



the oversight board

for the promise

Report THREE February 2025





**We grow up loved,
safe, and respected
so that we realise
our full potential.**

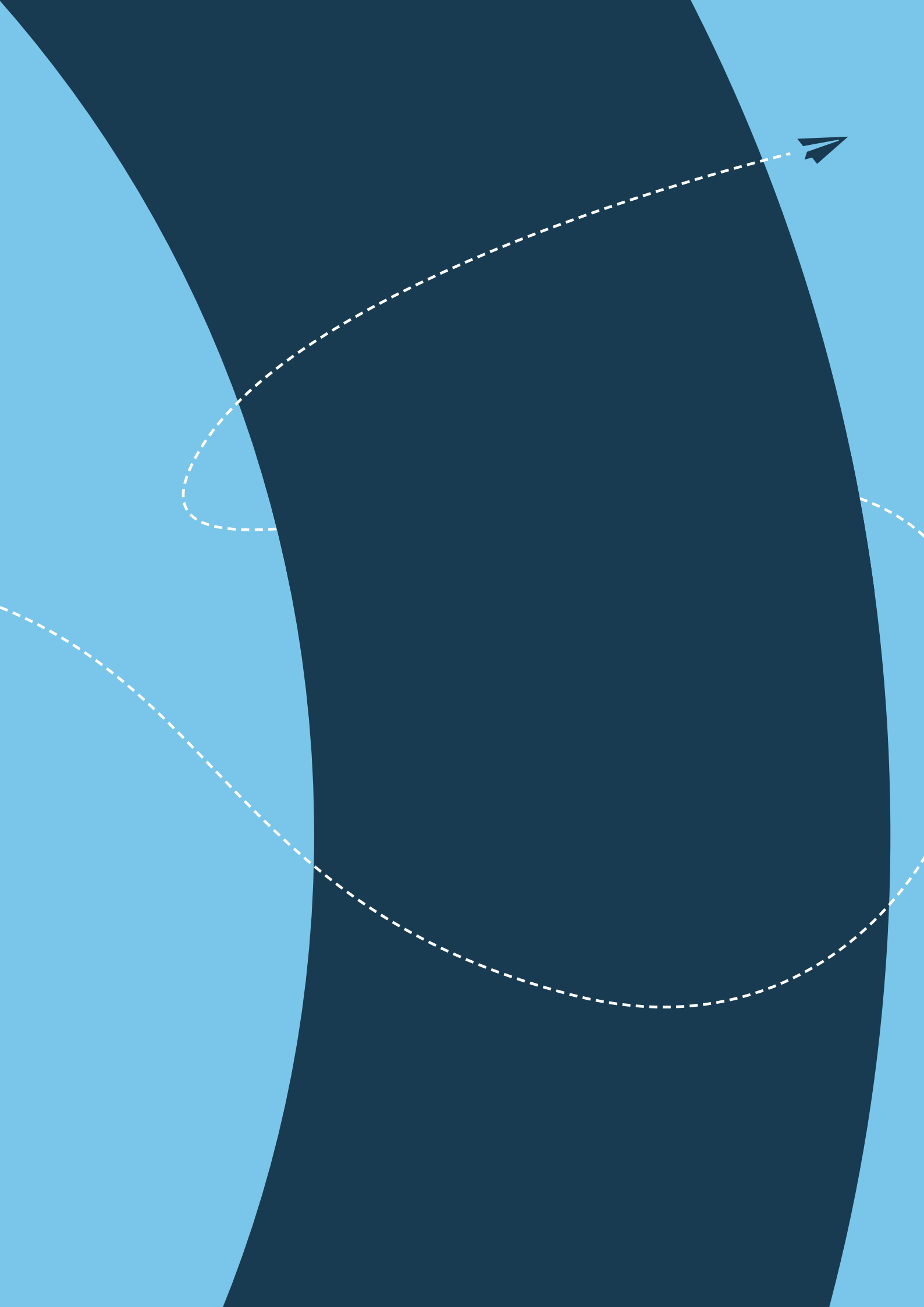
Scotland's ambition for
children and young people.

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Foreword





Foreword

When the Independent Care Review reported and told us, through the voices of all those who contributed, what needed to change to fulfil the promise, we knew the extent of the challenge — and the responsibility that came with it.

The conclusions set out everything that could and must be achieved to keep the promise by 2030.

This report, five years into that ten-year programme, marks the halfway point in time only.

The extent of the challenge was such that it needed every one of those with responsibility to commit to keeping it. Those commitments were promised.

2025 marks the midway point since the promise was made to when it must be kept. **But Scotland is not halfway towards keeping its promise.**

There have been unexpected events, delays, and unnecessary barriers. This means there are children and young people not receiving the care and support they need. That means for some in the care community the promise has already been broken.

The journey is behind schedule — but still on course. The destination is clear, and Scotland is heading in the right direction. **It requires pace, renewed purpose, and for everyone to play their part to smooth the path ahead.**

This is about Scotland's children and young people. There is no task which is more important. **The progress made thus far demonstrates that the necessary change is still possible.**

The duty to keep the promise lies with each and every single one of us. But there is no escaping the truth that some people have more power and influence than others to make that a reality.

As the board with the duty to check up on Scotland's progress, we recognise all those who embody the promise in their everyday work. People who live and breathe its principles, and its potential to change lives. Some of whom have been doing so long before the promise was made.

Let there be no misunderstanding: we recognise and value the many individuals who are working hard to deliver the promise. We too are also the workforce. When we highlight where work is still needed and identify barriers to progress, we do this to assist those who are faced with impediments to supporting children and their families. Be that through a lack of resources, funding issues, waiting times, or any other system-derived issue.

However, some people, some organisations, and some systems are not yet doing enough, and this risks the country as a whole failing to deliver the promise. Barriers to delivery include some leaders failing to prioritise the changes needed, and a fear of sharing power, budgets, and responsibility.

There are still some who do not see how delivering for care experienced young people not only improves the lives of their families and communities, but society as a whole. This needs to change so that further change happens.

While it is not the responsibility of the Scottish Government alone to keep the promise, it cannot be done without it. It took too long to produce a delivery plan and too long to respond to the serious concerns raised in our first two reports.

However, we acknowledge their continued commitment and support. **We encourage them to redouble their efforts now and act where the evidence tells us they need to.** Political commitment needs to be translated into drive for change that is felt by children and families.

The relationship between Scottish Government and local government is creating unnecessary tension in delivering the promise. This needs addressed, and requires collective effort and focus, without buck-passing or blame.

Local Authorities play a critical role. All Local Authorities need to accept their responsibilities and act now in those areas where progress is slow.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 named specific public bodies as “corporate parents”. Each of them has a range of responsibilities to care experienced children and young people, some more than others. Effectively, they form the “corporate family”, and all of them need to fulfil their responsibilities if children and young people are to get the support they need from across the system.

The promise won’t be delivered without all Local Authorities and corporate parents playing their part in full. We call on each of them to focus efforts, work together, and ask for and accept support where necessary.

The upcoming Promise Bill to be lodged in Parliament represents an opportunity and a risk.

