



FORT ST. JOHN AND SURROUNDING AREA

# Community Engagement Report Peace Region

Located on Treaty 8 Territory, the lands of the Dane-zaa

Image: [hellobc.com](http://hellobc.com)



BCAAFC | BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres



THE FEDERATION  
of COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES of BC

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# Project Purpose

## Why this project?

In late 2021 the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) unveiled a new service delivery framework for children and youth with support needs (CYSN) in the province. Unfortunately, it was released with limited consultation or input from families, service providers, and the social sector organizations working alongside those individuals with support needs.

The lack of engagement created overwhelming concern and confusion for all affected parties. Advocacy on behalf of children and youth with disabilities and support needs and their families started to occur with a demand for a consultative and collaborative review of the CYSN framework to take place prior to any changes being made to service delivery.

## Next Steps

A collective group came together including, the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCAAFS), BC Association of Child Development and Intervention (BCACDI), the Federation of Community Social Services, and Inclusion BC to support the collective concerns about the proposed CYSN framework and the changes that would be inflicted on children, youth and families. The collective group proposed to MCFD that a process take place allowing for provincial engagement at community levels to gain perspective and to better inform any of the changes coming to BC's systems of support.

In response, the government paused the rollout of the the redesigned service delivery framework and allowed for a deeper understanding. In 2022 MCFD awarded the collective group (detailed above) funding to support grant opportunities across the province to facilitate engagement. This allowed for exploration of what is working currently, where the gaps are for services, and ideas and thoughts on what would make service provision better in the communities that children and youth with support needs and their families are living in. The **Community Led Collaboration Project** launched in the fall of 2022 with Phase One including several pilot sites in the province. Phase Two launched in January 2024 and included 30 communities across the province including Fort St. John and the surrounding area of the Peace Region.



# Engagement Approach

## Approach

- A people-centred strategy is required, allowing individuals with a vested interest in the services and supports for children, youth and their families to be heard.
- Bringing engagement out to community through multiple avenues of connection and access, and removing many of the barriers that impede collaboration.
- Creating trusting and safe spaces to facilitate strong engagement.
- Cultivate a culture of learning about the strengths of the the current system, including story sharing and celebrating the successes.
- Ensure that engagement is lead from a place of truth and reconciliation, honoring and recognizing the historical impacts of colonization and ensuring space for marginalized and excluded contributors to be heard.

## Principles of engagement

- Respect, honesty, and concern for others
- Transparent and consistent
- Meaningful to the people involved
- Purposeful intent to support informed change

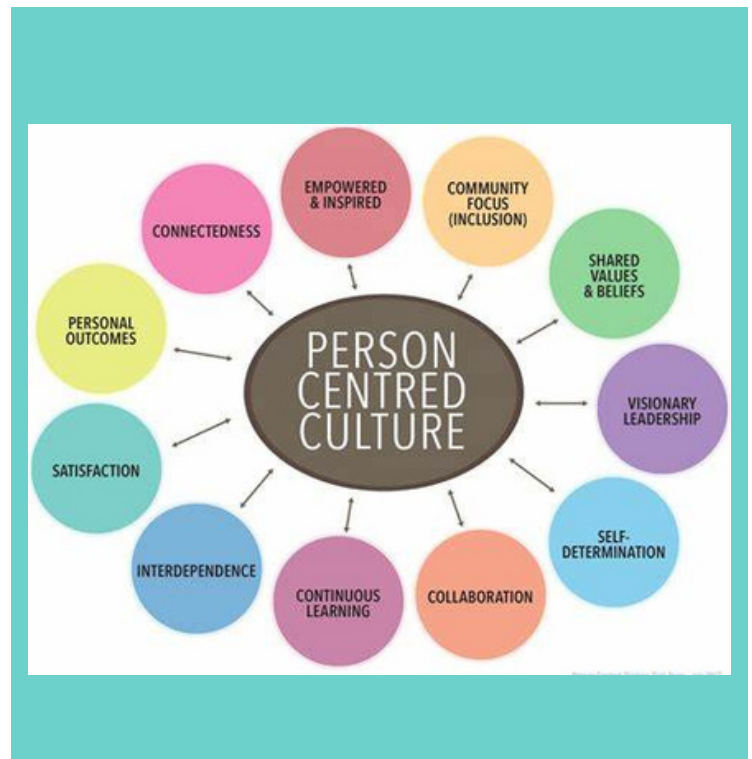


Image: Istockphoto.com

# Coming together in a safe, barrier free, and creative way

## 1

### Creating spaces for engagement

When planning the engagement process we wanted to give participants multiple options to connect including:

- Service provider space (CDC)
- Virtual space
- Family drop-in program
- Community events
- Indigenous outreach visits
- Open houses
- Family friendly events
- Surveys online and in person

## 3

### Removing barriers for participants

In order to ensure participants were able to attend sessions we provided the following:

- childcare
- transportation options
- location choices and virtual sessions
- snacks

To ensure attendees felt culturally safe and supported we provided privacy spaces for reflection and debriefing with follow-up support when in person.

