

A Vision for a Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth in Northern British Columbia

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Introduction

A dream often starts with a vision. In this case, the vision started with a question: “How can we design a comprehensive and integrated system of care that best meets the unique needs of children and youth in Northern BC?” Over the past few years, the Lheidli T’enneh First Nation and our neighbours in communities across the north came together to talk with one another about this vision, to ask the question, how can we turn the dream of a Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth in the north, for all the north, into reality.

The concept for the Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth is a purpose-built centre to bring together a multitude of child and youth health services for the Northern BC region in one location. We envision a welcoming space where every child's wellness is holistically and seamlessly supported.

Services could include but are not limited to, neurocognitive assessments, psychological/psychiatric support for children and youth experiencing mental health challenges, substance use treatment programs, as well as early years services tailored to the needs of young people in Northern BC.

Wherever the Centre ultimately is located, it would be complementary to and supportive of community-based services, including referral and follow-up services when patients return home. The Centre would primarily serve those aged 0-19 with transition services up to age 24.

Listening to the voices of Northern BC

From the first discussions about the possibility of creating a Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth, it was obvious what the first step needed to be. Or, put differently, where the first step needed to be taken. The first step needed to be taken into the communities of the region the Centre would serve.

It is the voices of Northern British Columbians – community and professional leaders, service providers and clinicians, people with lived experience and youth themselves – whose voices must be heard.

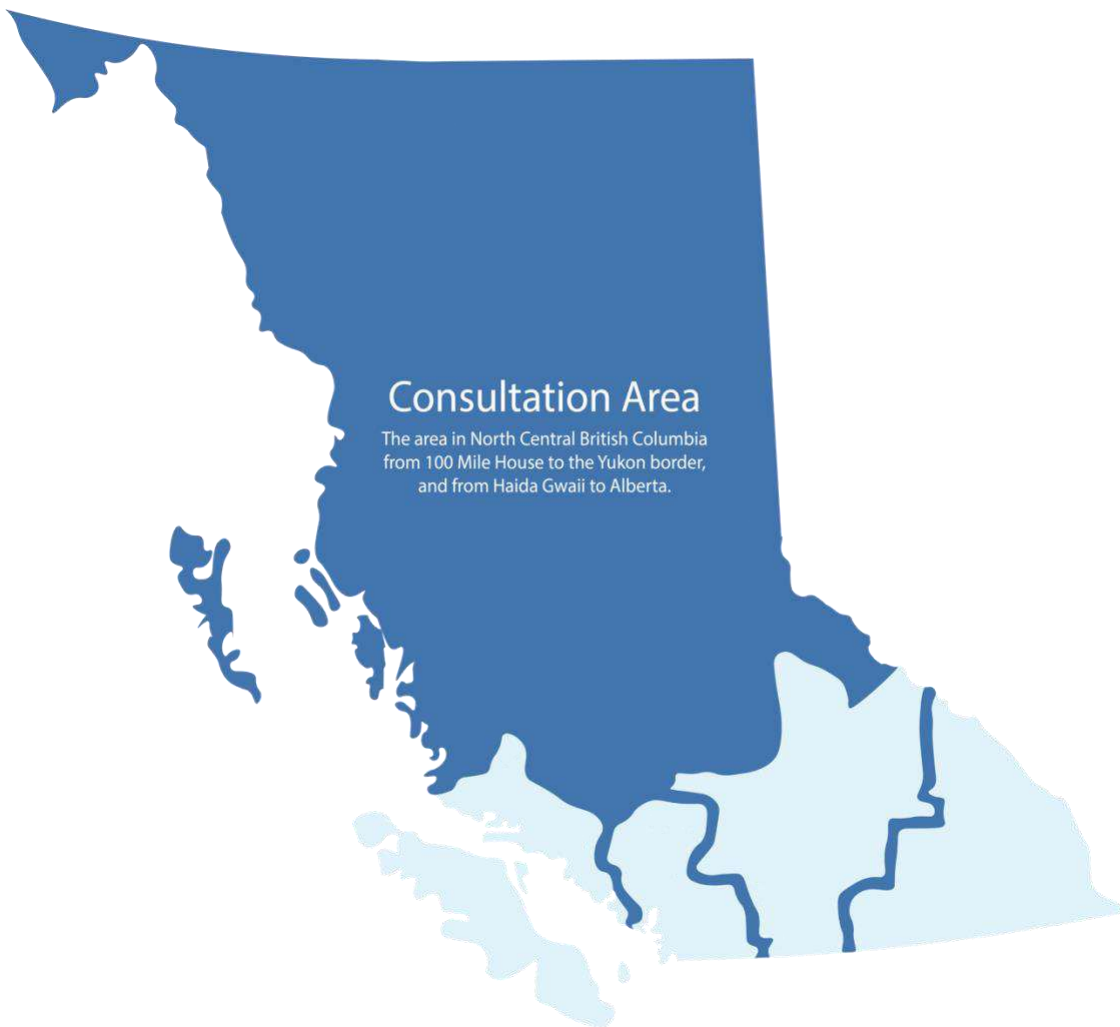
Indigenous and non-Indigenous service providers, clinical and research specialists, particularly specialists in delivering care to the unique needs of this diverse population, and individuals and families from Northern BC – these are the people for whom this vision document was created. This document is intended to be an information source, but also a guide to the discussion we need to have with our communities of interest.

As we begin the engagement process, we are seeking input from these voices on the vision for this Centre and the programs and services it would provide. This is part of a series of dialogues we’re holding across the region, in-person and online, to gather feedback from communities across the North.