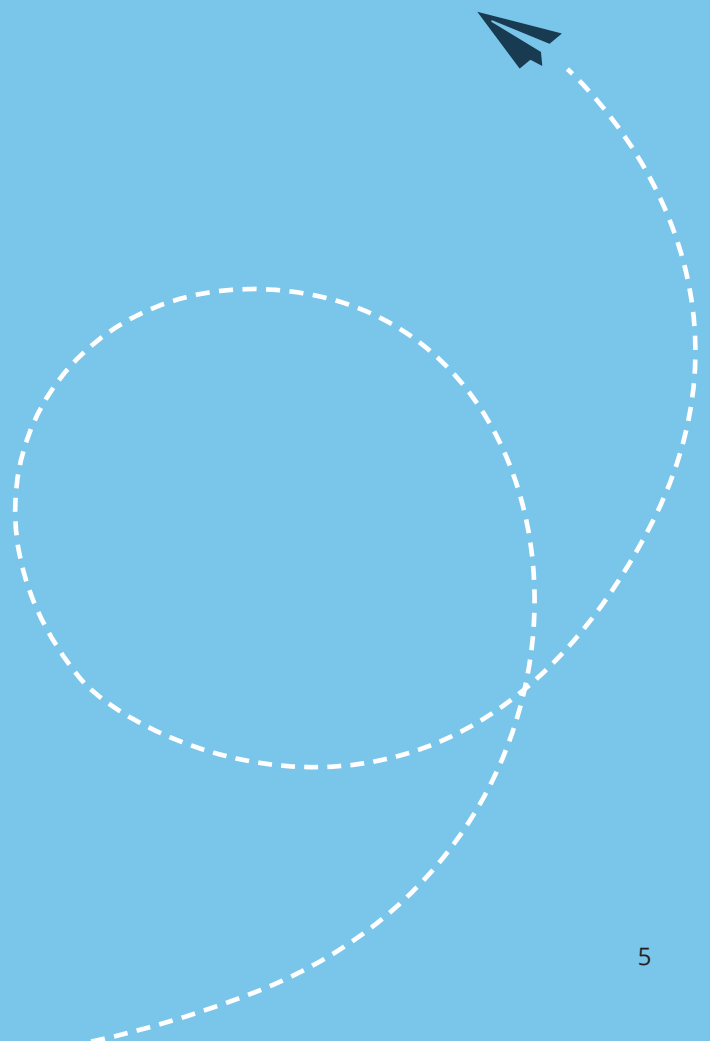
On one hand, it is critical to create the environment and the approach required in law to keep the promise. But it is also a ready-made excuse to slow the process down and to seek further consultations on issues, some of which Scotland has long known the answers to. This is borne out in the feedback we received from across support services.

What we need is action.

Action around spending decisions; bravery to do things differently; courage to count what matters rather than what is easy or politically palatable.

We remain hopeful and determined. Scotland’s promise can still be fulfilled by 2030, but there is not a moment left to waste — and no room for excuses.

The promise can and must be kept.



Introduction





Introduction

In 2020, Scotland made a promise: by 2030, all of Scotland’s children and young people will grow up loved, safe and respected. That promise was made five years ago. That means there are just under six years to go.

Keeping the promise is non-negotiable. To keep it by the 2030 deadline, Scotland must bring about the change demanded by the *Independent Care Review*, which published its findings in a series of reports on the 5th of February 2020. At that time, the Scottish Parliament expressed its unanimous support for the conclusions of the Independent Care Review, and renewed its collective commitment in a *debate on the 6th of November 2024*.

This is the third report from *The Oversight Board* on the progress Scotland is making to keep the promise. We report to the care community and the Scottish Parliament, but this report is also for the workforce and everyone who has some part to play in keeping the promise.

The Oversight Board and *The Promise Scotland* are two separate things: we exist to check up on whether the promise is being kept, while The Promise Scotland exists to support people and organisations as they work to keep it. The Promise Scotland provides secretariat support to us, including information and project management support. The contents and conclusions in this report belong to The Oversight Board.

The *members of our board* bring both expertise and lived experience of care to our role. We use a detailed assessment of progress provided by a range of organisations and encourage change to happen by highlighting what is and is not working. At times, we will make specific asks of those organisations with responsibility for keeping the promise.