Surveys were conducted anonymous unless individual chose to provide details.

## 2

### Marketing the sessions for success

Informing the community about the engagement opportunities and marketing the sessions in a way that created interest, the following measures were taken:

- Social media and website posts
- Posters in community
- Shared with Early Years and NP3 (non-profit network) groups
- News media releases
- Direct communication with families and organizations via email

## 4

### Creating intentional dialog

In engagement sessions participants were asked the following 3 questions:

- **What services and programming for children and youth with disabilities or support needs are working well?**
- **What are the gaps in services and supports?**
- **What does a better system of support and services look like?**

# About Fort St John and the Peace Region

Fort St. John is located in the rural and remote region of northeastern British Columbia, on the traditional territories of several Indigenous groups. These groups within Treaty 8 are primarily the Dane-zaa, historically referred to as the Beaver people. The Dane-zaa have lived in the Peace River region for thousands of years and have a deep connection to the land. The region is also within the overlapping territories of other Indigenous peoples, including the Cree, Dene, and Métis.

The region is comprised of many communities including Taylor, Hudson's Hope, Prespatou, Cecil Lake, Wonowon, and also encompasses the Blueberry River, Halfway River and Doig River First Nations. Fort St. John is the largest city in the Peace Region with a population of 21,465, outlying areas make up an additional 4387, with an Indigenous population of 3075. Overall 21% of the population in this demographic are children and youth.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a research document produced at the University of British Columbia by the Human Early Learning Project (HELP) 34% of children in Fort St. John displayed vulnerabilities in development upon entering kindergarten, a higher percentage than 32.9% reported on a provincial scale. HELP provides an understanding on healthy development for children in the community and the number facing vulnerabilities on one or more scales, including physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge.<sup>2</sup>



1

Image: BC Travel and Adventure, Fort St John, 2019, Bing Images

1. Statistics Canada . 2022 . (table). *Census Profile*. 2021 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X20210001. Ottawa. Released February 9, 2022. <https://www12statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>

2. Early Development Instrument, online: <https://earlylearning.ubc.ca>

# A Timeline of Engagement

## When, Where, and How?

### May – June 2024

- May 8 Attended Early Years Health Round Up – drop-in booth
- June 6 Attended Doig Days – community discussions
- June 20 Hosted Family Picnic at CDC –lunch and engagement event

### July – August 2024

- July 1 Attended Canada Day in the Park – drop-in booth
- August 9 Online surveys distributed
- August 18 Meeting/tour with Family Support Institute –collaboration
- August 26 Hosted Providers discussion group

### September – October – November 2024

- September 23 Community partner meetings
- October 17 Community partner meeting with Metis Nation BC
- October 19 Drafted report and distributed
- November 5 Hosted open house with FSJACL and online survey  
–final engagement session for seeking solutions

As described in creating spaces, the approach for engagement was somewhat unique in that it was not structured around formal engagement sessions as laid out in the grant guide; this was intentional.

Community collaboration is strong in the Peace Region and organizations that provide services for children and youth with support needs work together on an ongoing basis; often out of necessity as a remote community, but always because of longstanding relationships. Ongoing engagement with children, youth and families is embedded in how organizations deliver services in the community. The key to this project was to enhance that engagement with a goal to reach more participants where they were most comfortable. In addition to ensuring engagement was accessible, it also provided greater opportunities to gain input from participants that in the past may have fell through the cracks with more traditional engagement processes.

# 347

Number of participants that engaged

# 9

Number of community partners that engaged

# What we learned

## Conversations, Collaboration, Connection

From the initial launch at the Early Years Health Round-up to the final session seeking solutions, families and service providers were able to engage in a way that created meaningful dialogue. Participation numbers were high as a direct result of the many options to engage.

