

What We Heard

A Review of the Children, Youth and Families Act

Introduction

The **Children, Youth and Families Act** (the Act) was proclaimed on June 28, 2019, and is the legislation that governs some of the programs and services delivered by the Department of Social Supports and Well-Being including the Protective Intervention, In Care and Youth Services Programs. To access the Act, visit: [SNL2018 CHAPTER C-12.3 - CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES ACT](#).

The Act provides legislative authority for the delivery of services to children and youth in need of protective intervention in Newfoundland and Labrador. The purpose of the Act is to promote the safety and well-being of children and youth who are in need of protective intervention by offering, where available and appropriate, services that are designed to maintain, support and preserve the family where is it in the best interests of children and youth.

The Act requires the Minister of Social Supports and Well-Being to review the Act, and the principles on which it is based, every five years. The Act also states that the review must include public consultations. The review commenced in 2024 and focused on the following areas:

- Indigenous Child Welfare
- Permanency Planning
- Outcomes for Children/Youth In Care
- Youth Transitioning to Adulthood
- Information Sharing

Engagement Process

The legislative review was publicly announced on June 6, 2025, with the launch of an online discussion guide and surveys through engageNL. Those interested in participating in the review were encouraged to contribute through mail, email, written or telephone submission and/or through the completion of an online questionnaire. In addition to welcoming public submissions, the department developed an engagement process to invite input from a broad range of individuals and community partners. The engagement process occurred between June 6, 2025, and September 12, 2025. Over 40 organizations participated through written submissions, virtual or in-person dialogue sessions, or audience-specific questionnaires. One hundred and thirty-three responses were received from surveys open to children, youth and families receiving services from the department, the general public, and community partners.

Results

Participants were asked to provide comments on five key themes, in addition to any other feedback they wished to provide. Participants provided a tremendous amount of

feedback, which was analysed into key themes for the purpose of this document. All feedback received has been reviewed and considered for potential amendments to improve the Act. The following provides a summary of feedback related to each key theme.

Question:

How can the Department strengthen child welfare practice with Indigenous children, youth, and families, as well as Indigenous Governments and Organizations?

Over the last five years, the Department of Social Supports and Well-Being has worked collaboratively with Indigenous Governments and Organizations (IGOs) to strengthen relationships and improve service delivery to Indigenous children, youth and families. Significant enhancements were introduced in the **Children, Youth and Families Act** to recognize Indigenous children, youth and families and to support the involvement of IGOs in the planning and decision making regarding their children and youth and help Indigenous children and youth in care maintain connections to their culture and community. The Department is committed to continued collaboration with IGOs to improve outcomes for Indigenous children, youth and families involved with the child welfare system and supporting IGOs as they work toward assuming responsibility for child welfare services.

Feedback included:

- Improving supportive and financial services to Indigenous children, youth and families, particularly those in remote and/or isolated communities.
- Improving retention efforts to support consistent and qualified social work staff working in Indigenous communities.
- Continuing to support IGOs in any efforts to assert jurisdiction for child welfare services in their communities.
- Strengthening family and community connections for Indigenous children and youth, including offering services and supports to support children and youth safely remaining in their home and/or community.
- Strengthening collaboration with IGOs and other service providers, including enhanced information sharing, to improve service delivery to Indigenous children, youth and families.
- Mandating collaborative decision-making with IGOs, ensuring meaningful input is sought from Elders and local leaders.

- Recognizing traditional cultural healing practices.
- Utilizing genograms (a simple visual way to show a family's relationships and history) as an additional tool to share information with children and youth in care about their biological families.
- Strengthening Indigenous-focused training, including community-led cultural safety training, for departmental staff, foster parents and residential service providers, in addition to shared training opportunities.
- Requiring Cultural Connection Plans to be shared with relevant IGOs, and streamlining processes around cultural connection planning for children and youth in care placed outside of their community, including ongoing consultation with Indigenous Representatives and other service providers in the planning process.
- Establishing a navigator to assist with cultural connection planning for Indigenous families.
- Improving intergovernmental collaboration to support prioritization of services for Indigenous children, youth and families.
- Ensuring Indigenous laws, traditions, and practices have formal standing in child protection proceedings.
- Including a legislative provision that specifically outlines the best interests of Innu children.
- Requiring Innu-Aimun interpreters to be available for Innu children, youth and families involved in child welfare proceedings in court.
- Recognizing the term "Innu Representative" in the legislation.
- Recognizing the impact that a lack of resources has on court proceedings within Indigenous areas, timelines being insufficient for parents to effectively retain legal counsel and make necessary contacts prior to hearings, and recommendations to consider with an emphasis on moving towards a community court model.
- Ensuring consistent access to culturally safe and affirming early learning environments, with recognition of Indigenous languages, traditions, and land-based learning as essential to early childhood development.

