



the oversight board

for the promise

Report FOUR | September 2026



People.



Progress. Delivery.

Contents

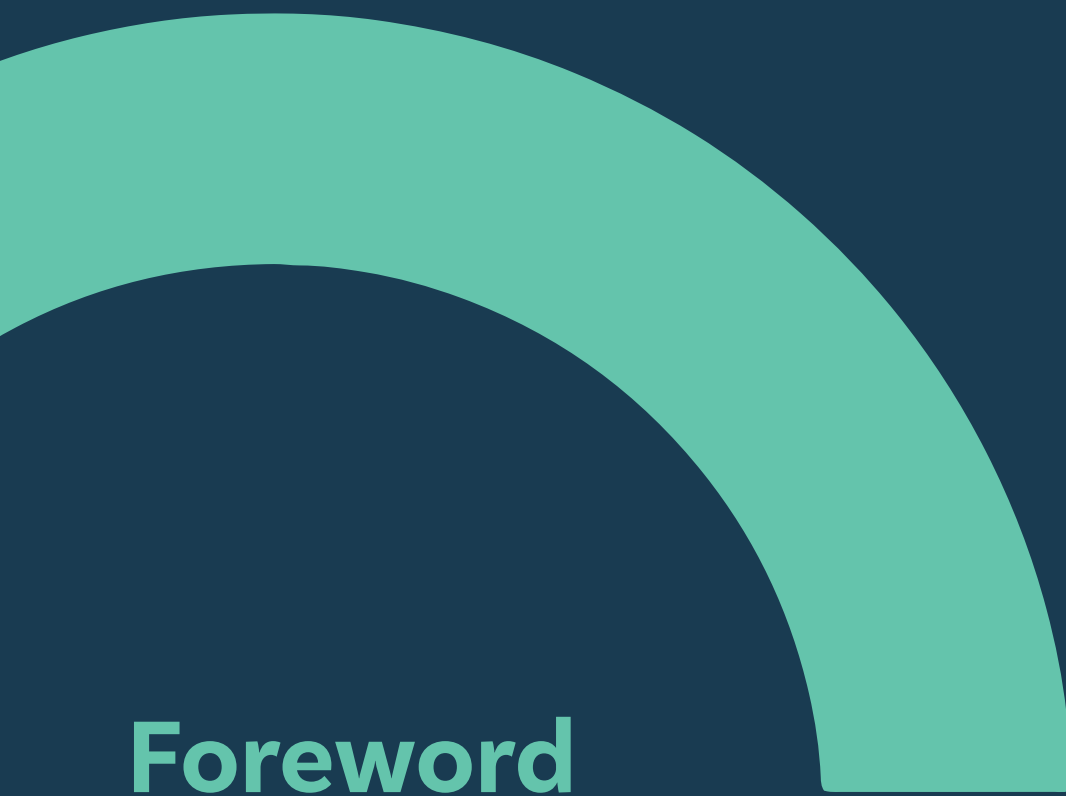
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Foreword

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**“Too much of
the promise
remains on
paper, not
in practice.”**





Foreword

Care experienced people told Scotland the truth. In 2020, Scotland promised that every baby, child and young person who needs care and support should grow up loved, safe and respected, with the relationships, stability and support they need to thrive, and that this promise would be kept by 2030. They did not do that so the country could become better at describing failure; they did it so care experienced people – now and in the future – would have different lives.

This report shows that Scotland has still not made that difference real enough, fast enough, or for enough people. **Too much of the promise remains on paper, not in practice**, with unnecessary barriers standing in the way of true care for those who need it. **Activity is not the same as action.**

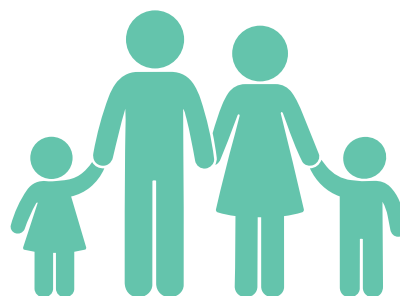
We know that relationships are central to success. Across Scotland, people are working hard, often in difficult conditions, to provide the care and support children and families need.

Partnership working allows services to function as they should, and long-term funding removes the jeopardy of repeatedly seeking money for the same essential support. But constant, unplanned change in an already complex landscape creates stress and uncertainty for a workforce carrying enormous pressure while trying to give people the support they need and are entitled to receive.

There are individuals, teams and organisations showing every day that change is possible, and we have heard examples of this repeatedly in our conversations. But it is not happening at the scale or pace required for Scotland to say it is keeping the promise. Indeed, we have heard views that make us question whether some areas will be able to make the necessary progress in time without significant intervention and support.

Legislation, plans, policy directives, meetings and good intentions all have their place. Scotland is well known for good ideas. But people do not live in strategies; they live in families, homes, schools and communities. If keeping the promise was like building a home, the foundations have been laid and some of the walls are up, but after six years the country should be much further forward.

“Activity is not the same as action.”



A house is not a home because the plans exist— it becomes one when there is food in the cupboards, heat in the radiators, security behind the door, and people who know they are safe, loved and belong. That is what delivery looks like in real life, and it is what Scotland now must make happen.

We are entering the final full parliamentary term before the 2030 deadline. This Parliament, this Government and those who now hold responsibility for delivery cannot regard the promise as somebody else’s commitment or another administration’s legacy. **If you are one of the many MSPs elected for the first time this year, the promise did not begin with you— but ensuring it is kept is now your responsibility.**

There is a real but narrowing opportunity for this Parliament to demonstrate what Scotland is capable of when it turns commitment into change in people’s lives. The promise remains Scotland’s clearest commitment to doing that, and this is the time to move faster, with greater urgency and a determined focus on what changes people’s lives.

There is no more important responsibility than securing the futures and wellbeing of Scotland’s children. For too many, change has already come too slowly. Parts of the promise remain unfulfilled in their lives and will continue to do so unless those with the power to act respond differently and with urgency. Scotland knows much of what is needed, and it also knows what happens when people receive the care and support they should be able to rely on: relationships strengthen, opportunities open up, families are better supported and the benefits reach well beyond one individual into communities and society.

It could and should have been much further on by now. **The next 6 to 18 months will determine whether the promise being kept remains possible.** By the time we report again, Scotland must be able to show visible progress in people’s lives: decisions changed, resources moved, barriers removed, and support reaching people earlier. If that does not happen, the remaining time will simply not be enough, and this narrowing opportunity to keep the promise by 2030 will have been lost.

Summary

**Report THREE
concluded that
Scotland was halfway
in time but not
halfway in progress
towards keeping
the promise
by 2030.**



Since then, Scotland has made some progress. Important legislation has been passed, services and approaches have developed, and there are places where children and families are experiencing the kind of support the promise envisaged. Scotland now has more of the legislation, structures, practice and delivery machinery needed to keep the promise.

But in important areas, too little has been done, action has taken too long, and some commitments have not been delivered at all. Elsewhere, significant work is underway but has not yet produced change at the scale or consistency required. The evidence available to us does not yet give confidence that the promise will be kept by 2030.

Good practice remains uneven. We have heard about effective partnerships, longer-term funding providing stability and workers being given the flexibility to build and protect relationships.

We have also heard about stretched teams, limited capacity and resources that do not match need.

The promise does not require services to look identical in every community. Variation in how support is organised can be desirable: communities differ and local services should be able to respond to local circumstances. But variation in whether children and families can obtain the help, relationships and rights they need is not.

