



Community-Led Collaboration Project 2024

Southern Gulf Islands – Salt Spring, Saturna,
Mayne, Galiano, and Pender Islands



With thanks to the Salish Sea (Strait of Georgia) on the shared, traditional, and unceded territories of the Coast Salish People, specifically the Hul'qumi'num- and SenĆoten-speaking peoples.



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Project Background

The Community-Led Collaboration Project (CLCP) provided communities in British Columbia the opportunity to engage in meaningful and inclusive conversations about how to create a better network of services for children and youth with disabilities and/or support needs and their families. Notes from all the conversations have been compiled into this report, which is being submitted to Inclusion BC and the CLCP Grant Committee. This and other community reports will be shared with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) with the hope to inform the future of services for children and youth with disabilities and support needs in BC. All personal information in this report is confidential, and no individual names or identifying characteristics have been used.

The Community-Led Collaboration Project aims to build on the existing strengths of community-based models and explores what truly collaborative and connected networks can achieve by working together for children and youth with support needs and their families. The community conversations that are included in this report focuses on children and youth who are under the age of nineteen, have an undiagnosed or diagnosed disability, need supports, and/or have possible developmental delays.

These conversations, which were conducted in partnership with Southern Gulf Island communities, will help inform an inclusive, culturally safe, needs-based approach to providing supports and services that consider the specific circumstances of the young people in need of supports and their families who live in these communities, and, importantly, the voices of people who historically have not been represented.



About the Southern Gulf Islands

The British Columbia Southern Gulf Islands are located in the Salish Sea (Strait of Georgia) on the shared, traditional, and unceded territories of the Coast Salish People, specifically the Hul'qumi'num- and Sencóten-speaking peoples, and consist of five island communities: Salt Spring, Galiano, Mayne, Saturna, and Pender Islands.

The Gulf Islands School District (SD64) serves approximately 1,500 students and provides quality programming, including a successful Indigenous program, a thriving international program, a performing arts academy, and a late French Immersion program, as well as ecological and nature-based opportunities for learning.

There are eight schools across the district, with a main high school on Salt Spring Island, the Saturna Ecological Education Centre for Grades 10 and 11 students on Saturna Island, and a kindergarten through Grade 12 school on Pender Island. There are three kindergarten through Grade 7 schools on Salt Spring Island and one kindergarten through Grade 7 school on each of the outer islands (Galiano, Mayne, and Saturna) ⁽¹⁾.

Children with disabilities/diverse abilities comprise just over 15 percent of all students attending school in SD64 (239 students during the 2023-24 school year) ⁽²⁾.

SD64 supports approximately 1,500 students. Just over 15 percent of those students have been diagnosed with diverse abilities.

Island Health currently supports approximately 180 children with support needs on the Southern Gulf Islands as part of its Early Intervention Program.

The Rural and Remote Division of Family Practice has a mix of a few community-based services, predominantly on Salt Spring Island, and a variety of options for remote supports for the other Southern Gulf Islands⁽³⁾. Families indicate these resources are not able to meet the needs of a number of the children and youth residing on the Southern Gulf Islands.

Families often require travel to Vancouver Island or Vancouver to access assessment, therapies, and supports for their children and youth with support needs.

The Approach to Engagement

The Community-Led Collaboration Project came together to create four guiding principles of inclusive community conversations as a benchmark for the working groups:

Reconciliation and Decolonizing: Reconciliation and decolonization guide our approach to community engagement, which is designed to be inclusive, accessible, and culturally safe, with an approach that makes space for historically excluded voices and perspectives.

Collaboration: The best engagement occurs when all members of a community actively work together to plan an engagement that will inform how they can create improved networks of support for children and youth with disabilities and/or support needs and their families. Inclusive communities are healthier communities, and building inclusive communities is a shared responsibility.

Community-Driven Change: This project presents an opportunity to build on the existing strengths of British Columbia's current system and challenges each community to address the changes needed to best support children and youth with disabilities and/or support needs and their families.

Transparency and Timeliness: Timely summaries of engagement will be circulated to keep participants informed, which will also help ensure that this report is capturing what is most important to the community.



The Process of Engagement

Pre-Engagement and Engagement Planning

On April 25, 2024, a pre-engagement planning session was conducted to share information on the project and gather community input into the planning process on how to best reach communities to participate in the engagements. Valuable input was provided by the British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS), Métis Nation BC, educators, community agencies, Island Health, parent representatives from the District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC) for SD64, and the FamilySmart and Family Support Institute. In addition, some parents and family members who work in the field and have lived experiences with the challenges faced by children and youth with disabilities and/or who need supports, contributed invaluable feedback.