Question:

How can the Department enhance permanency planning for children and youth who are in need of protection?

Permanency Planning refers to the process of carrying out activities designed to help a child or youth safely live in a permanent family meant to last a lifetime. There are four dimensions of Permanency Planning, which the Department focuses on when working with children and youth. These include:

- Physical permanence: a safe and stable living environment
- Relational permanence: a safe and stable enduring family or family-like relationships that are meant to last a lifetime
- Cultural permanence: the child or youth identifies with and is connected to their cultural community
- Legal permanence: a child or youth has a safe, caring, legally recognized family

Feedback included:

- Prioritizing permanency from the first point of contact with a family, including collecting necessary information to support permanency planning (e.g., asking who is important in the child's life, who is a support to the family).
- Continuing recruitment and retention efforts to ensure sufficient resources for improved service delivery and permanency planning for children and youth.
- Adjusting timelines for court proceedings to improve permanency (e.g., hearing timelines, custody orders, and timelines for judicial decisions).
- Exploring a legislative mechanism for regular review of permanency plans to ensure cultural needs are being met.
- Improving fly-in/fly-out staffing models to enhance consistency of service delivery.
- Enhancing supports and services for families to maintain children safely at home, where possible.
- Intentionally including culturally grounded life plans in every permanency plan to preserve and strengthen children and youth's connection to their heritage, language, and identity as these core elements shape a child or youth's sense of belonging, resilience and well-being, especially for Indigenous children and youth separated from their communities.
- Strengthening efforts to maintain relative and significant other connections for Inuit children and youth in care.
- Prioritizing expressed interest in permanent guardianship for youth preparing to leave care, especially for Inuit children and youth placed within their culture either through Inuit foster homes or Nunatsiavut community.

- Exploring opportunities for community partners to complete foster/adoption assessments to increase the number of approved foster/adoption placements.
- Improving interdepartmental collaboration and information sharing practices (e.g., Department of Education, Department of Health and Community Services, Department of Justice and Public Safety).
- Ongoing reassessment of reunification for children and youth in Continuous Custody with a mandatory timeline for reassessment and required submission to the court.
- Including a legislative mechanism to support kinship caregivers to obtain custody of children and youth in long term kinship care agreements.
- Implementing specialized permanency teams to support permanency for children and youth in care.
- Strengthening policy to support equitable rates and supports for kinship programming.
- Requiring consultation with an Innu Representative prior to consenting to the adoption of Innu children.
- Ensuring foster and adoptive parents receive mandatory training in cultural awareness, that is specific to the culture of the child or youth, and understand their responsibility to support the child or youth's ongoing cultural development.
- Strengthening legislation to look beyond the perspective of nuclear families and align with community views of child rearing that better align with Indigenous cultures.
- Enhancing collaboration with IGOs at initial points of contact, providing notification to IGOs of a family's involvement so they may avail of existing supports through IGOs directly.
- Strengthening legislation to encompass the social, emotional, and developmental dimensions of a child's life, broadening the scope of permanency to include stable learning environments with a focus on the continuity of attachment relationships with educators.

Question:

How can the Department strengthen the Act to better support improved outcomes for children and youth in care?

When a child or youth is unable to live at home with a parent, and arrangements with other family members are not available, a court process is necessary to transfer the care and custody of a child or youth to the Department. The decision to place a child in care is only considered where it is in the best interests of the child and there are no other options available to keep the child safe. When a child or youth is in care, the goal is to safely return the child or youth home with their parent, however, there may be times when a child or youth is unable to safely return home. In these situations, the child/youth remains in care while their social worker seeks to find a permanent living arrangement (e.g. child or youth may be adopted). The Department recognizes the importance of, and remains focused on, achieving the best possible outcomes for children and youth in care.

Feedback included:

- Providing improved financial and in home supportive services to families as a means to support their children safely living at home to reduce the likelihood of coming into care.
- Improving transition planning for youth in care transitioning to adulthood (e.g., strengthening lifelong connections).
- Strengthening life skills programming for children, youth and foster parents to better support successful transition to adulthood.
- Ongoing reassessment of risk to determine if a child or youth in Continuous Custody can safely return home, to other kin, or to a culturally appropriate placement.
- Ensuring parent-child relationships are at the centre of all services provided.
- Improving collaboration with other government departments and community partners to foster more cohesive case planning for children and youth.
- Improving access to mental health and specialized services. Participants advised long waitlists and lack of access to appropriate services (e.g., counseling, developmental supports) hinder outcomes. More services/supports needed to meet complex needs of youth to avoid negative impacts on case planning, permanency, and transitions. Difficulty accessing timely services - needs to be prioritized.
- Supporting foster parents to develop meaningful and respectful relationships with a child or youth's community and culture.
- Continuing recruitment and retention efforts to improve service delivery for children and youth by providing consistent and quality social work support across programs.

