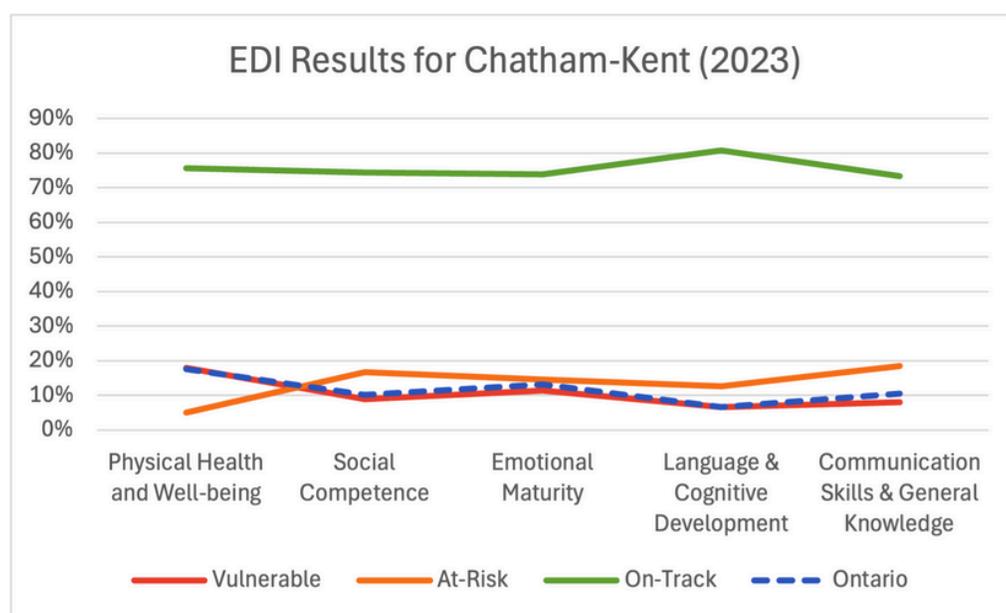
Children with scores below the 10th percentile

At-Risk

Children with scores between the 10th and 25th percentiles

On-Track

Children with scores above the 25th percentile

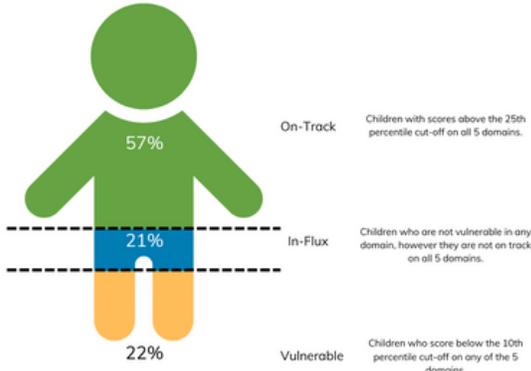


⁷ The EDI is based on a 103-item questionnaire completed by educators. While data is collected for each child, it is aggregated for use at the group level only.

The images below and on the following pages highlight the 2023 EDI results for each neighbourhood in Chatham-Kent.

Blenheim

Overall Vulnerability

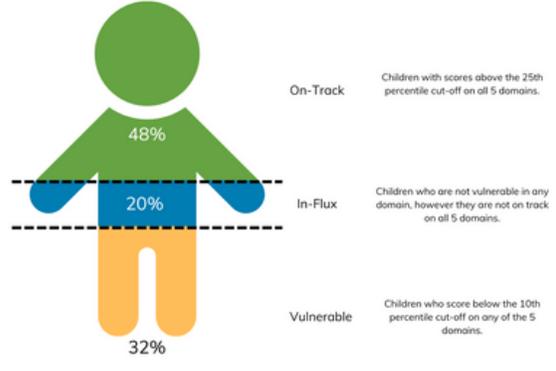


Least Vulnerable Domain:
Language & Cognitive Development

Most Vulnerable Domain:
Emotional Maturity

Central Chatham

Overall Vulnerability

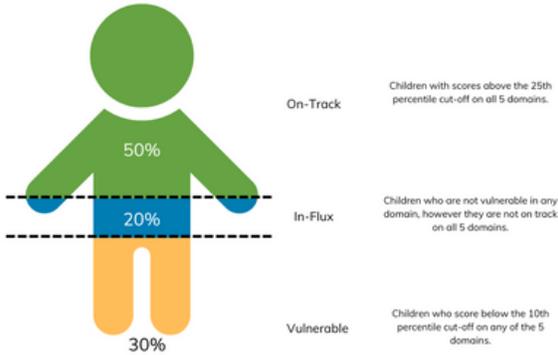


Most Vulnerable Domain:
Physical Health & Well-being

Least Vulnerable Domain:
Social Competence

Chatham

Overall Vulnerability

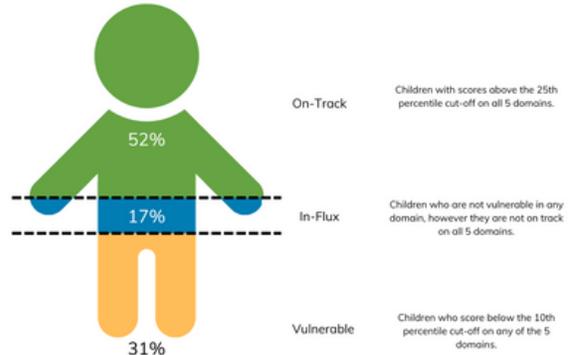


Least Vulnerable Domain:
Language & Cognitive Development

Most Vulnerable Domain:
Physical Health & Well-being

Dresden/Bothwell

Overall Vulnerability

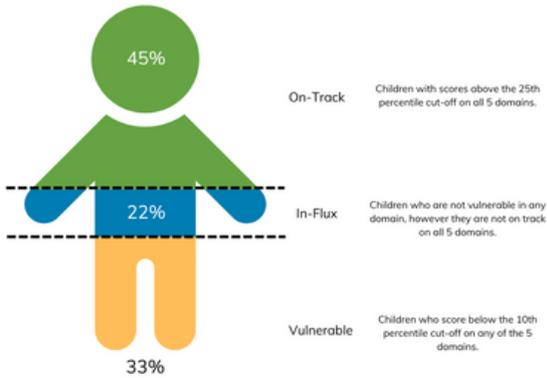


Least Vulnerable Domain:
Language & Cognitive Development

Most Vulnerable Domain:
Emotional Maturity

East Chatham

Overall Vulnerability



Least Vulnerable Domain:

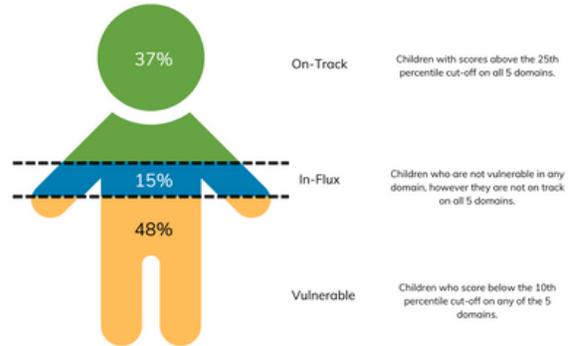
Communication & General Knowledge

Most Vulnerable Domain:

Physical Health & Well-being

East Wallaceburg

Overall Vulnerability



Least Vulnerable Domain:

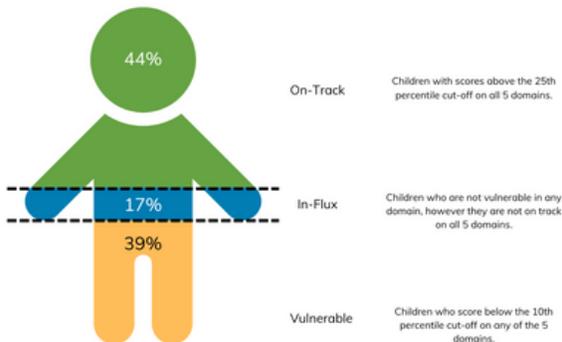
Social Competence

Most Vulnerable Domain:

Physical Health & Well-being

North Chatham

Overall Vulnerability



Least Vulnerable Domain:

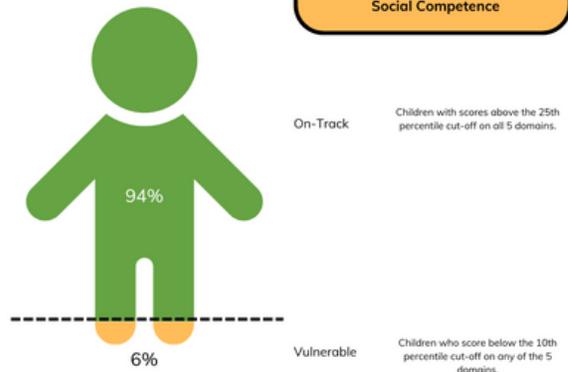
Language & Cognitive Development

Most Vulnerable Domain:

Physical Health & Well-being

Pain Court

Overall Vulnerability

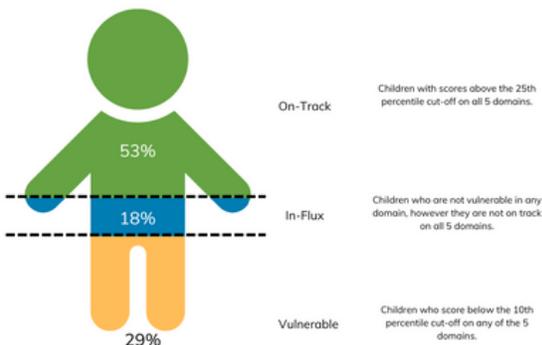


Most Vulnerable Domain:

