

HELP US PLAN TO PLAN: Help Shape the Future of Local Early Years Planning in B.C.

CONTEXT:

The B.C. government acknowledges that local early years planning is an important way to improve local coordination of programs and services throughout the province. This approach has been supported through more than a decade of annual provincial funding.

The intention behind local early years planning is to bring together key decision makers and partners and provide the opportunity for all parties to explore how they can leverage current policies and funding in order to build an integrated system of programs and services for families in their communities.

Local early years planning should provide the opportunity for decision makers from key systems – such as education, health, and early childhood development systems to come together to address local needs – such as health promotion and prevention; early intervention, family and parental supports, child care, and kindergarten transition through a strategic planning and shared implementation process.

Despite continued investment, this level and breadth of planning is not happening consistently in all communities. The following document outlines the Provincial Office for the Early Year's (EYO) intention to review early years planning investments in order to create a formal planning model for the early years.

LONG-TERM VISION

Through discussions with communities and policy makers, the EYO has come to understand that investment in local early years planning is not having a consistent impact. This infrastructure should support more than just network, share information and raise awareness. It is our long-term vision that local early years planning provides the opportunity for decision makers – from health, education, early childhood development, local governments sectors, and community partners – to engage in a joint planning process that would help guide their investments and resources at a local level. In its most sophisticated form, this planning model would include pooling resources and targeting funding to address service or program gaps and other vulnerabilities at a local level.

Changing a planning infrastructure is a process that has many phases and requires careful consideration. The EYO will take steps to address the challenges that communities and regions of this province are facing regarding the current planning infrastructure.

It is important for the EYO to be clear and transparent about its longer-term vision for early years planning in B.C. to ensure that communities and partners understand that this review is the first step toward a much larger goal.

We will not achieve our vision overnight – this will take time. There are many partners and many considerations to take into account, and all of our partners have a role in achieving this collective vision.

Recognizing this, EYO will proceed with exploring changes to the current planning infrastructure that will help set us on the path to integrated service and program planning, and help us make some of the foundational changes required to support our longer-term vision for planning in B.C.

CURRENT STATUS:

Part of the role of the Early Years Office is to identify and build on the strengths in the sector and at the community level. We need to understand what is working well but also ask the questions about what isn't working and what the sector needs and envisions in order to improve early years outcomes in BC.

Currently, early years tables are achieving what they were intended to accomplish – networking, information sharing, capacity development, public awareness and sharing information about the importance of the early years. There are currently over 140 early years tables in operation across BC.

This network has been an important vehicle for disseminating information and providing a local voice that has aided policy makers and families and professionals across the province.

For example, early years tables have led the distribution of calendars to families in BC with ideas about the importance of play and early childhood development. Tables host a vast array of professional development opportunities including webinars, face-face professional development, and even go so far as to develop new resources for parents. Most recently, early years tables played an important role in vetting and endorsing Early Years Centre proposals.

Through engagement, strong will, and effective networking, these tables have got people talking about the importance of the early years. Without this work, communities across BC would not be prepared to take the next steps to formalize early years planning.

CHALLENGES:

While the current investment and approach to local early years planning across B.C. has generated a great deal of momentum around the importance of the early years, ultimately, it has not had significant impact on improving outcomes for children.

Key challenges include:

1. **Redundant planning:** Over \$7M is invested annually in local early years planning, coordination and activities in B.C. Both Success by 6 (SB6) and Children First (CF) are community development programs that foster community partnerships to support healthy child development, from birth to age six.

This funding is distributed through two streams with different reporting and oversight, and yet they fund similar or identical activities in the community. For example, there are more than 140 early years planning tables across the province – most are SB6, some are CF, some are a combination of SB6 and CF, and other tables are neither SB6 or CF. The number and overlapping mandates of these tables can result in redundant planning that lacks strategic focus.