From June to October 2024, numerous community engagements took place, in which families, self-advocates, service providers, and educators provided important input. The Community-Led Collaboration Project created safe spaces for conversations through offering locations to meet that were comfortable for participants, provided childcare, and translation services, if needed. The engagements utilized methodologies of an in-person world café format, surveys, and both virtual and in-person discussions for those who preferred to not meet in a group.

Creating safe spaces was identified early in the project as a priority for families on the Southern Gulf Islands, especially when sharing information in the same space as service providers. Family and Service Provider engagements were conducted separately and the confidentiality of all was well supported.

Family Engagement

In-person and virtual family engagement sessions were offered. Eleven parents met in person on June 12, 2024, at the public library on Salt Spring Island. Thirteen families completed surveys, representing families from Salt Spring, Galiano, Mayne, and Pender Islands.

Service Provider Engagement

A virtual engagement session for service providers was held on June 17, 2024, and was attended by sixteen care providers, from community agencies focused on mental health, physical wellness, individual and family support and parent councils, representing all of the Southern Gulf Islands.

Additional support for sharing information

One to one interviews were conducted with an educator, service provider and family member who preferred to share their stories in person and not in a group setting.

What We Asked

In all engagements, participants were asked the following three questions:

1. *What services and supports for children and youth with support needs are working well in your community?*
2. *What are the gaps in services and supports for children and youth with disabilities or support needs and their families? What is missing or hard to access in terms of services and supports in your community?*
3. *What does a better network of services and supports look like? What changes or improvements would you like to see in your community so that children and youth with support needs and their families can thrive?*

What We Heard

The following are the overarching conversation themes that arose from the engagements on the Southern Gulf Islands:

THEMES	SUPPORTING CONVERSATIONS
<p>Family burnout <i>"We need more supports everywhere, in every way. The lists for access are lengthy and the resources are scattered and limited."</i>—Family member, Galiano Island</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resources was a resounding theme. • A number of families reported feeling isolated and alone. • Family mental health supports are needed. • Some families feel pressured to move from their homes on the Gulf Islands to larger urban centres to access resources. • Several families shared that they feel emotionally and physically exhausted, constantly fighting for their children to be included in community programs and schools. <i>"Families don't have the time or money to do everything they need to do to support their children."</i>—Service provider • Some families stated they don't feel listened to when they bring forward concerns to schools and community programs.
<p>Inclusion in schools <i>"[School staff] need more education on how to navigate their relationships and adapt their methods to accommodate children with disabilities."</i>—Parent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some families have experienced non-inclusive policies at school: <i>"Children [are] being sent home and there is often a long turn around for a return to school plan."</i>—Parent • Schools are struggling with staffing shortages and lack of trained staff. Some parents feel they would benefit by having access to a community support liaison who can provide guidance and support to families navigating systems, supports, and transitions. <i>"Children and youth are being excluded from school due to lack of resources available to provide an inclusive education."</i>—Parent • Several parents expressed that not all schools are fully accessible for children with complex physical needs (i.e., accessible playgrounds and washrooms). • Some families feel that students with disabilities are not treated equitably by the school system: <i>"Services and supports will continue to be under resourced because people with disabilities are marginalized the moment they step into a school system that is built for 'neuro-normative,' 'gender-normative,' and able-bodied humans."</i>—Parent
<p>Equitable resources <i>"It feels like inclusion is perceived as having a one-to-one</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several families expressed their children with support needs and without Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses miss out on funding to access supports.

<p><i>worker for my child instead of building flexibility into the system.”—Parent</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some participants felt that pay for experienced childcare workers is poor. • A few families mentioned that there is a lack of experienced childcare workers who know how to support inclusion. • Some parents and caregivers said that since there are limited options for support, they have no choice but to accept what is offered, even if it’s not the best fit for their child/youth. • It was commented upon that there need to be more Southern Gulf Island-based resources—many of the occupational therapists (OTs), social workers, physical therapists (PTs), psychiatrists, pediatricians, behavioural interventionist (BI) workers, and speech language pathologists (SLPs) are all based on Vancouver Island or on the mainland.
<p>Accessibility <i>“Since there are no supports on Mayne, we have to go off island for supports, which (with ferries) leads to a twelve-plus hour day for one or two hours of therapy, which isn’t sustainable.”</i> —Parent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travel plays a huge factor in accessing resources. It takes time and costs significantly more to access additional supports on Vancouver Island or on the mainland. Limited ferry schedules sometimes require parents to charter a private boat and stay overnight. Options for additional funds to support the high costs of travel are limited. • Transportation to school, even for younger students can be arduous. <i>“Bus service to schools can also be lengthy and up to a twelve-hour day for young children on Galiano.”—Service provider</i> • Students in Grades 10 through 12 require taking a water taxi to school. They catch a 7:20 a.m. taxi in the morning and the taxi home is at 5:40 p.m. This is a long day for many youth. <i>“Youth with high support needs can only be accompanied [on the taxi] by an EA. Parents are not allowed to accompany their children on the water taxi.”—Service provider</i> • Some families who are part of the “missing middle class” may struggle to access recreation programs for their children because they do not qualify for subsidies. <i>“Many children are left out of summer camps because they are not fully accessible.”—Parent</i> • The cost of living has increased significantly, and funding for programs and staffing does not reflect this change. <i>“There are a few truly inclusive programs, but they are costly and few and far between.”—Parent</i> • The infrastructure on the Islands is often <i>“unmarked and unusable for vehicles equipped with wheelchairs.”</i> It was pointed out as well that <i>“lack of accessible sidewalks makes Salt Spring incredibly inaccessible.”—Parent</i>