Social Competence

Ridgetown

Overall Vulnerability

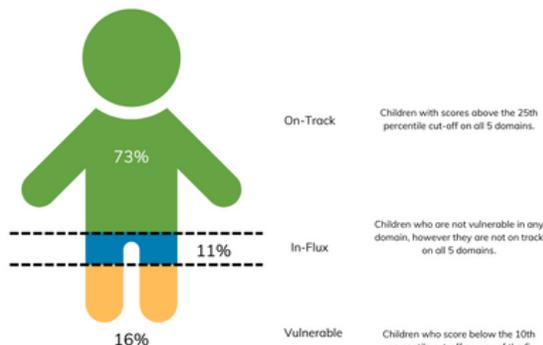


Least Vulnerable Domain:
Language & Cognitive Development

Most Vulnerable Domain:
Emotional Maturity

Thamesville

Overall Vulnerability

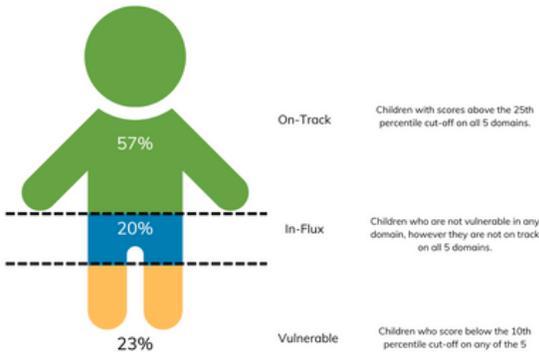


Least Vulnerable Domain:
Communication & General Knowledge
Physical Health & Well-being

Most Vulnerable Domain:
Emotional Maturity

Tilbury/Wheatley

Overall Vulnerability

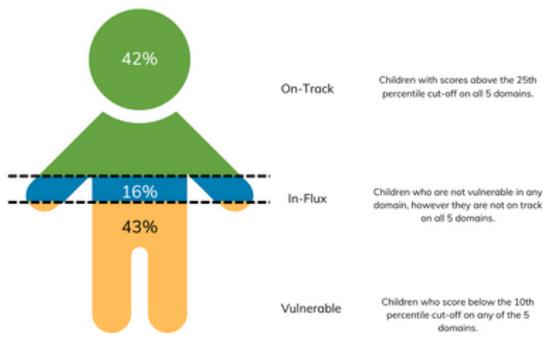


Least Vulnerable Domain:
Language & Cognitive Development

Most Vulnerable Domain:
Emotional Maturity

Wallaceburg

Overall Vulnerability

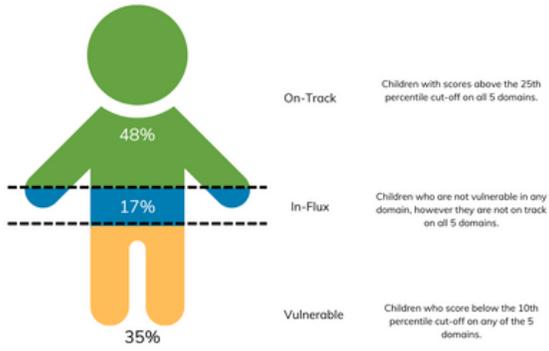


Least Vulnerable Domain:
Social Competence
Communication Skills & General Knowledge

Most Vulnerable Domain:
Physical Health & Well-being

West Wallaceburg

Overall Vulnerability



Least Vulnerable Domain:
Communication & General Knowledge

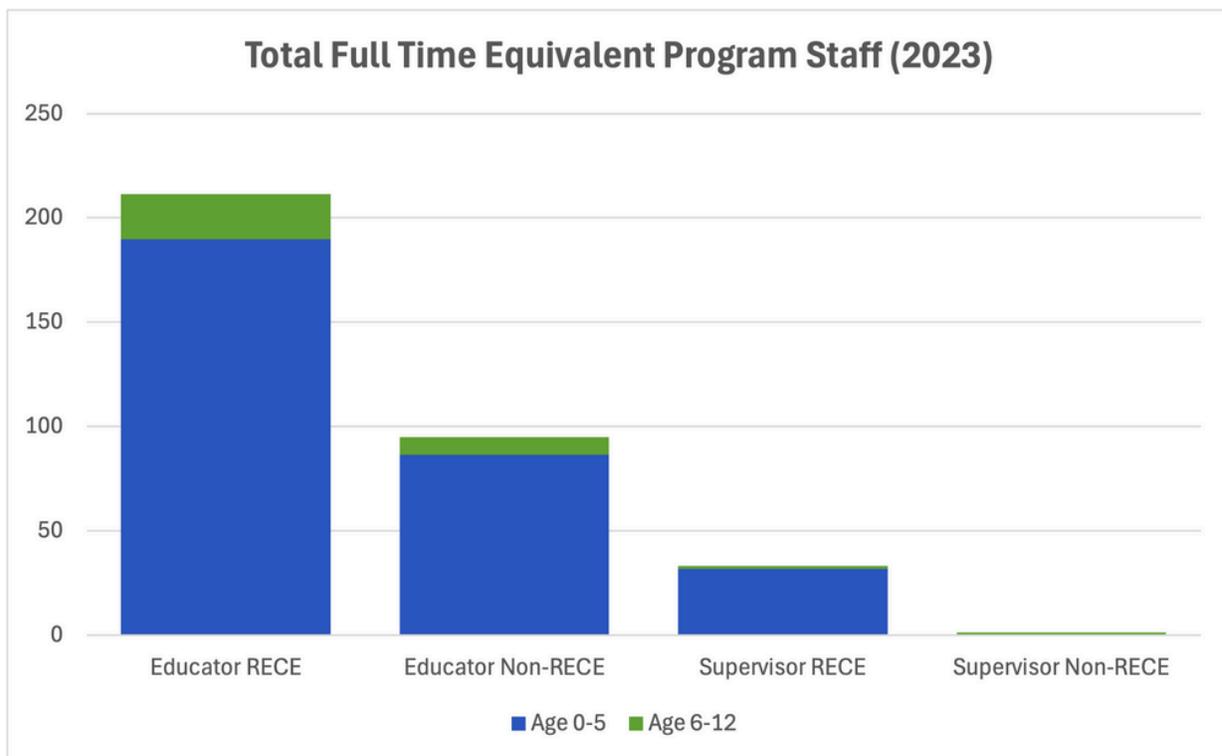
Most Vulnerable Domain:
Physical Health & Well-being



Workforce Profile

An engaged, skilled workforce is critical to providing quality child care and early years programming. Unfortunately, the Province-wide shortage of early years and child care workers remains a key challenge across Chatham-Kent. It has significantly lowered operating capacity across the system and restricted our ability to decrease the licensed child care waitlist.

As of December 2023, 38% of licensed spaces do not have staff.⁸



⁸ Of the total 3,607 licensed spaces in 2023, 2,381 were licensed for the 0-5 age group and 1,226 for the 6-12 age group.

The Knowing Our Numbers report, a collaborative project that focuses on understanding the challenges faced by the early years workforce in Ontario, consolidates feedback from almost 6,000 members of the early childhood education workforce in Ontario.⁹ The recent profile of Chatham-Kent and the County of Lambton, released in June 2024, highlighted a range of key challenges.

1	Wages	Average RECE wages range from \$21.71 at for-profit centres to \$29.67 at CMSM-operated centres. A further breakdown is included in Appendix 1.
2	Benefits	About three quarters (74.3%) report having access to paid professional learning opportunities and extended health benefits.
3	Exiting the sector	Almost a quarter (23.0%) of participants are planning on leaving the sector in the next five years, with another 44.6% unsure if they will remain.
4	Workplace discrimination	Almost half (45.9%) of participants experience workplace discrimination, primarily cited as bullying (57.1%).

In addition, less than half (44.9%) of respondents report they would recommend a career in the early years sector to others. Almost a third (32.4%) would not recommend early childhood education as a career option, with an additional 25.7% stating that they are unsure.

In recognition of these critical challenges, much of Chatham-Kent's resourcing and effort has been focused on improving recruitment and retention of early years and child care workers. Key initiatives include coordinating planning committees, targeted campaigns such as Heartwork, and engagement with child care centres, school boards, colleges and universities, and other community stakeholders.

In addition, strengthening recruitment and retention of the early years and child care workforce is one of the four goals under this plan. Further information on how Chatham-Kent aims to fulfil this goal over the next five years can be found on page 24.

⁹ Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). Knowing Our Numbers: A Provincial Study with a Local Lens on the Early Childhood Education Workforce in Ontario. Municipality of Chatham-Kent and the County of Lambton.

Child Care and Early Years Programs in Our Community

A wide range of high-quality child care and early years programs and services are provided in Chatham-Kent to meet the diverse and evolving needs of our community. Some of our key services are outlined below.

Centre-Based Licensed Child Care

We have purchase of service agreements with 14 child care operators to deliver licensed child care programs within Chatham-Kent. Child care centres are licensed by the Ministry of Education and regulated by the Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014. Staff are registered early childhood educators (ECEs), regulated by the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators.

A balanced program of activities for infants, toddlers, preschool and school-aged children is designed for children at different stages of development. This supports children to learn and grow while making friends with others.

Chatham-Kent has licensed child care centres in Blenheim, Chatham, Dresden, Merlin, Pain Court, Ridgetown, Thamesville, Tilbury, Wallaceburg and Wheatley.



