



What We Heard Report

Approaches to Early Learning and Child Care Space Creation

June 2025

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Executive summary

Access to adequate early learning and child care infrastructure across the Northwest Territories continues to be a challenge. Developing new infrastructure or retrofitting existing spaces can be expensive and take a long time to complete.

To support families and improve early learning and child care in the territory, the Government of the Northwest Territories [2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy](#) and [Canada – Northwest Territories Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement](#) provide the goals for transforming early learning and child care in the Northwest Territories. One of these goals is to create 300 net new licensed child care spaces for children birth to five years of age by March 31, 2026.

In May 2024, the Government of Canada and the Government of the Northwest Territories announced that the territory would receive approximately \$10.6 million over the next four years to support the development of early learning and child care infrastructure.

The proposed *Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Strategic Plan*, renamed the Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Framework, was developed to ensure the best use of this new funding to partners. The Infrastructure Framework will be the roadmap for expanding access to licensed early learning and child care spaces. Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, communities, not-for-profits, licensed centre-based early learning and child care facility operators and the Northwest Territories' Early Childhood Association were consulted to gather feedback on the proposed approaches. The Standing Committee on Social Development was also engaged regarding proposed approaches to creating early learning and child care spaces.

The Framework lists three approaches for creating and funding new early learning and child care spaces:

- The **capital contributions approach** is the Government of the Northwest Territories' current method for creating new child care spaces, which is currently funded through the [Early Childhood Infrastructure Fund](#). Recipients of the funding collaborate directly with architects and contractors to design and construct a facility on their own land.
- In the **modular or ready-to-move approach**, modular facilities are constructed off-site in a factory setting, then transported and assembled on a permanent foundation on land owned by the funding recipient.
- The **asset ownership approach** would involve using existing assets such as schools, constructing new facilities, or repurposing and renovating spaces for early learning and child care.

On July 4, 2024, the Department of Education, Culture, and Employment began engaging with partners. The intention of this engagement was to find the most useful and strategic way to spend infrastructure funding dollars as we recognize there are a lot of needs and limited funds. Invitations were sent to 57 organizations to participate in engagement sessions. There were 11 engagement

sessions hosted, which included representation from 44 percent of the invited organizations with a total of 25 participants that represented all regions of the Northwest Territories.

Participants provided feedback regarding the proposed approaches. While they agreed on the necessity of child care spaces in the Northwest Territories, they emphasized the importance of conducting needs assessments to identify the specific needs of each community. Participants expressed concerns about affordability related to operating a new facility, including maintenance, utilities and upkeep. Additionally, they highlighted the need for more support throughout the application process to secure funding for early learning and child care infrastructure.

Participants raised concerns about the modular or ready-to-move approach and expressed the view that modular facilities were less durable than stick-built facilities, however, agreed that they would be suitable for some situations. They generally supported the idea of asset ownership, and the department was urged to prioritize this approach in the short or medium term. To help overcome barriers to the construction or renovation of child care spaces, it was suggested interim financing be considered to reduce the gap between funding approval and receipt, but overall expressed concerns regarding the amount of funding available.

Participants identified the importance of working with Indigenous governments when building early learning and child care facilities in communities and of reaching out to all community governments to determine space creation opportunities. Participants stressed the need to ensure that the design of new child care spaces is culturally appropriate, highlighting the necessity for continuous collaboration and consultation with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations and communities in the design process. Participants also recommended that the early learning and child care sector needs to be regularly engaged on early learning and child care issues and suggested that the Government of the Northwest Territories needs to do more to support the sector and provide opportunities to provide feedback.

The Government of the Northwest Territories will update the Framework to incorporate the findings from engagement. The Framework will then be shared with the participants of the engagement for awareness and finalized. Once complete, it will be released publicly, and the Government of the Northwest Territories will work on implementing the outlined approaches to creating new child care spaces.

Introduction

The Government of Northwest Territories is committed to supporting an early learning and child care system that provides children and families with access to high-quality early learning and child care across the Northwest Territories.

The [2030 Early Learning and Child Care Strategy](#) and the [Canada – Northwest Territories Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement](#) provides the Government of the Northwest Territories with goals for improving the quality, affordability, accessibility and inclusivity of early learning and child care in the Northwest Territories and shares the long-term vision for a Canada-wide early learning child care system as set out in the Government of Canada's [Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) and [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#).

Like the rest of Canada, families in the Northwest Territories face challenges in finding child care spaces for their children. For instance, as of February 2024, there were 14 communities in the territory without licensed early learning and child care.