The Oversight Board holds Scotland to account



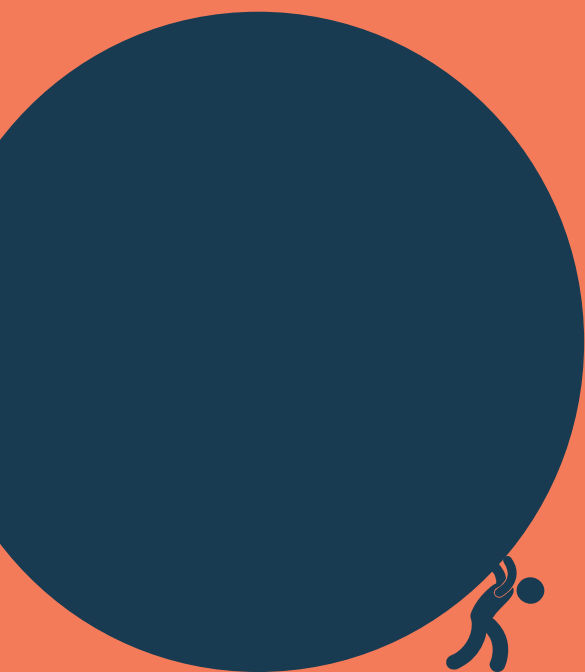
Scotland made a promise in 2020

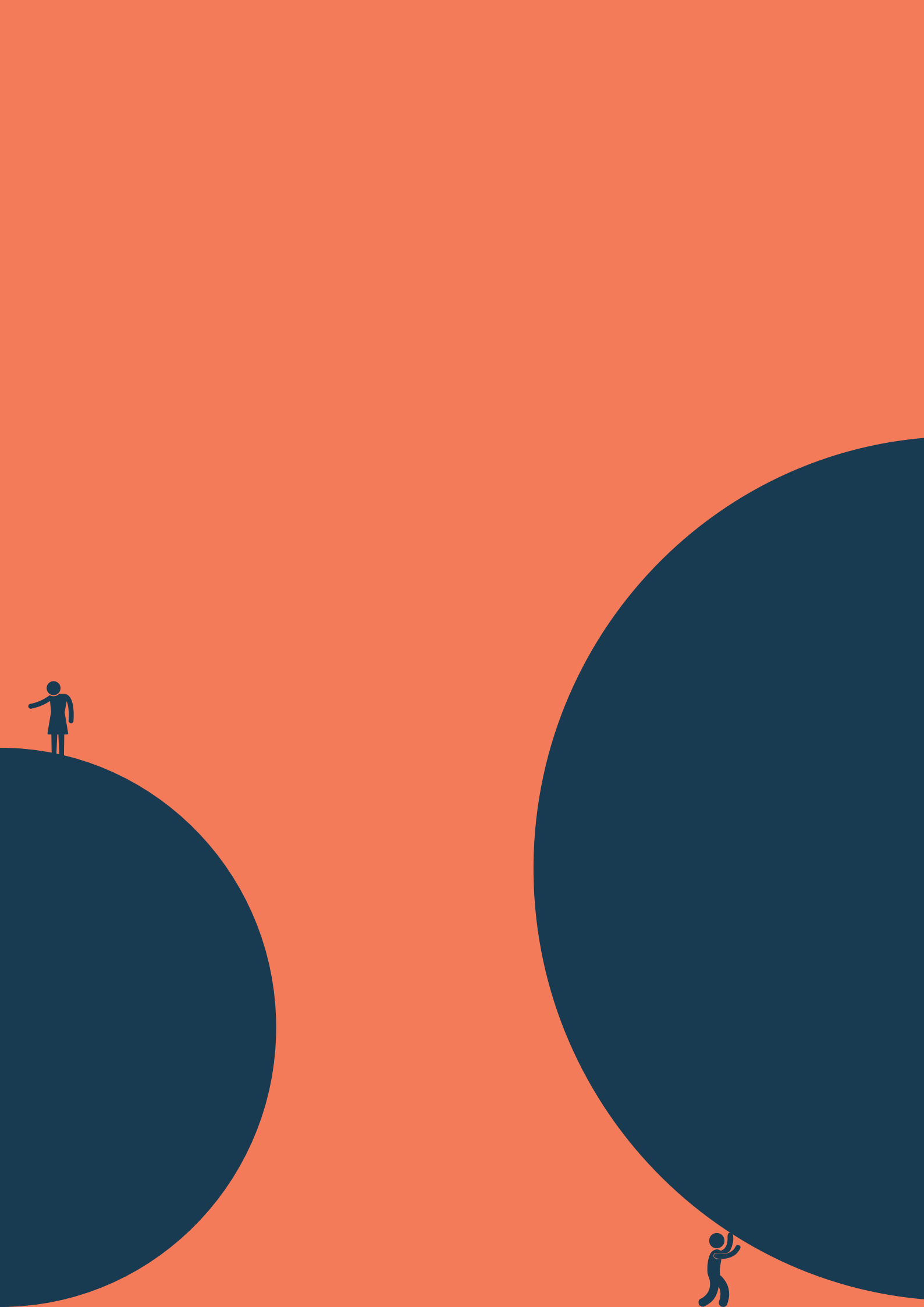


The Promise Scotland
supports organisations
to change



Keeping the promise by 2030: the halfway point





Has Scotland delivered Plan 21-24?

In this section, we reflect on whether Scotland has delivered *Plan 21-24*, which was the first plan setting out how Scotland can keep the promise.

Confirming our assessment in *Report TWO*, several objectives set for 2024 remain unmet, while for others there is significant variation between different areas in Scotland. This means **Scotland has not fully delivered Plan 21-24**.

However, it is not all bad news. Scotland has made progress. For example, the passing of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, while it should have happened earlier, has ended the imprisonment of children. There is now a *national minimum recommended allowance for foster carers and kinship carers*. We have seen commitment nationally and locally, and there are positive changes happening in every local authority area. But no part of Scotland is doing everything well, and there are still many instances where progress is too slow.

Does this mean Scotland will not deliver the promise?

Plan 21-24 was rightly ambitious in its aspirations for where we would be as a country at this point in the journey. We accept the circumstances in which it was launched. The effects of the pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis are still being felt. However, the failure to deliver Plan 21-24 does not mean that keeping the promise is unachievable.

It can still be kept by 2030, if everyone involved plays their part and works together constructively with children and their families.

The continued commitment to the promise is both welcome and encouraging. Most government reviews end up sitting on shelves with very little action, but that is not the case here. We acknowledge everyone who has worked to make improvements — sometimes in the face of the current ‘system’ that feels like it is still designed to stop them doing the right thing.

However, while we need that ongoing commitment and passion, we will not keep the promise unless we also align the formal planning, delivery, and governance structures behind this work.

Given the progress that has been made and the commitment and goodwill, we think it is still possible for Scotland to keep the promise by 2030. But only if key issues, such as those in our calls to action, are addressed immediately.

The five priority areas and key milestones for Plan 21-24



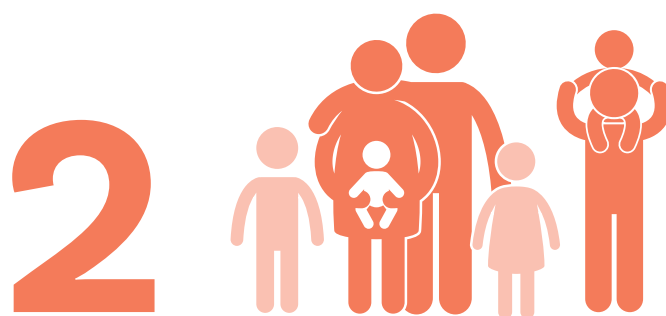
A good childhood

All children in Scotland's 'care system' will have a good, loving childhood. They will **feel loved**. They will have their **needs met**. And they will **have their rights upheld**.

Whole family support

To realise a child's rights, you have to **support their family** – whether it is one they are born into or not.

And all families need support at different times.



3



Supporting the workforce

Children experience the 'care system' through people – and those people **need better support**.

4



Planning

Scotland needs to plan for services that **#KeepThePromise**, and make sure these have the money they need. And it needs to make sure these exist everywhere: not just in certain parts of our country.



5

Building capacity

A lot needs to happen to build a system of care that **puts children and families at the centre**. Right now, Scotland must establish its foundations.

How did we come to our views on progress?

In writing our third report, it was frustrating that there is still no clear plan showing who needs to do what and by when, or a comprehensive set of data being collected and reported. However, we did have a range of information we could draw from, including:

- *Who Cares? Scotland's research* across all 32 local authorities.
- *STAF, in association with The Promise Scotland, 100 Days of Listening*
- The *Promise Progress Framework*, launched on 18 December 2024
- *An evaluation of Plan 21-24* commissioned by The Promise Scotland.
- The Scottish Government's implementation plan update report, *Keeping The Promise*.
- COSLA's report on *local government and the promise*.
- Reports from Parliamentary committees
- Meetings with organisations and individuals for whom keeping the promise directly impacts.
- The skills, knowledge, and experience of The Oversight Board members, over half of whom have their own experiences of care, and all of whom who are working to keep the promise.

We were therefore well placed to fulfil our duty of oversight of where Scotland is on the journey and to identify action that we know will deliver better lives for children and families.

For a breakdown of our assessment of Plan 21-24 and for detail on the organisations we heard from, please see the Further Information document on our website.



What needs to happen to deliver the promise by 2030?

In our previous reports we highlighted that Plan 21-24 was too broad, lacked clear measures of success, and included some goals that simply could not be achieved in three years. This was confirmed in an *evaluation* commissioned by The Promise Scotland.

In *Report TWO* we asked for:

- Work at pace to ensure effective governance arrangements are in place across both national and local systems. These must provide clarity on roles and responsibilities for making change and enable effective decision making and accountability.
- Explicit leadership and drive from Scottish Government and scrutiny bodies to articulate a clear set of principles, outcomes and milestones that will guarantee the promise is kept.
- A strategic investment plan to deliver the required change.

This has not happened. Looking back, we made the mistake in Report TWO of not being clear enough about specifically who we expected to do what, and by when, on these issues. We have learnt from this, and in this report we clearly identify who we think needs to deliver our calls to action.

If Scotland is to keep its promise to care experienced people, we need to see the following issues addressed.

1. Children and families need every organisation that has a role in delivering the promise to prioritise action

Delivering the promise is not just a responsibility for local authorities. It needs many organisations to play their part. In *Report ONE*, we highlighted the “cluttered landscape” of those that are accountable. Every corporate parent and all support services must step up to the challenge.

Who is responsible for delivering this?

By the end of October 2025, we expect to see all corporate parents detailing in their corporate parenting plans how they will keep the promise. We expect to see clear implementation plans showing genuinely collaborative approaches.

2. Scotland urgently needs a cohesive plan through to 2030

Action has been taken to develop a more detailed *plan for 2024-2030* to implement the measures required to deliver the promise. This work has been led by Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor on the promise, supported by The Promise Scotland. We note that The Promise Scotland has supported the development of this plan and is now working with organisations and individuals across Scotland to develop the more detailed route maps which they say will ensure delivery of Plan 24-30. We urge everyone involved to participate fully and seek support where necessary.

