



CAMBRIDGE CITY COUNCIL

To: Cambridge City Council
From: Finance Co-chairs, Councillor Patricia Nolan and Councillor Ayah Al-Zubi
Date: May 28, 2026
Subject: Process for Identifying Future Budget Priorities, Part 3

Dear colleagues,

Thank you for taking the time to meet in the Finance Committee both on February 25, 2026 and again on April 9, 2026 and your willingness to continue to collaborate on establishing future Budget Priorities. The purpose of this memo is to close the loop on the Council Prioritization Process and set expectations for how to work through these priorities over time.

Through the Finance Committee meetings earlier this year, we collectively worked to identify priorities, refine the list, and vote to prioritize 3 different items to scope in collaboration with City staff. The selection of these three priorities is not intended to preclude work on other initiatives; rather, this exercise was designed to provide direction and focus for staff capacity in the near term.

The Approach:

Step 1: Confirm the List of Initiatives (*this was the February 25 meeting*)

We reviewed and discussed a longer list of initiatives identified by reviewing previous prioritization sessions, committee hearings, and policy orders, and through discussions with individual councillors, the Mayor, and City staff. This list, which was organized by Council Priority Areas, was further refined and amended based on the substantive discussion on February 25.

Step 2: Identify a Focused Set of Priorities (*this was the April 9 meeting*)

Through a phased approach, we worked through a collaborative process to identify within the list of initiatives, 3 initiatives to scope with City staff and the City Manager. We did this through a phased approach of submitting a list of 4 line items from the longer list to prioritize, which resulted in a tiered list that helped us refine. At the April 9 meeting, after discussion and future refining the list to combine items related to Afterschool and Preschool, the Finance Committee identified 3 clear initiatives that were prioritized by the most councillors: **Social Housing, Supportive Housing, and Childcare Expansion**. The Finance Committee voted to adopt those items as the top stated council priorities.

Step 3: Define a Working Process (*we are here*)

Set up a clear process by which the Council and City staff can work through details and check in on the selected 2-3 priority initiatives. We need to ensure that program development and decision points are transparent, in line with Council priorities and that the City Manager is responsive to these priority initiatives. The process may include directing work through a specific committee or an Ad Hoc committee, as well as the Finance Committee, and/or the formation of a working group or task force. We will also be able to weigh in on progress on Council priority areas through the annual City Manager performance review process.

As we've discussed, these ideas and these priorities are not new. They represent ongoing work and initiatives years in the making, and so we are discussing these items in the current context. Some of that

context is outlined in the chart below under the “notes” section - this is a selection from the same chart we have been looking at for a few months now. Below are summaries of each of the three items we have prioritized and a projected path forward:

Social Housing

- On May 18, 2026, the City Manager delivered [CMA 2026 #141](#) and [CMA 2026 #152](#) which were responsive to [POR 2025 #131](#) and to a Housing Committee hearing on December 16, 2025 that brought together social housing stakeholders to discuss the potential for social housing. The Mayor and City Manager have appointed a task force that has been charged with evaluating and presenting a social housing model in Cambridge.

Supportive Housing

- The Supportive Housing Expansion line item that Councillors determined to prioritize was an amalgamation of a number of related items including: Albany Street Shelter expansion, Day Center, Housing Voucher expansion, and Overdose Prevention Center. Analyzing the current state of supportive housing investment within the city and what goals the Council and the City would like to pursue will be an important backdrop for scoping. Possible next steps include a Human Services Committee meeting (or a joint meeting with another committee) to discuss the landscape of supportive housing and defining the scope of expanded investment.

Childcare Expansion

- On April 27, 2026, the City Manager delivered [CMA 2026 #92](#) which was responsive to [POR 2026 #34](#) asking the City Manager to work to implement a process by which Cambridge can expand early childcare offerings. The report included information on current CPP programming, policy considerations for means testing future programming, opportunities for expansion, and recommendations for future work. The Mayor is scheduling a Roundtable Meeting for the end of June to discuss this report with the City Council and the School Committee.
- The Office of Early Childhood is currently partnering with researchers at the Harvard Kennedy School and with a City-wide Infant-Toddler Working group to conduct a landscape analysis of the infant-toddler sector and will draft a set of policy recommendations based on the findings of this landscape analysis.

Thank you all for working through this prioritization process in the first part of this term. We believe it will provide important structure for how we approach staff time and future budget cycles. We look forward to continuing to pursue these priorities in a structured way that promotes collaboration between the City Council and the City administration.

With gratitude,

Patricia Nolan
City Councillor
Finance Committee Co-Chair

Ayah Al-Zubi
City Councillor
Finance Committee Co-Chair

Priority (Categorized by priority area)	Implications on Operating and Capital Budget	Committee Path (all eventually involve Finance)	Project narrative examples and notes
Housing and Zoning			
Social Housing Revolving Fund	Operating and Capital Expenses	Housing	Example: Funding the acquisition and development of a social housing portfolio. Notes: Several policy orders including POR 2025 #131 and committee conversations including Housing Committee in December 2025. Could be included in a larger conversation around housing priorities and strategies of the Affordable Housing Trust.
Supportive Housing Expansion (combined / related items include: Albany Street Shelter expansion, Day Center, Housing Voucher expansion, or Overdose Prevention Center)	Operating and Capital Expenses	Housing & Human Services & Public Safety	Example: Creating additional housing and shelter capacity to create non-congregate and supportive shelter options, expanding the municipal housing voucher program, operating a Day Center or Overdose Prevention Center. Notes: Committee conversations including the Mayor's Task Force on Tenant Displacement, the Ad Hoc Working Group on Homelessness, and Human Services Committee on April 10, 2025 and policy orders including POR 2025 #50. Could be discussed in context of the Affordable Housing Trust and housing funding priorities. The City has recently supported the creation of 96 units of permanent supportive housing across three buildings, with \$18 million of funding from the Affordable Housing Trust.

Economic Opportunity and Equity			
Childcare Expansion (Afterschool Program and Cambridge Preschool)	Operating Budget Only	Human Services	Examples: Expanding afterschool childcare options to offer afterschool childcare to every Cambridge child. Expanding preschool options to offer affordable preschool programming and childcare services for more Cambridge children. Notes: Several policy orders including POR 2021 #210 in October 2021 and POR 2023 #59 in April 2023, and the Out of School Time (OST) Expansion Study Report in 2025. Should be combined with policy decisions around preschool programming and implementation questions. Since FY24, the City has invested ~1M annually in expanding afterschool, increasing offer rates to 89%, as of August 2025, from 76% in August 2023; further expansion could risk crowding out community programs that are partners in delivering afterschool care. In addition, the FY26 Adopted Budget included \$780K to support afterschool and summer childcare through several partners, which is projected to increase to \$990K in the FY27 budget (replacing expiring ARPA funds). Significant work on implementation of UPK for all 4-yr olds and many 3-yr olds. Numerous committee meetings and roundtable discussions including CPP Roundtable in January 2025. Still needs significant scoping and policy discussion - questions around age coverage, income scale, and budget implications over several budget cycles.