Home-Based Licensed Child Care

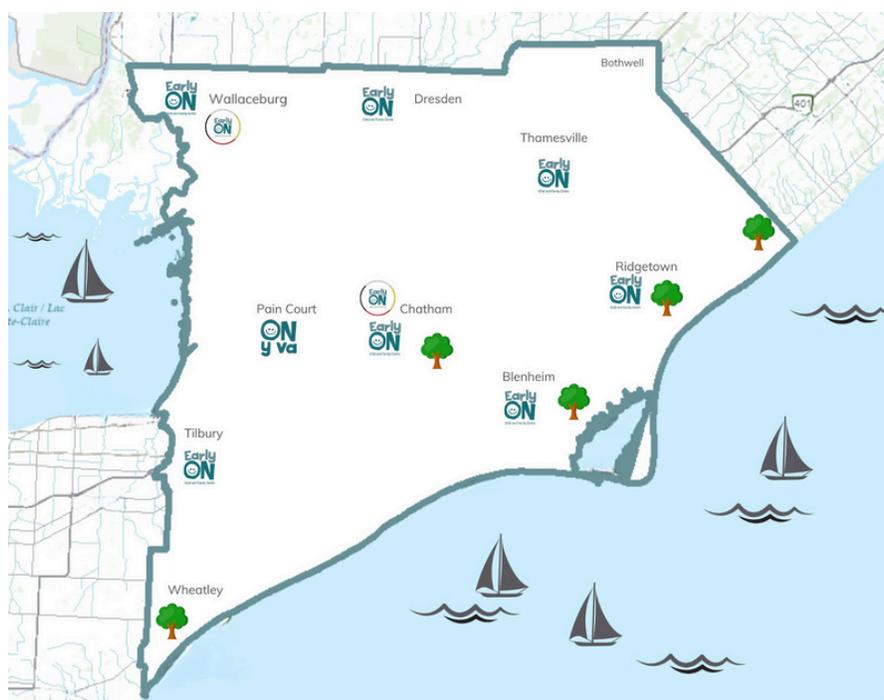
We have purchase of service agreements with two agencies to offer licensed home child care services throughout Chatham-Kent. Licensed home child care provides a home-like atmosphere for infants, toddlers, preschoolers and school-aged children. It enables flexible child care arrangements such as evening, early morning, weekend and overnight care. Flexible hours of service for child care are important to individuals to help maintain employment, education, and training.

EarlyON Child and Family Centres

We directly operate EarlyON programs within Chatham-Kent. We also have a purchase of service agreement with a third-party agency to deliver Indigenous EarlyON programs.

EarlyON is a free program for parents, caregivers, and young children from birth to six years old. It provides opportunities for families to learn, grow, and connect together through a range of play-based educational and social connectedness programming.

We offer both indoor and outdoor programs that support community connections, and prioritize culturally responsive programming by working closely with our Francophone and Indigenous partners.



Legend

-  Forest Program
-  Francophone Programs
-  Indigenous-Led Programs
-  Permanent Program Sites

Special Needs Services

Chatham-Kent has two purchase of service agreements with agencies to support children with special needs within the licensed child care sector, enabling families to continue to manage their work and education needs. These services are provided directly in child care centres and can be delivered as one-on-one supports or as support to a classroom as a whole.



Our Plan

Our five-year plan for Chatham-Kent's child care and early years system reflects the following:

- **The Ontario Government's vision** for all families to have quality child care and early years programs that are accessible, affordable, responsive, and high-quality
- **Feedback** from parents, caregivers, service providers, and community partners
- **Jurisdictional research** into key trends faced by other service system managers, as well as innovations underway
- **Data collected** about our communities, geographic area, and services

Our plan includes four priority areas.

1

Recruit and retain quality RECEs

Grow the RECE workforce in Chatham-Kent; build capacity, knowledge and skills in existing RECEs; and improve system management to increase capacity at the child care operator level

2

Provide affordable child care for families

Invest in child care staff and operations; develop strategies to make quality child care available to all Chatham-Kent children; and roll out the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system in Chatham-Kent

3

Support accessible early years child and family programs

Support families through building partnerships; and ensure children with special needs receive effective and timely supports

4

Engage responsively with the community

Collaborate and gather data for responsive planning; and connect neighbourhoods to strengthen capacity for localized solutions

Recruit and Retain Quality RECEs

Goal 1

Grow and retain the RECE workforce

Historically low wages for ECEs, combined with a lack of benefits and pathways for career advancement, have resulted in a staffing crisis for child care centres across Ontario. When considering potential career pathways, students may view RECE wages as a relatively low return on investment given the time and cost of the required training. This has led to a workforce shortage, with real impacts on families, children, and the Chatham-Kent economy.

Despite overflowing waitlists, many centres have been forced to limit child care spaces due to lack of qualified staff and the increasing number of educators exiting the field due to burnout.

Work with school boards

We work closely with local school boards to increase awareness of the field of Early Learning and Child Care so that faculty are able to accurately support students in their understanding of this as a social science career option. Through work with the local guidance departments, we are aiming to increase the number of students registering in RECE training programs and are looking at creative ways for students to explore ECE prior to exiting high school. This includes the establishment of a dual credit course in the early childhood sector, delivered to high school students in partnership with St. Clair College.

Work is well underway to support student's interest and understanding of this important field, by delivering engaging presentations to students and faculty.

Partnering with post-secondary institutions

Maintaining strong relationships with post-secondary institutions is key to developing a robust community of skilled graduates in Chatham-Kent. Through this relationship, we aim to continue collaboration to support new professionals to thrive in the workforce. We are committed to continuing discussions with St. Clair College on how ECE programs are promoted in the community and to ensure students receive relevant, high-quality training.



We are also working with LivingCK and local colleges to help support international students to stay and thrive in Chatham-Kent. Our Heartwork website has a dedicated space to showcase resources supportive to the lives of these individuals. We value the skills, perspectives, and diversity international students bring to our community.

We believe it is important to understand key trends in other communities across the province to provide the best outcomes for our local students. We will continue to engage with other post-secondary institutions to learn from their successes, challenges, and innovations being pursued.

Recognizing the high number of non-qualified early learning staff working within our community, we will continue to identify how more diverse and accessible programming can be made available – including through continuing education and apprenticeships.

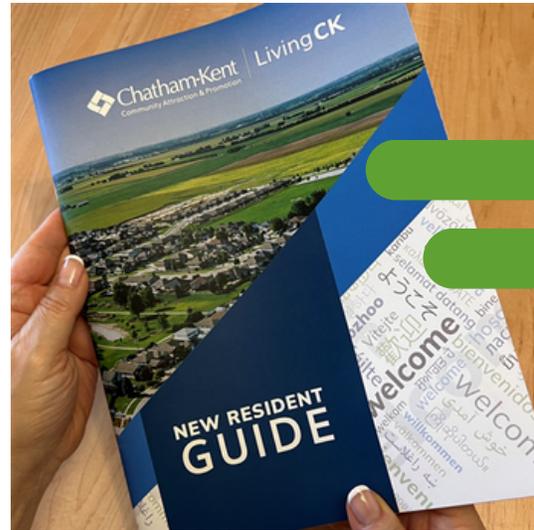
Employment supports

In partnership with the Municipality's Employment and Social Services division, we help facilitate the Early Childhood Educator Assistant program. Unemployed individuals can participate in a three-month program to upgrade their soft skills, complete a micro-credential course, receive literacy training, and experience hands-on educator skills training. The program includes an 80-hour placement within a local child care agency.

The Early Childhood Educator Assistant program is provided in collaboration with Employment Ontario, Adult Language and Learning, Lambton-Kent District School Board, St. Clair College, and local child care operators. In 2022, 15 individuals participated in the program, 11 of whom were successful in securing employment. Another 13 participants completed the program in 2024.

Additional funding

In 2022, a one-time federal investment in the Child Care and Early Years Workforce Funding was made to support the retention and recruitment of a high-quality child care and early years workforce. We used this funding to create a Workforce Strategy team, hiring two Early Years Strategy Specialists to assist in the planning and implementation of workforce initiatives.



In addition to these funds, the Ontario Government allocated an additional three-year funding stream in 2022 to help build capacity for early years professionals, including to enhance mental health resources and community supports:



In collaboration with mental health experts and early years professionals, Chatham-Kent has led the development and roll-out of an **Infant and Early Years Mental Health initiative**, which includes a range of resources and professional learning materials.



In the Spring of 2024, approximately 50 early years leaders participated in a **full-day event focusing on wellness** followed by an evening event attended by 200 early years professionals. Ongoing training is provided to support the implementation of these resources.

Heartwork

The Municipality's Heartwork initiative aims to elevate the early years profession as an essential and valued service in our community. The promotional campaign of Heartwork encompasses visibility throughout the sector in Chatham-Kent.



Heartwork includes a dedicated day for professionals to connect, learn and celebrate the early years sector as a community. Throughout the year, in consultation with the Heartwork committee, a wide range of professional development offerings are provided covering topics ranging from mental health initiatives to overall child development and classroom supports.

All Heartwork initiatives are housed on an accessible website and reviewed often to reflect the state of the current workforce. Professionals and students are encouraged to visit often for upcoming opportunities in the sector. The Municipality has launched an online resume submission portal for early years professionals and employers, to support filling vacancies more rapidly.

Our recent Heartwork day was attended by over 500 individuals working within the



Chatham-Kent child care and early years sector. The image on the previous page highlights the overall impact on their well-being. We look forward to continuing to host these sessions and other paid workshops where funding guidelines permit.

Goal 2

Build capacity, knowledge and skills for Early Learning Professionals

Early learning professionals play a critical role in children's education and overall development, while promoting a sense of belonging, engagement, well-being and expression. We feel strongly that supporting early learning professionals in their ongoing development is one of the most valuable ways to invest in the early years.

We pride ourselves on using a human-centered design approach to gather feedback. By putting this data at the center of our planning, we can offer more responsive professional development options that meet individual and agency needs.

Professional development

Through thoughtful planning and use of data collection, supportive professional development opportunities are selected and offered in consultation with the Heartwork Planning committee. Our goal is to assist and support Early Learning Professionals in obtaining personal and professional goals.



Supportive quality initiatives

Our priority is to grow and maintain high quality early learning environments across the municipality. Guided by Ontario's early years pedagogy, *How Does Learning Happen*, we provide strategies that foster the four foundations - Well-Being, Belonging, Expression and Engagement.

Stepping Side By Side CK

We have introduced Stepping Side by Side CK, a mentorship-modulated learning platform that engages educators independently or through a community of practice. The community of practice forum provides educators with valuable opportunities to learn from their peers, engage in a reflective process, and share innovative ideas that align with their ongoing growth and development.

We have also launched an ambassador program for early years professionals, committed to advancing their work in the sector. This group meets on a bi-monthly basis to provide input on a range of initiatives.

Anchored in Care

This initiative focuses on enhancing the quality of licensed child care by providing direct, on-the-job support to educators at various child care centres across the community. Through mentorship, training and resources, it aims to empower educators, improve practices and ensure a caring learning environment for children.

We have taken a collective approach to quality improvement by working collaboratively with operators, directors, supervisors and educators to identify the individual needs and goals of each centre, leading to more responsive outcomes. Centres are encouraged to contact us should they require further support.

