

Childcare centres safe until at least mid-2021, Region of Waterloo assures parents ^[1]

Region's 5 centres use just over 10% of its child service budget

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EXCERPTS

A recommendation to close the five child care centres run by the Region of Waterloo will be up for discussion this week, but council officials are assuring nervous parents that no decision will be made before the middle of next year.

A public meeting on the issue will be held on Nov. 18 at 6 p.m. This will be followed by a special council meeting on Dec. 2 at 6 p.m.

"There's been no decisions made yet," Chair Karen Redman told CBC News. "There will be a discussion, there will be a public meeting, and council will make its decision, but it's not something we're doing lightly."

The regionally-run child care centres have been under review before: their closure was recommended in 2015 and 2019 by third-party consultant KPMG. It concluded the current model produces a number of inefficiencies and unnecessarily high costs.

The most recent report, by the Children's Centre Reviewing Steering Committee and based on those KPMG reports, says discontinuing the provision of direct care would allow the region to fund key priorities in the local early learning and child care system and to re-focus on its role as a service system manager versus direct service provider.

Redman said council has to approach the issue not as a company that runs five child-care centres, but from the perspective of the organization charged with oversight of all child care in the region.

"We are responsible for a system which is 14,000 child-care spaces in the region, and 67 different child-care operators," she said.

"We happen to also directly operate five centres so we supply 1.9 per cent of the child care directly and yet the region uses just over 10 per cent of the child service budget; so ... is there a better way to serve child care throughout the region that looks at quality [and] accessibility?"

Parents fear centres will close in January

Children's Services Director Barb Cardow is assuring parents that the centres will not close in January as some who have contacted CBC Kitchener-Waterloo and regional council fear.

"In the report we project mid-next year, if the decision is to be made to close them," Cardow told CBC News.

She said the Elmira Children's Centre would take longer "due to some unique circumstances."

Meanwhile, Cardow said the region will work together with the community to figure out the best time if any centres were to close.

"We know that there are transition points that would make sense to close; for example as children enter into junior kindergarten," Cardow said.

"[That] would be a logical time that a large group — almost half of the children in our centres — would be making a transition into JK so that's a natural transition time for them.

"And then supporting of course the rest of the children and families in finding alternate care arrangements," she added.

Improving affordability

According to Region of Waterloo CAO Bruce Lauckner, the current system is fragile, and puts almost 14,000 kids at potential risk if it collapses.

He said improving affordability is one of the things that would be considered in arriving at a decision.

"We know [there were] many parents struggling before we got into COVID and many more during COVID who can't afford access to child care," Lauckner told CBC News.

"So reducing those fees would be the transition that we would move to instead of the current model where we're spending 10 per cent of the funding on a small number of spaces."

Redman said the region faces a \$20 million gap between the money it has available, and the services and costs outlined in the 2021 budget.

At the same time, she said council members also recognize that quality licensed child care is vitally important to the recovery of the local economy.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: closure ^[4]

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[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/closure>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8166>