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COLD LAKE & DISTRICT FCSS

Social Needs Assessment Summary Report



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE	1
2. COMMUNITY CONTEXT AND DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW	2
3. STRATEGIC AND COLLABORATIVE DIRECTIONS	3
STRATEGIC AND COLLABORATIVE DIRECTION FINDINGS.	3
KEY PRINCIPLES	4
4. FCSS MANDATE AND PREVENTION FRAMEWORK	5
5. METHODOLOGY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT	6
6. COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND ASSETS	7
7. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS	8
8. SOCIAL PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS.	10
PRIORITY 1.0 – MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS	10
PRIORITY 2.0 – HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS, AND COST OF LIVING	11
PRIORITY 3.0 – COMMUNITY SAFETY AND PUBLIC ORDER.	11
PRIORITY 4.0 – YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT.	12
PRIORITY 5.0 – ACCESS, NAVIGATION, AND TRANSPORTATION.	12
PRIORITY 6.0 – INCLUSION, CULTURAL SAFETY, AND COMMUNITY COHESION.	13
PRIORITY 7.0 – CHILD CARE, FAMILY SUPPORTS, AND EARLY YEARS.	13
9. VISION OF SOCIAL WELLNESS FOR THE CITY OF COLD LAKE	14
10. IMPLEMENTATION AND MOVING FORWARD	15
11. IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS, TIMELINES, AND INDICATORS	16
PRIORITY 1: MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS	16
PRIORITY 2: HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS AND COST OF LIVING	16
PRIORITY 3: COMMUNITY SAFETY AND PUBLIC ORDER.	17
PRIORITY 4: YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT.	17
PRIORITY 5: ACCESS, NAVIGATION AND TRANSPORTATION	17
PRIORITY 6: INCLUSION, CULTURAL SAFETY AND COMMUNITY COHESION.	17
PRIORITY 7: CHILD CARE, FAMILY SUPPORTS AND EARLY YEARS.	17

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

1

The Cold Lake & District Social Needs Assessment was undertaken to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the social conditions affecting residents of the City of Cold Lake and surrounding district. The assessment responds to increasing complexity in social issues, including mental health pressures, housing instability, youth well-being concerns, affordability challenges, and service system strain.

This document serves as a planning and decision-support tool for Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), municipal leadership, community organizations, and regional partners. It is intended to guide prevention-focused investment, policy development, service coordination, and long-term community well-being strategies.

The assessment recognizes that social issues are interconnected and that effective responses require collaboration across sectors, including health, housing, education, justice, Indigenous governments, and community-based organizations. Rather than focusing solely on crisis response, the assessment emphasizes prevention, early intervention, and capacity building.



2

COMMUNITY CONTEXT AND DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

Cold Lake is a regional service centre in northeastern Alberta with a population of approximately 15,600 residents. The community is shaped by several defining characteristics that influence both social strengths and vulnerabilities.

The presence of Canadian Armed Forces Base Cold Lake contributes to a young and mobile population, with frequent in and out migration. Military families often require integration supports, child and youth programming, and access to timely mental health services. Economic activity is also influenced by the oil and gas sector, which introduces cyclical employment patterns and income volatility.

Indigenous residents represent a significant and growing portion of the population, including members of nearby First Nations and Métis communities. Cultural diversity has increased over time, with newcomers contributing to the social and economic fabric of the community.

While Cold Lake benefits from strong amenities and quality of life factors, demographic pressures and population mobility increase demand for responsive and adaptable social services.



STRATEGIC AND COLLABORATIVE DIRECTIONS

3

A comprehensive review of municipal and community planning documents was undertaken to ensure that the Social Needs Assessment aligns with existing strategic directions, policy frameworks, and community priorities. This review provided essential context for understanding the broader vision guiding Cold Lake's development, the values underpinning planning efforts, and the strategic areas that intersect with social well-being.