That is particularly clear for children experiencing care at home. At the end of July 2025, 2,411 children were ‘looked after at home’, around one in five of all children who were experiencing formal care. **Scotland has important evidence about these children and their lives, including from inspection, education, research and lived experience. What it still lacks is a sufficiently current, connected and national understanding of what support individual children and families receive, how it varies, what difference it makes and what happens over time.**

The evidence does not show that children experiencing care at home can consistently rely on the support identified as necessary being available, timely and sustained. Scotland knows enough to act on that now while building the longer-term evidence it still lacks.

Voice and influence expose a related problem. **There is good participation work, but being asked for a view is not the same as having influence. People should be able to see what changed because they spoke.** Scotland still cannot show clearly enough whether lived experience is changing decisions or whether the people missing from existing evidence are being reached.

The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 is an important development. It creates new rights and duties that now have to become real in people’s lives. Implementation work has been happening, but at the time of this report there is still no clear, published, costed and sequenced route from the Act to delivery.

Many of the practical questions about workforce, services, guidance, funding and responsibility were foreseeable while the legislation was being developed. A right that Parliament creates must become a right people can use.

There has been important progress on kinship care. Changes to financial support and provisions in the 2026 Act provide a stronger basis for change.

The immediate task now is to make that progress real for families. Families should be able to point to practical differences in the help, information, financial support, housing and relationships that sustain family life.

Prevention remains one of the clearest areas where ambition and delivery do not yet match. Whole Family Wellbeing Funding has supported valuable work, but the investment delivered over the last Parliament was far below the original £500 million commitment and there is much less evidence of the wider shift in budgets, services and decision-making than was intended.

Scotland has committed to prevention repeatedly for many years and does so again through current public service reform. The issue is no longer a lack of agreement about the direction of travel. It is making that way of working normal.

Across all of this, the workforce remains central. Social workers, teachers, health staff, third sector workers, carers and others are being asked to deliver substantial change in difficult conditions. Scotland needs enough skilled people, in the places they are needed, with the time, support and services required to do their jobs well. Responsibility for creating those conditions sits with those who decide resources, staffing, priorities and how services are organised.

The promise was not made to an average child or a national statistic. It was made to every baby, child and young person who needs care and support, to their families, and to people whose experience of care continues into adulthood. National improvement is not enough if children in particular places, circumstances or types of care remain consistently less likely to receive what they need.

The opportunity to keep the promise by 2030 has narrowed considerably since Report THREE. **By the time we report again, there must be substantially more evidence of agreed change being delivered and support reaching people earlier and more consistently. The remaining period has to be about making that happen.**



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TO A NATIONAL STATISTIC.**

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child and
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***who needs care and support, to their
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Introduction

The Oversight Board exists to independently report on Scotland's progress in keeping the promise. More than half of our members bring direct experience of care, alongside experience across children's services, law, health, education, research, therapeutic support and public policy. Our role is to examine the evidence, recognise where change is happening, identify where it is not, and report clearly on what needs to happen next.

We report to the Scottish Parliament and to the care experienced community. Our reports are also intended for those whose decisions, resources and leadership determine whether the promise is kept, including the workforce across Scotland. **Board members are part of that workforce too: each of us has roles and responsibilities beyond our board role that contribute, in different ways, to keeping the promise.** It is important that we recognise the pressures on those doing the work while remaining clear about where responsibility and accountability sit.

We do not speak for every care experienced person, nor could we. **Our assessment has been informed by engagement across Scotland: with care experienced people, workers delivering support, managers, senior leaders and chief executives, local and national organisations, third sector bodies, inspectors, researchers and others responsible for delivery.** We do not treat any one perspective as the whole picture. Where evidence differs, our role is to examine those differences and reach an independent judgement.

The promise was made so that every baby, child and young person who needs care and support can grow up loved, safe and respected, with the relationships, stability and support they need to thrive. It also carries responsibilities to families and to people whose experience of care continues into adulthood.

Plans, legislation, funding, structures and implementation all matter and can represent real progress. But the promise ultimately has to be judged by whether those changes improve people's lives. Scotland therefore needs to be able to show not only what it has put in place, but whether support is reaching people, whether barriers are reducing and whether experience is changing.

Strong support in one place does not tell us what is happening elsewhere, and national averages can hide very different experiences. **Where important evidence is genuinely missing, Scotland should close the gap. Where enough is already known, lack of perfect evidence must not become a reason to wait.**

Report THREE marked the midpoint to 2030 and concluded that Scotland was halfway in time, but not halfway in progress. Report FOUR examines what has changed since then, what the evidence can and cannot tell us about people's experiences, where support and delivery still fall short, and what now has to happen if the promise has any chance of being kept by 2030.

As with our previous reports, **Report FOUR** combines an assessment of overall progress towards 2030 with closer examination of areas where the evidence suggests particular concern.

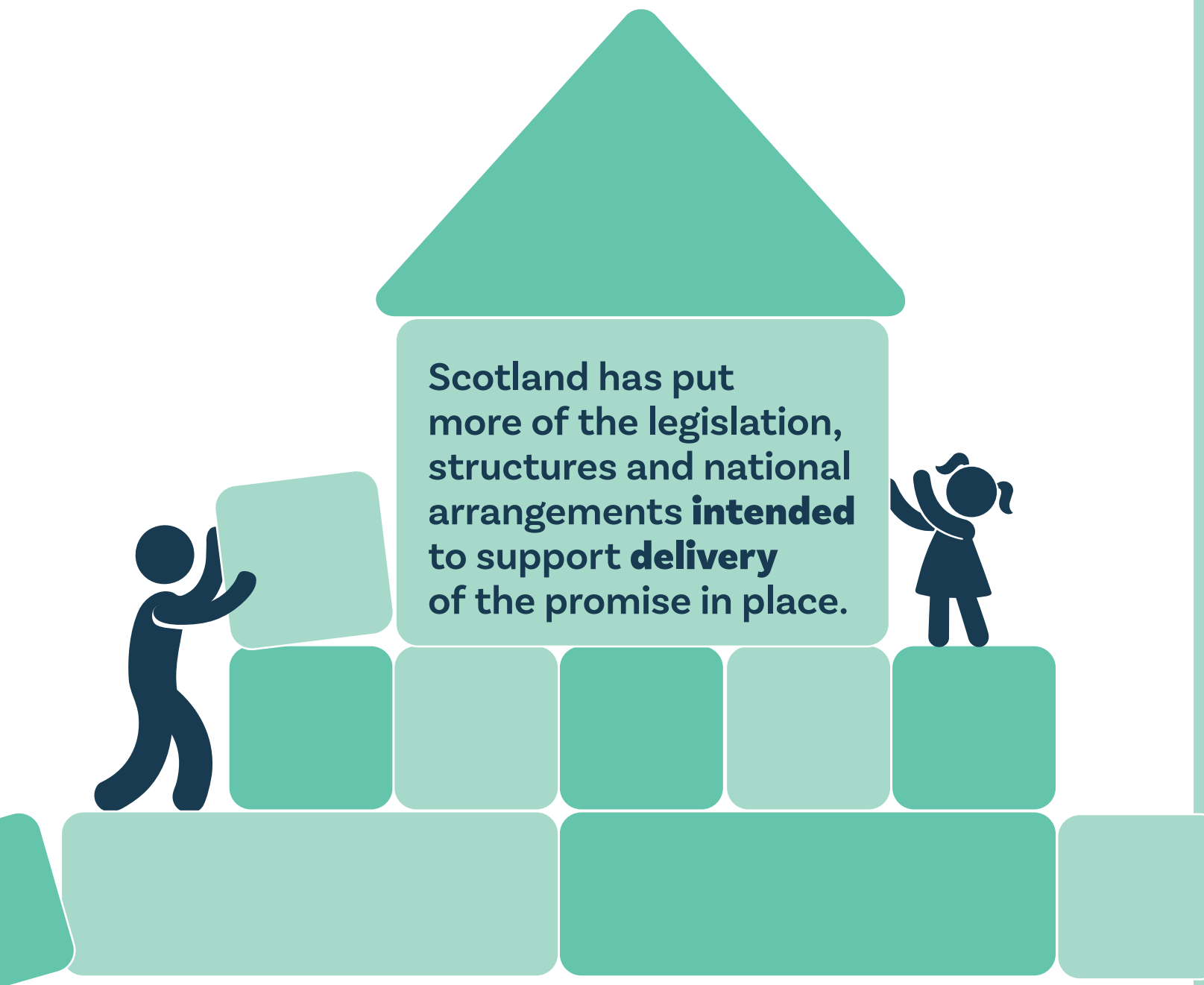
Report FOUR looks particularly closely at two areas. The first is children experiencing care at home, where being known to services does not always mean a child and family receive the support they need. The second is voice and influence: not simply whether people are asked what they think, but whether what they say shapes decisions and changes what happens in their lives.

