



Advancing Child Care in BC. Responding to Change, Planning for the Future

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As a mother of three, I am intimately familiar with the highs and lows of attempting to secure and maintain quality child care. When my kids were young, I relied on a mix of formal and informal care, working part-time in an effort to manage costs, spend time with my kids and maintain my career. My parents helped, I swapped care with friends, I juggled shifts, and my kids attended Strong Start, preschool or daycare depending on our care arrangements at the time.

Families all across British Columbia share in the struggle to secure affordable, high-quality, inclusive and flexible early learning and care. A significant share of children (64%) live in neighbourhoods with insufficient child care supply, while 14% live in outright child care deserts (Macdonald, 2026).

Why Plan Child Care?

Child care is critical social and economic infrastructure within every community. Access to affordable, high-quality early learning and care supports early childhood development and has positive long-term outcomes across the lifespan. It also increases labour force participation, especially among women resulting in broader economic benefits.

Overall, child care expansion between 2019 and 2024 is estimated to have boosted BC's GDP by \$5.8 billion (Stanford, 2024). Although local governments are not mandated to undertake child care planning, their involvement can greatly influence community well-being and economic vitality.

Provincial Planning Context

ChildCareBC, introduced in 2018, is a 10-year provincial strategy focused on increasing child care access, affordability, and inclusion with a long-range aim to create a universal child care system. The plan introduced a range of policy and program initiatives to address the immediate child care crisis.

In order to stimulate and align child care planning at the local government level, the Province announced one-time funding administered through the Union of British Columbia Municipalities in 2019. It funded child care planning projects that increased child care spaces and coordinated with other levels of government and community partners. Sixty grants were awarded reflecting a strong uptake from local governments.

Local governments engage in a range of

activities to support and create child care spaces including: zoning and land-use planning, streamlining development permitting and business licensing, contributing capital to new facilities, leveraging development financing tools such as density bonusing and amenity cost charges to establish new centres, leasing public land or assets at no or low-cost, awarding child care grants, and encouraging high-quality building design and co-location.

PIBC Internship Project

Many local government child care plans have now been in place for more than 5 years, presenting an opportunity to assess progress and strengthen plans. My internship project included a context analysis of the child care planning landscape and an industry scan to identify best practices and innovations. The resulting report is a resource for local governments who wish to update and strengthen their plans.

Over the course of my project, I worked closely with the social planning team at the City of Burnaby. My research included a literature review, interviews, and facilitated engagements tapping into the expertise of local planners, academics, child care operators,

school district representatives, public health, advocates, and non-profit organizations supporting children and families. These actors all participate in child care planning and provision. Herein, I refer to them collectively as practitioners.

Project Findings

BC's Progress

The Province has made progress reducing child care fees, increasing employment and earnings in the sector, and meeting their federal space creation commitments, but a lot of work remains. Child care access in BC is well below established national targets of 5.9 spaces per 10 children (Macdonald, 2026). Moreover, the expansion of new child care spaces has largely been achieved by for-profit operators (72%), despite senior levels of government expressed preference for non-profit and public provision (Friendly et al, 2026). Universal child care remains a distant ambition - only 10% of child care spaces are \$10-a-day (Macdonald & Friendly, 2025). Access to those spaces is inequitable – awarded by centre rather than demonstrated need. Meanwhile, families outside the \$10-a-day program pay market-based fees that remain high despite the Province's fee reduction initiative – especially in urban areas (Macdonald, 2025).

BC Budget 2026, paused new enrolment into the \$10-a-day program and new spaces funding. While existing supports remain, this decision is likely to slow child care expansion and gains in affordability.

Practitioner Perspectives

Practitioners working in child care planning and provision report a range of challenges working within the field. Foremost among these is a lack of provincial coordination and insufficient funding. Child care in BC remains fragmented and largely market driven, responding to opportunity rather than intention. Practitioners struggle to access adequate funding to develop and maintain accessible, high-quality programs. The families they serve are stressed and stretched. Meanwhile, early childhood vulnerability has increased in the province, especially in areas of social and emotional development (Nigelkehrer, 2025).

Planning a Way Forward

While planners experience capacity and resource challenges, wonderful child care innovations have been achieved. Planners rely on local government tools, relationships, partnerships and advocacy to advance child

care in their communities. Child care spaces have been achieved through memorandums of understanding with local school districts, through collaboration with public health, and through partnerships with non-profit organizations and operators. Using and maintaining data to assess and report on child care needs within local government and across the community has yielded positive results.

Planners and practitioners share these tips for others working in the field:

- Regular monitoring and evaluation of plans is a critical component to advancing child care.
- High-quality plans lead to stronger outcomes. Local governments can enhance plan effectiveness by assessing whether their plans (1) incorporate spatial, economic and social equity analysis, (2) communicate clear, specific and measurable goals, and (3) establish monitoring and evaluation frameworks with defined indicators, timelines and assigned responsibility (Binet et. al, 2025).
- Co-locating child care with other social infrastructure supports children and families, improves access, strengthens neighbourhood cohesion, and incentivizes sustainable transportation. Examples include the City of Richmond's early childhood development hubs, and the Town of Gibsons' affordable housing development for frontline workers which includes onsite child care.
- Child care preservation is equally significant to space creation. Planners can support preservation by monitoring development, identifying at-risk facilities and leveraging planning tools and relationships to mitigate loss. As an example, the City of Burnaby helped relocate a \$10-day program to a long-term care facility when their lease was unexpectedly terminated.
- Establishing communities of practice among practitioners and local government planners creates a valuable forum for sharing skills, knowledge and best practices. Members can collaborate, problem solve, and advocate.

Conclusion

Child care planning is impactful work that strengthens communities. While a systems approach and more funding is needed on a provincial level, local governments are key actors in supporting, expanding and sustaining child care within the existing system. Updating and strengthening plans, grounded in the current context, will enable local governments to respond to sector needs and

seize opportunities as they arise. Now is a critical time for local governments to lean into child care planning.

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