



Nova Scotia Children and Family Services Act

What We Heard Report |
A report on the public engagement

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Department of Community Services

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Executive Summary

The Children and Family Services Act (the Act) is a law in Nova Scotia designed to protect children and youth from harm and strengthen the wellbeing of families and communities. The Department of Community Services (the Department) manages the programs and services that support the Act, which include harm prevention, adoption-related services, and support for parents, caregivers, families, children, and youth.

The Act requires a review every four years, with the next review due by March 1, 2025. To prepare for the review, the Department asked Nova Scotians for their feedback on how the Act was working and what could be improved. This feedback was collected through various methods, including engagement sessions, written submissions, and an online survey.

Over 300 individuals participated in 60 engagement sessions, while over 260 respondents participated in the online survey. Four email submissions were received and four community partners opted to provide feedback via detailed written reports. All this information will be shared with the committee responsible for completing the review of the Act. When this feedback from Nova Scotians was analyzed, five key themes emerged.

Key Themes	Findings
Program Delivery and Support Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program delivery should be flexible, holistic, and based in communities. • Children, youth, and families need to be aware of the supports and services that are available to them. • Children, youth, and families need access to support that is based on their unique needs and builds on their existing strengths and capabilities.
Empowering Children, Youth, and Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children, youth, and families should be empowered to take an active role in their lives. • Socioeconomic factors play a significant role in determining the success of children, youth, and families.
Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equity, diversity, and inclusion should be promoted across programs and staffing.
Staff Education and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More comprehensive training of staff can help improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. • Staff should be provided training in diversity, inclusion, and addressing personal and systemic biases.
Communication and Continuous Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication should be open, honest, and clear. • Reporting expectations and processes should be clarified. • Service delivery should receive continuous feedback and evaluation.

Introduction

Children and youth need to be surrounded by a community of supportive people, and they need access to services that meet their unique needs. Government, service providers, families, and communities all need to work together to keep young Nova Scotians safe.

The purpose of the Children and Family Services Act is to both protect children and youth from harm and strengthen families and communities. It applies to all Nova Scotians in every community of the province.

The Department of Community Services manages the programs and services that support the Act, which include:

- services that help prevent harm from happening in the first place,
- services for parents or caregivers and families who may need extra support to cope with challenges,
- services for children and youth who may need protection from their parents or caregivers,
- services that support children and youth when they are unable to remain with their parents or caregivers,
- services that support other family members or approved individuals (such as foster parents) to be caregivers for children or youth, and
- services that support children, youth, and adoptive parents related to an adoption.

Every four years, government must review the Act. The next review is due March 1, 2025.

In preparation for the review, government engaged with Nova Scotians to better understand how to improve both the Act and the delivery of supportive services. The following report summarizes the key themes participants raised in the engagement process.

While all feedback was reviewed, it was not possible to address all feedback in this report. However, all of the information captured will be shared with the committee responsible for completing the review of the Act.

Overview of Engagements

Methodology and Participant Information

To develop this report, it was important to hear from a wide range of individuals who could provide their perspectives and knowledge of the Act, and real-life experiences with accessing and receiving its supports. To hear from the greatest number of Nova Scotians possible, a variety of ways to provide feedback were offered.

Engagement Sessions

A total of 60 in-person and virtual engagement sessions were held in Fall 2023, including 22 sessions facilitated by the Association of Black Social Workers for African Nova Scotians. More than 300 individuals from the public, academia, and community-based service providers participated in these sessions.

Written Submissions

Four email submissions were received, and four community partners chose to provide detailed written reports.

Online Survey

Nova Scotians could also participate by taking an online survey, which was open from October 2023 to November 2023. More than 260 respondents participated in the online survey.

Findings

This report summarizes the feedback provided by those who participated in the engagement activities. All information collected through the engagement process was reviewed and analyzed, and the following key themes were identified:

1. Program delivery and support services
2. Empowering children, youth, and families
3. Equity, diversity, and inclusion
4. Staff education and development
5. Communication and continuous improvement

Theme 1: Program Delivery and Support Services

Program delivery should be flexible, holistic, and based in communities.

“... all families are unique, and therefore the services that they need to access should be unique to them.”
– Engagement participant

Participants said they would like to see the Department building relationships with existing community groups to develop and deliver more programs with more diverse content. They suggested partnerships with Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, communities of African ancestry, and other cultural communities to deliver culturally appropriate programming. This programming should be unbiased and inclusive, and must reflect the cultural

values and traditions of the children, youth, and families it is meant to support. Programming should also connect children, youth, and families with supports that already exist in their communities.