2020

2030



1. Where Scotland stands now: what has changed since Report THREE and what progress actually means





Scotland's difficulty has too often been turning plans into the normal way government works.

Scotland is not starting from scratch in understanding how public services need to change. Fifteen years ago, the **Christie Commission** called for public services to prevent problems earlier, work across organisational boundaries and organise support around people rather than institutions. **The promise requires much of the same.** The Scottish Government's new civil service reform plan, *Serving Scotland*, again commits the civil service to stronger delivery, less bureaucracy, better use of evidence and more collaboration. The fact that these principles need to be restated matters.

That leaves a clear delivery gap: some agreed commitments are still outstanding, some action has come too slowly, and important developments have yet to translate into consistent change in people's lives.

Programme for Government 2026–31

Published as this report was being finalised, the 2026–31 Programme for Government reinforces several of the central conclusions of this report. For well over a decade, Scotland has committed to more preventative, joined-up public services and to shifting resources towards earlier support. The promise made those ambitions specific to children and families, but Audit Scotland has since shown that the planning and delivery needed to turn them into reality have been too weak and too slow.

The new Programme for Government again puts prevention, whole family support, and workforce, data and investment reform at the centre of public service reform, while the First Minister has renewed the commitment to keep the promise by 2030. The proposed Scottish Prevention Investment Framework could help deliver the shift in resources the Board has repeatedly called for, but only if resources actually move with it.

The commitment to a new Implementation Strategy also matters. The Scottish Government has had two previous implementation plans, but neither provided the clarity needed about delivery, responsibility, resources and impact. The new plan must therefore do more than restate the ambition or describe existing activity. It must make clear what will change, who is responsible for making it happen and how Scotland will know

whether it is making a difference.

For a child or family, what matters is whether useful support is there when it is needed. The Programme for Government strengthens the conclusion of this report: that Scotland does not lack ambition, evidence or analysis. The task now is to turn what is already known into consistent, demonstrable change at the pace required to keep the promise by 2030.



Legislation and its implementation

The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 is one of the clearest developments since we last reported. It creates important new rights and responsibilities, including a lifelong right of access to independent advocacy. Its passage also exposed serious concerns about affordability, capacity and deliverability. COSLA (the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) and Social Work Scotland raised those concerns publicly, and we have heard the anxiety behind them directly from people working in social work, health and the third sector.

At the time of this report, we have not seen a published implementation plan providing sufficient clarity about how the new Act will be sequenced, funded and delivered.

Implementation work has been taking place, but it did not result in a clear route from legislation to delivery being published at Royal Assent.

Not every detail could have been settled before Parliament passed the Bill.

But workforce requirements, service capacity, guidance, funding, dependencies and responsibilities could, and should, have been developed alongside legislation rather than only afterwards.

A separate independent review of the legislation governing children's care, led by Professor Kenneth Norrie, is also underway and is due to report in February 2027.

Its emerging work includes kinship care, accommodation under section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and permanence. The review intends to test practical solutions as well as identify problems. **Recommendations arriving in 2027 will need a clear route into decisions and implementation if they are to contribute to change before 2030.**

Elections, parliamentary recesses, budget rounds, consultations and changes in personnel are normal features of government. Babies grow, children move through school, families can move towards crisis and young people leave care throughout them. Where need is known and action has been agreed, government must maintain momentum through its own cycles.

Delay will sometimes be unavoidable. What should not be acceptable is delay without consequence. When agreed action slips, responsibility for removing the barrier, getting delivery back on track and, wherever possible, recovering lost time must be clear.

National leadership and accountability

There has been some change in national leadership. First Minister John Swinney has placed senior oversight of the promise with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic, Màiri McAllan, supported by a dedicated Minister. The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform, Ivan McKee, has told us that services need to become more preventative and joined up, that short-term pressures should not displace the reform required to keep the promise, and that resources need to shift towards relational and preventative support. The board will monitor this against tangible progress.

Senior political and official leadership now needs to be candid about what can be delivered, what is holding delivery back and what needs to change. There is greater recognition of the need for cross-portfolio working, but delivery has not changed quickly enough to match it. Housing, poverty, education, health, justice, social work and family support continue to be dealt with through separate budgets and processes despite being experienced together in people's lives.

This has not consistently been how government has worked so far. **Our experience during the passage of the 2026 Act illustrates the problem. Important concerns about delivery were not always worked through early enough with the organisations expected to implement the legislation, and on Family Group Decision Making a stronger position was reached only after sustained discussion and amendment late in the Bill. Communication and engagement that come too late do more than make relationships difficult: they leave practical problems unresolved for longer, consume time and can hinder progress.**

With fewer than four years remaining, Scotland cannot afford to make change harder through the way government itself works.

Serving Scotland is therefore welcome, but it should not be read as a description of how government already operates. It is a commitment to work differently. On the promise, that must mean involving the people responsible for delivery early enough to shape workable solutions, surfacing disagreement before it becomes delay, working across portfolios where people's lives cross departmental boundaries, and changing course quickly when existing processes are getting in the way. The measure of the plan will be whether those differences can now be seen in practice.

Workforce and local delivery

The National Social Work Agency is an important development since Report THREE. It begins, however, with unfinished business: the Joint Workforce Improvement Plan that Report THREE called for urgently was not delivered. The Agency therefore starts with work already overdue.

The Independent Strategic Advisor Fiona Duncan is also engaging with all 32 local authority areas to understand what is working, where and why, and what is proving harder. Local authorities and government must work together to act on her advice.

Our own local engagement shows why that matters. We have heard accounts in which commitment to the promise is not the issue, but budgets, workforce capacity and available services do not match the ambition. The lessons learned from local areas now need to move quickly into decisions about resources, workforce, and what national government can do differently.