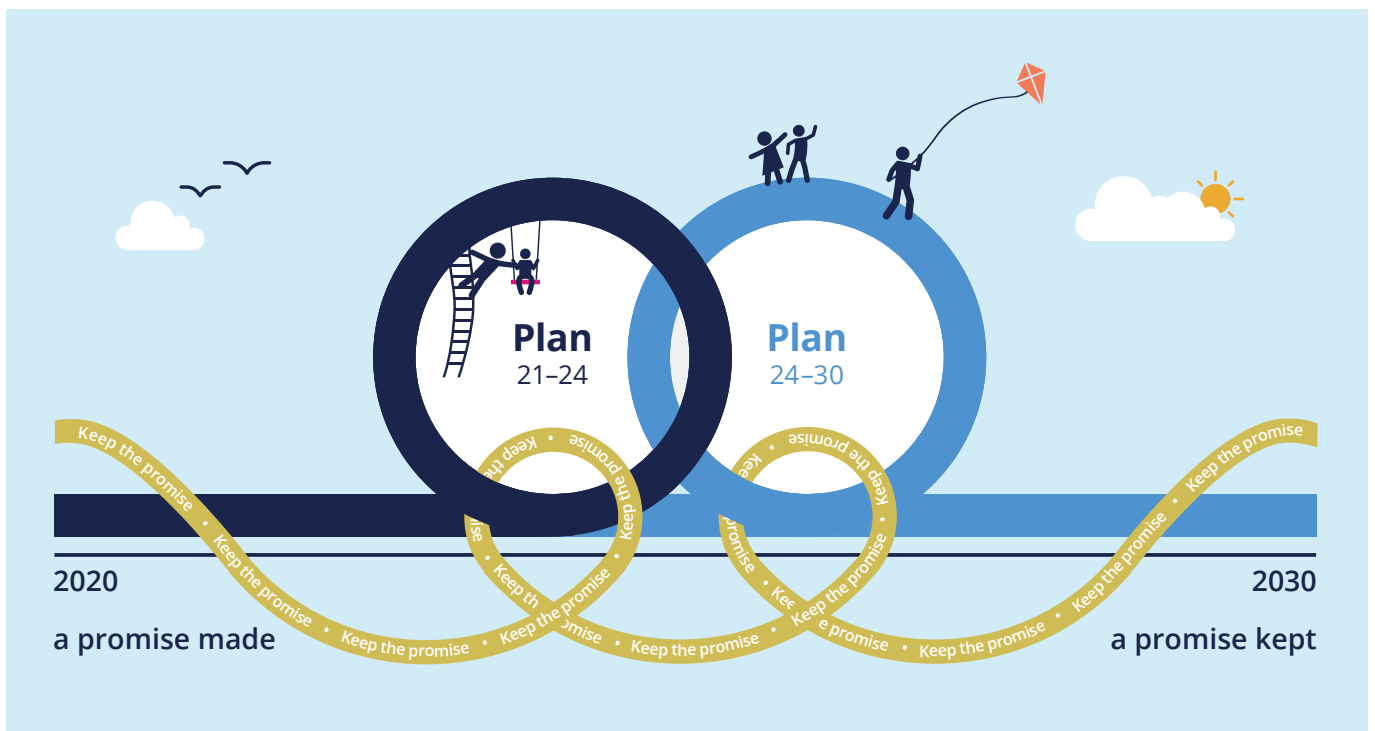
At the time of writing this report, that plan was still in the process of being refined. Rather than analyse a document mid-development, we have outlined in our Further Information document (which can be downloaded from *The Oversight Board website*) the criteria that Plan 24-30 must meet for us to consider it a credible plan.

Who is responsible for delivering this?

The Independent Strategic Advisor, supported by The Promise Scotland, has taken on the responsibility for producing *Plan 24-30*.

As part of this work, The Promise Scotland team is supporting and facilitating the development of 25 route maps (high-level plans). There is an urgency to this work and we would expect to see these completed by the end of 2025.

We expect to see all relevant organisations engage in this process and we will follow up on this in our next report.





3. Measuring progress

In both our previous reports, we called out the need to accelerate progress on the collection of meaningful data to assess progress. While progress has been slower than we would have liked, it is our view that progress is now being made.

We note that The Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland have jointly committed to the *Promise Story of Progress*, that recognises the importance of answering all three of the questions above.

We welcome the publication of the first iteration of *The Promise Progress Framework*, which is populated with national level data aimed at answering the question, ‘how is Scotland doing in its progress towards keeping the promise?’. Whilst we all accept the limitations of assessing progress through just looking at existing national indicators, they have an important part to play and, as highlighted by the publication:

“they can help to guide the ‘system’s’ understanding of where progress is being made, and which areas warrant further attention.”

We welcome the commitment made by the Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland and reiterated in the Progress Framework to ensure that, over 2025, the mechanisms required to answer the organisational and care experienced community level questions in The Promise Story of Progress will be developed.

The *Who Cares? Scotland* report highlighted us the value of assessing progress at an individual local authority level by exposing the significant variation that currently exists. However, we recognise that delivering the promise locally is not solely the responsibility of local authorities; the actions need to be owned across the whole local ‘system’.

For those actions which sit with children’s services, that means the Children Services Planning Partnerships (CSPPs). Those which sit with adult services need to be owned by the Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs). However, this cannot and must not result in a dilution of responsibility. We need organisations to play their part both individually and in partnership with others. And we need a way of assessing whether this is happening.

There is an urgent need for a clear structure that local organisations can use to understand their progress on delivery and the priorities for further work. There also needs to be a clear approach agreed to report progress. Therefore, **the commitment made by The Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland to progress putting in place the mechanisms to answer the question, ‘How are organisations doing in their work to keep the promise?’ must be actioned within the agreed timeline (by end of December 2025).**

This would enable our reporting on the second half of Scotland’s journey towards keeping the promise to differentiate between those local authorities, organisations, and bodies that are doing what is necessary, including the extent to which they are working in constructive partnerships with others, and those which need to do more.

Finally, and most importantly, the mechanisms for understanding whether the care community feels the impact of the promise being kept must be improved. This does not mean asking people to retell their stories. It means determining how they are experiencing support.

Again, we welcome the commitment from The Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland to develop this in 2025. Given we are five years on from the promise being made, it is vital this timeline doesn’t slip and that, by the end of December 2025, we have meaningful data to answer this question.

Who is responsible for delivering this?

Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland have committed to jointly developing the mechanisms required to answer the organisational and care experienced community level questions in The Promise Story of Progress, which will be developed by the end of December 2025.

We recommend that this includes an approach not just to assessing individual organisational progress, but also to looking at local progress through the Children’s Services Planning Partnerships and Community Planning Partnerships.

4. Reform of funding alongside a clear investment plan to deliver the required change

In every conversation we have, the issue of short-term funding that is not joined-up is raised as a key barrier to progress.

We understand that restrictions are often put in place to try and ensure that money is used to provide services to those most in need, but the evidence is clear that they have the opposite effect.

We've also heard consistently about the problems that short-term funding is creating. Whilst we understand there are challenges in making long term commitments in a context of financial uncertainty, we don't accept that there is no better and more effective way of allocating money that would manage the financial uncertainty as well as (and maybe better than) the current arrangements.

We note the commitment to reconfiguring budgets in the *2024-25 Programme for Government*. Given that everyone at every level appears to agree that short-term and siloed funding is a problem that is leading to inefficient and ineffective services, we don't understand why more isn't being done to address it.

We've also heard consistently about the practical challenges in shifting resources to focus on prevention and early help and support. Work by the Independent Strategic Advisor on the promise is progressing around what is called 'investment and disinvestment modelling'. This is aimed at working through the very real barriers that currently exist in shifting resources, so that problems are prevented in the first place.