To help address the shortage of child care spaces, in May 2024, the Government of Canada and Government of the Northwest Territories announced that the territory would receive approximately \$10 million over the next four years. In addition, the Government of the Northwest Territories invests \$1,000,000 annually in infrastructure projects through the Early Learning and Childhood Infrastructure Fund.

Infrastructure funding will be used to support the early learning and child care infrastructure development and improve child care access for families. Under the Canada-wide Agreement, our goal is to create 300 net new licensed early learning and child care spaces for children from birth up to five years of age by March 31, 2026. The Government of the Northwest Territories has developed an Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Framework, previously titled Early Learning and Child Care Strategic Plan, to ensure the best use of early learning and child care infrastructure funding. This Infrastructure Framework will be the roadmap for expanding access to licensed early learning and child care spaces.

The Framework prioritizes:

- Working with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, communities and not-for-profits to create licensed child care spaces in communities that currently do not have access to licensed centre-based early learning and child care facilities.
- Supporting inclusive child care and participation by providing funding to support the diverse needs of children, including those from equity-seeking families and children who have specific developmental needs.
- Supporting rural and remote communities where Indigenous people and families face barriers to accessing licensed child care programs.
- Providing solutions that meet the needs of diverse communities.

Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, communities, not-for-profits, licensed centre-based early learning and child care facility operators and the Northwest Territories Early Childhood Association were consulted to gather feedback on the proposed approaches to creating new early learning and child care spaces. This *What We Heard Report* summarizes that feedback.

Background

The Government of the Northwest Territories is proposing three approaches to child care space creation and funding: Capital contributions (short-term strategy), Modular/Ready-to-move construction (medium to long-term strategy) and asset ownership (long-term strategy; see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Proposed approaches

Capital Contributions	Modular/Ready-to-Move	Asset Ownership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term strategy for creating child care spaces. • GNWT provides funding for eligible infrastructure costs. • Expansion in new and existing facilities. • Operator owns or leases the asset. • Operator is responsible for maintenance, utilities, and upkeep. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium to long-term strategy for creating child care spaces. • Operator provides serviced land for the new facility. • Modular facility is built off-site and installed on a permanent foundation or GNWT builds and transfers upon completion. • Asset belongs to the community / operator. • Operator is responsible for maintenance and upkeep. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term strategy for creating child care spaces. • ELCC space included in new facility plans, i.e. schools. • Existing space in GNWT facility is re-profiled and renovated. • GNWT is responsible for maintenance and upkeep. • GNWT provides the space to an ELCC operator.

Each of these proposed approaches is described in greater detail below.

Capital contributions approach

Description

Capital contributions are the Government of the Northwest Territories current approach to creating new child care spaces through the existing [Early Childhood Infrastructure Fund](#). The criteria and processes currently used would be applied to the new funding from the Government of Canada’s [Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund](#).

Funding recipients would work directly with architects and contractors to design and build the facility on their own land, renovate an existing facility or reprofile a space to create new child care

spaces. The Government of the Northwest Territories would fund expenses related to architectural design services and facility construction, up to the approved amounts under the funding agreement.

Proposals would be assessed based on a demonstrated need for new child care spaces, funding eligibility, project costs and community support, among other funding criteria.

Operator responsibilities

Upon project completion, the operator would be responsible for the maintenance, utilities and upkeep costs of the facility.

Modular/Ready-to-move approach

Description

Modular/Ready-to-move refers to when the child care space's structural components are built off-site, in a factory setting. The building is then transported and assembled at the child care site on a permanent foundation. The modular or ready-to-move approach can be an efficient way to meet child care needs as construction is not limited by the short construction season faced by many communities in the North, or the limited ability to get resources into communities that are not accessible by road year-round.

To expedite the construction of facilities under the ready-to-move model, the Government of the Northwest Territories would pre-design modular facilities. These would include different sizes, for example, a small facility design (24 licensed spaces) that can be combined or stacked to create medium (48 licensed spaces) and/or large (56-96 licensed spaces) facilities.

Operator responsibilities

Proponents would be required to provide the land for the facility. The asset would belong to the community or operator after project completion, and the operator would be responsible for facility maintenance and upkeep.

Asset ownership approach

Description

Asset ownership includes existing assets (such as schools), inclusion of child care spaces in new facilities, or spaces in existing Government of the Northwest Territories facilities are re-profiled and renovated to create new child care spaces. The Government of the Northwest Territories would be responsible for the design, re-profiling or including space in new facility plans for use as licensed child care centres.

Operator responsibilities

Since the child care program will be in a Government of Northwest Territories facility, operators would not be responsible for maintenance costs and upkeep of the facility.