Materials and resources

A resource trailer has been purchased to help ensure Early Years Professionals have access to supportive materials to deliver quality programming. It is our goal to plan with operators a flexible schedule where the trailer will be accessible on-site. These resources include but are not limited to a wide range of kits supporting all areas of development and classroom environments, books and educator tools such as a laminator, button maker and Cricut machine.



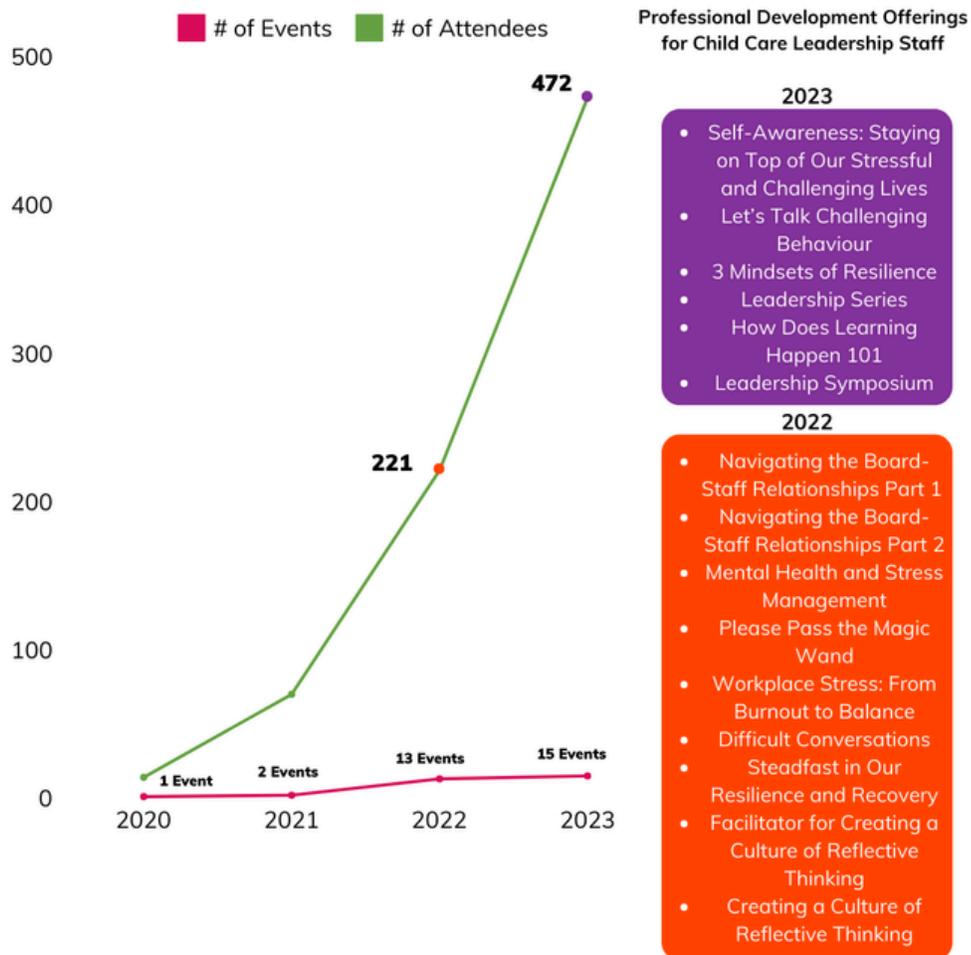
Goal 3

Build management skills in child care operators

Most child care management staff are promoted into leadership positions from an educator role. To support management staff and increase operator capacity, we are prioritizing mentorship and business training for child care operators. This includes training on how to support staff with mental health challenges, how to have difficult conversations with team members and families, onboarding staff, working with international students, and human resources best practices.

Some examples of how we are enhancing this training for child care leaders are shown in the image below.

Chatham-Kent is also enhancing system management capacity through Better Together – an ongoing collaborative strategic approach to province-wide collaboration and capacity building. It includes six CMSMs and DSSABs across Ontario committed to collectively advancing targeted projects across regional boundaries.



What we're doing to achieve our goals

- 1 Establish and implement an early years workforce strategy based on stakeholder feedback and workforce objectives
- 2 Offer high-quality training and support at no cost to educators and community partners who support children and families
- 3 Continue to invest funds to support competitive staff wages and benefits to attract ECEs to early years and child care programs
- 4 Continue to prioritize RECE recruitment and retention efforts through coordinated planning committees, targeted campaigns such as Heartwork, and engagement with child care centres, school boards, colleges and universities, and other community stakeholders
- 5 Work with centres to build capacity in the business of operating child care centres, including through additional training and education
- 6 Continue involvement in Better Together to progress strategic initiatives with other system managers
- 7 Enhance online administration, applications and digital forms to assist both families and operators
- 8 Introduce a data module to collect more useful information from operators to develop real-time solutions and supports
- 9 Build capacity with staff, families and the Chatham-Kent community around leading practices in mental health

How we'll measure and monitor progress

	Outcomes	Indicators
1	Increased number of RECE graduates entering the child care workforce	More qualified staff being hired, less "otherwise approved"
2	Increased number of RECEs remaining in the child care field	Less staff turnover, more experienced and knowledgeable staff
3	Increase the number of operating spaces in licensed child care	Reduced waiting list for families seeking child care
4	More leadership development opportunities available and accessible to all child care staff	Increased number of participants registering for learning opportunities, increased promotion within child care centres due to increased capacity
5	Child care staff receive more competitive wages and benefits	Reduced percentage in wage gap between RECEs and school board staff, fewer RECEs leaving the child care field to work for school boards
6	Increased number of families receiving financial support to cover their child care needs	Raised number of child care fees supported by the Municipality, increased number of children supported by fee subsidy
7	Child care operators are supported administratively (HR and accounting software and supports, etc.)	Child care management have more resources for effectively and efficiently running their business.
8	Increased data knowledge and mobilization through a consistent and relevant process to inform program changes and enhancements	Positive results from satisfaction surveys to both staff and parents due to timely and responsive decisions and changes

Provide Affordable Child Care for Families

Goal 1

Invest in child care staff and operations

Operational reviews and feedback from child care centres have revealed that there is a lack of consistent policies, administration support, and capacity in the child care system. Operators tend to conduct their business in their individual environments creating extra expenses, reducing capacity and communication within the child care system as a whole. In addition, chronic understaffing means that child care leadership and upper management are frequently needed to fill educator roles, and are left with less office time to develop strategies that ensure all children enrolled in licensed child care programs receive high quality care.



We continue to provide high-quality, relevant, and practical professional development on the business of child care operations. As a recent example, we worked with provincial and federal government representatives to host an operator information session on hiring and re-training international students and staff.

Goal 2

Develop strategies to see all children receiving quality child care

Our engagement with parents and caregivers indicated several key challenges, including a lack of available child care spaces, insufficient extended-hour and part-time programs, and limited available licensed home care providers.

This has forced many families to use unlicensed child care as their only option to ensure they can work or attend school. Due to the high cost of unlicensed child care, some families are unable to maintain employment or complete education, which negatively impacts their lives and the Chatham-Kent economy.

Our survey of Chatham-Kent parents and caregivers in February 2024 revealed that a third of families on the child care waitlist are unable to keep or obtain employment due to lack of child care, causing financial hardship.

As detailed at page 18, staff shortages are the key driver for the lack of child care spaces. As of December 2023, 38% of licensed spaces do not have staff.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of head offices	13	14	14	14	14
Number of sites	43	44	44	45	45
Number of licensed spaces 0-5		2,044	2,219	2,381	2,411
Number of licensed spaces 6-12		1,226	1,226	1,225	1,226
Number of spaces operational 0-5				2,030	1,723
Number of spaces operational 6-12				812	549
Average monthly number of children in licensed spaces			1,565	2,052	2,381
Average monthly number of fee subsidy recipients			1,045	1,130	1,052

Licensed home child care provider figures are provided below.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of head offices	1	1	1	1	2
Number of providers	17	16	5	5	10

We are also working to ensure that families know about the programs and services available to them that exist across Chatham-Kent. We collaborate closely with family doctors and other community partners to provide information packages on all child care options to new parents. For those families on the waitlist to receive services, we are working to provide greater transparency regarding timing and placement to help alleviate stress and frustration.

Goal 3

Roll out CWELCC in Chatham-Kent

March 28, 2022 marked a historical day for child care centres, families, and the overall economy in Chatham-Kent, as Ontario signed on to a 13.2 billion dollar agreement with the federal government on funding for the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system. CWELCC aims to achieve the following:

- 1 Increase affordability:** Reduce child care fees in phases, reaching an average of \$10-a-day child care by 2025-26
- 2 Strengthen access:** Create 86,000 new, high-quality child care spaces across Ontario
- 3 Sustain high-quality services:** Increase pay for RECEs and support recruitment of more educators into the field
- 4 Improve inclusion:** Support the needs of diverse and underserved populations, including low-income, Francophone, Indigenous, Black, other racialized and newcomer communities, as well as vulnerable children and children with special needs

5 Enhance data and reporting: Share financial and administrative data (including micro data) needed to monitor progress in establishing the Canada-wide system

Our growth plan

We added an additional 162 spaces in 2022, 30 spaces in 2023, and 124 spaces from January 1, 2024 to November 1, 2024. Plans are underway to add another home care provider by the end of 2024 to meet our 130 space target for 2024.



The remaining 19 spaces will be reserved for our home care agencies to bring on additional home child care providers by the end of 2026.

By the end of 2026, we are targeted to have 2,560 spaces for 0-5 age group. At this time, no new licensed agencies are being sought to fulfill our expanded targeted growth plan.

The expansion of child care spaces is rooted in Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework. This framework targets specific communities to support the families who need them most.

Under the CWELCC system, Chatham-Kent has a target increase of 341 new child care spaces from September 2022 to December 2026. The Child Care Space Creation Plan is shown below.

