



# Vibrant Communities - St. John's Report on Child Care Roundtable

Roundtable on Reducing Barriers to Affordable, Accessible  
Child Care for Families with Low Income

**PREPARED FOR VIBRANT COMMUNITIES - ST. JOHN'S  
AND THE COMMUNITY SECTOR COUNCIL NL  
BY KATHY-JANE ELTON OF ELTON MANAGEMENT CONSULTING INC.**

## Contact

Penelope Rowe, CEO  
Community Sector Council NL  
Suite 201, Virginia Plaza  
St. John's, NL A1A 3E9  
Telephone (709) 753-9860  
Fax

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Vibrant Communities has an overarching goal in the St. John's area to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life for low income families. One of its strategic imperatives is to improve access to quality, affordable childcare for low income families recognising that the inability to access good quality, flexible and affordable childcare presents a significant barrier to employment and escaping the poverty cycle.

To advance this issue Vibrant Communities sponsored a workshop to engage a broad spectrum of key stakeholders in developing policies and strategic priorities that would effectively support low income families/households in accessing affordable quality childcare and early childhood learning. Ideally, the workshop would also secure the sustained support of all participating stakeholders for advancing these policies and priorities to government. To facilitate this process Vibrant Communities engaged the services of Elton Management Consulting Inc. to design and facilitate a workshop and then produce a final report.

This report provides an outline of the workshop planning process, the key issues and strategic priorities identified during the session and potential strategies and challenges in addressing these issues.

## **2.0 WORKSHOP PREPARATION**

The primary tasks were undertaken to prepare and support the workshop:

- A review of the Vibrant Communities mandate;
- A literature and issue review:
  - Developing A Provincial Early Childhood Learning Strategy, Department of Education, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador
  - Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy
  - Childcare Resource and Research Unit ([www.childcarecanada.org/](http://www.childcarecanada.org/))
- Development of a pre-planning interview protocol for key informants; and
- Key informant interviews: a total of 17 stakeholders were interviewed prior to the workshop and a collapsed summary was prepared and presented. This summary

document was provided as a separate handout during the workshop and formed the basis for identifying and discussing the individual issues and challenges. An outline of “What I Heard” is provided in Appendix I. A listing of interviewees has been omitted in response to requests from interviewees for strict confidentiality.

### **3.0 SESSION OUTCOMES**

The session opened with a review of the following:

- Introductions;
- An outline of Vibrant Communities and its interest in the issue of childcare and early childhood learning;
- A review of the facilitator’s role;
- Ground rules;
- A review of session objectives and challenges; and
- An overview of interview outcomes.

#### **3.1 Session Objectives**

The original goal of the workshop was, as noted, to engage key stakeholders in developing shared policies and strategic priorities that would support an affordable community based model for quality childcare and early learning and therein the ability of lower income parents to transition from income support to employment.

Following the interviews it was apparent to the facilitator that the issues surrounding these objectives were complex and, furthermore stakeholders demonstrated divergent views with fixed passion. In this context, reaching a consensus on comprehensive priorities within a single session would present challenges. Issues where divergent views were most evident included:

- Removal of the private sector in favour of a fully funded public sector system;
- Defining appropriate professional requirements for all early childhood workers; and
- Establishing a range of childcare options for families.

There was also the added consideration that some workshop participants could not actively participate in discussions and needed to represent the established policies of their respective organization.

In response to these challenges the focus of the workshop was adjusted to address individual issues where agreement was largely established. The final goal of the workshop was:

***“To identify opportunities and initiatives that enhance the ability of low income families to access childcare and early childhood learning.”***

In order to give a voice to other issues that may not be encompassed in the day’s discussions, participants were invited to individually write issues, concerns, comments, recommendations, etc. on post-it-notes and post them on a separate bulletin sheet. These issues would then be captured in the proceeding notes and reflected, where appropriate, in the final report.