With funding for public services challenging at present, in our view this work presents the best opportunity to invest in activities that will prevent children entering the 'care system' in the first place. And where care is the best option for the child or young person, it can make sure that the care provided is the right care for that person.

We understand that this will take time, but we are impatient to see progress. Where we place our money as a country says so much about our values.

Who is responsible for delivering this?

The Scottish Government ultimately controls most public spending in Scotland. The Independent Strategic Advisor on the promise, supported by The Promise Scotland, is developing a strategic approach to help inform investment/disinvestment decisions. If embedded in the budget process, it could be a game changer. It now needs to be operationalised.

The issue of short-term and restrictive funding plays out through multiple routes including how Scottish Government allocates money, how local systems commission services (particularly third sector) and how philanthropic organisations spend funds. A sustainable investment approach needs to replace short-term grant funding.

Priority areas





Priority area: whole family support

“To realise a child’s rights, you have to support their family – whether it is one they are born into or not. And all families need support at different times.”

Plan 21-24

Why this matters

Whole family support is central to the promise, and it is essential that it reflects the many needs of Scotland’s diverse society. We know that families are not just those who have blood ties; communities are also families. If each person in every family – whatever that may consist of – is supported so that their own needs are met, then the promise has been kept.

There are 10 principles of intensive family support which should be embedded into the practice of all organisations that support children and their families, directly or indirectly:

- Holistic and relational
- Therapeutic
- Non-stigmatising
- Patient and persistent
- Underpinned by children’s rights
- Community based
- Responsive and timely
- Work with family assets
- Empowerment and agency
- Flexible.

We know that access to early help and support for families is a long-standing commitment by the Scottish Government and was restated in last year’s *Programme for Government*. In our first two reports, we highlighted both the progress made and the lack of adequate support. This report expands on our previous findings and focuses in on the key barriers that need to be addressed to see progress.



Funding challenges

Organisations told us about the detrimental impact of short-term funding cycles. The endless work of applying for funding, complying with different criteria, disproportionate monitoring and reporting drains energy and capacity from everyone involved. It creates uncertainty and wastes time that could be much more usefully spent providing support to care experienced individuals. Too many grants are short-term and monitor activity rather than looking at the difference that is made to people's lives. Small charities in particular speak of a lack of help to access funding. It should not be beyond funders to proactively identify and offer support with applications to those charities in need of such aid. Charities are understandably worried about funding. They cannot create the outcomes and impacts expected of them without long-term support that allows them to focus on supporting people.

This is evidenced in *the briefing on The Promise Partnership fund* which has already come and gone. Over £20 million has been invested and has supported good work. But feedback from local authorities and charities highlighted the need for consistent and multi-year funding, with short-term funding seen as a barrier to progress. It prevents stability and security, which are essential to a good childhood.

The lack of funding to upscale or even just to ensure survival also emerged as a theme in discussion with adoption, fostering, and kinship services. The Whole Family Wellbeing Fund has enabled some excellent work but consistently shows a significant underspend whilst critical services are struggling to pay the bills. The Scottish Government has stated in its *evaluation of the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund* that lessons have been learnt and that funding will change. We recognise this development and expect to see a change in feedback when we consult for our next report.

It doesn't have to be this way, Scotland has the ability to do things differently. This is evidenced in Inspiring Scotland's *Our Future Now* evaluation. **There is an urgent need to move to long-term, trust-based funding that allows the focus to**

be on the provision of high-quality care and support.

We are yet to see a clear timeline to reach the pledge that at least 5% of all community-based health and social care spend will be on whole family support. We have asked for this in both our previous reports and still think it is important.

Data

There is still a lack of clarity and transparency in some data collection. It is hard to determine the reality of a situation when the available data does not provide a clear and linked picture. For example, school exclusions, reduced timetables and non-attendance can be interlinked. Data sets must be connected to give a clearer picture of what young people need in order to thrive. The *Promise Story of Progress*, once complete, must be able to tell us how children, young people and their families experience support and therefore what is missing to assist in maintaining attendance and achievement. **This change is overdue.**

We recognise that the journey of change has started, with a real effort to ensure better data collection and use, for example in further and higher education. But those responsible can and must do better, and quantitative data must be underpinned by listening to what matters to children and families.

We have heard directly that major bodies such as the Care Inspectorate are beginning to collate statistics that include the experience of the children and families concerned. We've also heard about work by Public Health Scotland and Education Scotland to link health, social care and education data at a school level. This has the potential to provide key insights about the experiences of care experienced school age children across a range of critical areas. We welcome this work, whilst also noting the need for collaboration for the work to progress at pace. **Clear plans are needed to ensure the data is then used to drive improvements.**

Housing barriers

Availability of affordable housing

Having a home is a fundamental right for everyone in Scotland. We have stated in both previous reports that housing should be a priority for the Scottish Government. This was a strong message in the *100 Days of Listening report*. Yet 2023 saw a decrease in *approvals for affordable housing*. This is having a direct impact on many families, especially those experiencing poverty.

We acknowledge the funding announced to tackle homelessness in the recent budget. However, the latest data in the *Promise Progress Framework* shows that there were 10,110 children in temporary accommodation at 31 March 2024. The absence of a stable home increases the pressures on families and increases the likelihood of children in those families being taken into care.

Availability and quality of supported housing

People deserve supported housing options that ensure they can thrive. This can only happen when they are provided with a well-maintained space which not only addresses their basic needs but has the potential to become a safe, loving home.

We know that inadequate housing adversely impacts care experienced young people, with some falling into homelessness as a result. There are still young people being placed in unsuitable housing based on their age as opposed to their readiness. Loopholes exist that leave young people unsupported at this critical time in their lives.

Corporate parents must work together to ensure the availability of high-quality supported housing. Projects like the *Local House Project* show this can be done.

Homelessness prevention pathway

We have twice requested that the government reinstates the housing support route — or 'pathway' — for care experienced people, but we are yet to have confirmation this is to be done.

Despite both written and in-person discussions, we have had no reasonable explanation of why this has not happened.

The Oversight Board does not accept the Government's *recent reply to our latest prompt* indicating their belief that current action is sufficient. Their interpretation of data does not match our own. We strongly urge the Government to either reinstate or replace this provision. **The right to a home is fundamental to the promise being kept.**

Housing provision for larger families

Kinship care, fostering, and adoption all report capacity issues when it comes to housing provision for larger families. This impacts on work to keep brothers and sisters together. It also impacts on wellbeing when a lack of housing leads to instability and insecurity. The difference between geographical areas remains a barrier to the promise being kept. Relatively simple changes, for example around building extensions to existing accommodation, could be made in the short term.

Adoption, kinship and foster care

Adoption services and adoptive families have long felt they have not received the support they need. To ensure the impact of this lack of support can be properly understood, all local authorities should record breakdown of adoptions. It is recognised that the adoptive process is often complex and needs the full range of support available for families. While some progress has been made since 2020, it should be the case that the relatively small number of adoptive families in Scotland are well-supported.

Services have long stated that post-adoption services are not uniform or delivered at a level adequate to support the children and families who need them. It is not beyond the organisations concerned to ensure that timely support is provided, and progress has been too slow.

Those we spoke to told us that advertised services in local authorities are not always accessible and available as and when they are needed.

Direct feedback from adoption services has indicated there is an imbalance between pre and post support. **Post-adoption support is critical, yet support is discretionary when it should be mandatory.** Services believe a requirement in this respect would be helpful. A joint mapping exercise would be a positive development, and one that could see any geographical anomalies fixed through targeted action.

