City of Peterborough

To:	**Members of the Peterborough Regional Liaison Committee**
From:	**Sheldon Laidman, Commissioner of Community Services**
Meeting Date:	**March 25, 2021**
Subject:	**Report CSSSPRLC21-002** **Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal Update**

Purpose

To provide the Peterborough Regional Liaison Committee with an overview of the release dated February 11, 2021 from the Ministry of Children Community and Social Services detailing Ontario's vision for Social Assistance Transformation, through Recovery and Renewal of the system, and to inform of its potential implications to the delivery of Ontario Works.

Recommendation

That the Peterborough Regional Liaison Committee approve the recommendation outlined in Report CSSSPRLC21-002, dated March 25, 2021, of the Commissioner of Community Services, as follows:

That Report CSSSPRLC21-002 Social Assistance Recovery and Renewal Update and presentation be received for information.

Budget and Financial Implications

There are no budget or financial implications resulting from the approval of the recommendation of this report. Future budget implications will be addressed through the annual budget approval process, with updates provided to this Committee and Council when known.

Currently the base Ontario Works program is meant to be cost shared 50/50 between the CMSM and the Province. As the provincial funding has been kept at 2018 levels for

three budget cycles the municipal share has risen. The municipal cost share is a shared responsibility between the City and County of Peterborough based on caseload. As transformation of social assistance delivery proceeds, the funding model will evolve and align with the shifts in roles and responsibilities. A new funding model is currently under development and will be attached to a new performance and accountability framework, which will be co-designed with provincial and municipal partners through a provincial-municipal working committee.

Background

Provincial Announcement

On February 11, 2021, Ontario's Minister of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) announced the release of a vision for a renewed social assistance system called Recovery and Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation (attached as Appendix A).

The vision presents a roadmap for the Province to work with municipalities to create a social assistance system that is modern, sustainable, with emphasis on connecting people to the supports they need. This announcement follows various provincial studies, consultations with municipalities and stakeholders, and Ontario's Recovery and Renewal Plan announced in the fall of 2020.

Service Delivery Structure

In Ontario, there are 37 Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs) and 10 District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSABs). These Service Managers partner with the Province to fund and deliver programs to the community in the areas of social assistance (Ontario Works) and employment supports, child care and early years programs, housing and homelessness prevention, and emergency social services.

As a CMSM, the City of Peterborough has an obligation to deliver provincial mandates and outcomes for the various programs within this role. CMSM's collaborate with partners, plan, implement, and oversee service delivery systems while offering direct delivery of many social programs.

COVID-19 Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of the social safety net that many of the community's most financially insecure rely upon. In addition, the pandemic has caused an accelerated economic downturn and subsequent unemployment in sectors that typically employ the clients served through various social programming. It is encouraging that there is a commitment by the Province to renew and re-think how services are aligned and interact at the municipal and provincial levels.

Rationale for Social Assistance Transformation

At the core of Recovery and Renewal is a transformed service delivery model for social assistance that reconsiders the provincial and municipal roles. Instead of being oriented along the traditional program lines of Ontario Works and ODSP, this transformation would instead be oriented around who can best provide the service to get the best results. The Ontario Works program itself can be difficult for clients and staff to navigate given the number of benefits, rules, rates, and legislated requirements. The complexity of the current system results in confusion, inconsistency, an excessive administrative burden, a lack of transparency, and barriers to exiting social assistance for employment.

Provincial studies have shown that under the current system, caseworkers spend as much as 70 per cent of their time administering the rules and requirements that exist within the complex benefit structure of Ontario Works, rather than collaborating with clients to help them achieve their goals.

Key Principles for Recovery and Renewal

The key principles outlined in the Recovery and Renewal: Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation include:

- prioritizing employment outcomes, financial resilience, independence, and well-being
- supporting positive client and staff experiences
- assigning roles where they make the most sense and improve efficiency
- improving program integrity by leveraging data and technology
- partnering in the design with municipal service managers
- building a system that puts people at the centre, with services that work effectively together to support them
- using data, evidence, and the voice of clients to inform design

The renewed system realigns administrative processes aiming to create better client and community outcomes by reducing poverty and increasing labour market attachment. The model proposes a final state where:

- Qualifying for social assistance is not required for people to access supports for life stabilization
- Supports are bundled around each individual and family based on their needs and acuity, where possible
- There are many tools to help people enhance and improve their quality of life (not just issuing social assistance)

Proposed Realignment of Provincial and Municipal Roles

The proposed realignment identifies that:

- the Province will focus on overseeing financial assistance, making it quick and easy for people to access the system while ensuring program integrity

- municipal service delivery partners will use their experience and expertise in delivering person-centered casework. Staff can leverage other internal resources, such as Housing Stability Fund and rent supplements, and in-depth knowledge of available community supports to create supportive plans with people.