### **3.2 Session Outcomes**

There was considerable consistency among stakeholders in identifying the critical issues that impact access to early childcare in the province. The majority of respondents noted that access to childcare and early childhood learning is increasingly recognised as being an integral component to social and economic development. In terms of the provincial climate, access to childcare is seen as being a crucial element to a number of other government strategies notably the “Poverty Reduction Strategy”, encouraging women to enter non-traditional occupations and growing the labour force to support anticipated economic development. Other critical issues identified by all interviewees were:

- Insufficient capacity (not enough available spaces, limited hours of operation);
- Parent fees charged incremental to provided subsidies;
- Restricted transportation and access;
- Limited availability of qualified childhood/daycare staff;
- A lack of education and understanding among parents and other stakeholders as to the importance of quality early childhood learning;
- Quality; and
- Added challenges in rural environments

The individual points of discussion as expressed in the workshops are provided in detail in Appendix II and reflect individual points as they were recorded. Additional comments posted to the “side board” are also included in this section. In order to collapse the individual points of discussion, eliminate redundancies, clarify the language and identify strategic priorities a subsequent session was held December 13<sup>th</sup> with members of Vibrant Communities “Think Tank” committee who also participated in the initial workshop. The final strategic priorities developed during the second session are addressed in the following section.

## **4.0 KEY ISSUES**

The following outlines a summary of the key issues addressed at the workshop and the strategic priorities that emanated out of those discussions. The order of the key issues in no way reflects their relative importance in addressing childcare issues. Rather, all of the issues form the core foundation for establishing and sustaining a childcare system that ensures that all families and children have equal access to quality childcare. The issue of quality is especially significant for stakeholders and it cannot be addressed outside of issues on education, subsidies, staffing issues and other issues. As well, access cannot be facilitated without effective transportation and access to information. In this regard, all of these issues must be addressed under the same umbrella program to ensure an integrated quality childcare system.

### **4.1 Quality**

*Issue:*

- The need for quality childcare must be an implicit element in all aspects of the childcare continuum. What constitutes “quality” has not been adequately defined within the province and therefore it is not universally understood across the province.

*Strategic Priority:*

- The province needs to establish a clear definition of what constitutes quality childcare that reflects our current understanding of early childhood education which will be advanced as minimum standards for childcare throughout the province.

### **4.2 Insufficient Capacity/ Number of Spaces**

*Issue:*

- There are not enough spaces and options available in the marketplace to meet the demands of families, notably low income families, in both urban and rural areas of the province.

*Strategic Priority:*

- There needs to be an expanded continuum of quality child care options that meet the needs of all income families. This may include:
  - Access to spaces outside of traditional hours of work;
  - Access to immediate, short term and part-time spaces;
  - A range of choices for families;
  - A review of policies and legislation that may affect and which will support the implementation of new childcare options; and
  - Opportunities to encourage and promote partnerships among stakeholders with government, community and business.
  
- Government should explore the “neighbourhood hub” (New Brunswick) model as part of its long term municipal and provincial strategy for advancing quality childcare across the province.

### **4.3 Subsidies**

*Issue:*

- Many childcares centres are charging incremental parent fees to low income families receiving government subsidies and this compromises their ability to access quality childcare. Centres maintain that subsidies do not reflect the true cost of delivering a childcare “seat”.

*Strategic Priority:*

- The government must review and determine the true costs of establishing, delivering and sustaining a quality childcare space (within both the private and public sectors) that ensures trained professional staff (ECE’s) and appropriate programming. Based on this assessment government will establish appropriate subsidy levels that will eliminate the need for incremental parent fees among low income families and will also address their need for additional support including:
  - Transportation support;
  - Extending subsidies to people actively looking for work and educational programs; and
  - A simpler and faster application/approval process.

#### **4.4 Transportation and Access**

*Issue:*

- Current policies respecting transportation support do not reflect the realities of the NL environment and challenges of families, notably low income families, in accessing quality childcare. Rural areas are particularly challenging with no public transportation or private taxi services.

*Strategic Priority:*

- Government needs to revisit and adjust its current model, policies and practices for supporting affordable childcare transportation with a view to developing a model that is more flexible and responsive to the needs of low income families. This would include a review of all current policies, including capacity, distance requirements, subsidies and other issues.

#### **4.5 Staffing**

*Issue:*

- There is a serious lack of professional childcare educators (ECE's) to support the current need in the marketplace and this reflects the lack of acknowledgment and respect for the profession, chronic low wages and benefits among qualified workers and limited educational opportunities for people to gain recognised credentials.

*Strategic Priority:*

- Government needs to support a number of mechanisms that will encourage and support increased entry into the occupation of Early Childhood Educator that would include a number of initiatives including:
  - A range options for individuals who want to develop their knowledge and skills in childcare, including apprenticeship and part-time programs; and
  - Mechanisms to recognise current competencies and experience.
- Guidelines need to be set for appropriate wage rates for professionals in the industry that would recognise the professionalism of the occupation and encourage new entrants.