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LOCAL
AUTHORITY
AREAS



1

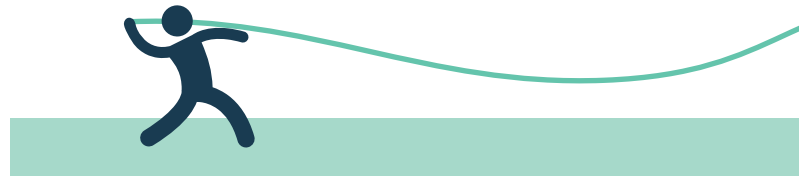
What is being done?

2

How do we know?

3

What difference is it making?

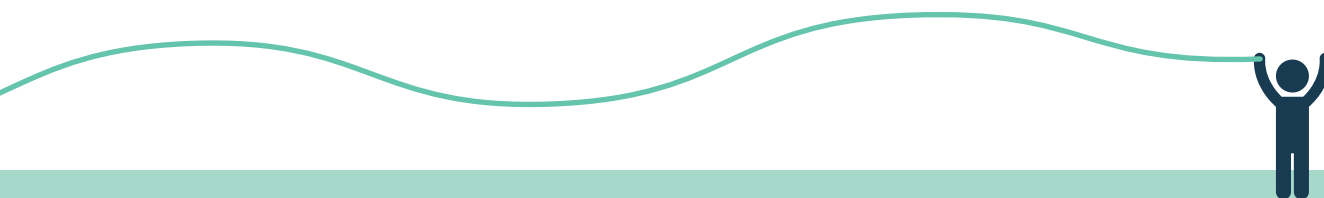


Data and evidence

There has been further work on data and evidence. The Promise Data and Evidence Group has a new workplan intended to strengthen quantitative and qualitative evidence and longer-term data infrastructure. The Scottish Government's 2026–29 Areas of Research Interest also now identify specific questions about children experiencing care at home, including outcomes, consistency of practice and support, and what helps families achieve greater stability, safety and wellbeing.

The new work recognises important gaps that remain unresolved. The questions are clearer; the answers are not yet there. At this point in a ten-year commitment, Scotland still cannot reliably connect activity, support and individual experience over time well enough to know where the promise is being kept, where it is not and why.

Scotland holds considerable data and is now doing more to improve how it is used. The next step is not simply better measurement. Evidence has to lead to changes in decisions, support and delivery when it shows children and families are being missed.



Our recent scrutiny of premature deaths exposed a similar weakness. Scotland holds substantial information across health, justice, homelessness and public services, yet care experience is not routinely visible across those datasets. **Better linkage could help identify where support fell away and where opportunities to intervene were missed. Collecting information without using it to change what happens next is not enough.**

Funding and investment

Whole Family Wellbeing Funding was intended to help shift support towards families earlier, with an original commitment of £500 million over the 2021–26 parliamentary term. **Valuable work has resulted from the funding, but the scale and timing of investment were very different from that commitment. Government’s own evaluation also shows that the harder whole-system changes around leadership, workforce, culture and use of budgets have been less developed.**

Some funded work is working. What remains incomplete is the wider transformation that funding was meant to help unlock.

Education and housing both show why investment has to be followed through to people’s lives. There has been dedicated funding for care experienced pupils and new preventative investment in homelessness, yet significant inequalities and risks remain. **New money becomes meaningful for the promise when it changes who receives support, reduces avoidable harm and gives children and young people greater stability.**

There is also a more hopeful picture. Timely practical help, stable housing, good support at school and trusted relationships can change the direction of a life.

We have seen strong partnerships and workers with enough flexibility to respond well. Good practice gives Scotland something practical to build from. It should not depend on geography, luck or an exceptional worker finding a way around barriers that should not be there.

2. Experiencing Care at Home

A child is 'looked after at home' when they live at their usual family residence with their parents or carers, but they are legally subject to a supervision requirement or Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO) with no condition of residence issued through the Children's Hearings System. The intention is that children can remain safely within their families while receiving the help they need.

Where a child can remain safely with their family, experiencing care at home should bring whatever practical help, specialist support and trusted relationships are needed to make family life safer, more stable and better able to meet that child's needs.

By the end of July 2025 there were 2,411 children in Scotland who were experiencing care at home— around one in five of all children who were 'looked after'. **This is not a small number of children. Their experiences should tell Scotland something fundamental about whether being known to services results in the help a child and their family need.**

Scotland has important evidence about these children. Inspection, education data, research, advocacy and what children, families and workers have told us demonstrated good practice and significant problems. The Care Inspectorate found strong relationships and committed staff in some areas, and earlier Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) research found evidence of improvement for some children subject to compulsory supervision orders and living at home.

That positive evidence matters. But it's too early in the Care Inspectorate's current inspection programme to draw firm national conclusions about outcomes. Its Review of findings from the

joint inspection programme 2021–2025 identified inconsistent access to the right support at the right time, disruption caused by staffing changes, variable access to advocacy and too much reliance on process information rather than evidence of the difference services were actually making for children and families across the partnerships reviewed.

Taken together, the evidence leaves a clear concern: children experiencing care at home cannot yet rely consistently on support identified as necessary being available when it is needed and sustained for as long as required. Nor does Scotland yet have sufficiently current, connected and national understanding of what support individual children and families receive, how it varies, what difference it makes and what happens over time.

That evidence gap is serious. It is not a reason to wait. Scotland already knows enough to act.

What needs to change now

A child can have a plan that correctly identifies what needs to change and still not receive the help needed to make that change possible. A social worker cannot provide a mental health service that does not exist, create suitable housing or remove a waiting list simply by recording the need in a plan.

Where support identified as necessary is unavailable, delayed or inaccessible, someone must be responsible for acting on that problem. The response must change rather than allowing the same unmet need to be recorded again at the next review.

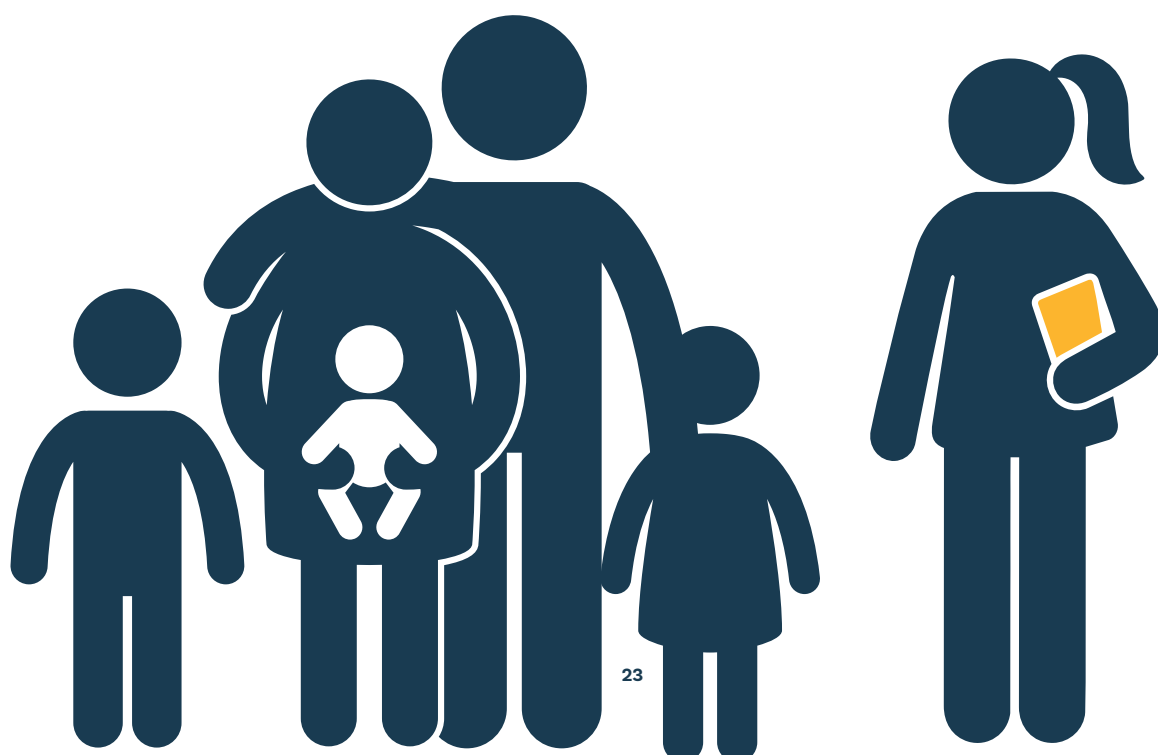
Families should receive the right support at the right time. When they do not, difficulties can escalate into crisis and opportunities to help earlier can be lost.