- |                               |                 |                      |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| • Early Years Health Round-Up | 45 participants | 8 community partners |
| • Doig Days                   | 17 participants | 3 community partners |
| • Family Picnic               | 67 participants | 2 community partners |
| • Canada Day in the Park      | 73 participants | 5 community partners |
| • Online Surveys              | 49 participants | 1 community partner  |
| • Family Support Institute    |                 | 2 community partners |
| • Discussion Group            | 37 participants | 1 community partner  |
| • Community Partner Meeting   |                 | 6 community partners |
| • Metis Nation BC             |                 | 2 community partners |
| • Open House /Online Survey   | 59 participants | 6 community partners |

In each session we asked three questions. What services and programming for children and youth with disabilities or support needs are working well? What are the gaps in services and supports? What does a better system of support and services look like? There were common themes that emerged throughout the entire engagement process regardless of how the engagement took place. It was not surprising to learn that organizations providing services and programming and the children, youth and families receiving the services had very similar responses.



*“It is heartbreaking to wait so long for services”*

Parent

*“We have so many children waiting for services, it is creating burn-out of staff”*

Occupational Therapist

Image: Tana Millner/CDC



In person sessions: 7

Virtual sessions: 2

Online Surveys: 2

# What we learned continued

Conversations, Collaboration, Connection

## What is working well?

- Organizations across the region work together to support children and youth with developmental and/or support needs and their families
- The people working in this field are knowledgeable, have strong connections to the clients they support, and provided wrap-around services
- Most all of the programming for children with support needs can be found in one place
- Families are supported with many options for drop-in programming
- Despite the rural location, services for children and youth with support needs are available in the central community
- There are more private provider options now than in the past
- The community is very generous in supporting the local non-profit service providers

*"We have committed parties at the table, always working hard and striving to do better"*

Community Partner - FSJACL

*"My son received all the therapies and the staff was amazing, the CDC is my second home and family!"*

Parent

Incentives to engage:

snacks  
door prizes  
childcare  
transportation  
technology

# What we learned continued

Conversations, Collaboration, Connection

## What are the gaps?

- Access to services. Though they are available in the community, the demand far exceeds what organizations are able to provide creating long waitlists
- Need to increase outreach to Indigenous communities
- Unfair system that supports diagnosis over needs
- Access to specialists ie; psychologists, pediatricians, audiologists, mental health supports etc. is extremely limited
- Demands for service far out way the amount of funding provided to support the needs of the community
- Inclusive childcare is struggling as there is not enough funding for supports
- Transitioning to school and adult services is challenging
- There is currently no overnight respite in the community
- MCFD does not have enough social workers to support children and youth with complexed needs and also provide protection services at the same time

*"I appreciate the resources provided as my daughter waits for speech services, but it does not come close to what she needs and we have been waiting for 14 months"*

Parent

Project encompassed children 0-19 having a disability, diagnosed or undiagnosed, need support, and /or have a possible developmental delay

# What we learned continued

Conversations, Collaboration, Connection

## What does a better system of services look like?

- Access to all services for children and youth with support needs and their families regardless of diagnosis, and extend early intervention to age 8
- Ministries working together ie; Health, Education, Children and Family Development (reduce silo of services)
- Family supports not just for the children and youth, for entire family including mental health access
- Adequate, equitable, and appropriate funding to meet the service demands of the the community and outlying areas including outreach
- More supports for daycares
- Transitioning supports (family support worker) for children and youth especially during school entry and moving into adult services
- A full suite of respite services
- Parent supports (groups, workshops, training)

*"Parents and caregivers need a break, whether it is having timely access to services for their child or supports for themselves"*

Community Partner - South Peace CDC

# Solutions Summary

## Fort St. John and surrounding area

Engagement sessions allowed participants to look at what is working well in the community and allowed them to explore opportunities to expand on this to create positive change. Participants were able to discuss what challenges they encountered, and were asked to imagine what the future would look if they had access to an ideal suite of services that truly supported children and youth with disabilities and/or support needs and their families.

In most of the engagement sessions we invited participants and community partners to think about possible solutions to the challenges identified, and in our final open house and last online survey we compiled the responses, brainstormed further, and finally formulated our vision for the future in the community.