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Number of new spaces targeted by the Ministry	162	60	100	7	12
Number of new spaces created or projected for CK	162	30	130	7	12

Priority neighbourhoods

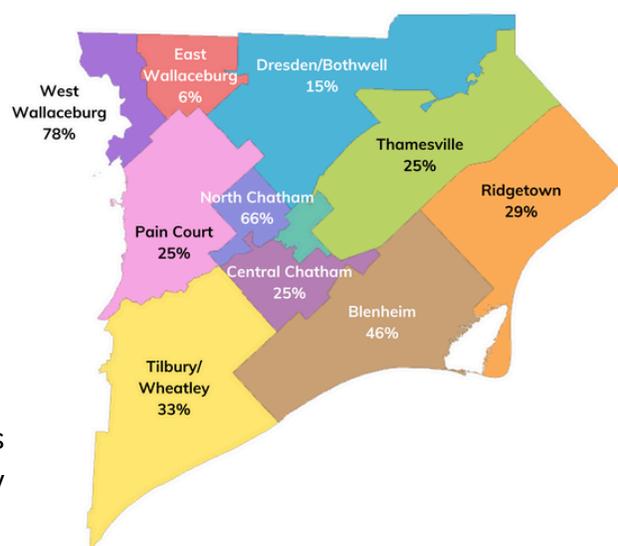
The neighbourhood data below depicts the number of spaces and children in our community. Neighbourhoods that score 33% or below for the child care coverage rate, or where there are more than 3 children to 1 space, are considered a priority. This is the standard measurement within the Ministry's targeted growth plan.

EDI Neighbourhood	Population aged 0-6 (2021)	Licensed child care spaces 0-6 (2023)	Number of children aged 0-6 per space	Child care coverage rate for children aged 0-6
East Wallaceburg	440	26	16.92	6%
Dresden/Bothwell	470	69	6.81	15%
Thamesville	280	70	4.00	25%
Central Chatham	1,140	289	3.94	25%
Ridgetown	300	87	3.45	29%
Tilbury/Wheatley	885	288	3.07	33%
Pain Court	175	57	3.07	33%
Blenheim	665	284	2.34	43%
East Chatham	435	289	2.04	49%
North Chatham	1,195	786	2.04	66%
West Wallaceburg	350	272	1.29	78%
Total	6,315	2,381	2.65	38%

Based on this criteria, there are five main priority neighbourhoods for child care growth in Chatham-Kent for children aged 0-6:

1. Dresden/Bothwell
2. Thamesville
3. Ridgetown
4. Tilbury/Wheatley
5. Pain Court

Although Chatham and Wallaceburg as an entire community does not fall below the target to be considered a child care desert area, Central Chatham and East Wallaceburg as separate neighbourhoods do fall below the 33% threshold. We are identifying opportunities for growth in these two areas as well.



We also refer to the child care waitlist in determining which neighbourhoods should be prioritized due to high numbers of families requiring child care. As a result, Blenheim and Chatham are also included as priority locations.

To assist families in most urgent need, we are looking for child care locations with capacity to transform under-utilized spaces to better meet community needs. We are investigating opportunities to add spaces to Francophone schools and other locations that realign existing licensed spaces to better serve our families – even if it does not increase overall space capacity. We are also investigating opportunities at Holy Family, Winston Churchill, Gregory Drive, St-Philippe, and Ste-Catherine.

To reflect community feedback, we will explore opportunities to support additional access to part-time and off-peak child care – in particular, to accommodate shift workers in Chatham-Kent. This may include additional spaces for before and after school hours or extended-hour care through home care providers.

CWELCC achievements to date

Other key achievements to date related to the implementation of the CWELCC system include:

- 1 Reduced **parent fees** by 52.75% beginning January 1, 2023 (we will continue to reduce fees as announced by the Ministry of Education until an average of \$10/day has been met)
- 2 Applied a **Wage Enhancement** that gave all child care program staff an increase of \$2/hour
- 3 Applied a **Wage Stabilization** that gave all child care program staff an increase of an additional \$2/hour on top of the Wage Enhancement increase until the wage floor could be increased in 2024
- 4 Developed a **reporting system** for child care operators to track operating capacity in a more consistent manner
- 5 Embedded a community **viability analysis protocol** for every Purchase of Service application. This ensures that child care operators are financially viable in our community so that quality child care can continue to be a priority
- 6 Planned to implement a new **funding formula** across the system as announced by the Ministry of Education in 2024 which will aim to further stabilize the system

Fee subsidy

Although an average of \$10 a day child care may sound like an affordable solution for families, in Chatham-Kent, 8 in 10 families that received subsidy prior to CWELCC would still need assistance to pay this amount. The child care fee subsidy program therefore continues to be a key priority for Chatham-Kent.



Our survey in February 2024 highlighted the impact of this program on families in the community. In particular, 70 percent of parents and caregivers who receive fee subsidy payments told us that the amount they receive is adequate to meet their family's financial needs. Other comments from the survey are included below.



Without subsidy I wouldn't be able to work and provide for myself and daughter. I didn't realize how much help I was eligible for and I appreciate everything that's being done for us.

Subsidy has been a blessing to our low income, disabled family. I believe not all families like ours are aware of this program and how to access it. I feel like that could change.



Unlicensed home child care providers

We also work hard to encourage unlicensed providers to become licensed, including through start-up funding, a general operating grant, community information sessions, and other promotional activities. We will continue these efforts, including in partnership with other municipalities.

What we're doing to achieve our goals

- 1 Continue to roll out the CWELCC system in Chatham-Kent to provide more affordable and accessible child care, including 341 new spaces by 2026
- 2 Establish benchmarks for the true cost of delivering child care
- 3 Develop and implement policies that ensure operating funding for licensed child care providers offsets fees paid by parents
- 4 Continue to invest funds to support competitive staff wages and benefits to attract RECEs to early years and child care programs
- 5 Develop a communication plan to ensure the community is well-informed of changes in the child care system, e.g. rates, expansion plans, licensed spaces, etc.
- 6 Continue to develop and implement policies to effectively manage changes in fee policies and child care rates
- 7 Develop a strategy to increase the number of licensed home child care spaces
- 8 Develop a Directed Growth Strategy for licensed child care in Chatham-Kent, with a focus on providing services in neighbourhoods most in need of support
- 9 Develop a quality assessment framework to support active participation in inclusive practices for early years and child care service providers
- 10 Develop a quality evaluation and monitoring framework for collecting feedback from families of children receiving licenced child care

How we'll measure and monitor progress

	Outcomes	Indicators
1	Child care staff receive more competitive wages and benefits	Reduced percentage in wage gap between RECEs and school board staff, fewer RECEs leaving the child care field to work for school boards
2	Increased number of families receiving financial support to cover their child care needs	Increased number of child care fees supported by the Municipality, increased number of children supported by fee subsidy
3	Increased number of child care spaces available	More home child care centres becoming licensed, reduced waiting list for families seeking child care
4	An accessible and transparent communication and information system sharing CWELCC (etc.) updates with operators, staff, and families	Information is readily accessible (e.g. on website) and inquiries are answered in a timely manner
5	Increased percentage of child care providers who report feeling more knowledgeable about delivering inclusive programs	Fewer or no children being turned away from child care centres due to behaviours or special needs
6	Consistent and relevant data collection process to inform program changes and enhancements	Positive results from satisfaction surveys to both staff and parents due to timely and responsive decisions and changes

Support Accessible Early Years Child & Family Programs

Goal 1

Support families through building partnerships

EarlyON programming

A key way we support families and build networks across the community is through our EarlyON Child and Family Centre programs. EarlyON is a free program for parents, caregivers, and young children from birth to six years old. It provides opportunities for families to learn, grow, and connect together through a range of play-based educational and community programming.

The Municipality of Chatham-Kent has directly operated EarlyON Child and Family Centres within the community since 2017. Our programs are designed and delivered through a lens of learning, based on the foundational elements of *How Does Learning Happen?* Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years. We strive to offer environments for learning that are welcoming, high-quality, inclusive, integrated, and community led.

Chatham-Kent's EarlyON programming supports local and unique community needs, and is provided alongside community partners to deliver a range of diverse programs, services and experiences for children, families, and caregivers. Examples include:

- EarlyON Forest and Nature programs
- ON y va Francophone and bilingual EarlyON programs
- Indigenous-led EarlyON programs and services
- Outreach to newcomer families
- Mobile 'Pop-Up' programs to meet families within the rural community

Our recent parent and caregiver survey revealed that 95% of respondents were "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the EarlyON programs they had attended. In particular, respondents felt that staff are knowledgeable and helpful, and that their child was able to take part in free-play and child-led exploration.

Suggestions were made to provide greater flexibility in hours of operation and offer additional program locations. These valuable suggestions continue to be explored for future planning opportunities.



EarlyON during the Pandemic

Along with other child care and early years programs, EarlyON met the challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic head on, using creativity and initiative to support families through the crisis. EarlyON staff quickly learned how to create videos to connect with and support families, in collaboration with community partners for a large variety of fun, interactive content. To date, over 200 videos have been made, many of which are still on our YouTube channel.

Many other options were also regularly offered to families:



Virtual programming: “EarlyON-Line” programs, where families could participate in engaging sing-alongs and interactive at-home programming and discussions, including LaterON with EarlyON for parents and caregivers, Mini Chefs, Musical Makers, set-up story strolls in the community, and Creative Kit drop-offs.



Indigenous-led programming: Indigenous-led EarlyON services were offered virtually in the community throughout the Pandemic. An Indigenous-led EarlyON Child and Family Centre also opened its doors in March 2022, offering culturally diverse programming and supports for all families.



Outdoor programming: When permitted, EarlyON re-opened with outdoor programs located in parks across the community. These programs proved to be highly popular with parents, caregivers, and children alike.



Goal 2**Ensure children with special needs receive effective and timely supports**

As the CMSM for Chatham-Kent, we fund, support and oversee special needs resourcing through community partnerships and within our programs and services. In response to a growing need for special needs support for children, we have sought out new ways to assist operators in supporting Chatham-Kent children.

As part of our continuous improvement efforts, we are conducting program reviews of our special needs resourcing model for before and after school programming and licensed child care for children aged 0-4 years.