<p>Stigma <i>“A huge barrier to creating a network of supports is the societal stigma and shaming associated with disabilities.”</i> —Parent</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some families said they feel judged when they try to advocate for their children.• Some participants voiced the sentiment that small communities, in which people share challenges, have a fear of losing supports if they complain.• Disabilities and behavioural support needs are sometimes viewed as “problems.” Some parents also indicated that at times they felt that care providers labeled their families as “difficult child, difficult parents.” Some participants also said that they felt that neurodiversity is not embraced.
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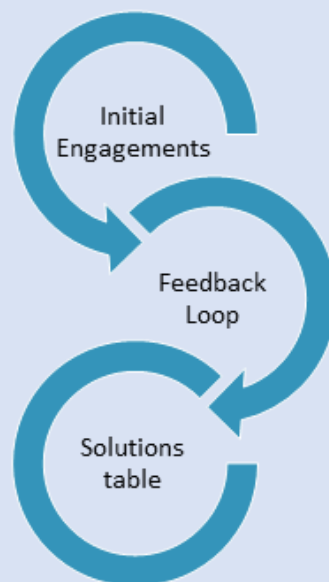
Southern Gulf Islands Solutions Table

Recommendations

During the Southern Gulf Island engagements, families, self-advocates, and members of the community explored what is working well, where there is room for improvement, and what they envision for the children and youth with support needs in their community.

After the initial engagements were conducted, a follow-up loop took place to ensure that the voices of each person were heard clearly and accurately. Notes of all the engagements were gathered, and the key findings were brought forward to a diverse and small group of community members, knowledgeable about children and youth with disabilities and/or who have support needs. This group came together to collaborate on a Solutions Table. The Solutions Table working group consisted of a meeting with parents and a follow up with educators, health care providers, and community care providers. They all had the opportunity to discuss recommendations to improve services and supports for children and youth with support needs on the Southern Gulf Islands.

These recommendations align with promoting a holistic, accessible, and a collaborative system for families.



Vision

Families, children, and youth with support needs are valued members of the Southern Gulf Islands community; are provided with choice; and are equitably supported in school, health care, mental health, and community programs.

What Steps/Solutions Are Required to Achieve This Vision?	Who Needs to be Involved to Bring These Solutions to Life?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand the existing medical and community knowledge base so that mainstream, local professionals are given the tools and education to better support neurodiverse children and youth. Tools, in addition to education, include added accommodations of time, supports, and funds to adequately and equitably address the needs of children and youth. • Provide more support workers to work with individuals and the community to support integration into the community and build existing community capacity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RCMP and first responders • Health authority (Island Health); medical providers; mental health providers • Education partners; community centres; youth sports teams; the University of Victoria for education and information • Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD); Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction (MSDPR); community agencies; Work BC; Chambers of Commerce on individual islands; Inclusion Canada; Inclusion BC; Family Support Institute • Consultation with parents and guardians to ensure supports are working for each child/youth served
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the size of the work force through incentives to support hiring qualified professionals who are passionate and knowledgeable in supporting children, youth, and families with support needs. This could include increased pay, signing bonuses, Gulf Island living and travel allowances. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A collaboration of ministries and agencies to examine the economy and workforce and set up a process to increase the acquisition of skilled people to work in remote areas, e.g. MSDPR, MCFD, the Ministry of Education and Child Care, the Ministry of Health, Island Health, BC Housing, Work BC, and child care providers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide timely support and reduce waitlists by ensuring needs of children and youth are met as needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A collaboration of MCFD; MSDPR; Island Health; Child & Youth Mental Health (CYMH) program; College of