Detailed information on the asset ownership approach is still being developed. This will include the development of early learning and child care facility capital standards and policies.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodology used during the engagements and preparation of this report.

Objectives and participants

The approach to engaging with partners was designed with the following objectives in mind:

- Gather feedback on the proposed approaches to creating new child care spaces.
- Promote awareness of funding opportunities for new licensed centre-based space creation.
- Explore opportunities to strengthen relationships and partnerships with the early learning and child care sector.

To achieve these objectives, the Government of the Northwest Territories engaged with a range of partners, including Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, communities, licensed centre-based operators, education bodies and the Northwest Territories Early Childhood Association. The Standing Committee on Social Development was also engaged.

Engagement approach

Participants were engaged through interviews and focus groups. To facilitate these engagement activities, the Government of the Northwest Territories prepared engagement tools, which included a PowerPoint presentation, a plain-language summary of the proposed Plan (renamed Framework), and discussion questions.

Starting June 24, 2024, invitations to participate in engagement activities were sent to partners. Engagement activities were hosted on Microsoft Teams or Zoom platforms. In advance of each engagement activity, participants were sent the plain-language summary and discussion questions.

A total of 11 focus groups and interviews were held between July 4, 2024, and July 25, 2024, with 25 participants taking part in a focus group, interview or providing a written response to the discussion questions (see Table 1).

Table 1: Engagement participants by group.

Group	# Participants
Licensed centre-based operators (not-for-profits)	10
Indigenous government and Indigenous organizations	6
Education bodies	5
Interested not-for-profits and associations	4
Total	25

At the start of each engagement activity, an overview of the proposed space creation approaches was presented to participants followed by a discussion. This discussion was guided by the questions listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Questions used to guide discussions during engagement activities.

Category	Questions
Ideas for strengthening the planned approach	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Based on what you’ve learned about the Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund, what suggestions do you have for creating new licensed centre-based child care spaces in the territory? 2. Is there anything missing from our planned approach that can contribute to increasing the number of licensed centre-based child care spaces in your community?
Options for creating new licensed child care spaces	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. How do you see any of these options working in your community? What changes, if any, are needed to make them work? 4. The modular/ready-to-move approach proposes pre-designing early learning and child care facilities (small, medium, and large). What are your thoughts about this approach and the sizes that should be pre-designed?
Strengthening relationships and partnerships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Our success relies on partnerships and the participation of community-based partners. How can existing early learning and child care partnerships be strengthened?
Additional thoughts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Are there other early learning and child care infrastructure or centre-based space creation considerations, concerns, and opportunities that are not addressed in the questions above?

Focus group sessions took place virtually and ranged in length from 60 to 90 minutes. DPRA Canada was responsible for scheduling sessions, facilitating focus group discussions and taking notes during each engagement session.

Limitations

The results of the engagements are limited as a total of seventy-nine (78) participants, representing fifty-six (56) organizations were invited to attend the engagement sessions. Twenty-five (25) individuals representing twenty-three (23) organizations participated. Given this, the findings may not be reflective of all partners in the early learning and child care sector.

What we heard

This section summarizes the feedback gathered during engagement with partners regarding the proposed approaches to creating new child care spaces.

During engagement activities, the feedback shared by participants often overlapped discussion questions. For this reason, this section is organized according to the following themes:

- Capital contributions approach
- Modular/ready-to-move approach
- Asset ownership approach
- Funding challenges faced by communities
- Ideas for strengthening proposed approaches to creating new child care spaces
- Strengthening partnerships
- Additional comments, suggestions and considerations

Capital contributions approach

Participants offered a variety of comments on the proposed capital contributions space creation option. These comments have been presented below according to the following themes:

- Support for the capital contributions option
- Barriers and challenges

Support for the capital contributions approach

Participants offered several comments in support of the capital contributions approach.

- Constructing new facilities enables buildings to be tailored to the specific needs of the community.
 - Communities with smaller populations may build multi-purpose facilities that include early learning and child care and kindergarten spaces.
 - New buildings can be better insulated to withstand the harsh climates of northern and remote communities, thereby reducing additional heating costs during winter.
- Capital contribution projects may be cost-effective in the long term.
 - Communities can utilize available land, avoiding the need to purchase new land.
- Capital contributions can help build the capacity of the local labour market.
 - Capital contributions enable communities to use local labour and supplies, enhancing the employable skills of community members and providing employment opportunities such as construction and project management.

Barriers and challenges

Participants identified a number of barriers and challenges associated with the capital contributions option.