These wage rates need to be reflected in an assessment of the true cost of providing one childcare seat.

- Mechanisms to support childcare centres/providers in recruiting trained staff, such as wage subsidies, professional development supports or tax benefits should be explored and the required supported established.

## **4.6 Education**

### *Issue:*

- The value of quality childcare and early childhood learning is not uniformly understood or appreciated among the full range of stakeholders within the province and this compromises families, children, communities, employers and the province in terms of the proven long term social and economic benefits associated with early childhood learning.

### *Strategic Priority:*

- The province needs to introduce and support a long term program that will educate individuals, families, communities, educators and all relevant stakeholders on the importance of quality childcare and early childhood learning. This could include such initiatives as integrating appropriate learning into the school curriculum, prenatal and parenting programs, career counselling for young adults and other “on the ground” initiatives that target key stakeholders and communities.
- The province needs to develop a province wide public awareness and communications strategy that effectively defines, educates and advances an understanding of what constitutes quality childcare.

## **4.7 Rural Challenges**

### *Issue:*

- Rural areas of the province face enhanced challenges in supporting quality childcare as a result of declining populations, infrastructure and other community based services.

*Strategic Priorities*

- Supports and incentives need to be established that will enable municipalities to become more engaged in addressing/supporting the need for quality childcare within their communities. Government programs and support mechanisms should also be sufficiently flexible to address the incremental challenges in rural areas.

**4.8 Communications***Issue:*

- There is no central source of information available to parents, families, community workers or other stakeholders that provides a single point of entry for information and support in accessing quality childcare.

*Strategic Priority:*

- The province needs to create a centralized information/resource centre where parents, families and caregivers can access current information and services relating to quality childcare. This would include such information and support for accessing:
  - Subsidies and “navigator”/counselling support
  - Transportation information and subsidies
  - Community support
  - Education

**5.0 NEXT STEPS**

As noted, all of these issues are integral components to supporting low income families in accessing quality childcare and early childhood learning. Opportunities for advancing these issues among stakeholders will present a variety of options and opportunities to collaborate with partners. Within this context Vibrant Communities can assist in bringing the stakeholders together, advancing the issues and sponsoring specific projects such as the establishment of a central database, providing ‘navigator’ services and/or addressing public education.

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## **APPENDIX I: THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT: WHAT I HEARD**

The following represents a synopsis of the key informant interviews. Outputs of the interviews demonstrated strong consistency in identifying the challenges currently in the market place particularly with respect to availability of seats, costs to parents, transportation, qualified childcare workers and the incremental challenges to access childcare in rural areas. Differences of viewpoints became evident with respect to how these challenges should be addressed, particularly in the context of the role of the private and public sectors.

### **1.0 Insufficient Capacity**

- Not enough childcare spaces
- Not enough spaces in local areas
- Long wait lists
- Regulations inhibit flexibility; subject to different interpretation
- Need to recognize other options and provide parents with choices
- Need broader hours of operation: 24/7
- Provide equal access; do not create no ghettos
- Need to increase the number of centers – provide support for new infrastructure/facilities development
- Must recognize and support other options: community based/neighbourhood centers; family home centers; participation of the business community and at work options
- Need to explore opportunities for collaboration

### **2.0 Parents Fees in Addition to Subsidy**

- Subsidies are not sufficient; parents have to pay extra
- Not for profit centers cannot operate without subsidies; often able to access subsidies not available to the private sector
- Very difficult for private sector to generate a profit; people do exit the industry
- There should be a cap on what can be charged directly to parents
- Centers challenged to meet all legislated requirements with current market rates
- Not affordable for low income families
- Subsidies are focused on centers and not families
- Subsidies should not be restricted to licensed day cares
- Subsidies should follow the child and allow families broad choices
- Allow subsidies to continue when families on interim basis to support transition
- We need a publicly funded system – eliminate the private sector. This will require a change in policy. We cannot defer solutions pending this change in the landscape
- Government needs to step up

- The private sector has a strong presence and this is not going to change; they stepped up to provide services and they will always be there

### **3.0 Transportation and Access**

- Centers are challenged to finance transportation; insurance prohibitive
- Subsidy guidelines too stringent and do not reflect challenges associated with weather and parent timelines
- Very challenging for families generally and almost impossible when there are children attending more than one location
- Distance requirements need to be reduced
- We need more neighbourhood based services
- We need a fully funded public system that also provides transportation
- We need to provide access to local/community centres