One organisation described the need to “poverty-proof” planning for children experiencing care at home. Where poverty is affecting a child’s safety, stability, education or family life, the plan around that child should show what is being done about it.

Poverty does not explain every difficulty a family experiences and recognising its impact should never be used to minimise harm to a child.

But material circumstances affect what families can change and sustain; leaving those pressures untouched can make the change being asked of parents far harder to achieve.

Education provides one of the clearest warnings that more needs to happen. **In 2024/25, pupils ‘looked after at home’ had an attendance rate of 69.8%— the lowest among children in any looked after setting.** Attendance matters, but that figure cannot explain why an individual child is absent or tell us whether they feel safe, feel that they belong at school, or are getting the support they need.



WHERE THE STATUTORY CRITERIA ARE MET, A PLAN IS PUT IN PLACE AND USED TO CO-ORDINATE THE SUPPORT THEY NEED.

When attendance begins to break down, the reasons should be understood quickly and support around that child should change accordingly.

For children experiencing care at home, difficulties with attendance, exclusion, reduced timetables, unmet additional support needs, distress, transport or pressures at home should lead to a joined-up response around the child. Children experiencing care at home are eligible for Care Experienced Children and Young People funding, but nationally we cannot see clearly enough how much of that support reaches them specifically or what difference it makes.

‘Looked after’ children are presumed in law to have additional support needs unless assessed otherwise, and education authorities must consider whether each child requires a Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP). For children experiencing care at home whose education is already showing signs of difficulty, that responsibility should be visible in practice. Scotland should be able to show that these children are being properly considered for a CSP.

Children need someone they trust who stays alongside them. Every child experiencing care at home should be able to rely on a consistent trusted relationship. Where that relationship is not already present, a mentor, trusted adult or equivalent support should be offered proactively rather than depend on a child or family knowing to ask for it. Whether and how a child takes up that offer should remain their choice. It should not depend on geography, waiting lists or short-term project funding.

Independent advocacy needed to be available early enough to matter. Children needed to understand why people were involved in their lives, what support should follow ‘looked after’



status, their rights and what they could do if something in their plan did not happen. The Care Inspectorate found that independent advocacy was not yet consistently well embedded across the partnerships it reviewed locally.

The 2026 Act creates important new routes to expand advocacy, including earlier access for children involved in the Children's Hearings system and a lifelong right for care experienced people. That is significant progress, but it will only close the gap if the new rights are implemented with the capacity and services needed to make them usable.

Children experiencing care at home are also entitled to the attention and support of Scotland's corporate parents.

Those statutory duties include being alert to matters affecting wellbeing, assessing need, promoting children's interests and helping them access opportunities, services and support. Responsibility therefore extends beyond social work. For older young people, corporate parents should also use their wider functions, including education, training and employment opportunities; approaches such as the Family Firm show how that responsibility can be made practical.

Earlier family-led support

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), a family-led approach that brings together relatives and other people important to a child to help agree a plan, is one area where something important has changed since Report THREE. The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 strengthens its place in law. Where FGDM services are available, children and families can request them; local authorities will have duties around awareness and information; national guidance is required; and provision will be reported nationally.

We strongly welcome this. We have supported FGDM over a long period and pressed for it to be given greater weight. The stronger provisions emerged only during the later stages of the Bill, after sustained discussion and amendment.

Government could have engaged earlier and reached that position sooner. The eventual outcome is positive, but the route to it reflects concerns raised elsewhere in this report about communication and ways of working. Where there is substantial experience and evidence behind an approach, government should be able to engage with it earlier, resolve disagreements and avoid losing valuable time.

The experience of FGDM also shows that legislation alone will not make it work. Where it is well embedded, social workers have described it as a natural way of working with families rather than a separate service considered only at a particular stage. Achieving this requires workforce confidence, local relationships and sufficient capacity. The Act does not itself guarantee that FGDM will be available in every local area.

The implementation task is therefore to make effective family-led support something families can reasonably access across Scotland, not merely to regulate how a request is handled where a service already exists.

Stable, well connected family support can also allow social workers to work differently. **We heard the practical example of workers able to go home on a Friday knowing that trusted support remained available to families over the weekend.** Sustained third sector and community support can provide continuity for families and reduce pressure on statutory services.

Local authorities also make choices about priorities, commissioning and which forms of support are protected. Financial pressure is real, but where support is reduced, delayed or withdrawn, the impact on children and families cannot be invisible.

Moving resources towards earlier support requires real choices about money. Scotland cannot withdraw necessary crisis provision and assume prevention will immediately replace it. **For a period, essential crisis responses and earlier support will both need to be funded.** If money does not move earlier and faster, Scotland will continue paying for crises while talking about prevention.

Compulsory measures

We have also heard concerns about the timing and use of Compulsory Supervision Orders (CSOs).

Some practitioners and organisations have told us that, in some circumstances, a CSO has helped secure support that was otherwise difficult or impossible to obtain. We have also heard examples where compulsory intervention has come only after opportunities for earlier support have already been missed. We do not have evidence to say how widespread either experience is.

This is not a new concern. Hearings for Children examined the relationship between early support, referrals and compulsory measures, and the Scottish Government accepted recommendations intended to strengthen coordination and understanding of voluntary support. The issue for Report FOUR is whether that work is now changing what children and families experience.

Compulsory measures will sometimes be necessary to protect a child. But ordinary practical and specialist support, advocacy and

trusted relationships should not become easier to obtain only once a family has moved further into crisis or compulsion, or we risk building a system that only responds once things have gone wrong, rather than one that helps early.

This is also relevant to the current debate about how quickly decisions should be made about children's long-term care. Research is clear about the harm caused by delay, but also about the need for parents to receive timely support to make change. A timetable for a family without timely support from the state risks solving one problem while creating another.

Understanding what changes lives

Scotland needs stronger long-term evidence about the lives of children living at home with significant identified need and social work involvement, including children experiencing care at home. Children can move into and out of different legal statuses over time; the evidence should follow their lives rather than treating legal status as a fixed boundary.

That work should connect circumstances, support and legal status with education, health, housing, relationships, advocacy and what happens over time, including experiences of poverty. It should examine support before, during and after 'looked after' status and whether children with comparable needs receive different help depending on their legal route.

Scotland already knows the value of following children's experiences and outcomes over time. It has done this in other parts of the care system, but there is no equivalent depth of understanding for children experiencing care at home.