Several participants suggested the Department should use community navigators to act as bridges between cultural communities and the Department. These navigators could help provide information and services to children, youth, and families.

Participants would also like to see community-based programs have increased access to sustainable, long-term funding to ensure they can continue to provide support. They indicated that this could lead to stronger relationships between participants and program providers.

Participants frequently mentioned the need for flexibility in the way the Act's programs are delivered. They suggested that a rigid, “one-size-fits-all” approach should be avoided in favour of flexible, trauma-informed strategies that respond to the unique needs of each family.

The increased use of technology was also discussed throughout the engagements. Participants would like to see the Department implementing changes to allow for increased use of online reporting, forms, and communication.

Children, youth, and families need to be informed about the supports and services that are available to them.

Participants felt there are barriers that keep families from using the Department's programs and services and that these need to be removed.

They felt the awareness of existing programs and supports was low, both within their communities and among Department staff, and more consistent visibility of the Department in communities and awareness of existing supports could lead to a more equitable system. Participants recommended strategies like community workshops and ongoing roundtables to increase engagement and trust, and education and awareness campaigns to inform the public about the role the Department plays in the community. Participants felt that this would help reduce stigma and help families feel encouraged and empowered to access support.

Participants further suggested that the programs could also be delivered in different ways, such as online, or at different times of day. This way, more families could access them. They would like to see more programs people would voluntarily choose to access on topics such as parent education. They would also like to see more collaboration among service providers.

While it was acknowledged by participants that supports should be offered both within and outside of the school system, the school system is seen as having a large role to play within the community. Participants felt that offering Department programming in schools could foster trust and encourage relationship-building with children, youth, and families.

Participants noted that people who live outside of urban settings face extra barriers to accessing programs and services, including a lack of transportation, and that services available to Indigenous children, youth, and families living on and off reserve are inequitable.

They also reported that long wait times and high costs made it difficult to access support services. Free or low-cost options often have longer wait times and are not available in all communities. Participants noted that mental health supports were particularly difficult to access. They asked to see more funding directed toward mental health programs so more children, youth, and families could access them.

Participants also noted a need for greater clarity regarding the eligibility criteria for various programs. They expressed a desire for an expansion in universally accessible programs, along with an increase in specialized programs that cater to specific groups, including fathers, youth reaching the age of majority, and individuals living with disabilities.

“I participated in parental groups and I wish I had known about them sooner.”

– Engagement participant

“People need to do this work with flexibility and compassion. This is and cannot be a one size fits all approach.”

– Engagement participant

Children, youth, and families need access to support that is based on their unique needs and builds on their existing strengths and capabilities.

Participants stressed the importance of community programs and services, and stated there is an overall need for more of these programs. They wanted to see a shift away from programs and services that discipline parents or react to existing problems in families, and towards initiatives that focus on prevention and intervention, building on family and community strengths.

At the same time, participants did note they were encouraged by recent efforts made by the Department to focus on prevention and early intervention and would like to see this continue.

Participants also felt that the Department and community-based supports should take into consideration the impacts of trauma and mental health issues when dealing with children, youth, and families. They indicated this could increase not only the quality of the supports being offered, but also the level of comfort and safety participants feel when accessing services.

Additionally, participants noted that supports provided through the Department are often only available after an investigation occurs. Participants would like to be able to receive support and ask questions about their rights without the need for an investigation, which some viewed as intrusive and an unnecessary stressor. Solutions proposed included the establishment of a confidential hotline.

Theme 2: Empowering Children, Youth, and Families

Children, youth, and families should be empowered to take an active role in their lives.

“The children need to have a voice, you need to listen to the children.”

– Engagement participant

Participants wanted to see more opportunities for children and youth to meaningfully participate in their care in a way that impacts decisions and outcomes. They highlighted the importance of empowering children and youth to understand and exercise their rights; they felt the Act should be explicit in stating that children’s voices should be heard and their opinions considered.

Participants stressed the importance of involving children, youth, and families in decisions that affect them in an age-appropriate way, and providing more opportunities to do so, such as using a family-led decision-making model, and developing Department materials available in child- and youth-friendly formats. Participants felt that there should be a process by which caregivers and age-appropriate youth are given access to their own records.