### **4.0 Early Childhood Educators**

- Not enough ECE's in the labour force
- Occupation not recognized as professional occupation
- Wages are too low and there are no benefits
- Insufficient incentive to enter the profession
- High turnover
- Operators cannot find competent trained staff
- Do not recognize people with skills developed through informal training
- We need to establish professionalism of occupation
- Need to recognize skills and competencies developed in the field and through other venues outside of formal training
- Introduce apprenticeship programs
- Establish a wage scale
- Improve payroll subsidies
- Enhance educational subsidies
- Provide continuing support to centers for staffing development and support

### **5.0 Education**

- Public/Parents do not understand the value of early childhood learning
- Need to understand the requirement for qualified/certified staff
- Our understanding of what is required for early childhood learning needs to form the basis for any model or framework
- We need public and parental education
- Need to educate people on the distinction between babysitting and early childhood learning

**6.0 Quality**

- Already defined by provincial legislation and regulations
- Challenges not isolated to private sector
- Parents are not educated
- Desperate people don't care about ideologies
- Acknowledge that quality is implicit in legislation and regulations and therefore already addressed
- Deal with the individual issues first and then quality as an overriding issue
- Recognize private sector is a significant piece of service providers

**7.0 Rural Environment**

- Fewer, if any, licensed centers
- Proximity to services is a bigger problem
- Transportation can be a bigger issues
- All issues become a greater challenge in rural environments
- We need alternative models for rural areas
- We have to allow more choice in the marketplace

**The Side Board**

- Re Cost Issue: Need to look at some case studies; requires "research" to figure this out; the real/time cost of childcare spaces including salaries, food, transportation, etc.
- Subsidies need to be looked at in context of REAL COST of spaces = universal system
- (Need) up to date source of information about available programs, subsidies and spaces
- Sort term availability and PART TIME spaces. NB: people have to give notice to remove children and it is very hard to fund short term spaces.
- Need centralized process, list and longer approval periods
- Check out NAVNET's role and capacity
- EDUCATION: "Value of EC Learning+ - Public Awareness media campaign like VPI "Teach Him How To Respect Woman"
- Staffing/Training: Need and Early Childhood Training Centre" model that was supported by the Community Services Council
- More Public education on the 1) value of ECE; 2) on what motivators exist to recruit and retain
- Make sure Minister Joan Burke gets a copy of this report quickly!!
- Navigator idea if terrific. A community Organizations taking on a research subsidy piece

## **APPENDIX II: FLIPCHART NOTES**

### **Insufficient Capacity/ Number of Spaces**

- The Provincial government is embarking on a 10-year strategy for childcare
- Address the need for properly trained staff
- Need more family/home based and safe; allow such daycares to be licensed
- Need a range of choices that families can access (metro and rural)
- Recognise the value in other options
- Need a greater range of options outside of licensed centres
- Consider legislation that will encompass other options
- Keep the focus on the child and quality daycare; focus on the benefit to the child
- Recognise that quality childcare is also a critical component to the province's Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Need short term solutions
- Also need part time supports and subsidies
- Provide a continue that includes options
- Quality assurance and leadership programs that tap into younger adults who are interested and can feed into childcare options
- Can't develop infrastructure everywhere. What existing resources (in communities and rural settings) can be accessed/adapted?
- Need access to spaces during non traditional work hours
- Need community based centre in neighbourhoods to act as hubs that can incorporate childcare options. Municipalities and the province needs to cooperate (to establish hubs that would address a number of needs regarding childcare and early childhood learning)

### **Subsidies**

- (Have access to) pre-approved subsidies so they are there when the parent has employment; need to be faster and for longer periods
- Extend subsidies to people actively looking for work or waiting to access educational programs
- Also recognise need for part time spaces
- Increase subsidies to reflect increases in operating costs (as a result of increases in minimum wages and other costs)
- Review current income thresholds for support
- Address and simplify the application process itself

- Have an up to date database (available to stakeholders) to provide current information on spaces, subsidies, transportation, etc.
- Provide “on the ground” ‘navigators’ as support to families going through the process (of seeking/securing childcare). This process is currently attached to the centres and does not need to be; these services need to be “on the ground” and in neighbours where they are most needed
- Vibrant communities could play a role here
- Be more proactive in the process – go to the clients/families in need
- Approvals needs to be quicker and put in place for longer periods
- (Seek) corporate or other (community based) stakeholders to sponsor spaces
- Have a provincial waitlist
- Educate people on the front line (first point of contact) on what is available and educate them regularly to respond to staff turnover
- Review true costs and subsidies
- Look at how the whole system can be funded. Make sure subsidies do not result in people being left out
- Do not create new classes of poverty as a result of some children not be able to access quality childcare
- Vibrant communities could do an analysis on the true costs of (operating) a childcare space