Linck Child, Youth and Family Supports

Linck is an accredited, multi-service agency providing children's mental health, developmental and protection services in Chatham-Kent. As the CMSM, we partner with Linck to fund Developmental Support Workers who work with child care centres across Chatham-Kent to support children experiencing special needs.



Linck supports an integrated approach to planning for Infant and Child Development and Special Needs Resources. All developmental services are provided at no cost to families who are residents of Chatham-Kent. Linck's program objectives are to:

- 1 Promote early identification and intervention for children with extra needs
- 2 Maximize opportunities for optimal growth and development of the child and family unit
- 3 Provide family-centred service based on caregiver strengths, needs, and priorities
- 4 Provide service within the child's natural environment(s)

Examples of key initiatives being progressed by Linck include quarterly professional learning sessions, a provision of professional development on mental health supports in partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), and bilingual literacy support programming for staff in partnership with the Hanen Centre.

Children's Treatment Centre of Chatham-Kent

The Children's Treatment Centre of Chatham-Kent (CTC-CK) is a non-profit facility that has served the community for 71 years. Its mission is to provide specialized therapy and innovative programs to empower children, youth and their families to reach their individual potential. With professional staff and volunteers, CTC-CK is committed to providing support and serving needs both in the centre and in our community.



As the CMSM, we partner with CTC-CK to fund supportive services and provide resourcing at child care locations throughout Chatham-Kent. Other ways we work together include:

- Sharing information and resources
- Mutual warm referral services
- Direct referrals through the Child Care Registry (OneList)
- Coordinated service planning to assist families in navigating the system
- Shared spaces in schools across Chatham-Kent, such as clinic rooms, office spaces and EarlyON rooms

Inclusion Advisory Committee

We also chair an Inclusion Advisory Committee (previously named the Special Needs Implementation Working Group) with representatives from Linck, CTC-CK, and child care centres.

These meetings provide a forum to discuss issues and identify more coordinated solutions. The Committee has developed a Team Approach to Quality Childcare (TACQ), which provides a collective service model for supporting children with special needs in Chatham-Kent.



Pilot initiatives

We are currently piloting the following initiatives to support children with special needs:



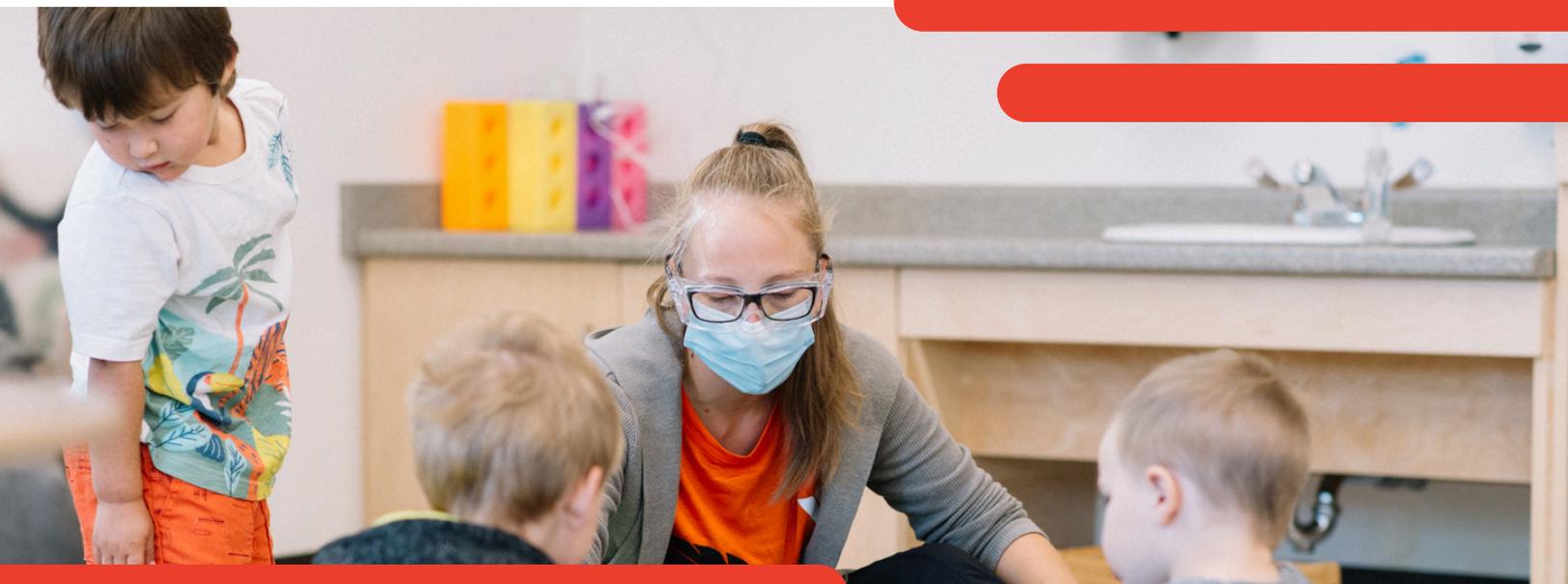
A one-year contract for an **Early Years Strategy Specialist** has been introduced to conduct a needs analysis in collaboration with child care centres and community partners. Best practices will also be benchmarked from across the province to determine what could be implemented locally. One potential example may be the introduction of a Special Needs certificate for RECEs, supported by additional training opportunities.



A pilot **Before and After School program** is supporting child care centres to boost staff numbers in areas where Developmental Support Workers are not available for children in need. This pilot may be extended to other child care sites if evaluated and found to be successful.



We are identifying ways to support **summer camps** staffed by Developmental Support Workers for children with special needs, including through CK Recreation Programs. This is being conducted in partnership with the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club of Canada, and will be piloted in September 2024.



What we're doing to achieve our goals

- 1 Continue to build relationships and networks of support with families through EarlyON programs, including through enhanced Indigenous and Francophone programming
- 2 Enhance engagement with community partners to support the delivery of high-quality EarlyON programs
- 3 Take a data-informed approach to increase vulnerable families' access to child care and early years programs and services
- 4 Continue communication and marketing efforts to increase public awareness of EarlyON programs – including the importance of early developmental support
- 5 Review the special needs resourcing model in before and after school programming
- 6 Review the special needs resourcing model for children 0-4 years in licensed child care
- 7 Design a special needs resourcing model for EarlyON programming
- 8 Pilot innovative new initiatives, including the Early Years Strategist role, Before and After School supports, and new summer camp model
- 9 Enhance data collection methods and systems through the Inclusion Advisory Committee
- 10 Collect demographic information to better understand our evolving community profile

How we'll measure and monitor progress

	Outcomes	Indicators
1	Families of all cultures feel welcomed and see themselves reflected in the EarlyON programs	Increased number of diverse populations attending EarlyON, increased participation from hard-to-serve populations
2	Families' needs are recognized and supported by a variety of services and programs due to a collaborative planning system that considers the community and families' needs upfront	Increased collaboration with community partners offering support to vulnerable populations, increased 'pop up' programming to more remote locations
3	Parents, caregivers and children feel their social, emotional, etc. needs are met through high-quality early years programs in their community, with access to up-to-date information, from knowledgeable educators and community supports	Increased positive feedback from families through satisfaction surveys, etc.
4	Parents have enhanced understanding of children's learning, the benefits of play and their influence on the trajectory of their child's life	Parents report that they are knowledgeable of child development red flags and available resources, and are able to understand and support their children's behaviours and needs
5	The public and parents are informed of EarlyON programs and services through marketing efforts	Increased participation in programs, increased online engagement
6	Consistent feedback loop from families and amongst community partners to inform planning and support systems	Programs and services are flexible and are altered when necessary to consistently meet families' needs

How we'll measure and monitor progress

	Outcomes	Indicators
7	Survey feedback and data is gathered, analyzed and available to all community partners in a cohesive manner that is easily understood and informs planning	Community partners and service providers have access to data that highlights the physical, human and organizational resources that exist regionally at a neighbourhood level. This helps them deliver services where they are most needed
8	Children experiencing special needs receive supports in a timely and effective manner	Reduction in special needs waitlist, more widespread support for children experiencing special needs in child care, recreation, and EarlyON

Engage Responsively with the Community

Goal 1

Strengthen partnerships with all communities

We make all efforts to understand, support and celebrate the ever-increasing diversity in Chatham-Kent. We have a deep history of Indigenous and Francophone communities, people of colour, and an increasing newcomer population from across the world.

To help support Chatham-Kent's richness of diversity, in 2021 the Municipality began developing its first ever Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Justice (DEIJ) Strategy which engages all municipal staff and offers information and resources to support them on their learning journeys regarding DEIJ matters.

The Child Care and Early Years division supports organizational efforts by appointing staff to sit on the DEIJ committee and share information during team meetings. We have also made successful efforts to increase diversity in our internal hiring practices.

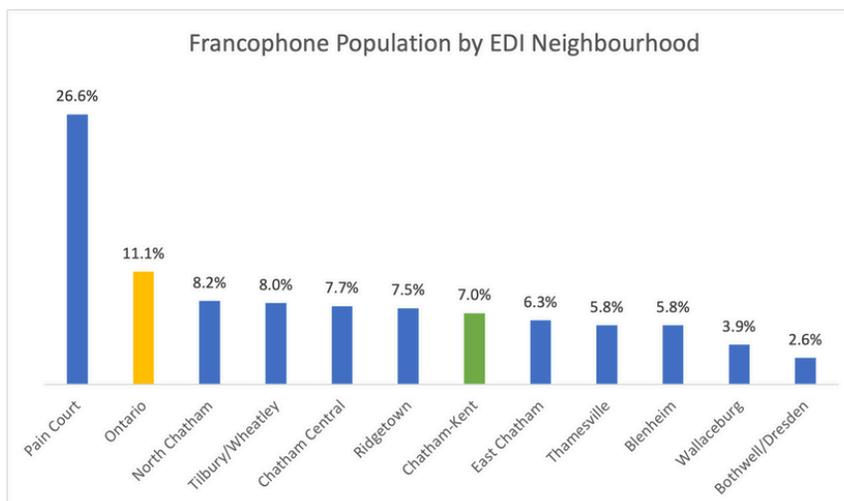
In addition, we work closely with child care centres to promote the importance of celebrating a range of cultural traditions, practices, and holidays on-site.