- Challenges related to funding, maintenance, utilities and upkeep:
 - The capital contributions option may not be possible with existing funding restrictions. For example, there's a perception that if an organization has enough money to purchase land, it may no longer qualify for funding.
 - Some organizations may be unable to cover the cost of maintenance, utilities and upkeep, given they are currently experiencing challenges covering maintenance costs.
- Limitations associated with expanding on existing spaces:
 - Existing spaces do not have room for additions, so new builds would be the best option.
 - It may be difficult to incorporate cultural design elements when expanding facilities in existing buildings under the capital contributions option.
- Community-specific challenges:
 - Some communities rely on ice roads, which affects construction timelines (e.g., construction can only proceed at certain times of the year).

Modular/Ready-to-move approach

Participants offered a variety of comments on the modular/ready-to-move approach, which are presented under the following themes:

- Support for the modular/ready-to-move approach
- Barriers and challenges
- Considerations for determining the appropriate size of modular facilities

Support for the modular/ready-to-move approach

Participants offered several comments in support of the modular/ready-to-move approach.

- Modular/ready-to-move facilities are well suited to communities with the following characteristics or needs.
 - Modular facilities are ideal for communities in which there are restrictions on renovations or a shortage of buildings that can be viably re-purposed.
 - Modular units could work well in remote communities that face construction challenges due to barriers accessing the community.
 - Modular facilities could work well in communities with plenty of land available for purchase.
- Modular/ready-to-use facilities have been successfully used in several communities.
 - Modular/ready-to-move facilities are widely used in some communities.
- Modular/ready-to-move is the best approach for meeting the urgent need for creating new child care spaces.
 - Communities cannot wait five years for a structure to be built – they need new child care spaces now.

Barriers and challenges

Participants identified a number of barriers and challenges associated with the modular/ready-to-move approach.

- Logistical challenges can make it difficult or impossible to transport modular facilities to some communities.
 - Modular units are too large to be transported across many bridges and may need to be barged in.
 - When water levels are low, it may not be possible to use barges to transport modular buildings to smaller communities, which can cause significant delays in construction and project completion.
 - It would be prohibitively expensive to transport modular facilities to some communities, which are sometimes accessible only by ice roads.
- Concerns regarding the durability of modular units and the high cost of maintaining and heating them.
 - The high cost of maintenance makes modular units unsustainable.
 - In some communities, it would be very expensive to maintain a modular building, as maintenance specialists and/or parts may need to be flown in.
 - Modular units can be damaged in transit (for example, a floor that was cracked in transit is currently delaying the opening of a modular centre and increasing costs).
 - Heating and longevity challenges associated with modular units have been reported in some communities.
- Regulatory requirements for modular facilities can be onerous, making this a risky option.
 - As modular buildings need to conform to a number of building codes, it may be necessary to adjust buildings after they are completed to ensure compliance.
- Some operators feel modular units are representative of their lack of autonomy or control in the early learning and child care sector more generally.
 - Under this approach, the Government of the Northwest Territories is designing the type of building, and then the operator is responsible for everything.
 - Some operators said that they want a better understanding of why the Government of the Northwest Territories is considering modular units given the challenges associated with them.
- Suitable land must be set aside for modular units.
 - Land in some communities is prohibitively expensive, potentially compromising the feasibility of modular centres.
 - Indigenous governments, Indigenous organization and communities may be hesitant to set aside land for modular/ready-to-move centres if community's needs cannot be demonstrated.
- Concerns regarding the cost of modular buildings.
 - The modular approach might be too expensive.
 - The allocated funding is not enough for building new modular centres but could be enough to build additions to existing space.

Considerations for determining the appropriate size of modular facilities

- Consider long-term population fluctuations and changes before determining the appropriate size of modular facilities.
- Take care not to mismatch a medium or large modular facility with a declining population, which introduces concerns about who maintains the building, whether it wastes energy, etc.
- In some communities, the Aboriginal Head Start program is only licensed for 11 or 12 children. It may be necessary to combine programming to make use of a modular facility. Other similar programs could run out of one larger facility.

Asset ownership approach

Participants did not identify any challenges associated with this approach. Participants offered a variety of comments on the asset ownership approach.

- Support for the asset ownership approach
- Additional comments concerning the asset ownership approach

Support for the asset ownership approach

Participants indicated that the asset ownership approach is best suited to communities with the following characteristics or needs.