<p>arise and are not subject to official diagnoses before help is offered.</p>	<p>Physicians and Surgeons of BC and College of Psychologists of BC to discuss levels of support that can be offered prior to assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MCFD; SLPs and OTs; counsellors; education partners; and community agencies to discuss levels of support and funding for services offered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish an online and in-person communication hub that supports and educates families on how to access resources both off and on the Islands. This hub would provide in-person navigation support to assist families in accessing resources when additional supports are needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MCFD • First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) and Island Health • Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA); Islands Trust; Chambers of Commerce on individual Gulf Islands; local agencies; supports off Island; and Information Host Resource
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire an objective, non-biased person to coordinate a steering committee/ collaborative team to work with families, youth, and local supports to discuss barriers and solutions to building a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive community for children and youth with diverse abilities. This person would report directly to MCFD with a mandate of presenting comprehensive community action plans to improve supports for families in the remote areas of the Southern Gulf Islands. Governance of recommendations would be based on human rights, disability rights, the MCFD provincial framework, and community needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MCFD • Island Health; FNHA; CYMH • BC Ferries • Education partners; youth sports teams • Islands Trust Conservancy; community agencies; community groups • Families, children, and youth being served

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve school accessibility by increasing opportunities for education and integration/ socialization on the Islands. Evaluate structural accessibility and travel by reviewing impact of water taxi times and buses for families. Assess efficacy of 64-GO (the district’s new online school), as well as other satellite schooling options for students struggling to attend schools far from home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gulf Islands Water Taxi; education partners; local communities; families, children, and youth being served • 64-GO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access to off-Island critical appointments for children and youth by ensuring families in need have guaranteed access to ferries, are provided accommodation when necessary, and have resources available to cover expenses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health authority (Island Health) • BC Ferries • Families, children, and youth being served
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broaden service types and delivery methods. Conduct a needs assessment with families and implement a request for proposal (RFP) that extends beyond the Islands to encourage other service providers to establish resources and supports on the Islands, reflecting the diverse needs of the children, youth, and families who live there. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MCFD; service providers; families, children, and youth served
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase supports especially through transitions. • Provide family support workers/ navigation coordinators to support families in accessing resources and supports. These staff members would help case manage, meet with families in person, support families at 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MCFD; MSDPR; health authority (Island Health) • Education partners; community agencies; families, children, and youth served

meetings, and help families receive supports.

- Expand school transitions beyond five-year-old students to include SLPs, OTs, and PTs. Expand Island Health's services to support transitions and extend into early learning.
- Expand the Strengthening Abilities and Journeys of Empowerment (SAJE) program to include youth with support needs who are not in care or who do not have a special needs agreement (SNA).



In Summary – What We Heard on the Southern Gulf Islands

What is Working Well

1. Library programs on Salt Spring and Saturna Islands
2. Pender's Wheelchair Basketball program
3. When families are able to access supports, the SLPs have been very helpful.
4. School meal program

Opportunities for Change

More Local Resources Needed

- There is a shortage of trained workers and professionals on the Islands, especially pediatricians, SLPs, respite workers, BIs, and educational assistants (EAs).
- There is a reliance on schools and one large agency. Families told us: *“We need more opportunities for our children, more selection of resources to choose from.”* And *“It feels you ‘get what you get’, because that is all there is. The diverse needs of our children can’t be well supported this way.”*

Connection:

- Some families feel stigmatized and struggle to trust that they will be heard and able to access supports that will meet the needs of their children. There is a *“deep sense of disconnect between some of the larger service providers and families.”*—Family member
- Some families feel isolated by location, lack of resources, lack of support, and overwhelmed with processes to access supports.

What We Envision for our Community-

Vision and Solutions Summary

Vision

Families, children, and youth with support needs are valued members of the Southern Gulf Islands community; are provided with choice; and are equitably supported in school, health care, mental health, and community programs.

Solutions:

- Increase resources by expanding existing community knowledge base, provide more support workers for inclusion
- Attract and incentivize trained workers with a Southern Gulf Island living allowance
- Establish a model of supports based on need, not reliant on diagnoses
- Establish a communication hub and provide in-person family support team for help with navigation and advocacy
- Increase supports for families through transitions
- Establish an objective, non-biased person to coordinate a steering committee to evaluate how to improve supports and build collaboration and quality assurance for inclusion within the Southern Gulf Islands community.
- Conduct a family needs assessment and expand options for supports that reflect the needs of the communities by broadening the resource base to other agencies, private care, health etc.

References

1. About Gulf Islands School District 64, June 9, 2023, sd64.bc.ca/page/372/about.
2. 2023 School District Report, SD64 Gulf Islands, Government of British Columbia, studentsuccess.gov.bc.ca/school-district/064/report/contextual-information.
3. Salt Spring Community Services, saltspringcommunityservices.ca/.



With Thanks

The Community-Led Collaboration Project would like to deeply thank everyone who shared their time, ideas, experiences, concerns and hopes with us. Their words have made all the difference as Southern Gulf Islands look to best support children and youth with disabilities or support needs so they can thrive now and into the future.

