

Access to Town Meeting (ATM) Committee
Childcare Working Group
October 2022

Background:

We spoke with the volunteer lead who coordinated the 2017 Annual Town Meeting childcare in support of the school budget operational override. With Town Meeting scheduled to start at 10am and the article of interest planned for 11am, approximately 50 children were dropped off for the 'morning session' of childcare located in the Millennium building behind Abbot school. Parents were asked to bring a completed hard-copy registration form or fill it out at drop-off. Childcare was closed for the Town Meeting lunch break and caregivers had to come retrieve their children. The afternoon session had much fewer children participating. The program was staffed with non-resident Westford Public School staff members, as well as Girl Scout helpers. Only potty-trained children, Kindergarten age and up, were accepted. Activities were planned and some play materials were borrowed from the preschool classes that operate from the same building.

Recent history in Westford:

In 2020, childcare services were being planned in time for the March Annual Town Meeting before COVID-19 delayed it. A representative from the League of Women Voters partnered with the Westford Public School district to secure the services of a certified teacher as adult supervisor, supplemented by Westford Academy student volunteer helpers. In 2021, childcare was offered in advance of the June Annual Town Meeting at WA Field. Two children were pre-registered using the online form; however none showed up on the day of the meeting.

Research of other communities:

[North Andover, MA - May 2022](#): (Tuesday 6:30-10p) At the request of Town Moderator Mark DiSalvo, North Andover Community Programs will be offering a child care service to families attending Town Meeting at the High School on Tuesday, May 17th, 2022. It is provided to North Andover school age students (K – 6th grade). Please be advised that this is not a drop in program and you must pre-register for a spot in order for us to properly staff the program. Drop off will begin at 6:25PM and we ask that you pick up your child no later than 10:00PM. Location: High School Time: 6:30PM – 10:00PM Cost: Free

[Concord, MA - May 2022](#): (Sunday 1-6p & Monday 7-10p) Childcare is provided at the Town Meeting for children ages 3 years to 11 years by Concord Recreation. Registration in advance and payment are required. Cost is \$10 per child and \$20 maximum per family. If registering more than 2 children, please call 978.287.1050 to register over the phone.

[Longmeadow, MA - October 2022](#): (Tuesday 7-9p) The LHS Key Club will be offering child care services for up to 20 child sign-ups on the evening of October 25th from 6:45 pm to 8:30 pm so that parents with child care conflicts can attend some of the Town Meeting. This is open to children ages 5-10 only. Children must be signed up in advance via the Sign Up Genius linked here. We will have approximately 10 LHS Key Club volunteers and Catherine Gizelis (Key Club co-advisor) will be there for adult supervision. Children can be dropped off at the LHS Library any time after 6:45 pm and must be picked up there by the same person who dropped them off - we will be requiring that parents sign their children in and out for safety purposes. In the LHS Library, we will have a child-friendly movie playing in the Lab as well as coloring, board game, and reading stations around the Library. Children will be monitored at all times.

[Hanson, MA - May 2022](#): (Monday 7-10p) The Annual Town Meeting for the Town of Hanson will be held on Monday, May 2, 2022 at 7:30 PM. Hanson Annual Town meeting will be held at the Hanson Middle School At 100 Liberty Street, Hanson. The YMCA is providing cost-free child care for children aged 5-12 and will be available from 7:00 PM – 10:00 PM for parents attending the town meeting. Signs will instruct families where to bring children for child care.

[Orleans, MA - October 2022](#): (Monday 6p) The Orleans Recreation Department will be offering childcare for parents planning to attend the Town Meeting on Monday October 17, 2022. We will be in the cafeteria of Nauset Regional Middle School beginning at 5:45 pm until the conclusion of the closing of Town Meeting. To have a child participate in childcare, the following conditions are required: 1. Child must be at least 5 years old. 2. Parent must be a registered voter in Orleans. 3. Parent must attend Town Meeting. 4. Parent must pick up child when leaving Town Meeting. 5. Pre-Registration is required. It is highly recommended that each child brings a beverage and snack.

Recommendation:

While we acknowledge that childcare has not been consistently used in recent years, the 2017 example demonstrates that offering childcare service has the potential to be used. Several aspects presumably led to that strong participation — trust by using known school staff; strong visibility by advertising it heavily with the Equitable Teacher Pay campaign; and the largest motivation was probably that the issue at stake had many engaged voters.

Based on the winter 2022 resident survey conducted on behalf of the ATM Committee, groups of both frequent and rare attendees listed ‘childcare’ as an obstacle or challenge. We believe establishing childcare at Town Meeting can help diversify the participation and attendance in this aspect of local government.

We recognize that creating a steady offering of childcare service adjacent to Westford Town Meeting is not a small undertaking and may not have immediate payoff — it might take some cycles before it is truly utilized or trusted - and as such should be started as soon as possible, even with a limited number of spaces. If a future town meeting had a popular topic planned and an attendance surge was expected, slots could be increased by the town service or expanded in collaboration with volunteers affiliated with the marquee issue.

Our recommendation: Westford should offer town-provided childcare, starting with the March 2023 Annual Town Meeting.

Town-provided childcare:

1. Having a cap of allowed sign-ups could help with planning logistics while demand is unstable. *Example: Longmeadow offered 20 slots.*
2. Should be consistently offered, run by a trustworthy department/organization, and well-advertised in advance of the meeting.
3. Using an existing Town organization, like the Recreation Department, allows the process to use that department’s capability for online registration and other logistics. *Example: Concord and Orleans use their Recreation Department.*
4. If a fully staffed service is not supported, we recommend pursuing a paid town staff adult supervisor supplemented with student volunteers.
5. Activities for the children can be modest, with a movie being shown for entertainment. *Example: Longmeadow.*
6. It makes sense that the same individuals who are promoting and organizing Town Meeting are also responsible for coordinating this service, whether individually or shared between the Town Manager’s office and the Town Moderator. *Example: North Andover*

If childcare service is not supported at this time, the town should still continue to promote ways in which families are encouraged and welcomed to attend. Building the visibility of the event as a welcoming inclusive space will hopefully broaden the diversity of the audience, leading to a future where childcare may be more in demand.