- Due to current funding available for hiring staff and the existing cost of running centres, the asset ownership option is a feasible approach to creating sustainable, long-term increase in the number of child care spaces.
- Asset ownership is the easiest option for communities with vacant buildings available (e.g., as oil and natural gas operations shut down in some communities, buildings will become available).
- Asset ownership is suited for remote communities in which there is no shortage of land available for purchase.
- As there is limited space for new facilities in some communities, the asset ownership option offers opportunities to re-profile or renovate child care spaces in the region.

Additional considerations concerning the asset ownership approach

- Consider whether re-purposing existing buildings is the most economical approach.
- As there are many vacant office spaces in some communities, consider retrofitting office spaces.

Funding challenges faced by communities

Participants identified a range of challenges communities may face in implementing the proposed approaches.

- Barriers to accessing funding

- Insufficient funding

Barriers to accessing funding

Participants identified a number of existing and potential barriers to accessing funding.

- Interactions between existing funding restrictions and proposed space creation approaches.
 - The capital contributions and modular/ready-to-move approaches proposed are not possible with existing funding restrictions, including limits on surplus funding and stacking Government of the Northwest Territories funding with funding from other sources.
 - Under the capital contributions and modular/ready-to-move approaches, licensed operators may be unable to cover maintenance and upkeep costs without raising fees or compromising service.
- Incompatibility with needs of Indigenous governments and Indigenous organizations.
 - The funding proposal and application processes do not reflect the unique needs of Indigenous governments (e.g., requiring a letter of support from Indigenous government leadership).
 - The existing funding application approach is considered paternalistic and not reflective of community-led, grassroots approaches of distributing funding.
- Application process is too onerous for organizations with limited capacity.
 - The funding application package is overwhelming and challenging to complete, especially for centres dealing with capacity challenges. This leads some organizations to seek funding through other sources with less onerous application requirements.
 - Need for interim funding to address gap between funding approval and receipt that can result in delays in the construction or renovation of child care spaces.

Insufficient funding

Participants expressed concerns regarding the amount of funding available, as summarized below.

- The funding allocated through the Government of Canada's [Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund](#) is not enough for the entire territory, especially if most of this funding is allocated to larger communities.
While admirable, the goal to create 300 new child care spaces by 2026 is unrealistic with the current funding allocations.

Ideas for strengthening the proposed Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Plan (Framework)

Participants offered a variety of suggestions for strengthening the proposed approaches to creating new child care spaces.

- Conduct a needs assessment

- Ensure culturally appropriate design and community involvement
- Provide infrastructure funding support to assist with implementation
- Application support to assist with implementation
- Additional suggestions

Conduct a needs assessment

Participants suggested that a needs assessment should be conducted to identify the specific needs of each community and support implementation.

- Methodological considerations or suggestions.
 - The needs assessment should identify the number of spaces and type of infrastructure needed in each community.
 - Consider administering a survey to capture the needs of each community.
 - Consider completing a scan to identify the number of spaces currently available and assessing the accuracy of those figures (e.g., some families place their children on waiting lists before they are even born).
 - Consider correlating students dropping out of school with a lack of available child care options in their community.
- Needs assessment should support equitable distribution of funding.
 - As the need for funding exceeds the amount available, it is critical that the Government of the Northwest Territories has a strong understanding of the needs of each community so that funding is equitably, efficiently, and effectively distributed.
 - To ensure that the fund is equitably distributed, steps should be taken to ensure that communities outside of Yellowknife are adequately represented in the needs assessment.
 - A needs assessment will help the Government of the Northwest Territories to better serve its most vulnerable residents.
 - If a government wide needs assessment is not conducted, collaborating with communities to identify their unique needs should be considered. This could be achieved through providing funding to support the development of feasibility studies to help communities make informed decisions about their needs.

Culturally appropriate design and community involvement

Participants indicated that the design of new child care spaces needs to be culturally appropriate.

- Collaborating with communities can help secure buy-in from community leaders and establish connections with community champions.
- Modular facilities need to be designed in collaboration with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organization and communities. The designs could also be approved through consultation with these groups.
- Child care spaces should be informed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action 12 on Education that calls upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal

governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families. These spaces should also reflect Northwest Territories' realities (e.g., not be designed for the South).

- Rather than relying on the community to do the heavy lifting, consider working with local cultural centres and architects to prepare design options that can then be presented to the community.
- Consider the recent Beaufort Delta Education Council initiative to Indigenize its schools, which included interior design elements (e.g., placement of artifacts, pictures of Elders, etc.).
- Infrastructure guidelines could be reviewed to help address constraints for culturally appropriate design (e.g., square buildings).

Funding support to assist with implementation

Participants requested financial support to assist with implementation.