The Province intends to gradually take on more of the program administration to make it easier for people to navigate the system. This includes introducing new digital tools to make applications and determining monthly entitlements consistent, streamlined, faster, and cost-effective. This shift is intended to support municipal front-line workers to have more time to connect clients with supports, such as job-readiness programs, housing, childcare, skills training, and addictions and mental health services. This is referred to as providing Life Stabilization supports.

Advancing Recovery and Renewal

The Province has signalled with the release of Ontario's Vision for Social Assistance Transformation, it will be working with municipalities and other stakeholders on the design and implementation of the vision.

Continued consultation on program design will occur over the coming months through a newly established Provincial-Municipal Human Services Collaborative Table and the existing Provincial Municipal Social Assistance and Employment Committee (PMSAEC) and its subcommittees. Peterborough staff participate in the existing tables and subcommittees and have had the opportunity to provide input and feedback from a municipal perspective.

The Province has communicated a phased-in working vision for social assistance that looks to clarify the realigned responsibilities of municipalities and provincial automation and centralization. Essentially, the roles of each stakeholder will align with an end-goal of human services integration.

During 2021 and 2022, much of the work underway will be learning and testing years with multiple pilot projects and evaluation activities taking place across various prototype municipalities, of which Peterborough is one.

By the end of 2022, the Province will intend to have reached full consolidation of financial assistance, and by 2024, implement a larger integrated human services model.

Attached as Appendix B is a visual representation of the working vision for social assistance.

Local Perspective

Peterborough is a prototype site for the two Provincial modernization initiatives, known as the Employment Services Transformation (EST) and the Intake and Benefit Administration Unit (IBAU). This positions Peterborough well to transition to the new vision.

The EST is a provincial prototype that transfers the responsibility for municipal employment services to a local Service System Manager (SSM) under the oversight of the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. In 2019 the City of Peterborough was part of the first wave of provincial prototypes as part of the Kawartha-Muskokas Region (with the City of Kawartha Lakes, Muskoka, and the County of Northumberland.)

The IBAU is a provincially administered centralized intake process which uses an automated risk-based eligibility verification tool. The intent of the IBAU is to create a reduction of administrative paperwork for caseworkers, allowing them more time to support clients through the provision of Life Stabilization supports. Social Services has also introduced new digital tools and service modernization initiatives, such as expansion of the MyBenefits digital platform and Electronic Document Management systems, to help create systems that are faster, fairer, and more accountable while freeing up staff time for high impact activities with clients.

Since the announcement of the EST prototype, work has been underway to transform the Social Services Division to an organization that supports any individual or family who needs help navigating social and community services with access to wrap around supports and services, when needed. People are most likely to achieve economic and employment success when the rest of their lives are stable. This includes having a safe place to live, their physical and mental health needs met, and feeling connected and supported within their communities.

In mid-2020 a new structure for the Social Services Division was implemented to:

- evolve as part of the EST prototype
- address administrative funding cuts in multiple program areas
- integrate programs (including Housing Services) to enhance customer service
- shift the focus to the provision of Life Stabilization supports

The goal of implementing the new structure was to align with the core principles of Ontario’s Vision for Social Assistance Transformation, through a fully integrated, person-centered service model with a foundation of collaborative case planning and providing high-quality client service.

Staff at Social Services already use a Bridges out of Poverty philosophy to engage with clients, which fits well with the Province’s vision. The division is actively rolling out a Co-Active Coaching model building the foundation for planning through mutual understanding, empowerment, and respectful relationships. Additional work is planned with investments in staff training and awareness of broader system supports, how to make “warm” referrals to external resources and services and developing and/or enhancing collaborative partnerships with those external resources and services.

Integrated access to internal resources beyond social assistance that support Life Stabilization is also under development. Training will focus on enhancing case planning practices, collaboration, and action planning. The division is also piloting technologies

such as the use of Microsoft Teams as a phone system to ensure that connections with clients can be quick, easy, and “face to face” as much as possible.

The Province has offered the division the opportunity to become involved with a Youth Intensive Case Management model pilot and evaluation which has resulted in full provincial funding to have 2 Client Service Workers focus on youth requiring supports and services and build collaborative case management protocols with local youth organizations.

2019 Social Services KPMG Report

Many Provincial modernization efforts as well as City initiatives and responses to the pandemic reflect process recommendations by KPMG in its 2019 review of Social Services (Report CLSFS20-057).

Summary

The Province’s plan to redesign social assistance with municipal feedback into the design process is a welcome approach to implementing overdue and needed reform to the programs that are meant to support the most vulnerable in our community.

Social Services staff see this as an opportunity to guide and plan a path forward through true partnership with our provincial colleagues in the design and implementation of Social Assistance.

Submitted by,

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Attachments:
Appendix A: Recovery and Renewal: Ontario’s Vision for Social Assistance Transformation
Appendix B: A Working Vision for social assistance
Appendix C: Presentation