Participants emphasized the importance of empowering Indigenous and African Nova Scotian children, youth, and families to make decisions that align with the unique needs of their communities. They felt that this approach would help to promote self-determination and respect for cultural traditions.

Participants also said they wanted to see better education for foster families caring for African Nova Scotian and Indigenous children, so that they can provide those children with care and resources that are racially and culturally inclusive.

“If DCS is recognizing the need for early intervention / prevention, then engaging and supporting community is an absolute must.”

– Engagement participant

Socioeconomic factors play a significant role in determining the success of children, youth, and families.

Throughout the engagement, participants observed that socioeconomic factors significantly influence the wellbeing of families. Increasing poverty levels often reduce the ability of families to meet their children’s needs, resulting in cases of neglect as it is currently defined within the Act.

Participants felt that the Act should serve as a tool to empower families, enabling them to adequately provide for their children, rather than assuming harm. It was noted that this assumption of harm often disproportionately affects vulnerable and racialized families.

Participants, particularly those in the public engagement sessions, expressed a desire for increased financial supports for struggling families.

Participants wanted to see more recognition of the impacts of family violence and trauma and how it can affect family dynamics. Participants felt the Department’s role should be centred around providing families with the necessary skills and resources to succeed, rather than focusing on their lack of access to resources.

Participants expressed concern that if they asked for help with basic needs, they might face negative consequences from the Department, such as having their children removed from their care. They said that this fear stopped them from asking for help. Overall, participants wanted to see programs and services that take a proactive approach, providing support to help families stay together.

Theme 3: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Equity, diversity, and inclusion should be promoted across programs and staffing.

Participants wanted the Department staff, and the programs and services offered as part of the Act, to reflect and respect the diversity of cultures in Nova Scotia so the unique needs of all children, youth, and families are met. Indigenous communities, Black, bi-racial, people of colour (BIPOC) and newcomer and immigrant populations were mentioned as key groups the Department should partner with to ensure this happens.

Participants felt that having staff who are reflective of the diversity of the communities they serve, and who spend time within these communities building meaningful relationships, would help address bias and improve service delivery. This includes diversity of the leadership team within the Department.

Participants wanted to see programs and policies that consider the unique needs and practices of various cultural communities, including a more flexible definition of who is included in a family. Participants felt that extended family, when appropriate, should be included in care planning and support plans. In order to include the cultural nuances of the African Nova Scotian and Indigenous communities, for instance, the concept of kinship should be added to the definition of family. It was identified as imperative that the Department understands how family dynamics, values, background, and moral views influence how children, youth, and families interact with supports and services.

“The stigma is still very strong. Indigenous families are receiving far too much judgement when what they need is encouragement and empowerment.”

– Engagement participant

Participants also called for more explicit language in the Act that directly addresses issues of discrimination, racism, and bias, and that directly acknowledges and addresses historical discrimination. Participants noted this language should clearly use the term “race,” and not present race and culture as one and the same. Participants reported feeling discriminated against based on their race, culture, gender identity, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, or other parts of their identity when receiving services. They also expressed frustration with the

discrimination and stigma that Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, and other racialized groups often face when accessing services, including a lack of understanding of the stress racism adds to encounters between parents and Department staff. They said that this often leads to a lack of trust and engagement with the system, and a reluctance to access services regardless of need.

While there was recognition that the Department has made strides in addressing discrimination and racism, participants felt more needs to be done. Some suggested that equity-based, culturally attentive policies, programs, and materials, including provisions for those with disabilities, was needed. Participants also noted that decisions that affect groups who are often discriminated against should not be made without involvement and input from these groups themselves.

In general, participants felt that all children, youth, and families should have equitable access to supports and services that respect, safeguard, and sustain their diversity.

Theme 4: Staff Education and Development

More comprehensive training of staff can help improve outcomes for children, youth, and families.

Participants felt that Department workers, in particular social workers, are overworked and that this may result in less effective service delivery. They suggested introducing caseload caps to keep workloads manageable and allow Department staff to provide higher quality and more personalized support and service. Participants also said it was crucial that the Department recruit and retain skilled social workers.

“[the Department] needs to have enough staff to be able to effectively work and build relationships with children.”

– Engagement participant

Participants felt that there are inequities across the system and the quality of care received was heavily reliant on the skills of the individual worker. They wanted to see a more consistent approach to service delivery and training that is evidence-based and evaluated regularly, and which includes learning and implementing Africentric and Indigenous specific approaches to support.