- Consider providing additional funding to allow organizations to hire project management specialists to assist communities with the creation of new child care spaces from the application stage through to the opening of a new centre.
- As it may be difficult to afford operating expenses under the proposed space creation options, Government of the Northwest Territories should consider providing small centres with financial assistance to defray administrative costs.
- In addition to providing financial support to cover eligible expenses for operators in the asset ownership option, the Government of the Northwest Territories should consider providing similar support to community organizations in the capital contributions and modular options.
- Consider taking a more grassroots approach to funding by allowing the funding from the Government of Canada's Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Fund to flow through Indigenous governments rather than the Government of the Northwest Territories.
- To reduce delays in the construction or renovation of child care spaces, consider providing interim funding to shorten the gap between funding approval and receipt of that funding.

Application support to assist with implementation

Participants requested application support to assist with implementation.

- Consider collaborating with Indigenous governments to streamline requirements to have the application process better reflect the uniqueness of Indigenous governments.
- Consider streamlining the application process or providing application support for organizations with limited capacity.
- Business planning support should be provided in advance of the application and capital planning processes to address questions such as: Who will run the program? What is the governance structure?

Additional suggestions

Participants offered a number of additional suggestions for strengthening the proposed *Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Plan (the Framework)*.

- Given the urgent need for new child care spaces in the territory, the Government of the Northwest Territories should place an emphasis on expediting implementation.
- The Government of the Northwest Territories should consider requiring or encouraging developers to include child care spaces in new infrastructure projects (e.g., a new office space should include child care spaces).
- Consider including a plan for sharing information regarding licensing and other resources.
- Consider renovating existing office buildings or community hall spaces to add child care spaces on the ground floor near green spaces.
- Consider embedding the need for new child care spaces in processes at the community planning level.

Strengthening partnerships

Participants offered a variety of comments about strengthening partnerships.

- Need for improved engagement, support and communication
- Additional suggestions

Need for improved engagement, support and communication

Participants indicated that partnerships can be strengthened through improved communication, engagement and support.

- More engagement with partners.
 - Indigenous governments want to be engaged more.
 - Consider conducting focus groups with the broader community and involving Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs).
 - Commit to proactively engaging in-person, not virtually, with communities.
 - Engagement with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations, communities and level of government is essential.
 - Ensure Indigenous governments are represented on day care boards.
 - Consider providing Family Day Homes with opportunities to provide input.
- Additional support from the Government of the Northwest Territories would strengthen partnerships.
 - The Government of the Northwest Territories should provide more support to, and advocate on behalf of, community organizations applying for federal funding (e.g., Jordan's Principle).
 - Additional support from the Government of the Northwest Territories for completing [infrastructure] funding applications would be helpful.

- Government of the Northwest Territories staff should be more accessible so that community organizations can acquire support and help if needed.
- Build in occasional check-ins with early learning and child care regional representatives.
- Enhance communication between the Government of the Northwest Territories and the early learning and child care sector.
 - More regular communication between Indigenous governments, the Government of the Northwest Territories and early learning and child care staff is needed to strengthen partnerships.
 - The Government of the Northwest Territories needs to communicate on an ongoing basis, and not just when there are new initiatives.
 - Quarterly or monthly meetings with Regional Early Childhood Coordinators would strengthen partnerships.
 - Establish formal, multi-directional communication channels between Government of the Northwest Territories' early learning and child care staff, sponsor organizations, and program managers (e.g., currently, program managers deal directly with Government of the Northwest Territories and not sponsor organizations)

Additional suggestions related to early learning and child care

Participants offered a variety of additional suggestions for how to strengthen partnerships.

- Consider establishing a needs assessment committee.
 - The completion of a needs assessment is critical to building relationships and maintaining them in this sector.
 - Consider forming a committee involving a range partners (e.g., communities, the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs, Northwest Territories Housing, etc.) to ensure needs are accurately captured.
- Establish safe spaces for partners and stakeholders to collaborate and discuss challenges.
 - Consider organizing an early learning and child care summit to strengthen partnerships, facilitate collaboration, share ideas, and support implementation.
 - Need to transparently and openly discuss early learning and child care challenges and opportunities.
- Consider implications of some partnerships.
 - Consider whether partnering with schools creates complications for home child care providers.

Additional comments, suggestions and considerations

Participants offered a variety of additional comments, suggestions and considerations for the Government of the Northwest Territories to consider in relation to the approaches to creating new child care spaces as well as early learning and child care issues more broadly.

- Pay discrepancies
- Early learning and child care facilities
- Regulatory and licensing issues
- Child care demand and planning
- Integration and collaboration
- Prioritization and future directions
- Funding and hiring requirements
- Wage comparisons

Pay discrepancies

Participants suggested that there is a pay discrepancy between those who are employed at licenced centre-based facilities, schools and those who operate home-based facilities.