Strategic and Collaborative Direction Findings

The review outlined clear strategic directions and principles identified by the municipality that reinforce and complement the priorities identified through engagement. These include:

- **Managing Growth Proactively:** Ensuring that infrastructure, housing, and services keep pace with population growth while preserving Cold Lake's character.
- **Building Partnerships:** Strengthening collaboration between the City, First Nations, Metis Settlements, non-profits, social agencies, businesses, and provincial/federal governments.
- **Focusing Resources:** Concentrating on key social themes such as housing, youth services, families in crisis, newcomer integration, and seniors, rather than dispersing resources too broadly.
- **Leveraging Funding and Measuring Impact:** Using community-based priorities to guide grant-seeking efforts and municipal budgeting, while implementing clear metrics to track progress on strategic initiatives.
- **Integrating Social Planning:** Embedding social priorities within broader municipal planning documents (e.g., economic strategy, infrastructure investment) to ensure a coordinated approach.

Overall, the document and resource review underscores a high degree of alignment between existing municipal strategies and the priorities emerging from community engagement. Housing, mental health, youth programming, cultural inclusion, and seniors' supports stand out as consistent areas of focus across existing plans and strategic direction. Cold Lake's strong community identity, natural assets, and collaborative culture provide a strong platform for coordinated social development. At the same time, the documents highlight the need for sustained investment, innovative partnerships, and integrated planning to address gaps and ensure that growth translates into improved well-being for all residents. These findings provide a strategic foundation upon which the Social Needs Assessment builds, ensuring that future actions are both community-driven and policy-aligned.

Key Principles

Key principles, identified through the review, that helped to guide the Social Needs Assessment include:

- Valuing community well-being and inclusion.
- Supporting complete communities where housing, services, jobs, and recreation are within reach.
- Protecting environmental and cultural assets.
- Fostering partnerships among the City, First Nations, Metis Settlements, businesses, and other levels of government.
- Valuing collaboration and partnerships in working to resolve areas of concern and take advantage of social opportunities.



FCSS MANDATE AND PREVENTION FRAMEWORK

4

Family and Community Support Services operate under a provincial–municipal funding partnership, with the Province of Alberta funding up to 80 percent of eligible preventive programming costs. FCSS-funded programs are designed to enhance social well-being, build resilience, and reduce the likelihood of individuals and families requiring crisis or statutory interventions.

The FCSS prevention framework emphasizes both primary prevention, which targets the general population, and secondary prevention, which focuses on individuals or groups at elevated risk. Programs must address social issues such as mental health promotion, family violence prevention, aging well in community, homelessness prevention, and community inclusion.

This social needs assessment aligns with the FCSS mandate by identifying upstream opportunities where strategic investment can reduce long-term social and economic costs while improving quality of life for residents.

Cold Lake FCSS provides comprehensive information and referral services to residents based on the role of the municipality in being closest to the community. Increasingly, FCSS finds it's preventative role to include supporting residents in accessing programs and services offered by other levels of government. Support can include systems navigation, access to technology (required to complete online submissions and communication) and assistance with application and reporting forms and procedures.

5

METHODOLOGY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Social Needs Assessment employed a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative data sources. This approach ensured that statistical trends were complimented by lived experience and professional insight.

Data collection methods included 30 in-depth interviews with service providers, Indigenous organizations, municipal staff, RCMP, health and housing partners. Community working sessions provided opportunities for dialogue and validation of emerging themes. Two surveys were conducted, receiving responses from 136 residents and 212 from youth. A review of municipal strategies, FCSS reports, and regional data sources further informed analysis.

In total, more than 425 individuals contributed input to the needs assessment. The breadth of engagement strengthens the reliability of findings and reflects a wide range of perspectives across age groups, cultures, and service systems.



