

# Advocacy groups seek clarity on Liberal 'social infrastructure' pledge <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Expectations that Canada is in for another year of sluggish economic growth have turned a spotlight on how the Liberals will carve up their promised spending of \$20-billion for "social infrastructure."

Pressure is mounting on the federal government to provide stimulus as soon as possible with promised infrastructure cash.

The Liberals' use of the term "social infrastructure" raised the ire of the NDP during last year's election campaign because it included spending in areas such as child care that are not usually classified as infrastructure.

The Liberal platform said the 10-year fund would be spent on affordable housing, seniors' residences, early learning and child care, and cultural and recreational infrastructure. The government has not said how the fund will be divided among these issues.

"People are holding their breath waiting to see what happens next," said Sharon Gregson, spokeswoman for the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C., one of many child-care advocacy groups that have written to the federal government requesting a meeting but not received a response.

"Nobody wants to have a situation where we're fighting over the same piece of pie, so I think it would be to the federal government's benefit to avoid that and make sure that there are dedicated streams of funding for each of those, which are very important subject areas," she said.

Tim Ross, interim executive director of the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association, agrees clarity is needed and said he will be pushing for a strong pledge for affordable housing. "I know this is perceived to be in competition with other priorities, but we strongly believe there is a lot of public support around affordable housing investments," he said.

The Liberals are also promising two other \$20-billion funds focused on transit and green infrastructure for a total infrastructure package of \$60-billion over 10 years.

Yet more than two months after the cabinet was sworn in, a senior minister responsible for delivering key sections of the Liberals' social infrastructure program has not yet hired a chief of staff.

Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Jean-Yves Duclos is also operating without any communications staff. A public servant is filling in until political aides are hired.

A reference in the platform that was not clearly worded left advocates with the impression that a federal-provincial meeting on child care would take place within the first 100 days of a new Liberal government. But that early February deadline is approaching with no signs that such a meeting will take place by then.

The 100-day deadline was not mentioned in the mandate letters of Mr. Duclos and Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett, who has also been asked to work on a national early-learning and child-care framework.

Child-care advocate Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, said her initial understanding was that a federal-provincial meeting would take place by early February with consultations leading up to that, but she no longer expects that will happen.

"There hasn't been anybody to set up the meetings," she said. "It won't be a surprise to me if child care doesn't move ahead by the time of the federal budget."

Mr. Duclos declined an interview request. His office said the minister is communicating with provinces and child-care groups.

"Work on child-care issues is indeed commencing within the first 100 days of the government," said Alain Garceau, the public servant who

is on loan to the minister's office for communications work.

Andrée-Lyne Hallé, a spokeswoman for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, said the political promise was that work would begin on child care within 100 days and not that a federal-provincial meeting would take place. Ms. Hallé said the breakdown of the social infrastructure fund will be announced in the future.

Liberal MP Adam Vaughan, parliamentary secretary to Mr. Trudeau, said housing is the lead component of the social infrastructure fund.

"It's primarily housing," he said in an interview. "But we also know – and you see this in Toronto – that when you build housing, you have to do more than just put bedrooms and kitchens together. You've also got to put together seniors' drop-in centres. You've got to be able to put in daycare or recreational space in order to be able to make complete communities work functionally."

NDP MP and finance critic Guy Caron said child care should have clear funding that goes beyond simply new construction. He said the Liberals need to clear this up in the budget.

"Social infrastructure, since they launched it during the campaign, I always wondered what it was," he said. "It was basically – I won't say a slush fund – but a big roof to put all of the other investments.... I'm not even sure they have an explanation as to what exactly it encompasses."

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**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** accessibility <sup>[4]</sup>

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