Francophone community engagement

The Municipality now offers bilingual options for many existing programs and has created a wide range of new bilingual programs.

In 2018, the Child Care and Early Years division opened its first ON y va, a French-

language led EarlyON centre, offering French and bilingual programs and services, with Francophone educators consistently offering bilingual programs to families throughout Chatham-Kent.



Our EarlyON team partners with local Long Term Care homes to offer bilingual programs such as *Bilingual Babes and Books* and works closely with the local French school board to offer programs and celebrate Francophone events.

Chatham-Kent is also fortunate to have four full French schools. Our team has created a partnership video with Conseil Scolaire Catholique Providence (CSC), the French School Board – *Une Culture de partage et de collaboration: Ensemble, nous rayonnons!*

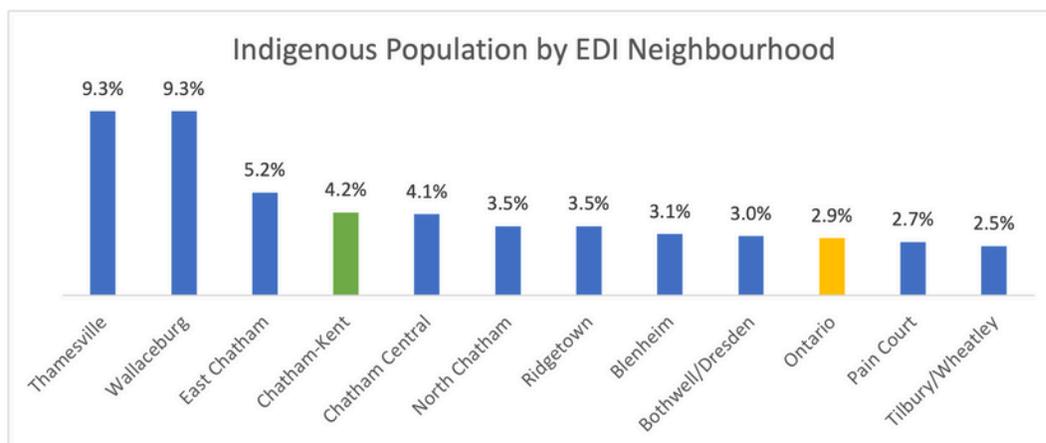
We also collaborated with CSC Providence and other Francophone partners to offer a Franco-Fun event, which celebrated Franco-Ontarian Day with festive and engaging activities for families.

Indigenous community engagement

Chatham-Kent is home to Eelūnaapéewi Lahkéewiit (Delaware Nation at Moraviantown), and neighbour to Bkejwanong First Nation (Walpole Island). Many members from these reservations, as well as other Indigenous communities, live within the many communities of Chatham-Kent. Bkejwanong First Nation falls within the boundaries of Sarnia-Lambton, however, due to their proximity, many services and supports are provided by Chatham-Kent organizations.

As we continue challenging ourselves to find ways to better support families, a recurring theme is the importance of building relationships with our Indigenous community partners and families. The Child Care and Early Years division is committed to making all attempts at reaching out, connecting with, asking questions, and supporting our Indigenous families and children.

The first Indigenous-led Child and Family centre was opened in Chatham in March 2022, followed by the second in Wallaceburg in November 2022. These locations provide both Indigenous-led child care and EarlyON programs, as well as housing supports and other services as needed.



In addition, a CK Urban Indigenous Network was formed to develop a needs analysis and strategy plan to find new and ongoing ways to support our Indigenous populations. This has resulted in a network of valuable new connections and knowledge-sharing amongst community partners that continues to grow and thrive.

Other initiatives have included:



Distribution of the **Ontario Government's Journey Together book series**, which examines ways to help address the legacy of residential schools, close gaps and remove barriers, support Indigenous culture, and reconcile relationships with Indigenous peoples.



Development and distribution of the **Road to Understanding Indigenous Culture** card, which outlines local details of Indigenous history, geography, and key events. It also provides an overview of culturally significant concepts, including spirituality, communication styles, historic relationships, and historic sources of distrust.

Goal 2

Collaborate and gather data for responsive planning

Chatham-Kent's Child Care and Early Years division is renowned for prioritizing strong, trusting, and enduring community partnerships. Through ongoing relationship-building, coordination, and collaboration, we have built on critical partnerships and fostered new relationships that ultimately help improve services for children and families in Chatham-Kent.

Child and Youth Planning Network

One of our most successful ongoing collaborations is the Child and Youth Planning Network (CYPN) – a network of over 30 community partners that meets for a full morning each month to discuss key issues and identify ways to best address Chatham-Kent's evolving needs. CYPN's four pillars of shared values include Family Voice; Equity and Access; Data and Knowledge Mobilization; and Partnership and Innovation. These pillars guide us in open and honest conversations that lead us to action.



A key way CYPN helps to drive change is through data sharing and analysis. In August 2023, a new shared Data Portal was created for CYPN members to access. Our goal is to generate and share accurate, localized, coordinated evidence to evaluate services and help improve program delivery. This will be an iterative process, as new pathways increase our ability to engage families and learn about how best to serve them.

A full-time Evaluation and Planning Coordinator position has also been funded by partners to help populate and maintain the portal and conduct analysis to inform joint interventions.

In addition, CYPN has established an Advocacy Working Group to drive broader change. This includes topics such as national universal child care, prioritization of child care within the Federal budget, specific funding requests for evaluation and planning support, and grant applications to the *Anti-Racism Anti-Hate* and *Together CK: Community Projects* grant programs.

Other key partnerships

The Municipality convenes and participates in a range of other innovative partnerships on topics of collective importance:

- **Strategic inter-municipal coordination**, including through the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA) and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)
- **RECE training and education**, with St. Clair College and all school boards, resulting in the creation of an ECE teaching classroom, plus sharing of spaces to better reach families
- **Indigenous Support and Planning Meetings**, including through the Maajitamay Table and CK Urban Indigenous Table
- **Site-specific arrangements**, such as collaborating for a Multi-Purpose Room with the new Children's Treatment Centre of Chatham-Kent
- **COVID-related collaboration**, including to create outdoor classrooms and programming
- **Inter-municipal data collaboration meetings**, with data analysis coordinators to collaborate in resource sharing, planning, and program evaluations for Child Care and Early Years in Ontario

Further opportunities to enhance system-level coordination and strategic planning are also being explored, with a focus on initiatives that will create new models and accelerate system change. This work is taking place within the *Better Together 2024* initiative.

Goal 3**Connect neighbourhoods to increase capacity for localized solutions**

A strong community is a place of opportunity, and a key way we work to increase capacity for localized solutions is through Connect the Block (CTB). CTB is a forum for citizen-led community planning to improve early years and child development outcomes at the local level. Unlike top-down methods of community planning, local CTB groups are led by and for local families and puts the needs of children 0-6 at the center of their work.



CTB aims to build connection and capacity with people to work together on common issues and opportunities. Through this initiative, we can help start community conversations about local residents' well-being and how neighbourhoods can support individuals to thrive.

The goal of CTB is to strengthen communities and help all members thrive by:

- 1 Increasing knowledge of the role community and neighbourhoods play in positive change
- 2 Supporting the use of data in community and program planning
- 3 Facilitating stakeholder partnerships to move from data to action



What we're doing to achieve our goals

- 1 Continue to strengthen partnerships with Indigenous community through participation in local Indigenous planning tables
- 2 Collaborate with Francophone partners to expand French-language and bilingual access to child care and early years programs
- 3 Continue to engage the Child and Youth Planning Network for collaboration, finding service gaps and problem solving to make supports and services stronger for Chatham-Kent families
- 4 Continue conducting neighbourhood planning exercises through Connect the Block
- 5 Develop a quality evaluation and monitoring framework for implementation in licensed child care and EarlyON programs through standardized surveys and other means of data collection

How we'll measure and monitor progress

	Outcomes	Indicators
1	Engagement and feedback informs 'next steps' in developing neighbourhood community action plans	Connect the Block takes on a life of it's own as locals step forward to lead the way in their neighbourhoods
2	Clearer understanding of localized community needs for more responsive system planning	Information gathered from the community results in measurable, actionable goals and outcomes
3	Due to community partner collaboration, knowledge of and support for local events is shared widely throughout Chatham-Kent	Attendance and participation at community events supporting diverse populations in Chatham-Kent, e.g. Indigenous People's Day, Francophone Day

How we'll measure and monitor progress

	Outcomes	Indicators
4	Community leaders and partners are knowledgeable about family needs and service gaps in each neighbourhood, and collaborate to find effective solutions	The Data Portal is shared and used regularly by community partners, with information informing service planning

How this Plan was Developed

We believe that system planning should be informed by community engagement, research, and data. This section outlines how we gathered this important information to develop the system plan.

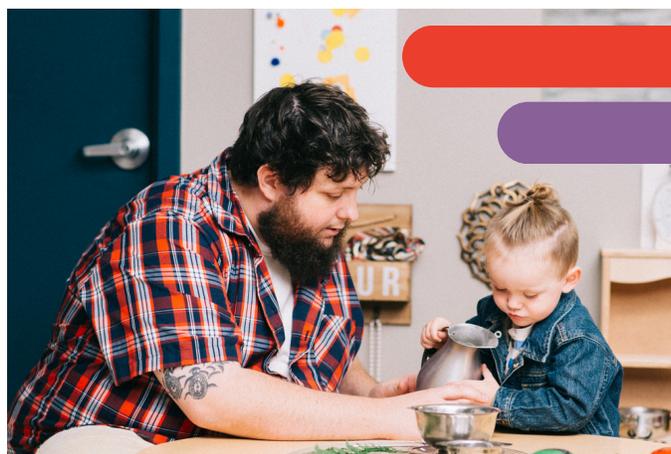
Community Engagement

This system plan is built on engagement with the Chatham-Kent community. From February to April of 2024, we reached out to parents and caregivers through an online survey and facilitated in-person working sessions with service providers and community partners.