COMMUNITY STRENGTHS AND ASSETS

6

Across Cold Lake, there is a deep sense of community resilience, volunteerism, and commitment to helping one another. Residents and organizations consistently pointed to a strong base of social, cultural, and organizational assets that support quality of life and form a foundation for addressing emerging social needs. Several key strengths were repeatedly emphasized:

Community spirit, pride and volunteerism: Cold Lake is widely described as a place where people “step up when it matters.” And where residents care about one another’s well-being.

Active community organizations: Including FCSS, Friendship Centre, Dragonfly Centre, and others that work collaboratively to fill gaps where they can.

Collaborative service networks: Service providers and community organizations described a high degree of collaboration across social sectors in Cold Lake.

Diverse cultural fabric: Cold Lake’s population is characterized by a blend of long-term residents, Indigenous communities, military families, and newcomers from across Canada and abroad.

Youth engagement and recreation assets: The City’s recreational infrastructure was identified as a significant strength. Facilities such as the Energy Centre, sports fields, and lakeside spaces are seen as key assets for youth engagement and supporting community well-being.

Municipal leadership and FCSS role: Municipal investment in FCSS and related programs is viewed as a major asset in Cold Lake’s social landscape.

Natural environment and place-based identity: Cold Lake’s natural surroundings, particularly the lake itself, are viewed as a source of pride and supportive to resident well-being. Residents described the ability to “step outside and feel connected to the land” as something that enhances quality of life and fosters community identity.

7

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Alongside Cold Lake's many strengths, there are clear and persistent challenges that shape residents' daily experiences and strain local systems. These barriers are often interconnected; housing pressures exacerbate safety issues, mental health needs intersect with service gaps, and transportation challenges limit access to programs and supports. Several key themes emerged consistently across perspectives.

Housing insecurity pressures and homelessness: Affordable, appropriate housing is a major concern in Cold Lake. Residents described a tightening rental market, rising costs, and a lack of transitional and supportive housing options. Also noted gaps in affordable rental and ownership options and emergency shelter spaces.

Mental health and addictions: Mental health and addictions were described as "the single biggest pressure point" in the community for families, schools, RCMP, and health services, and others. Concerns identified long wait times, limited local services, and growing youth concerns about suicide and substance use.

Service access and navigation: While Cold Lake has many programs, services and agencies, residents often face challenges simply finding and accessing the right supports. Barriers, including cost, lack of awareness, and transportation, prevent many from reaching the supports they need.

Transportation barriers: Transportation emerged as a persistent challenge, especially for seniors, people with low incomes, and those living in outlying areas.

Youth vulnerabilities: Youth in Cold Lake face a complex mix of opportunities and challenges. While sports and recreation are strong assets, many young people, particularly those not involved in organized sports, lack accessible, affordable options for engagement. Many teens feel disconnected from their community.

Inclusion and cultural safety: Despite Cold Lake's growing diversity, not all residents experience the community as inclusive. Indigenous people, newcomers, LGBTQIA+ residents and people with disabilities continue to encounter discrimination, stigma, and systemic barriers.

Community safety concerns are rising: particularly among youth, who connect safety issues to drug use, bullying, violence, and homelessness.



Workforce and capacity strains: Many organizations face resource and staffing challenges that limit their ability to meet demand. Recruiting and retaining skilled staff, particularly in social services, early childhood education, and health, is difficult in a competitive labour market.

Childcare, family supports, and early years programming: Supports to families is not keeping pace with increasing demand, need for affordability and suitable availability and access for many families.

Broader economic and cost-of-living pressure: Are affecting residents' ability to participate fully in community life.

8

SOCIAL PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Seven core social priorities were identified through the need assessment process, informed by resident and youth perspectives and supported by best practice. For each, FCSS has a clear role in prevention, early intervention, inclusion, and navigation, while other partners including, but limited to, health, housing, justice, education, Indigenous governments, and industry, have essential roles in service delivery, infrastructure, and systemic change. These priorities emphasize prevention, equity, collaboration, and long-term sustainability.