- Expanding Prohibit Contact Orders to include youth.
- Increasing approved foster homes in an effort to reduce the number of children and youth living in staffed living arrangements.
- Supporting foster parents to provide consent for extracurricular and day-to-day activities that are not based around medical, religious or other significant life decisions.
- Strengthening child-specific placement options to improve successful placements, reduce potential for placement disruption, and emotional impact on children and youth.
- Arranging for an Innu Representative to attend interviews with Innu children.
- Improving facilitation of opportunities for continued familial/community connections for Indigenous children and youth placed outside of their home community.
- Improving coordination for Inuit Child First Initiative (ICFI) programming.
- Considering having supervision of Inuit children and youth living in Happy Valley-Goose Bay offered by management in the Nunatsiavut zone.
- Exploring hearing and custody order timelines to better support children, youth and families as current timelines do not offer sufficient time for parental intervention plans to be fully implemented.
- Considering adjusting custody order timeframes, so they are the same for children of all ages. When families have multiple children of varying ages come into care, it can create barriers to reunification as the orders for some children expire more quickly than others.
- Monitoring of outcomes beyond placement stability, including school readiness, participation in early learning, and developmental progress indicators, embedding a trauma-informed, developmental approach into care standards, to ensure that children in care receive consistent access to enriching early learning experiences.

Question:

How can the Department better meet the needs of vulnerable youth (e.g., youth living independently in the community, youth transitioning into adulthood)?

The Department offers support to youth who are in need of protection, and youth who are leaving care, during their transition to early adulthood. The Department recognizes that youth continue to need support and guidance during this stage of life and understands the importance of youth being connected to a network of support, which provides youth with the opportunity to gain life skills, knowledge, and the support necessary to successfully transition into adulthood.

Feedback included:

- Expanding Youth Services programming for those youth who require continued support to age 25. This would reflect the needs of this vulnerable population while also acknowledging that brain development continues to age 25 and there is a need for continued support.
- Improving recruitment and retention efforts; issues with both create barriers for youth maintaining a consistent connection with their social workers, who are often the only consistent adult in their lives.
- Completing an ongoing reassessment for youth to determine if they can safely return home and maintain ongoing efforts to sustain and support lifelong connections and provide other identified supports, as needed.
- Strengthening life skills programming opportunities, including culturally specific programming, and implementing earlier planning to successfully prepare youth for transitions to adulthood and independent living.
- Strengthening policy to support youth in kinship care transitioning to the Youth Services Program.
- Improving coordination to streamline the transition for youth transitioning out of the Youth Services Program into adult programs (e.g., Community Services Program, Income Support).
- Providing timely transition planning that is culturally informed, includes mentorship from cultural peers, helps maintain identity and belonging, and is done well in advance of the youth leaving care.
- Enhancing local supports available to youth to support lifelong connections.
- Exploring partnerships with government and community partners to ensure youth have access to safe and affordable housing, in addition to supportive employment programming.

- Mental Health Services: the lack of mental health services impacts case planning, permanency, and transitions. Recognizing mental health history and addressing it is critical to support successful transition to adulthood.
- Shifting away from a directive model of service delivery to an individual needs-based approach that considers a youth's specific needs and readiness to engage in programming to support independent living.
- Continuing to support the involvement of those significant to the youth in their programming/services.
- Developing semi-independent living opportunities for youth to support their successful transition to adulthood
- Increasing support for Innu youth in care transitioning to adulthood.
- Improving legislation and policy to support youth-led approaches that see youth supported within their home community and near kin in the Nunatsiavut region. Chronic housing shortages, economic challenges, and social issues experienced within the Nunatsiavut region also contribute to youth not being able to live independently or semi-independently in their communities.
- Strengthening training for social workers to help prepare youth in their transition to adulthood.
- Recognizing the role of consistent educator relationships in supporting a successful transition to adulthood, by providing collaborative opportunities for age-appropriate skill development in formal and informal learning settings.
- Considering including 18-year-olds in the definition of "youth" to enable those in school to access services under the Act.

Question:

How can the Department enhance information sharing between the Department and community partners/service providers to ensure services are provided in the best interests of children and youth?

Sharing information about children and youth and parents, with others involved in their life (e.g. counsellors, family/friends), is important when assessing safety and risk to children and youth, developing case plans/agreements, and making decisions in the best interests of children and youth. The Department remains committed to strengthening information sharing practices in the best interests of children and youth.