This gap also limits the Promise Story of Progress. Scotland can report numbers and aspects of education, legal status and service involvement,

but not consistently what support children and families received, whether it arrived when needed, how it was experienced or what happened over time.

The Scottish Government has now identified important research questions about children experiencing care at home. That recognition is necessary, but late. A research priority does not by itself commission or fund the longitudinal work required, and identifying the questions should not delay the work beginning.

Better evidence must run alongside action. Where support is already known to be unavailable, late or inadequate, Scotland should act now.

What needs to change

Scotland needs to act on what it already knows while building the evidence it still lacks.

For children living at home with significant identified need, the practical question is whether the help identified as necessary actually reaches them and their families. Legal status may affect duties and routes to support, but need does not disappear because a child falls outside the looked after category.

The Scottish Government and local authorities must make sure that children and families receive timely practical and specialist support, advocacy and trusted relationships where needed, and that somebody takes responsibility when support identified in a plan is not available.

Alongside that action, the Scottish Government must commission funded longitudinal work capable of following children over time, including children experiencing care at home, with staged findings early enough to influence support before 2030.

**SCOTLAND
NEEDS TO
ACT ON WHAT
IT ALREADY
KNOWS WHILE
BUILDING THE
EVIDENCE IT
STILL LACKS.**

**EVERY CHILD
SHOULD BE
OFFERED A
CONSISTENT
MENTOR,
TRUSTED ADULT
OR EQUIVALENT
RELATIONSHIP.**



3. Voice, influence and lived experience

The promise exists because care experienced people, children and families told Scotland what needed to change. They spoke about love, relationships, trust, being listened to and understood, having people stay alongside them, and getting the support that allows them to feel safe, stable, included and able to thrive.

One young person from our consultation said they felt ‘listened to, but not always understood’. Being given an opportunity to speak is not the same as being understood, and being understood means little if nothing changes afterwards.

For six years, the responsibility has been to turn what Scotland was told into change. That has happened for some, but nowhere near consistently enough, and for some people the point at which help could have made the greatest difference has already passed.

There are signs of culture and practice changing. Relationship-based, trauma-informed and rights-focused practice is more visible, and recent Care Inspectorate work has found trusting relationships and meaningful involvement among the strengths of better practice. In South Ayrshire, for example, young people influenced the language used for their own review meetings, moving away from institutional terminology towards meetings named around the individual child.

But Scotland still cannot show clearly enough, for enough people, whether what they say changes decisions, brings the resources they need or alters the support they receive.

What happens after people speak?

There is already a substantial body of evidence about what care experienced people have told Scotland. **New children and families will always need opportunities to be heard as circumstances change. The problem is not that Scotland should stop listening; it is that people should not be repeatedly asked to tell stories without being able to see what happened because they spoke.**

The existing evidence does not allow us to answer that, so we undertook some direct engagement ourselves. Young people spoke about trusted relationships, belonging, being taken seriously and having what they said acted upon. Some described the frustration and trauma of repeatedly explaining personal experiences.

Their contributions helped us, but the fact that we needed to undertake this work forms part of our findings. Scotland should already be much better able to show whether children and young people feel heard and whether what they say affects what happens to them. **The issue now is not whether Scotland listens. It is whether participation has consequence.**

We heard about a grandmother caring for a child in kinship care who asked for support that would allow her to return to work. It did not arrive until a charity stepped in.

Third sector organisations and others working alongside families have also told us about practical help not being available when it was needed, including where responses were constrained by available resources.

A child or family can be heard and understood, but that means little if what they have said cannot get them the help they need.

Advocacy and making rights real

Advocacy can help people understand their rights, express what matters to them and challenge decisions. Provision and legal rights have developed since the Independent Care Review, but access remains inconsistent.

We do not need to prescribe one model. People need effective support to express their views and exercise their rights, with independent advocacy available where needed and trusted relationships respected.

I'M LISTENED TO BUT I'M NOT ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD.



Who Cares? Scotland's advocacy evidence shows that the issues people bring span relationships, moves, education, finance, health and wellbeing, dissatisfaction with services and legal concerns. Children under 16 'looked after at home' formed the largest single care-setting group among the children and young people it supported.

This shows how closely care experience is connected to housing, education, relationships, money and health. **Advocacy can help someone understand and exercise their rights, but it cannot provide a service that does not exist or create capacity that is not there.** If advocacy repeatedly identifies the same barriers, that must lead to decisions about funding, services and capacity. Otherwise people may be better able to describe what they need and challenge what is happening, without the system being any more able to respond.

Whose experience can Scotland see?

There is no single care experienced voice. Children, adults, families and carers can experience the same services differently and reach different conclusions about what should change. Organisations working alongside them can disagree too. Our responsibility is to hear those differences, assess the evidence and reach our own independent conclusions, without pretending there is agreement where there is not.

We also need to consider who is not being reached. Babies and younger children require different approaches, as may disabled and neurodivergent people. Children experiencing care at home, children close to entering care, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people, care experienced adults and people with little connection to formal

services may also be missed by established participation methods.

Some young people we engaged with were unsure what 'care experience' meant or how the promise related to them. That should not become another burden placed on children.

They should have clear information and access to advocacy where needed, but a child should not have to understand which definition applies, which budget pays or which organisation is responsible before support arrives. Those are adult responsibilities.

For babies, listening cannot mean asking for an expressed opinion. Adults need to understand their communication, development, attachment, distress and wellbeing and act in time to make a difference.

The promise was made to each and every child.

Changes in national averages cannot tell Scotland that it has succeeded if some children remain absent from the evidence or continue to experience something very different.

Scotland still cannot show clearly enough what changes

The weakness in the evidence is recognised beyond us. One local authority told us that its existing performance measures could not capture voice and lived experience well enough. The Care Inspectorate has also found that partnerships needed to improve how they understood the impact of services and how children's views influenced wider planning.

If the way Scotland gathers information cannot show whether people influence decisions, participation can look stronger on paper than it feels in people's lives.

We have also heard concerns about changes to local arrangements for children's rights and participation. Change in how a service is organised is not necessarily a problem. But where those arrangements change, authorities must be able to explain how children will continue to have their rights upheld, access independent support and influence decisions about their lives.

Who Cares? Scotland's advocacy evidence points to another weakness in how the picture is assembled. The issues people bring do not arrive in neat categories: moves affect relationships and education; housing and finance affect stability; health and wellbeing affect every part of daily life. Yet much of Scotland's information about those experiences is still held separately by different services and on different systems.

People do not experience housing, education, health, poverty, relationships and care as separate datasets. Scotland should not try to understand their lives that way.

National statistics cannot on their own tell Scotland whether the lives and experiences of care experienced babies, children, young people and adults are improving. **Keeping the promise requires understanding the lives behind those numbers.**

The Promise Story of Progress is intended to bring together national information, organisational evidence and the experience of the care community. Important parts of that picture are still being developed. The Promise Data and Evidence Group is now working on quantitative gaps, qualitative evidence and longer-term infrastructure, while the Scottish Government has identified further research priorities for 2026–29.

That work is necessary, but Scotland cannot allow measurement itself to become the end point. Some questions can be answered now from evidence already held; others require funded longer-term work.

There will always be more to learn.

The balance now needs to move decisively from building the means to know towards routinely using evidence in decisions, scrutiny and delivery.