Priority 1.0 – Mental Health and Addictions

Mental health and addictions emerged as the most pressing social concern across all engagement activities. Residents and service providers described long wait times for counselling and psychiatric services, limited access to affordable care, and a lack of local detoxification and treatment options.

Youth mental health concerns were particularly prominent, with reports of anxiety, depression, bullying, and social isolation. Untreated mental health needs often intersect with housing instability, justice involvement, and family breakdown, increasing pressure on emergency and crisis services.

Participants emphasized the need for preventive mental health promotion, early intervention supports, and expanded local service capacity.

Recommendations identified include:

- Expand early intervention and prevention, affordable counselling, youth spaces, and culturally grounded supports.
- Advocate for more local psychiatric treatment capacity.

Priority 2.0 - Housing, Homelessness, and Cost of Living

Housing affordability has deteriorated in recent years, driven by rising rents, limited supply, and income instability. Service providers reported increasing visible homelessness and hidden housing insecurity particularly among families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities.

Gaps exist across the housing continuum, including emergency shelter, transitional housing, and supportive housing. Housing instability was consistently linked to worsening health outcomes, increased justice involvement, and reduced community safety.

Participants identified housing stability as a foundational determinant of social well-being that requires coordinated action across municipal, provincial, and community partners.

Recommendations identified include:

- Collaborate on transitional and supportive housing.
- Strengthen navigation and life-skills supports.
- Reduce stigma around homelessness.

Priority 3.0 - Community Safety and Public Order

Community safety concerns were frequently raised, particularly related to substance use, homelessness, and youth safety in public spaces. Many residents expressed a desire for compassionate, community-based responses rather than solely enforcement-based approaches.

Youth reported experiences of being bullied and feeling unsafe in certain areas of the City. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of prevention, outreach, and harm reduction in addressing root causes of social disorder.

Recommendations identified included:

- Expand violence prevention, anti-bullying initiatives, and promotion of youth-friendly spaces.
- Strengthen community policing and cross-sector responses to non-criminal issues.

Priority 4.0 – Youth Opportunities and Engagement

Youth engagement emerged as a critical area for investment. While sports are a strong asset, youth not involved in organized athletics face limited options for social connection and recreation.

Participants identified a lack of accessible youth spaces, mentorship opportunities, and leadership development pathways. Youth expressed a desire to be meaningfully involved in community planning and decision-making.

Recommendations identified include:

- Co-design accessible, affordable spaces and programming with youth.
- Build leadership and mentorship pathways.

Priority 5.0 – Access, Navigation, and Transportation

While Cold Lake has a variety of programs and services, many residents, especially youth, struggle to find, navigate, or physically reach them. Fifty percent of youth said they were not aware of available programs, and fifty four percent cited cost as a key barrier. Access issues due to transportation barriers were identified by eighteen percent, but interviews revealed that for those without vehicles, access is severely limited, especially for youth, seniors, and lower-income families.

Residents described fragmented service information, inconsistent communication, and confusing referral pathways. Youth overwhelmingly identified social media as their preferred communication channel but noted that information “doesn’t get out to the teens who need it.”

Recommendations identified include:

- Centralize and coordinate service information.
- Expand navigation supports
- Advocate for youth- and senior-friendly transportation solutions.

Priority 6.0 - Inclusion, Cultural Safety, and Community Cohesion

Barriers to service access include transportation challenges, fragmented systems, and lack of centralized navigation. Indigenous residents, newcomers, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, and people with disabilities reported experiences of exclusion and stigma.

Recommendations identified include:

- Co-design culturally safe programming with Indigenous, newcomer, and 2SLGBTQIA+partners.
- Strengthen intercultural and intergenerational connections.

Priority 7.0 - Child Care, Family Supports, and Early Years

Families identified shortages in affordable childcare and early years programming as significant stressors affecting employment and participation in community life.