- Educational Assistants are paid more in schools.
- Jordan's Principle funding has attracted day care workers to schools for better pay.
- Early learning and child care staff wages are perceived to be capped by the Government of the Northwest Territories.
- Family day home providers need wages based on education, programming, and experience. Currently, those who run day home programs are paid one flat rate, regardless of education, qualification and program offerings.

Early learning and child care facilities

Participants offered a variety of miscellaneous comments concerning early learning and child care infrastructure.

- The Government of the Northwest Territories should provide all operators with a building code binder that includes all codes and specifications required for new early learning and child care centres, and it should be made clear that these requirements are to be met when purchasing or constructing a new early learning and child care centre.
- The Government of the Northwest Territories should consider how best to save on energy costs for new buildings (e.g., installing solar panels).
- Existing experiences with "stick build" facilities are positive, with examples such as the Northwest Territory Métis Nation's day care in Fort Resolution. Several other communities have consulted with project managers and builders who have advised pursuing stick-built facilities over modular units.

Regulatory and licensing issues

Some participants mentioned that the regulatory and licensing requirements are restrictive and may deter community members from becoming involved in early learning and child care.

- The current Government of the Northwest Territories processes and structures may deter people from pursuing Early Childhood Infrastructure Fund and modular options.

- The Government of the Northwest Territories may be able to expedite the licensing process by outsourcing inspection duties (e.g., health inspectors).
- Early learning and child care licensing requirements may not be reflective of Indigenous practices. For example, Indigenous foods (e.g., traditional food that has been hunted) are not allowed by health inspectors.

Child care demand and planning

Participants indicated that some communities are struggling to forecast the size and number of child care facilities they will need based on the fluctuating population and available labour pool.

- Communities struggle to project future space needs due to changing population trends.
- More child care spaces could help to alleviate labour shortages and provide economic and social benefits as community members will be working at the new centres.

Integration and collaboration

Participants suggested integrating multiple facilities into one centre to alleviate the burden on child care providers and parents.

- Consider creating one facility offering all programming (e.g., office space, day care, kindergarten, etc.) by combining resources from different Government of the Northwest Territories departments.
- Collaboration between schools and day cares could address declining school enrollment of young parents.

Prioritization and future directions

Participants offered suggestions on future directions for the early learning and child care sector in the Northwest Territories.

- Child care options are needed for parents of children with special needs.

Funding and hiring requirements

Participants commented that centres will require more funding to hire additional staff, and that benefits and incentives for working at early learning and child care centres should be reviewed.

- Existing approach to distributing funding makes it prohibitively expensive to operate infant spaces.
- Early learning and child care centres need increased funding to hire additional staff, including on-the-floor staff, custodians, managers, and administrators.
- Centres must incentivize community members to work in day cares rather than schools via increased pay, housing benefits, and professional development or training opportunities.

Wage comparisons

Participants suggested that wages in the Northwest Territories' early learning and child care sector should be higher than wages in southern Canada.

- Early childhood educator wages in the Northwest Territories are similar to southern Canada, which is unfair due to higher living costs in the North.
- Early childhood educator salaries in the Northwest Territories are too low and do not reflect the level of expectations placed on them.

Summary of key findings

This section summarizes the key findings that emerged during the engagement. These findings are categorized under:

- Conducting an early learning and child care needs assessment.
- The optimal space-creation options for each community contexts.
- The design of new early learning and child care spaces needs to be culturally appropriate.
- Barriers to accessing infrastructure funding.
- ELCC partnerships.

Needs assessment

Participants stressed the importance of conducting a needs assessment to identify the specific needs of each community and to support the implementation.

Given the limited funding available and the significant need for new child care spaces, participants indicated that it is critical that the Government of the Northwest Territories has a strong understanding of the needs of each community so that funding is equitably, efficiently, and effectively distributed. Participants stressed the importance of ensuring that the needs of all communities, including those outside of Yellowknife, are adequately understood.

Participants also suggested that the Government of the Northwest Territories engage directly with communities to administer a survey, to complete a needs assessment scan and/or to implement other methods to identify each community's needs, including the number of new spaces needed and the optimal type of space. Participants also suggested establishing a needs assessment committee, which would have the added benefit of strengthening relationships with the early learning and child care sector. It was also suggested that some communities may require funding to accurately assess needs and support the development of feasibility studies.