2. **The absence of key voices from planning and unused policy tools:** Decision makers from school districts, health authorities, local governments and regional MCFD offices are often not actively participating in local planning efforts. Often, existing planning tables do little more than share information and network. In most cases, strategic planning is not part of the mandate of the table and is beyond the scope of the existing coordinators. Additionally, many of the partners participating at existing planning tables face conflicts of interest and are tasked with planning for programming dollars in which they all have vested and overlapping interests.
3. **Lack of program/service integration:** In the 2014 survey of community tables, it was found that the most popular activity undertaken by tables to improve coordination was networking and information sharing. Only 25% of SB6 and CF tables reported that they actually worked on developing integrated services. Key systems continue to plan and implement primarily in isolation and families continue to face service gaps and redundancies that are not being addressed under the current planning model in communities.
4. **Key populations, particularly Aboriginal communities and children, are being underserved and key stakeholders are underrepresented in existing planning efforts:**
A 2014 report of existing community tables found that the number of MOUs between tables, First Nations, and community agencies actually decreased year over year, suggesting the current model/infrastructure for local early years planning does not recognize and/or take into account planning for Aboriginal children. Of the 140 tables that exist in B.C., fewer than 20 are Aboriginal. It is unclear how strong Aboriginal participation is on the other mainstream tables.
5. **Lack of clear overarching intended outcomes or accountability framework:** There is currently no provincial, overarching framework or oversight to ensure that communities and regions are planning in a consistent, measureable way. The lack of a formal guiding policy creates further confusion about the roles and responsibilities associated with local planning.
6. **Childcare planning is not currently part of early years planning:** In most cases, childcare planning is not included as a focus for existing early years tables and planning processes. Given this is a key component under the BC Early Years Strategy, childcare planning needs to be an integral part of all early years strategic plans.

The lack of a formal guiding policy and associated targeted outcomes/performance measures – as a condition of funding – has limited the success of the current model. Despite a decade of investment, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) rates have increased over the same period; from 29.9% to 32.5% in 2013¹. Ultimately, government investment in early years planning is not being fully realized.

¹ EDI measures the percent of children exhibiting vulnerabilities (at the time of kindergarten) across 5 developmental domains: physical, social, emotional, language, and communication
Wave 2 of EDI: 29.9% of children vulnerable on one or more scales of the EDI.
Wave 5: 32.5% of children vulnerable on one or more scales of the EDI.

CURRENT OPPORTUNITY:

The Early Years Office will undertake targeted consultations with a goal to refocus funding for local early years planning on an infrastructure model that will ensure:

- Key decisions makers are actively engaged;
- Strategic planning is focused on service integration;
- Planning occurs consistently across the province and is grounded in data regarding the community's identified needs and quality early years and family support practices; and
- Funding to support planning is guided by a formal planning and accountability framework.

Intended outcomes of this review include:

- Maximizing the resources invested in programs/services/supports (there are no plans to cut funding in the early years but rather look at ways to make the most of the current investment);
- Strengthening the role of school districts, health authorities, local government and regional MCFD offices in decision making and early years planning ;Improving the role of Aboriginal communities in early years planning and decision making;
- Providing stronger guidance regarding early years planning from the Provincial Office for the Early Years;
- Enhancing opportunities to seamlessly connect families with a wider range of support, from prenatal to kindergarten;
- Strengthening the links between local planning/decision making and BC Early Years Centres;
- Reducing the confusion, duplicated efforts and competition among tables/providers.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. How does a local planning model support your mandate? And what do you see as your role in a local planning model?
2. What would compel you to participate in a local planning model?
3. What is most important to your community in the early years and how does local planning support this objective?
4. What might a future 'infrastructure' to support local early years planning look like?
5. What accountability and guiding policy needs to be in place to support this planning?
6. What is 'community' in the context of local early years planning? School district? Region? City?
7. How can we strengthen the involvement of FN/Aboriginal leadership in local early years planning?
8. What are some important issues that should be carefully considered when implementing such a change?
9. What needs to be considered to ensure local systems, including education, health, local government and MCFD, are active contributors to this work?
10. How can we capture and build from the most effective components of the current system?