The purpose of community engagement was to gather perspectives on the strengths, challenges, and opportunities for the current and future state of child care and early years in Chatham-Kent.

Parents and caregivers

Between February 22 and March 9, 2024, 795 parents and caregivers responded to a survey about child care and early years services in Chatham-Kent. This included licensed child care (both centre-based and home-based), special needs resourcing, fee subsidy, and EarlyON child and family centres. It also included parents and caregivers on the waitlist to receive child care services.



The survey included 41 questions focused on the following areas:

- **Respondent profile**, e.g. demographic and household considerations
- **Program access**, e.g. which services respondents had accessed
- **Program satisfaction**, e.g. areas of strength and opportunities for improvement

A summary of key insights is included on the following page.

Who responded to the survey?



1

The vast majority of respondents identified as **female, white / European**, between the ages of **25 and 44**, and have a household that includes a **couple** with one or more dependent child.

2

The number of people who identified as **LGBTQI2S+** was similar to the national average (4%). The number of **Indigenous** respondents was also similar to the demographic estimate for Chatham-Kent (3%).

3

Only 9% of respondents stated that they or their child has a **disability** or requires special support.

4

Respondent's average **household income** was higher than the average for Chatham-Kent.

How satisfied were respondents across the various programs and services?



1

Satisfaction rate:

- **EarlyON** child and family centres: 95%
- **Centre-based** licensed child care: 87%
- **Home-based** licensed child care: 87%
- **Special needs** resourcing: 77%

What did we learn about centre-based licensed child care?



1

In general, parents and caregivers are **happy** with the contributions of individual ECEs, the level of inclusion at centres, being able to rely on centres to be open during regular business hours, being able to address concerns with the centre, and feeling that their child is safe while at child care.

2

Some parents and caregivers would like to see **more child care spaces** in Chatham-Kent, a wider range of timing options to accommodate shift workers, higher pay for educators, and enhanced communication from centres.

What did we learn about EarlyON child and family centres?



1

Parents and caregivers are **satisfied across a broad range of areas** – including staff knowledge and helpfulness, the ability for their child to take part in free-play and child-led exploration, and the ability to use ideas and information at home that were learned at EarlyON.

2

Hours of operation was seen by respondents as the biggest barrier to accessing EarlyON programming. Suggestions focused on providing additional programming, including on weekends and in the evenings and at new locations.

3

Many parents and caregivers expressed their **appreciation** for the EarlyON program and staff.

What did we learn about special needs resourcing?



1

The most significant barriers for parents and caregivers were the lack of availability of part-time, weekend, and evening care – along with the lack of programming in convenient locations. Most suggestions for enhancing special needs programming focused on these issues.

2

Transportation, language, and culture were not perceived as significant barriers for the vast majority of parents and caregivers.

What did we learn about fee subsidy?



1

70% of fee subsidy recipients feel the amount they receive is adequate, and highlighted the significant positive impact it has had for their family.

2

83% of fee subsidy recipients applied through the online portal (OLAF), and 76% found it easy or very easy.

What did we learn about the child care wait list?



1

A third of families on the child care waitlist are unable to keep or get employment, causing financial hardship.

2

Suggestions focused on the need for greater transparency and communication regarding wait list placement, and many respondents highlighted the stress, anxiety, and frustration caused by being on the wait list.

Service providers

An in-person workshop was held in February 2024 to gather service providers' perspectives.

Providers discussed the impact of their services, including how they contribute to the broader well-being of children and families in Chatham-Kent. Key themes included:

- Creating a sense of belonging for children and families, including for newcomers
- Supporting the developmental fundamentals that set children up for success
- Allowing parents to participate in the workforce
- Identifying and helping to manage behavioural challenges
- Alleviating financial stress for families, including through CWELCC
- Providing children with a safe and fun space for new experiences

A range of challenges were also identified – primarily, a significant ECE workforce shortage that results in long waitlists and a lack of child care spaces. Providers told us this is caused by both recruitment challenges (insufficient new ECEs entering the labour market in Chatham-Kent) and issues with retaining staff – caused by low wages, insufficient benefits, burnout, high expectations from families, and a lack of career pathing.

Suggestions for how to address these issues focused on additional investment in training, greater centralization of services, and the creation of fast-track pathways to accreditation for new educators.

Community partners

Recognizing the importance of a holistic, connected network of children's services, we gathered perspectives from the Chatham-Kent Child and Youth Planning Network. A complete list of members is included in Appendix 2.



Together, these partners play a key role in delivering programs and assisting with service navigation – helping families to access the network of supports they are eligible to receive. They also help ensure a smooth transition from early years and child care (age 0 to 6) to school age and youth (age 7 to 18).

Community partners' suggestions for the service system plan focused on improving service coordination, providing additional mental health supports for children aged 0-6, enhancing supports for families on the wait list to receive child care, and conducting a service audit to better understand the range of child and youth programming available.

Research

We conducted a detailed review of nine other service system managers' approaches to the child care and early years programming to identify trends and leading practices. Service system managers play a central role in the planning, funding, administration and operation of early years and licensed child care services in Ontario.

The research focused on catchment areas across Ontario comparable to Chatham-Kent in terms of population demographics and the rural-urban geography. Information on the research questions used is included in Appendix 3.

The research revealed three important trends commonly experienced by most or all service system managers, which have informed the development of this plan.

Service system managers are working hard to address **ECE recruitment and retention challenges**

- Partnering with universities and colleges to build an ECE graduate pipeline
- Supporting long-term professionalization of the ECE career path
- Recognizing ECEs to ensure they feel valued
- Helping to build ECE capacity through training and mentorship opportunities
- Ensuring high school faculty are equipped with up-to-date knowledge of the early years and child care field, including current training programs, grant information, and the economic return on quality child care in the community

The **introduction of CWELCC** is having a range of impacts on early learning and child care

- Severe staff shortages are limiting service system managers' ability to meet CWELCC targets
- There are unintended consequences for vulnerable and low-income families, including a reduction of available spaces for subsidy-reliant families who now face increased competition
- Many third-party operators are concerned by the uncertainty of future funding formulas with the introduction of CWELCC
- As a result of CWELCC-related fee freezes, many providers are now locked into pre-Pandemic fees and struggling to meet demand while managing inflationary costs

The **COVID-19 Pandemic** continues to impact children's services

- Employment in the childcare and early learning sector dropped 21% compared to 3% among other workers during the Pandemic. Many ECEs exited the workforce and did not return, and the number of new workers entering has not kept pace
- Service system managers are reporting an increase in children with complex needs who require specialized support. This has heightened the demand for special services and specialized training for ECEs, and presents an additional challenge regarding recruiting and retention of specialized staff ¹⁰

¹⁰ McCuaig K., Akbari, E., Correia, A. (April 2022). Canada's children need a professional early childhood education workforce. Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Appendix 1

Child Care Program Staff Wages in Chatham-Kent, 2023

Administrative staff ¹¹	Min	\$18.50
	Max	\$54.18
	Ave	\$31.85
Cook	Min	\$16.55
	Max	\$23.84
	Ave	\$18.48
Custodial	Min	\$16.55
	Max	\$23.65
	Ave	\$17.97
Program (non-RECE)	Min	\$18.25
	Max	\$27.74
	Ave	\$21.54
Program (RECE)	Min	\$19.88
	Max	\$30.45
	Ave	\$24.51
Supervisor	Min	\$22.50
	Max	\$33.53
	Ave	\$28.09

¹¹Note that this includes a range of desk-based roles, including leadership and administrative roles.

Appendix 2

Child and Youth Planning Network Partnerships

- Adult Language and Learning
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada
- Blenheim Youth Centre
- Boys and Girls Club of Chatham-Kent
- Chatham-Kent Child Care & Early Years
- Chatham-Kent Community Attraction & Promotion
- Chatham-Kent Community Health Centres
- Chatham-Kent EarlyON
- Chatham-Kent Heartwork
- Chatham-Kent Family Health Team
- Chatham-Kent Ontario Health Team
- Chatham-Kent Public Health
- Chatham-Kent Public Library
- Chatham-Kent Recreation
- Children's Treatment Centre of Chatham-Kent
- CLASS Shared School Services
- College Boréal
- Community Living Chatham-Kent
- Conseil Scolaire Catholique Providence
- Employment and Social Services Chatham-Kent
- Humana Community Services
- Lambton Kent District School Board
- Lambton Rural Child Care
- Linck Child, Youth & Family Supports
- Lower Thames Valley Conservation Authority
- Maryvale
- Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
- Ska:na Family Learning Centre
- St. Clair Catholic District School Board
- St. Clair College
- Thames Valley Children's Centre
- The Mental Health Network of Chatham-Kent
- Vision Us
- Walpole Island First Nation
- Wee Watch Quality Licensed Home Child Care
- YMCA Chatham-Kent

Appendix 3

Jurisdictional Research Approach

Leading practices were identified from comparator service system managers, with a focus on innovations to service delivery. Desktop-based research was conducted across nine service system managers with semi-structured interviews on an as-needed basis.

Research jurisdictions

Research was conducted on nine other service system managers with comparable population profiles (large geographies with both rural and urban centres) to Chatham-Kent across a range of provider models.

1. The County of Dufferin
2. The County of Grey
3. The County of Norfolk
4. The City of Brantford
5. The City of Cornwall
6. The City of Hamilton
7. The District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board
8. The Regional Municipality of Niagara
9. The United Counties of Prescott and Russell

Research questions

Case studies

Selected case studies highlight innovative initiatives in four themes that structure the Municipality of Chatham-Kent's service system plan – quality, responsiveness, accessibility, and affordability.

Each case study addresses the following questions:

- What is the problem being addressed?
- What are some of the solutions to the problem?
- How have these solutions been implemented?
- What outcomes or benefits have been realized as a result?

Across all service system managers

- What trends are impacting early years and child care, and how are service system managers responding?
- What impact is CWELCC having on the system?
- How does each service system manager approach issues of quality, responsiveness, accessibility and affordability?