### Vision One – All families have timely access to services they need

Solution: Remove the barriers of diagnosis for children and youth with complex needs and extend early intervention to age 8

Who will deliver the solution:  
Ministry of Children and Family Development  
Ministry of Education

Solution: Increase funding to public service providers so they are better able to meet the demands in the community

Ministry of Children and Family Development  
Treasury Board  
Local MLA

Solution: Provide families with a family support worker to assist with accessing services, working with multiple agencies and navigating transitions

Who will deliver the solution:  
Community Providers with funding supports provided by MCFD

Solution: Increase respite services to benefit children and youth with support needs and their families

Who will deliver the solution:  
Community Providers with funding supports provided by MCFD



# Solutions Summary

## Fort St. John and surrounding area continued

### Vision Two – Improve outreach to Indigenous Communities

Solution: Allow for adequate time to develop relationships in community to support services that are needed for children, youth and families

Who will deliver the solution:  
Service Providers  
Indigenous Service Providers

Solution: Ensure travel time and associated expenses with outreach are recognized by funders and reflected on in a positive way

Who will deliver the solution:  
Ministry of Children and Family Development  
Service Providers

Solution: Partnering with service providers during outreach to expand service delivery to meet the demands in the community

Who will deliver the solution:  
Service Providers including CDC, FSJACL,  
Northern Health, First Nations Health Authority,  
Ministry of Education, Nenaan

### Vision Three – Improve Parent Support Systems

Solution: Provide parents and caregivers access to training, workshops, peer groups etc. to gain knowledge and skills, build confidence and capacity, and create a community of belonging

Who will deliver the solution:  
Community Providers with funding supports  
provided by MCFD

Solution: Increase access for children and youth with mental health support needs and their families in community

Who will deliver the solution:  
Community Service Provider  
Ministry of Education  
(access the Pathways to Hope contract)

# Final thoughts and next steps

The community came together to share their collective experiences on the network of services for children and youth with disabilities and support needs in Fort St. John and the surrounding area. There were many conversations regarding what is working well and what was found to be the most challenging. After sharing the results of the engagement sessions the participants brainstormed possible solutions and also acknowledge that together as a collective community voice, there are opportunities for favorable change.

## **The positive:**

- Service provider collaboration is vibrant in the region
- There are many services provided in one location making it easier for families to navigate
- Experienced and knowledgeable organizations are providing the service
- The community supports non-profit service providers in their fundraising efforts which improves services

## **The opportunities for change:**

- Many of the solutions proposed in the report require adequate funding to provide the services. This did not come as a surprise, it has been a consistent problem for many years in service provision, however now it is at a critical stage and impacting the ability for children and youth to thrive
- Siloed services make it challenging, especially during transition stages and families need support
- Support needs must be recognized regardless of diagnosis. With the wait times associated with assessments in our province children and youth are being denied their right to service

# Final thoughts and next steps continued

## The unanticipated results:

- There were multiple engagement sessions taking place in the region at the same time ie; both the Family Support Institute and Metis Nation BC were also awarded grants to carry out the project. Though families may have had engagement fatigue as a result of this, it was beneficial from an organizational perspective to collaborate with the provincial organizations. The conversations and results obtained from a local perspective were in line with what was reported provincially.
- Families that participated in the in-person engagement found the process provided an opportunity to bond with other families based on shared experiences, and they felt supported.



Images: Tana Miller/CDC

# Final thoughts and next steps continued

## What now:

- The provincial collective group will share the results of the engagement projects spanning across the province with the Ministry of Children and Family Development in January 2025.
- The outcomes from this Community-Led Collaboration Project belong to the community of Fort St. John and surrounding areas of the Peace Region. It is a tool for advocacy to support children, youth, and their families with their need to have a strong network of services and supports in the community they belong to.
- This report is a reflection of a close and caring community, that wants to bring about positive change, and ensure that transformation to the Children and Youth with Support Needs programming results in a future where all can thrive.

*“My hope is that our voices are heard and our family gets the support we need”*

Parent



Images: Tana Miller/CDC



# With much thanks and appreciation

To the families and caregivers that shared their stories, provided answers to the questions, and some positive solutions, you truly defined community collaboration, thank you!

To the community partners that came to the table and provided keen insight, asked and answered the important questions, and worked together for the greater good of children and youth with support needs and their families in the region, thank you!

To the collective group of agencies (BCACDI, BCAAFC, Inclusion BC, and the Federation), thank you for leading this project and advocating on behalf of children and youth with disabilities and/or support needs and their families across the province.

*Although most of B.C.'s First Nations have never signed treaties with the government of Canada, the four Dane-zaa First Nations of the Peace River area are covered by Treaty No. 8, which also covers other First Nations in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories. In 1900, when some Dane-zaa leaders signed the treaty, they understood it to be a treaty of peace and friendship.*