We have had to assemble parts of this picture from lived experience, the workforce, local authorities, charities, researchers, national organisations and scrutiny bodies. We can identify what that evidence shows and what remains unknown; responsibility for creating the national evidence base does not sit with an independent oversight board.





Seeing the lives of children experiencing care at home

Our call for a connected longitudinal programme is not a request for another research project sitting apart from people's lives. **Scotland needs to follow children experiencing care at home over time and connect what they say and experience with the support they receive and what is known about education, housing, poverty, health, relationships, advocacy and legal status.** Among those under 16 supported in the Who Cares? Scotland data considered for this report, **28% were 'looked after at home', the largest single group supported.** That is not a national prevalence estimate, but it reinforces the significance of this group within advocacy demand.

Existing lived experience and advocacy evidence should form part of that picture rather than remaining separate from administrative data, and learning must emerge early enough to change support for children growing up now.

This principle extends well beyond children experiencing care at home. Unless Scotland can see and hear evidence of change in the lives of people with care experience themselves, it cannot credibly say that the promise is being kept.

Better evidence must never become an excuse to wait where enough is already known. Its purpose is to show who is being missed, understand what is making a difference and expose where decisions, services or resources need to change.

What needs to happen?

Where Scotland seeks further views, that work should build on what is already known and be clear about why new engagement is needed, what it can influence and what happened as a result.

Where a decision does not change, people should be told why.

Care experienced people have already given Scotland an enormous amount, sharing personal experiences because they believed doing so could make things better for those who came after them. **Scotland will always need to listen as circumstances change, but listening cannot substitute for acting on what has already been heard.**

“People will know they were heard when what they said changes what happens in their lives.”

4. What wider delivery tells us



“The gap between national ambition and delivery is often carried by the workforce.”

Report THREE called for greater pace, clearer responsibility, stronger implementation and a visible shift in resources towards prevention. Since then, Scotland has put more of the machinery for delivery in place and some of that work has been necessary but on its own it is far from enough.

Across the evidence, the problem is not one thing. Some commitments have not been delivered; some action has come too late; elsewhere significant work is underway but has yet to change what people experience consistently.

For years, government, local government, the third sector and others have broadly agreed on the need for earlier support, collaboration, strong relationships, a supported workforce, better use of evidence and resources directed towards need. Scotland now needs to turn that broad agreement into delivery.

Prevention, investment and working differently

Whole Family Wellbeing Funding was intended to help shift resources towards earlier support. The Scottish Government committed £500 million over the 2021–26 Parliament, but the investment delivered within that period was far below the original commitment.

The funding has supported valuable preventative work. Government’s own evaluation also shows that the harder change – reorganising services, leadership, workforce, culture and budgets so earlier family support becomes the normal response – remains incomplete.

Scotland has already agreed ten National Principles of Holistic Whole Family Support. They describe support that should be:

NATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF HOLISTIC WHOLE FAMILY SUPPORT	
NON-STIGMATISING	WHOLE FAMILY
NEEDS BASED	ASSETS AND COMMUNITY BASED
TIMELY AND SUSTAINABLE	PROMOTED AND EASY TO ACCESS
TAKING ACCOUNT OF FAMILIES' VOICES	COLLABORATIVE AND SEAMLESS
SKILLED AND SUPPORTED WORKFORCE	UNDERPINNED BY CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The issue is no longer agreeing what good whole family support should look like. It is whether families can rely on support being delivered in this way.

From April 2027, current programmes are due to come together through new Whole Family Support arrangements. Bringing programmes together should help. But administrative integration will not be enough if budgets, responsibilities and decision making remain divided. Families will experience integrated support only if the decisions behind it become integrated too.

The Scottish Government has committed repeatedly to prevention. It must now demonstrate where resources have actually moved, what support has been built or protected and what that has changed for children and families.

The workforce and the reality of implementation

The gap between national ambition and delivery is often carried by the workforce. People are trying to make the promise real while dealing with high workloads, vacancies, insecure funding, administrative demands and services that are not always available when children and families need them.

Responsibility for those conditions does not sit with the individual worker. It sits with those who determine resources, staffing, priorities and how services are organised.

The shortage of suitable care is an immediate example of what happens when capacity does not match need. **In June 2026, all 32 Chief Social Work Officers described an acute shortage of suitable homes and carers for children who could not remain with their families.** The Scottish Government’s Residential Childcare Reference Group has since recorded occasions when available placements were inappropriate and the appropriate placement was not available, and noted the impact of the fostering crisis on residential care.

Having placements somewhere in the system is not enough. Concerted effort must now ensure the right kinship, foster, residential or specialist care has to be available for the child who needs it, when they need it. Otherwise, decisions intended to protect that child cannot reliably be made real.

That becomes more important with implementation of the 2026 Act. It creates important new rights and duties, but serious concerns were raised during its passage about affordability, capacity and deliverability. Those concerns do not diminish the rights Parliament has created. They increase the responsibility on government to ensure those rights can actually be exercised.

A right without the workforce, funding, guidance and services needed to deliver it risks widening the gap between what Scotland promises and what people experience. It can also place additional expectations on people already trying to deliver change in difficult circumstances.

The National Social Work Agency provides a new route to understand and address some of these pressures. Its value will be in whether better intelligence leads to changes in workload, continuity, supervision, retention and time for direct work, and whether the wider workforce needed by children and families is planned for rather than left to absorb new expectations.

Third sector organisations provide much of the practical and relational support described in this report. Recent work across government, public service reform and the sector shows substantial agreement about what needs to change: earlier involvement in service design, more sustainable funding, proportionate accountability, better commissioning and greater stability for services where relationships matter.

The developing Third Sector Partnership is an opportunity to make that agreement real. Scotland does not need another statement of partnership principles. Where support is established, effective and meeting continuing need, organisations should be able to plan, retain staff and protect relationships rather than repeatedly wait for the next short-term funding decision.

From structures to delivery

Report THREE asked for clearer responsibility and stronger implementation. Scotland now has more structures intended to provide both. The question is what happens when those structures encounter a barrier.

Complex problems usually involve more than one organisation. That does not remove responsibility. **When organisations come together, it should be clear what they are there to fix, who can make the necessary decisions and what happens if progress stalls.**

Working groups and collaborative structures can be necessary. Their creation is not progress in itself. They matter when they produce decisions, remove barriers and change delivery.

This is also a question of accountability. Culture change takes time, but it cannot explain unnecessary delay. Responsibility sits with those who decide resources, priorities, structures and the conditions in which services operate. Government must be able to change its own processes when they stand in the way of timely action, rather than leaving children, families and the workforce to manage the consequences.

More of the conditions for delivery now exist. The next period needs to show decisions implemented, problems resolved and change reaching people.

**COMPLEX
PROBLEMS
USUALLY INVOLVE
MORE THAN ONE
ORGANISATION.**

**THAT DOES
NOT REMOVE
RESPONSIBILITY.**

5. The final delivery period to 2030

The remaining time makes the consequences of further delay much greater.

The Parliament elected in 2026 holds the final full parliamentary term before 2030, and the Scottish Government has reaffirmed its commitment to meeting that deadline.

THE REMAINING YEARS MUST BE ABOUT DELIVERY.

By 2030, what Scotland currently describes as good practice needs to have become ordinary practice that babies, children, young people, families and care experienced adults can reasonably rely upon. **Keeping the promise does not mean every service will be identical or every problem will disappear. It means a person's chances of getting the support, rights, relationships and influence promised to them should no longer depend heavily on where they live or whether local capacity happens to be available.**

Support should reach people earlier and more consistently. Rights should be usable, relationships should be protected, people should have real influence over decisions that affect them, and workers should have the conditions to provide the support expected of them.