The optimal space-creation options for each community

Participants indicated that the optimal space-creation option for each community depends on the specific characteristics and needs of the community and the organizations responsible for serving that community (see Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of participants’ feedback on community-based implementation

Feedback	Capital contributions	Modular/Ready-to-move	Asset ownership
Contexts that are well suited to the option	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renovations are being planned for existing buildings in the community. • Land is available in the community for new facilities. • Operator has room in budget for costs related to maintenance, utilities and upkeep. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community is accessible via multiple modes of transport. • Maintenance specialists available locally • Serviced land is available for modular units. • Not many buildings in the community that can be repurposed. • Urgent, short-term need for new child care spaces in the community. • Operator has room in budget for maintenance costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vacant buildings are available to be repurposed in the community. • Land is available in the community for new facilities. • Operator has limited budget for maintenance, utilities and upkeep.
Contexts that are poorly suited to the option	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operator has limited budget for maintenance, utilities and upkeep. • For new facilities, community has limited construction season due to remote location. • Existing facilities may limit culturally appropriate design. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community is typically accessed via narrow bridges or icy roads and is inaccessible by barges. • Maintenance specialists need to be flown in. • Shortage of serviced land available for modular units. • Vacant buildings available to be repurposed in the community. • Operator has limited budget for maintenance costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urgent, short-term need for new child care spaces in the community. • For new facilities, community has limited construction season due to remote location. • Existing facilities may limit culturally appropriate design.
Additional feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider potential implementation barriers due to funding restrictions (e.g., stacking). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider issues related to longevity of modular units and maintenance costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considered the most feasible approach by some participants.

Culturally appropriate designs

Participants indicated that child care spaces created need to be culturally appropriate regardless of the space-creation approach used. For example,

- New child care spaces built under the capital contributions or asset ownership approaches should be informed by Indigenous government, Indigenous organizations and communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action 12. It was also suggested that it may be difficult to incorporate cultural design elements when expanding facilities in existing buildings or working within the constraints of existing infrastructure guidelines.
- It may be difficult to incorporate cultural design elements under the modular/ready-to-move approach because they are typically designed in the south and not reflective of northern Indigenous cultures. Instead, modular facilities should be designed in collaboration with Indigenous governments, Indigenous organizations and communities and/or approved by communities before they are built.

Barriers to accessing to infrastructure funding

Participants indicated that operators may be unable to take advantage of the proposed space-creation options due to existing barriers to accessing funding. For example,

- Some not-for-profit operators may no longer qualify for government funding if they had enough money to purchase land due to the restrictions on surplus funding and stacking funds from other sources. Accordingly, it is important to consider how existing funding restrictions may constitute barriers to successful implementation.
- Funding applications are too onerous to complete, especially for centres with limited capacity. For example, current applications submitted by Indigenous governments require a letter of support from Indigenous leadership. This additional burden is unnecessary when Indigenous governments are the ones submitting the application. Further, participants commented that the gap between being approved for funding and receiving the funding can delay the creation of new spaces.
- Allocated funding is not enough to meet the child care space needs of the entire territory. For this reason, participants suggested reconsidering the goal to create 300 new child care spaces by 2026.

There's need for additional support from the Government of the Northwest Territories. For example, it was suggested that some organizations require support when completing funding applications, and that the Government of the Northwest Territories should advocate on behalf of organizations applying for federal funding.

Early learning and child care partnerships

Participants indicated that the Government of the Northwest Territories can strengthen partnerships in the early learning and child care sector by taking steps to improve engagement, support and communication. For example, the Government of the Northwest Territories should consider engaging with the broader community on early learning and child care issues through

focus groups, in-person engagement sessions in affected communities, and that local MLAs should participate in the engagements. Participants also recommended that Indigenous governments, Indigenous organization and communities be more regularly engaged on early learning and child care issues and that they be represented on day care boards. It was also suggested that the Government of the Northwest Territories needs to do more to provide home-based facility operators with an opportunity to provide feedback.

Additionally, participants indicated that there appears to be a disconnect between decision-making processes in the Government of the Northwest Territories and operational realities in the sector and that the funding formula needs to be revisited to address this. It was also suggested that the Government of the Northwest Territories should consider organizing an early learning and child care summit to strengthen partnerships, facilitate collaboration, share ideas and support implementation.

Next steps

The Government of the Northwest Territories will update the Early Learning and Child Care Infrastructure Framework to incorporate the findings from engagement. The Infrastructure Framework will then be shared with the participants of the engagement and finalized. Once complete, the Infrastructure Framework will be released publicly, and the Government of the Northwest Territories will work on implementing the outlined approaches to creating new child care spaces.