Recommendations identified included:

- Expand affordable childcare and parenting supports.
- Coordinate early years services.
- Address specialized needs.



9

VISION OF SOCIAL WELLNESS FOR THE CITY OF COLD LAKE

Through the needs assessment process residents contributed comments describing their views on a vision of a socially “well” Cold Lake. A synthesis of those perspectives is described below.

A socially well Cold Lake is a community where every person, regardless of age, culture, identity, or income, can feel safe, supported, and connected. It is a place where children and youth have opportunities to grow, participate, and belong, where families can access the supports they need before crises occur, and where seniors can age with dignity in the homes and communities they love.

This vision recognizes that wellness is not simply the absence of problems, but the presence of meaningful opportunities such as affordable housing, accessible and culturally relevant services, vibrant community life, safe neighbourhoods, and inclusive spaces for everyone. Social wellness in Cold Lake means that people do not fall through the cracks of fragmented systems, instead, they are met with coordinated, compassionate, and culturally safe responses that honour their dignity, strengths, and diverse identities.

Ultimately, a socially well Cold Lake is one where residents thrive together, rooted in belonging, inclusion, and resilience, and supported by strong partnerships among community organizations, the municipality, Indigenous Nations, schools, local businesses, and residents themselves.

IMPLEMENTATION AND MOVING FORWARD

10

The assessment concludes that no single organization can address these challenges alone. Progress will require clear leadership, coordinated action, shared accountability, and sustained investment in prevention.

FCSS is positioned as a central leader in convening partners, supporting service navigation, and advancing inclusive approaches. This assessment serves as both a roadmap and a call to action to strengthen social well-being and quality of life for all residents of Cold Lake and the surrounding district.



11

IMPLEMENTATION ACTIONS, TIMELINES, AND INDICATORS

This section outlines practical implementation actions aligned with the seven identified social priorities. Actions are organized by timeline and include suggested indicators to support monitoring, accountability, and continuous improvement.

PRIORITY 1: MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTIONS

Action	Timeline	Lead / Partners	Indicators
Expand prevention and early-intervention mental health programming	0–2 years	FCSS; Recovery Alberta; Community Agencies	Participation rates; reduced wait times
Enhance addictions outreach and recovery supports	2–5 years	Municipality; Health Partners	Reduced crisis presentations

PRIORITY 2: HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS AND COST OF LIVING

Action	Timeline	Lead / Partners	Indicators
Implement coordinated housing navigation	0–2 years	FCSS; Housing Providers	Households stabilized
Develop transitional and supportive housing	5+ years	Municipality; Province; Non-profits	Units created; housing retention

PRIORITY 3: COMMUNITY SAFETY AND PUBLIC ORDER

Action	Timeline	Lead / Partners	Indicators
Expand community safety and outreach initiatives	0–2 years	FCSS; RCMP; Community Groups	Calls for service; safety perceptions

PRIORITY 4: YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES AND ENGAGEMENT

Action	Timeline	Lead / Partners	Indicators
Develop youth hubs and non-sport programming	2–5 years	FCSS; Schools; Youth Organizations	Youth participation and engagement

PRIORITY 5: ACCESS, NAVIGATION AND TRANSPORTATION

Action	Timeline	Lead / Partners	Indicators
Create centralized service navigation supports	0–2 years	FCSS; Community Partners	Successful referrals

PRIORITY 6: INCLUSION, CULTURAL SAFETY AND COMMUNITY COHESION

Action	Timeline	Lead / Partners	Indicators
Support culturally grounded and inclusive programming	Ongoing	FCSS; Indigenous and Cultural Organizations	Participant feedback

PRIORITY 7: CHILD CARE, FAMILY SUPPORTS AND EARLY YEARS

Action	Timeline	Lead / Partners	Indicators
Support expansion of affordable childcare capacity	2–5 years	Municipality; FCSS; Province	New spaces; reduced waitlists