Collaboration with the Government of BC

In January 2024, the Government of BC [announced funding](#) to support the process of gathering input on the programs and services that would be delivered in a northern Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth. The engagement is led by the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation with this funding support from the Province. A final report and proposed service model plan will be developed based on feedback received during the engagement.

Why a Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth in the North?



There is a critical need to improve access to specialized services in this region, which comprises 69% of BC's landmass, and almost 60% of the Indigenous population.

On average, Northern BC families wait 80 weeks to access assessment services

Demand for youth substance treatment continues to significantly increase in Northern BC

One in four pediatric patients present with mental health concerns

Families in the north are struggling to access coordinated care and services for their children when community-based services are not available or sufficient. We want to ensure there is a continuum of care that allows families to remain in the North. We don't want families to continue being sent from building to building. We want to assure families you're not travelling to Vancouver for a 20-minute appointment, travelling all the way home and having no follow-up.

Dolleen Logan, Chief of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, shares that these aren't just statistics, these are lived experiences for her and her family.



“My grandson is in grade 8 and on the waitlist for an assessment. At the current rate, by the time he’s assessed, he’ll be in grade 10. He should have been tested in elementary school. He’s losing years during this critical period in his development. I hope you can agree, this is too long for anyone to wait to get diagnosed and to get the support they need.

Luckily for him, he has the support of a strong and resilient family, but not every child is this fortunate. This is why we need to build a better system – one that is based in prevention, and also offers the treatment necessary to help our children and youth live healthy, productive lives in their communities.”

Vision Statement

At the Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth, we envision a welcoming space where every child's wellness is holistically and seamlessly supported right here in Northern BC.

Our vision is to bring together diverse services to support child and youth wellness, including mental health and substance use services under one roof. We will work with a children and family focus, helping families find care across various agencies and bridge service gaps between Northern Health, the First Nations Health Authority, the Ministry for Children and Family Development, the Ministry of Education, the 14 school districts, and all of the allied service providers in Northern BC in Northern BC.



Illustration for ideation only

We will be navigators, ensuring families can easily access the services and support they need in real-time. We want families to have a sense of hope and leave with a plan for ongoing care. The journey doesn't end when the family leaves the centre. We aim to provide a comprehensive plan tailored to each child's needs, with ongoing support and follow-up that continues when the family goes home. We need to more creatively consider who can provide services, especially when specialty recruitment is an ongoing challenge. We want to make care more accessible and equitable through the integration of a hybrid approach of virtual care, residential family spaces, and outreach health care.

This will be a space that is open to all – Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It will include Indigenous cultures and traditions while being open to children from all backgrounds. We want families to feel comforted when they walk in, to be greeted by people with smiles on their faces and ask, “How are you, how can we help?” The space itself will support this sense of warmth with natural elements like wood, greenery and light.

Our Center of Excellence is more than just a facility; it's a promise of coordinated care, where every child and family is welcomed, supported, and empowered to thrive.

Principles

The Centre's services and structure would be guided by the following principles:

- Welcoming, accessible, acceptable, and appropriate.
- Integrated care that is holistic, culturally safe and trauma-informed with the ability to seamlessly address multiple issues in a seamless way.

- The physical environment will be safe and friendly by being, for example, informal, not visibly clinical, and non-stigmatizing.

Programs and Services

The following is a list of possible services for consideration. The services would primarily serve those aged 0-19 with transition services up to age 24. This list is by no means comprehensive, nor will all services listed need to be in the Centre. Ultimately, this is what we are seeking feedback on. What about the vision resonates with you? Are we building the concept in a principled and inclusive way? Are we considering the right services and programs? What services would you envision for such a centre?

Services

- Neurocognitive assessments (testing brain function).
- Specialized autism and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders.
- Psychological/ psychiatric support for children and youth experiencing mental health challenges.
- Early psychosis intervention.
- Eating disorders.
- Substance use treatment programs.
- Youth substance use treatment services (NYTP).
- Suspected child abuse and neglect assessments.
- Early years services.
- A focus on ‘information sharing’ and ‘complex/involved’ interactions to facilitate a well-coordinated, wraparound service delivery model.
- Connect with virtual service models that are anchored in the centre.

Accommodation space

- A residence to provide a home away from home for families travelling while their child is receiving health care. Provide a place to stay for families so “communities of support” can be built around the healing power of family and play.
- Space to accommodate visiting specialists from around the province including visiting specialists from BC Children’s Hospital. Allow team-based care and enhance services with medical specialists, nurses, and allied health professionals who are from other parts of the province.
- The centre could include indoor and outdoor recreation spaces for people staying in residences, such as children’s play areas, games rooms, a quiet reading space, and an outdoor courtyard for sports.
- The residence could also offer facilities for a peaceful and tranquil space for wellness retreats for children, youth and families.

Discussion Guide

As part of the consultation process for the Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth, the project team will be facilitating in-person and virtual engagement opportunities. These sessions aim to ensure communities of interest have accessible opportunities to share their valuable perspectives and insights. We're asking you as a Northern British Columbian interested in these topics to think about the following questions to help you prepare for the discussions we'll have at the sessions.

1. How do you feel about the idea of a Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth being established in Northern BC?
2. Thinking about the vision statement and guiding principles described in this document, is there anything you particularly like and/or dislike about any of them? What is missing?
3. If you were designing the list of programs and services for a Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth in Northern BC, what would you say are most important to include?
4. Are there any barriers that you worry might make it difficult for you or others to access the services that would be provided by this Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth?
5. Have you got any suggestions for how best to address any concerns or overcome any challenges or barriers that you worry about for this Centre of Excellence for Children and Youth?