Adopted children must have life story work throughout their entire experience of care. They should have a sense of identity from a young age that tells of their life before adoption, and that continues as they grow. All adoptees must be offered support to learn their life story and to access their care records, if they want to.

We heard that social worker retention and recruitment are having a detrimental impact on **foster care** support provision. At the same time, a shortage of foster carers is increasing the pressure on social workers.

The work led by Scottish Government on the future of foster care is welcomed, and must progress at pace. The consultation on this work closes after our publication, and we urge action on what was heard during the Independent Care Review and subsequently.

The planned national foster care recruitment campaign is a welcome step, and we hope that together the work on the future of foster care and recruitment and retention sees both an increase in the number of carers, and that they are supported to develop strong relationships with those they care for. Government must focus on addressing systemic issues like lengthy approval processes or strict eligibility criteria, attracting new carers and supporting existing carers, enabling local efforts, streamlining processes, and ensuring robust support systems.

We welcome the new national minimum recommended **allowance** for foster carers and kinship carers, introduced in 2023. However, the wider difficulties caused by the lack of inclusion of informal **kinship care** (when a child is raised in the care of a friend or family member) by legal definition should be dealt with immediately.

Not only do 'informal' kinship carers not receive statutory support, but this can also be the difference between receiving kinship care allowance or not. This is putting financial strain on many kinship families, who receive no additional income for the children they are bringing up.

Support for kinship carers varies across Scotland, with some local authorities offering support and others offering the bare minimum. There is also very little support or resource available to help families during a crisis, which often leads to long-term caring for a child. Support must be made available to kinship carers to guide them through the crisis and, as part of this, to help them to respond effectively to trauma.

The promise is clear that where they are loved and where it is safe to do so, children should stay with their families. Approximately one in five 'looked after children' in Scotland are **cared for at home**. This group of children — just under 2,500 as of 31 July 2023 — often receive less support than other groups. This is why it is so important that all families, especially those in contact with the care system, have access to early and ongoing help and support that is free of stigma and designed to meet their specific family circumstances and needs.

Organisations with a focus on supporting fostering, kinship, and adoption told us that **the development of 'communities of practice' set up to aid joined-up working have been helpful**. Where these had been put in place, and care and time had been taken to support and develop them, they were found to produce good results by strengthening connections between organisations and ensuring shared direction and activity.

Brothers and Sisters

In *Report TWO* we highlighted that: *We need an accurate picture of whether brothers and sisters are living together, with a simple metric for measuring this.*

For the first time, the official statistics around care experienced children and young people will include data on sibling and sibling-like relationships. The data should be reported in the spring of 2025. This is a welcome, albeit long overdue, development. It means, however, that we are currently still without reliable data about the extent to which brothers and sisters are able to stay together. There are also concerns about whether this data will be able to tell the story we need to hear. We recommend that the Scottish Government reviews the data and approach after the first publication.

In the meantime, we are encouraged by the work of the *Community of Practice for Siblings*, which has become a vibrant place for learning and sharing work across the country. This is a good example of how collaboration can help support practice across the country, and identify and overcome the barriers that are getting in the way of people being able to do the right things.

However, workforce capacity issues (explored in more detail in the next chapter) impact negatively, and housing issues (referred to above) remain a barrier to progress.

Other issues

- **Whole family group decision making:** this area has shown success over the long term. It is in line with the promise if it is led by the families involved, gives power to children, and is aimed at being support that comes before any involvement with the hearings system. We welcome the publication of *national standards for family group decision making* and, while it now exists in some form in 23 local authorities, **there is a need to ensure it is available to everyone who would benefit from it wherever they live in Scotland, and that it is sustainably funded.**
- **Peer and community support:** we have heard that meaningful support exists and, where it does, the results demonstrate how necessary it is. However, this support needs to grow further and will require continued funding and effort for there to be any chance that the promise is kept. We have heard of too many small charities unable to see a future due to funding issues. **It is not for a Local Authority to determine what is 'essential' to a family. It is those individuals themselves who will often know what works best for them.**
- **Consultations:** there is a widespread opinion that further consultations on the case for change are unnecessary, because this information already exists. The focus must be on addressing issues that have long been highlighted. A common theme emerged from those we heard from, many of whom spoke of the need to move from a culture of consultation to action to take forward the recommendations from research already carried out. **People are tired of restating the same thing and the retelling of stories must stop.** While consultation on detailed legislative proposals will always be required, we urge the Scottish Government to keep a tight focus.
- **Mental health provision:** everyone should have access to high quality mental health support to support them through adversity. Mental health support for care experienced children, young people, and adults is at best reactive. Care experience is lifelong, and the mental health support which is offered should reflect this.



- **Anti-racism action:** we know that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic families are at an added disadvantage within the system, and the actions required to change are not adopted as widely as they could be. Organisations we spoke to told us that there is a significant need, and opportunity, to urgently progress anti-racism in the care sector to improve the care and support provided to all families. This should feature in all organisations' strategic plans.
- **Accessing support:** There are persistent problems related to availability and accessibility of support:
 - Too many cannot access the right family support when they need it.
 - Some do not know about their rights to support or the assistance available to help them realise these rights.
 - Families should be able to self-refer and reach out for what they need when they need it.
 - Added to this, time-consuming funding applications and consultations are frustrating service providers and placing an unnecessary burden on all involved.

When finance is difficult to come by, there is a real risk that we stop funding the things that prevent problems developing in the first place. This means we just end up moving more funding to support the consequences of not intervening early, which leads to further cuts in the preventative work. And the negative spiral continues, with more and more complex need presenting because we failed to take preventative action. We have outlined above the action we expect to see around funding reform.

Our Calls to Action

- Scotland must address the imbalance of support and resource, including the difference between support for those experiencing foster care, formal and informal kinship care, and care at home.
- Funding must be long-term and trust-based, allowing the focus to be on the provision of high-quality care and support.
- The recommendations of the *100 Days of Listening* work led by Staf and The Promise Scotland must be progressed as per Plan 24-30. This includes the production of a shared set of standards and principles that will guide systems and practice to support those moving on from care.
- The National Family Group Decision Making Steering Group *National Standards and Practice Guidance* must be embedded across Scotland.
- National Bodies must work collaboratively to streamline consultation and reporting, including sharing information to enable collaboration and avoid duplication.
- Where consultation is absolutely necessary, it needs to be led by voice, including ensuring that the voices of children, families and care experienced adults are truly heard and they are not repeatedly asked to share their views and experiences without seeing action.



Priority area: supporting the workforce

“Children experience the ‘care system’ through people – and those people need better support.”

Plan 21-24

Why this matters

Scotland must hold the hands of those who hold the hands of the child. This refers to the paid and unpaid workforce supporting care experienced children, young people and their families across Scotland. When we talk about the workforce, we mean all of those who work with, or on behalf of, care experienced people and their families, as well as the wider children’s sector. We use a broad definition because children and their families have relationships with a wide range of people, who are tasked with specific roles to ensure our children are loved, safe and respected.

We recognise the pivotal role of social workers. The workforce comprises more than social workers, residential care workers and foster carers, and includes a range of professionals from housing support, teachers, the police, a variety of health professionals including GPs and other primary care providers, befrienders, mentors etc. They may work in the public, third or private sectors. **Each person has their own responsibilities, based on their job, their professional codes of practice and their level of power or influence.**

To deliver the promise by 2030, we need empowered workers, bold leaders and determined change-makers.



The impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis

The cost-of-living crisis has pushed more children, young people and families in our communities into poverty. *The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'Poverty in Scotland'* report, published in October 2024, once again paints a stark picture of poverty in Scotland, and it is shameful that Scotland continues to have around a quarter of a million children living in poverty. And whilst the pandemic has had an impact on everyone, it was much harder on those who were already living in poverty and/or facing discrimination. And as well as affecting children and families, this has impacted on the workforce.

The workforce is already struggling in the face of enormous and growing pressure on public finances and services. And they are not only trying to keep the promise, but also responding to calls for action to address child poverty and action focused on improving support for early childhood development. All three are important and overlapping, but too often the asks on the workforce are disjointed. At any one moment in time, the totality of the changes the workforce is being asked to action across all three programmes of reform is too much.

At the same time, the continuing debate around the National Care Service and its knock-on impact on the creation of a National Social Work Agency has delayed progress.

And all of this sits alongside the challenge of dealing with high levels of stress and poor work-life balance, cited in the *CELCIS Children's Services Workforce report* as contributing to high rates of sickness absence and turnover. At the same time, some workers are also personally experiencing the cost-of-living crisis and all that life brings. **We understand how incredibly difficult this is; many members of The Oversight Board are also part of the workforce.**

Scotland is still waiting for the Joint Workforce Improvement Plan, promised in the *Keeping the Promise Implementation Plan Update* and due in autumn last year.

The challenges facing families and communities, and those that work with them, are a dangerous mix that leaves everyone at risk. The importance of supporting and nurturing the workforce so that they can do their best is essential to keeping the promise. **A well-supported and well-resourced workforce can deliver the promise; an overstretched and under-resourced workforce cannot — no matter how much it wants to.**

Funding challenges

The workforce wants to deliver high quality support, and we have seen promising practice across Scotland. The *Keep the Promise Fund* distributed over £5 million of funding across the country, with a focus on 'supporting the workforce'. However, **these projects are time limited due to short-term funding.**

Recent research by CELCIS, and our conversations with Social Work Scotland, tell us that the children's services workforce urgently needs a joined-up plan and the necessary investment to deliver it. There needs to be a long-term commitment from national and local leaders, which moves the workforce from a position of constant precarious funding cycles and successive cuts to a position of stability and security. We recognise that the context for leaders is challenging; however we know that decisions on resourcing and funding are choices made by people according to their priorities. *There is clear evidence* that early help and support is cost effective in the long term and has a real impact. We urge those in positions of power and influence to work together to **ensure we protect our children's longer term future by investing in prevention focused services in the here and now.** A practical example of action here is supporting work on the investment and disinvestment modelling.

Jobs people want to do

We also know that vacancies can be hard to fill, and staff hard to retain. We know that attempts to convince people to join or stay in professions which are stressful, undervalued, or unsupported will be unsuccessful. Instead, leaders must consider how they can ensure working environments for those supporting children and their families that are, at their core, rewarding and enriching. While this includes rethinking the purpose and tasks that people are employed to do so that they are reoriented towards what matters to children and their families, it also includes shaping organisational cultures which value, respect and nurture staff.

We believe that an empowered, supported and trusted workforce is our greatest asset in keeping the promise.

The commitments of the promise and keeping it are everyone's responsibility. Investing in the workforce allows them to deliver the quality of support and services the care experienced community deserves, and helps them to keep the promise. Those in positions of power must work together to ensure the conditions, support and investment needed by the workforce are delivered.

We believe a national focus is needed to ensure consistent standards, involving professional bodies like Social Work Scotland and Education Scotland. Local delivery should be managed by local children's services partnerships, community planning partnerships, NHS Boards, and third sector collaboratives, who should be empowered to design and deliver services which meet local needs.





Our Calls to Action

None of what we are highlighting here is new: the issues are known. What we need now is action to address them.

- The Scottish Government and COSLA must produce the Joint Workforce Improvement Plan that was due in autumn 2024 as a matter of urgency.
- Ways of working should be reviewed to ensure that people are able to focus on what they are there to do, to drive out duplication and wasted effort. For example, strategic identification and allocation of referrals to third sector agencies working in the same local authority could cut down waiting times.

Scotland is not a big country. It is therefore entirely possible for the responsible parties to come together to create one joined-up workforce strategy. All strategic partners are currently engaged in work to address the need for change. We call on them to organise themselves with a view to producing the specific national plan needed to change things in time for the 2030 deadline. This should happen no later than 2025.



Opportunities



As we look ahead to the next five years, we can see opportunities to maximise Scotland’s ability to keep the promise and to improve the lives of all children, young people and families.

The Promise Bill

Consultation has been taking place on elements to be included in the forthcoming Promise Bill. The period to early summer 2025 provides an opportunity to influence the drafting of the Bill. As it progresses through the Scottish Parliament in the latter part of the year there will be further opportunities to influence its scrutiny, such as giving evidence to committees.

The Independent Care Review’s report on *The Rules* sets out what is required in legislation, and it is an opportunity to simplify the complexity of the legal landscape. At the time of writing, it is still unclear what will be included in the Bill. It appears that the redesign of children’s hearings, foster care, moving on from care and the definition of “care experienced” will be included. This does not cover everything in The Rules report, with protections for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children an obvious omission, as well as a right to advocacy. **Given that life-long advocacy is a key element of the promise and the need to ensure the significant number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Scotland are properly supported, these issues must be included.**

There is a danger that the progress of the Bill will be disrupted by a variety of different asks and a desire to fix everything through legislation. We therefore recommend that the scope of the Bill is defined as soon as possible, that it is proportionate, and focused on addressing the recommendations in The Rules report. It is important that any other legislation being developed in parallel does not undermine or conflict with The Promise Bill. **There is enough confusion due to the number of laws already in place. Care must be taken to simplify matters whilst ensuring rights are comprehensive.**

UNCRC incorporation

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was incorporated into Scots Law in July 2024. That means children’s rights must be embedded across public policy and the actions of public authorities. The UNCRC could be used to secure further positive changes for care experienced children and young people.

However, for this to work properly, the scope of the legal competence of incorporating the UNCRC needs to be addressed by the UK Government following a legal challenge instigated by the previous Westminster administration. **The UK Government must make the appropriate changes to the Scotland Act to allow the UNCRC to be implemented fully and without hindrance.**

The Promise Progress Framework

The Promise Progress Framework, published by Scottish Government, COSLA and The Promise Scotland in December 2024, is an opportunity to get much more meaningful and useful intelligence which can be used to drive change. This is just the first part of the *Story of Progress*. We look forward to accessing information about how organisations are doing in their work to keep the promise in time for our next report. Crucially, the Story of Progress will also tell us whether the care community feels the impact of changes.

Plan 24-30

Plan 24-30 is an opportunity to ensure that people across the system are clear about what they need to do and by when. The process of developing route maps should foster collaboration, ownership and buy-in.

New UK Government

The new Government in Westminster is an opportunity for the UK and Scottish Governments to work together and address some of the most significant causes of poverty.

The UK Government has set up a poverty taskforce, and the Secretary of State for Scotland has been clear he wants to see Scotland's particular needs reflected. The taskforce is due to report in Spring 2025. It must look across the whole system, and start from the viewpoint of children, families and households rather than institutions. If done correctly, this could be a very significant opportunity for a real shift in poverty and inequality.