Participants noted that it is common for child protection staff to be newly graduated social workers. Participants felt these roles require more experience, or at least specific training with opportunities for mentorship from more experienced workers.

Staff should be provided training in diversity, inclusion, and addressing personal and systemic biases.

Participants felt it was important that staff both inside and outside the Department receive training in diversity and inclusion, cultural differences, and available programming. Participants also wanted to see culturally specific guidelines and protocols embedded in the Act and other Department materials, and ongoing training such as anti-Black racism education prioritized. Participants called for ongoing performance evaluations measuring cultural and racial proficiencies.

The Department’s Africentric team was highlighted as a success, but participants called for greater and more timely involvement from this team, and increased awareness in communities of these culturally responsive services. Mi’kmaw Family & Children’s Services was also noted as effectively providing culturally relevant service to Indigenous peoples in Nova Scotia.

Participants felt that Department staff should demonstrate awareness of both personal and systemic biases and make a conscious effort to mitigate these in their work. They felt greater understanding and respect for cultural, identity, and physical differences would also help reduce stigma and discrimination.

Theme 5: Communication and Continuous Improvement

Communication should be open, honest, and clear.

Participants wanted to see the Act and materials provided by the Department written in clear, accessible language, and available in a wide variety of languages to reflect the diversity of Nova Scotians.

Participants highlighted the need to build trust between staff and children, as well as between children and their families, before open communication can begin. They felt that communication and transparency can be lacking.

Participants said children, youth, and families did not always have a clear understanding of the status of their involvement with the Department. They would like to see more frequent and detailed communication, including progress updates and timelines, and they felt this better communication would build trust and mutual understanding, ultimately creating a better environment for everyone.

“We had a great social worker but the lack of communication from the entire system is devastating. People should be contacting and providing updates throughout the entire process.”

– Engagement participant

Participants felt the many units within the Department often did not communicate well, leaving families to independently navigate the system and identify suitable programs. While participants saw confidentiality as important, they were concerned that the inability to share information sometimes created barriers for families. Participants suggested expanding interdepartmental information sharing, creating one Department-wide case management system and access to province-wide child protection files.

At the same time, participants wanted to have a better understanding of why their personal information is collected and how it is used.

Reporting expectations and processes should be clarified.

Participants wanted to see improvements made to the intake and assessment process, including the duty-to-report regulations. While some participants felt that reports were often not taken seriously enough, others felt the Department often becomes too involved too quickly. They wanted to see a consistent, transparent approach to this process with a focus on keeping families together.

Participants wanted to see more education and awareness-building on the signs and impacts of child abuse and maltreatment, including how to report suspected child abuse and the process that follows.

Participants wanted to see children being brought into care only as a last resort. If a child must be removed from their home, appropriate foster caregivers should be available. Participants also felt court proceedings often caused undue harm to children and families, and that a more collaborative approach, such as mediation, should be used first.

Service delivery should receive continuous feedback and evaluation.

Participants wanted to see a culture of continuous evaluation and improvement within the Department. They felt that regular evaluation by a third party, including independent child advocates, would help align programs and services with the needs of Nova Scotians.

“A lot of the time it’s the numbers being looked at instead of the impact and outcomes you see as the service provider working with them on the ground level.”

– Engagement participant

Participants further said that the Department needs to capture and consider meaningful data in order to truly evaluate the job it is doing. This data should accurately reflect outcomes and impacts for children, youth, families, and communities. Participants said the Department should look at qualitative feedback on the quality of outcomes, not just quantitative data showing the scope of services provided. They felt this expanded evaluation should also extend to community service providers who are supporting children, youth, and families.

Participants wanted to see a safe and respectful environment in which all partners can voice their concerns. However, they also noted that until the Department has rebuilt trust with families, it will be difficult for Nova Scotians to feel safe providing feedback.

Participants said they wanted an easier-to-understand, more streamlined process for providing feedback to the Department. When the Department asks for their feedback, participants suggested that questions should be easy to understand or open-ended, and various options for providing feedback (e.g., online, in person, phone) should be offered.

Participants also felt that there was a lack of follow-up when they made a complaint or provided feedback and emphasized that workers need to be held accountable when they do not respect the rights of children and youth. They suggested that consequences should be enforced for those workers, and that children, youth, and families should be informed of the process and what steps are being taken to improve service.

Next Steps

Feedback received from the engagements will be shared with the Minister-appointed committee responsible for conducting the comprehensive review of the Act starting in spring of 2024.