Feedback included:

- Providing continued education for social workers, caregivers, government services, and community partners on information sharing practices supported by legislation.
- Strengthening policy to improve information sharing with caregivers as well as developing guidelines for informed consent and culturally appropriate communication with children, youth and families to support transparency.
- Enhancing recruitment and retention efforts to ensure consistent staff as a means to foster effective relationship building and information sharing.
- Establishing clear information sharing practices that respond to cultural protocols and values, particularly when working with Indigenous governments, organizations and communities.
- Providing children, youth, and families with plain-language explanations of their rights and how their information will be used.
- Strengthening policy to support the use of electronic consent forms.
- Expanding the Right to Information section of the legislation to include youth (i.e., s.96(1)(b)).
- Strengthening policy to support regular case conferencing with children, youth, families and service providers.
- Improving collaboration between the Department and community partners such as schools, police, and health officials, in addition to collaborative training opportunities.
- Improving training around information sharing to ensure consistent practice across all service providers, ensuring timely, coordinated, and responsible information sharing in the best interest of children and youth.
- Considering an amendment to legislation around information sharing to establish clear expectations of the minimum of information required for schools with respect to protective intervention and custody/access.
- Acknowledging schools as ‘in loco parentis’ relationship for information sharing purposes, and specifically in addressing disclosure without consent in situations where parents refuse consent.
- Considering an amendment to the Publication Ban section (s. 55) to ensure a child’s information is not published or made public where the child is in receipt of child

protection services.

- Strengthening policy to clarify consent requirements for children and youth based on their age and stage of development.
- Strengthening policy to support enhanced communication and transparency between the Department Social Supports and Well-Being and the Department of Justice and Public Safety with regard to families experiencing family violence, and associated involvement with the criminal justice system.
- Considering integrating into the legislation the requirement to adhere to the Innu-CSSD Protocol.
- Continuing efforts to improve relationship building and information sharing with Indigenous Governments and Organizations, including formalizing Information Sharing Agreements.
- Exploring more formalized and scheduled case planning to support improved service delivery.

Other Things We Heard

In addition to comments on the five identified areas for review, other feedback included:

- Continuing recruitment and retention efforts to support implementation of current legislative requirements.
- Improving training for social workers with targeted areas of focus, including provincial and federal child welfare legislation, ongoing permanency planning, trauma-informed practice, culturally sensitive practice, intergenerational trauma, LGBTQIA2S+, mental health, youth transitioning to adulthood, family dynamics, and supporting children and youth in care.
- Developing policy to better support children and youth in care who become parents.
- Strengthening efforts to preserve and promote Indigenous cultural identity, language, traditions, and community connections in all areas of service delivery.
- Improving policy to support children and youth in care with more culturally relevant opportunities.
- Considering amendments to legislative timelines to support procedural fairness (e.g., allowing sufficient time to secure legal representation in advance of court

appearance).

- Considering amendments to legislation to support judicial discretion and deemed consent so matters can be addressed in a timely manner and in the child or youth's best interest.
- Considering providing more prevention and early intervention services to reduce the number of families being serviced in the child protection and in care programs.
- Providing more supports and services to children, youth and families as a preventive measure to reduce the number of children coming into care.
- Considering the enhancement of legislation to support social workers being able to enter a home when determining whether a child is, or remains, in need of protective intervention.
- Considering opportunities for social workers to work in communal settings (e.g., schools) as a way to increase trust and strengthen relationships with families and other service providers and support issues being addressed in an effective manner.
- Considering addition of school absenteeism under s. 10 (Grounds for Protective Intervention), to clearly articulate a definition that is inclusive of a parent failing to meet a child's basic educational needs, and to recognize that addressing chronic absenteeism under the **Schools Act, 1997** has been ineffective.
- Considering an amendment that would support parents who act to protect their children but have to violate a family court order in the process (e.g., families who experience family violence/intimate partner violence) or parents who want to report protection concerns related to the other parent but fear retaliation or repercussions in family court.
- Clarifying s.96 (Right to Information) to state whether employees of community and non-profit organizations are required to disclose information the same as employees of public bodies.
- Considering amending s.40 (Effect of Continuous Custody Order) to also include youth to clarify the Manager's ability to make decisions in the best interests of the youth.

Next Steps

Thank you to everyone who participated in this review process by providing a written submission, joining an in person or virtual engagement session, or completing a questionnaire. Your input is critical to the review of the Act and efforts to strengthen and

improve the legislation that guides the child protection, in care and youth services programs in this province.

As we go forward, participant input will be considered along with research and best practice information to identify ways in which the legislation, policy and practice may be improved.