### **Transportation and Access**

- Buses need to be equipped with car/booster seats
- (Need to engage) more recreation centres/schools
- Plough streets and sidewalks so they are safer and more accessible
- Partner with other service/community based organization for services
- Review current practices / distance requirements for transportations subsidies in terms of children requiring early childcare
- Develop alternative models/process that allows an assessment of individual family needs (for transportation subsidy
- Need to be more responsive when assessing the need for subsidies; must consider families’ circumstances, capacity and need for safety

### **Staffing**

- (Explore/establish) “Apprenticeship” programs that recognise skills and experience
- Allow people to remain in the workforce while training and pursuing skills enhancement

- Develop an appropriate wage scale (Province has a wage scale now for Child care workers) and legislate
- Government needs to subsidize wages at the level of the (recommended) wage scale – for private and not for profit
- The profession should set wage guidelines and ask the government to support
- Need to determine the true cost of operating a childcare
- “Apprenticeship” program that recognises prior learning and facilitates different/alternative approaches/pathways to certification (Red River Community College)
- (Establish a) training tax credit for staff and/or centre
- Find alternative pathways to certification
- Do not compromise quality
- Primary education should teach (importance of) quality childcare
- Follow-up on Peggy (Machiem’s) Childhood Training Center. See if it works, where the participants are now and can it be pursued/undertaken again
- Create opportunities for people to engage in course on a part-time basis/ offer courses in a different form (so they are more accessible by more people)
- Compile or group core courses so they can be offered in workshops and in a supportive environment
- Have competency based learning
- Train the trainer – can we utilize existing ECE’s and develop master trainers
- 3-5 day institutes/professional development days where you can upgrade skills; this should be offered several times a year
- Opportunity for other individuals, which normally would not have access, to be an ECE – look for people with low income who demonstrate interest and aptitude; provide them with support
- Look for mechanisms for improved recruitment and retention

## **Education**

- Come at it from a labour market issue
- Advertise the value of early childhood education
- Recognise the research (that has been done)
- Put (the importance of early childhood education) in the school curriculum so that kids learn the importance – this will advance culture change
- (Integrate into) career development programs/training at schools and promote work as a viable and valued occupation
- Incorporate importance (of quality childcare) into prenatal programming



- Incorporate importance (of quality childcare) into parenting courses and school curriculum for young adults
- Introduce more parenting courses and make them more acceptable/more mainstream. Family resources ventures could provide this service more widely
- Have post natal program (that promotes the importance of early childhood learning)
- Integrate importance into “Navigator” program
- Provide a “warm line” through community resources/connections
- Parenting courses should be automatic – remove stigma
- Implement full day kindergarten
- After school programs
- Target low income neighbourhoods – best approach is face to face – provide resources to support
- Utilize community people to promote playgroups and transfer skills and information
- Recognise and provide support to informal childcare and other family options – family resource centers and Community centers

## **Quality**

- Legislation provides minimum standards and is not quality
- Quality is not an add on for childcare but essential
- Poor quality childcare impedes moving issues forward; poor quality will reap negative consequences
- Difficult to measure (quality); it is a snapshot in time
- ECERS, etc – link ratings to licensing and re-licensing
- Collective agreement on the definition of quality – what it is and what it is not
- Need a simple message as to what is quality
- Need to reflect (what is quality) in informal and formal (setting)
- Develop an understanding among providers
- Provide education on what is valuable (what is and is not quality)
- Keep focus on the child and quality of care
- Quality is a critical component to the provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Embed quality in all children’s’ programs

## **Rural Challenges**

- No public transportation even in urban areas such as Conception Bay South; and no taxis
- Engage the private sector/businesses
- Capacity Consultants

- Family Childcare-Continue to do what is required to develop skill sets
- Look to transfer resources to support family childcare
- Subsidy linked to probationary period
- Can Family Resource Centers extend their mandate and provide support for Childcare
- Reach out to unregulated sector and support them as they move to regulated  
Provide interim subsidy based on probationary period
  - Need a measure in place for families to retain subsidy and access alternative care (if centre does not meet requirements after probationary period)
  - Link to core competency model
- No sense of ownership by municipal governments