As referred to above, the court case in which the previous UK Government challenged Scotland's ability to incorporate the UNCRC and the European Charter for Local Self Government *ruled* that any amendments to Scots Law can only apply to laws created by Holyrood. **This impacts on the ability to bring challenges under the UNCRC, limiting it to matters enacted by the Scottish Parliament following its formation in 1999. The UK Government could change that, and we support the Human Rights Consortium Scotland's calls for change.**

The Children's Wellbeing Bill, introduced to the UK Parliament in December 2024, provides some positive developments and **it is important that the Scottish Government works closely with its counterparts in Westminster to ensure that learning is shared and any opportunities for cross-border working are maximised.**

Sharing good practice to encourage progress

Every year, there are opportunities for different parts of the 'system' to keep up momentum on progress, at both a national and local level. National conferences and events — such as the Social Work Scotland conference, The Promise Scotland Stories of Change conference, the COSLA conference and the NHS conference — create chances for good practice, success, and learning to be highlighted and shared — helping to keep a focus on Scotland's ambition to keep the promise. Webinars and events in different local authority areas encourage cross-sector collaboration and change.

In considering this point, The Oversight Board has asked The Promise Scotland to support a gathering between the Scottish Social Services Council, higher and further education institutions, The Care Inspectorate and placement providers to bring focus to the issue of social work and social care education. Whilst it is not the job of The Promise Scotland to organise or facilitate such a thing in the longer term, we believe that it would be useful for the purpose of sharing ideas and practice and developing plans and strategies to ensure workforce training issues are more unified and cohesive. Scotland needs a well-trained workforce to keep the promise.

Everyone feels daunted from time to time when trying to make such a seismic change. Sharing our learning and bringing our focus back to children, young people, and their families helps to deliver hope and action. We call on everyone involved in keeping the promise to maximise these opportunities. The halfway marker on the journey to deliver the promise will prompt a host of events, local and national. Let's use them to redouble our efforts in a focussed manner and plan ahead to achieve the promise we have all made.

Calls to Action





From Halfway Section:

- All corporate parents must detail how they will keep the promise in their corporate parenting plans by the end of October 2025.
- The development of the route maps in Plan 24-30 must be supported by The Promise Scotland and completed by the end of 2025.
- The Promise Story of Progress should look at local progress through Children's Services Planning Partnerships and Community Planning Partnerships.
- Investment/disinvestment approaches need to be operationalised.
- A sustainable investment approach must replace short-term grant funding.

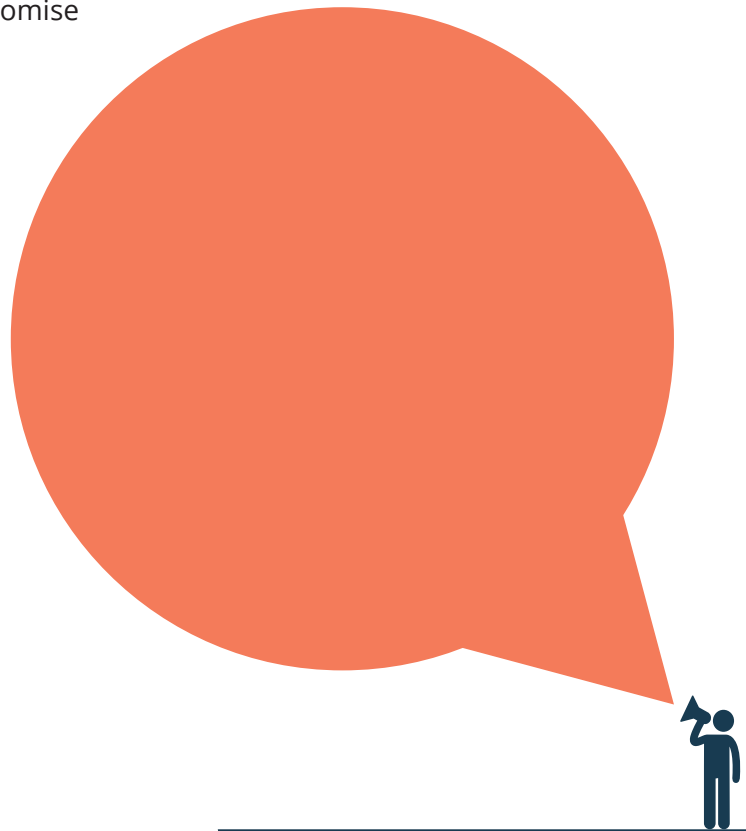
From Family Support Section:

- Scotland must address the imbalance of support and resource, including the difference between support for those experiencing foster care, formal and informal kinship care, and care at home.
- Funding must be long-term and trust-based, allowing organisations to focus on the provision of high-quality care and support.
- The recommendations of the *100 Days of Listening* work led by Staf and The Promise Scotland must be progressed as per Plan 24-30. This includes the production of a shared set of standards and principles that will guide systems and practice to support those moving on from care.
- The National Family Group Decision Making Steering Group *National Standards and Practice Guidance* must be embedded across Scotland.
- National Bodies must work collaboratively to streamline consultation and reporting, including sharing information to enable collaboration and avoid duplication.
- Where consultation is absolutely necessary, it needs to be led by voice, including ensuring that the voices of children, families and care experienced adults are truly heard and not repeatedly asked to share their views and experiences without seeing action.



From Workforce Section:

- The Scottish Government and COSLA must produce the Joint Workforce Improvement Plan that was due in autumn 2024 as a matter of urgency.
- Ways of working should be reviewed to ensure that people are able to focus on what they are there to do, to drive out duplication and wasted effort. For example, strategic identification and allocation of referrals to third sector agencies working in the same local authority could cut down waiting times.
- COSLA, the Scottish Government, Social Work Scotland, the Scottish Social Services Council and The Care Inspectorate should come together to focus on producing a unified workforce strategy that is aimed at keeping the promise by 2030.





About The Oversight Board

The Oversight Board was established in January 2021. We were recruited based on a set of agreed values reflecting those under which the Independent Care Review operated, and we continue to reflect and hold to those values in how we undertake our work:

- Committed to realising the vision of the Independent Care Review.
- Determined to support change.
- Brave, with a willingness to hold those with responsibility to account.
- Dynamic and flexible.
- Approachable.
- Compassionate, with a willingness and ability to listen carefully to alternative perspectives.
- Honest, with very high levels of personal integrity.

As a board, we have responsibility for the task of monitoring, tracking and reporting on Scotland's progress to keep the promise. There are real challenges in how we undertake our monitoring and reporting task and what information we use to check up on progress, but our commitment is to be honest while maintaining our belief that the task can be achieved.

In undertaking our role, we are supported by The Promise Scotland, a non-statutory company set up to support the work of change. The Promise Scotland has work underway that will support us in monitoring, tracking and reporting. We do not have governance responsibility for those projects, but the organisation helps us as we fulfil our role.

Board members

Anna Fowlie

Carrie McLaughlan

David Anderson Chair

Emma Brennan (joined January 2024)

Euan Currie

Jasmin-Kasaya Pilling

Jemma Kerr

Kelly Parry (joined January 2024)

Kezia Dugdale

Lisa Mason (joined January 2024)

Lorraine Moore (joined January 2024)

Maria McGill

Oisin King (joined January 2024)

Ruth Glassborow

Ryan McShane (joined January 2024)

Taliah Drayak

Ewan Aitken, Fiona Duncan, Dr Helen Whincup, Iain MacRitchie, Professor Morag Treanor, Neil Squires, Dr Patricia Watts, Sharon McGhee and Tracey McFall stepped down before this report was developed. We thank them immensely for their contributions to our previous reports and their legacy of insight, ideas and ways of working.

All members of The Oversight Board have a connection with the 'care system', whether that involves lived experience and/or expertise. You can see details of our financial and non-financial interests on our [Register of Interests](#). It is inevitable that there will times when those interests come into conflict with The Oversight Board's purpose — to report on Scotland's progress to keep the promise. We have a robust process to identify and manage conflicts in our meetings and in the writing of this report.