Where Scotland already knows support is inconsistent, unavailable or arriving too late, there should be clear evidence that those gaps are closing for the children, families and care experienced people currently experiencing them— not only across national measures.

Some implementation will continue after 2030, and public services will continue to change.

That does not move the deadline. If parts of the wider reform agenda cannot reasonably be completed by then, Scotland should still be clear about what must have changed by 2030, what remains outstanding and who is responsible for finishing the work.

Elections, changes in leadership, legislation and organisational change are predictable parts of government. They cannot become reasons for agreed commitments to stall or begin again.

We have seen enough good practice to know substantial change is possible. What is missing is consistency. Good support still depends too often on local capacity, individual persistence or unusually strong partnerships.

Over the next reporting period, the evidence should increasingly be about delivery: decisions carried through, persistent problems resolved and support improving. Where progress stalls, those responsible should act to correct it.



Parliament, local government and scrutiny

Parliament has an important scrutiny role in this final period. **The promise was made before many current MSPs entered Parliament, but responsibility for keeping it now belongs to them too.** Scrutiny should focus increasingly on what has actually changed, where delivery is behind, whether resources match commitments and what happens when agreed action slips. MSPs should also use their constituency and regional roles to understand what care experienced people, families and the workforce are seeing locally.

Local government carries the same weight of responsibility. Councils make many of the decisions that shape what children and families experience, and Scotland's local government elections in May 2027 will leave just over three years to the end of 2030. A national commitment is only kept if it reaches each child and family locally. Those elections cannot become another pause in delivery.

Current councils still have decisions to make before those elections. Those elected in 2027 will inherit responsibility for the final years of the promise. A change of political leadership or elected membership cannot reset the clock on commitments already made.

National and local government therefore both enter a period in which decisions taken now will materially affect what Scotland can credibly say in 2030.

Beyond 2030

Keeping the promise by 2030 does not mean responsibility ends in 2030.

Babies and children will continue to experience care. Adults with care experience may continue to need support. Scotland will also need to know whether the changes made during this decade last.

Independent public scrutiny should therefore continue after 2030. That is not an extension of the deadline. Its purpose would be to examine whether change is sustained, whether gaps reopen or new ones emerge, and whether Scotland continues to honour the promise over time.

Decisions about that future oversight should be made before 2030, with sufficient independence from those responsible for delivery and with the confidence of the care experienced community.

For now, the focus must remain on what can still be delivered before the deadline.

Calls to action





**These calls set out
what now needs
to be delivered, by
whom and when.**

**Where work is
already underway,
the call is that this
must be evidenced
in people's lives,
not just in process.**

Calls to action

1. MAKE SURE CHILDREN LIVING AT HOME GET THE HELP THEY NEED

The Scottish Government and local authorities must make sure that children living at home with significant identified need receive the practical and specialist support, advocacy and trusted relationships they need, whether or not they are formally 'looked after'.

A child can have a plan that clearly says what they need and still not get it. If support identified as necessary is unavailable or delayed, someone must be responsible for acting on that problem rather than simply recording the same unmet need at the next review.

Every child experiencing care at home must be able to rely on a consistent trusted relationship. Where that relationship is not already present, a mentor, trusted adult or equivalent support must be proactively offered. Taking up that offer must remain the child's choice.

Where new rights or duties in the 2026 Act apply, they must be resourced and usable when they come into force.

By our next report, Scotland must be able to show that more children and families are receiving the support identified as necessary when they need it, and that avoidable delays and unmet need are reducing at a pace that will see the promise kept by 2030.

2. BUILD THE LONG-TERM EVIDENCE SCOTLAND SHOULD ALREADY HAVE

The Scottish Government must commission funded longitudinal research into children living at home with significant identified need and social work involvement, including children experiencing care at home.

The work must follow children over time and connect their circumstances, support and legal status with what happens in their lives. It should examine support before, during and after 'looked after' status, and whether children with comparable needs receive different help depending on their legal route.

The questions have now been identified. The next step must be commissioning and beginning the work, with staged findings early enough to influence policy and practice before 2030 and longer term follow up capable of showing what happens across childhood and beyond.

3. USE EVIDENCE TO CHANGE WHAT IS NOT WORKING

The Scottish Government and those responsible for national delivery must use the evidence Scotland already holds to identify where progress is weakest, understand why and change what happens.

By this stage, collecting evidence cannot be the end point. Where evidence shows children, families or care experienced people missing out, those responsible must act on it and show what changed.

Important evidence gaps should be closed through funded, timebound work, but gaps must not be used to delay action where the problem is already understood.

People who contribute their experiences should be able to see what was heard, what changed, what did not change and why.

4. TURN WHAT SCOTLAND KNOWS ABOUT PERMANENCE INTO ACTION

Scotland has known for many years that some children wait too long for decisions and for the stable care they need. The forthcoming permanence work and summit must do more than restate different views about where responsibility lies. They must identify what is causing avoidable delay and what Scotland will do differently.

The Scottish Government must use the conclusions to produce a national plan that identifies where children are waiting unnecessarily – including for assessments, services, decision making, legal processes or the right care to be available – and who is responsible for removing those delays, and by when.

Families must receive help early enough to have a genuine opportunity to make the changes needed within a child's timescale. A family cannot fairly be judged on change they have been unable to make because the help needed to make it was unavailable.

Equally, where sufficient support has been provided and a child cannot safely remain or return home, uncertainty must not be prolonged because the system has failed to make or implement the necessary decision.

The plan must also address the workforce, services and range of family, kinship, foster and adoptive care needed to make decisions real. The statutory review should strengthen and test that action, not become a reason to postpone it.



Calls to action

5. TURN PROGRESS ON KINSHIP CARE INTO CHANGE FAMILIES CAN FEEL

Scotland has established what kinship families and carers should be able to expect. Changes to financial support and new provisions in the 2026 Act provide a stronger basis for change. The task now is to make that progress real for families.

The Scottish Government and local authorities must ensure that the phased and costed delivery plan sets clear responsibility, resources and milestones, and is followed by implementation without avoidable delay.

By our next report, kinship families should be able to point to practical differences: getting help when they need it, understanding the support they can expect, and receiving the practical, financial, housing, mental health and relationship support necessary to sustain family life.

Families should not have to rely on luck, persistence or a charity stepping in to get help already known to be needed.

6. MAKE THE NEW ACT REAL

The 2026 Act creates important new rights and duties. A right that Parliament creates must become a right people can use.

The Scottish Government must publish a clear, costed and sequenced implementation plan for the Act. It must show when provisions will commence, who is responsible, what they will cost and what workforce, services and other capacity will be required.

The plan must be developed with the organisations responsible for delivery and with care experienced people and families where provisions affect them directly. Government must own the final plan; involvement of delivery partners must not become a veto or another source of delay.

Material disagreements about capacity, resources or safe delivery must be transparent, resolved quickly and accompanied by a clear decision and timetable. Capacity constraints must be addressed as an implementation responsibility, not allowed to become grounds for indefinite delay.

People should not acquire a right and then discover that the service, workforce, guidance or funding needed to make it real is not there.

7. DELIVER THE WORKFORCE PLANNING SCOTLAND ALREADY NEEDED

Report THREE called for the overdue Joint Workforce Improvement Plan to be produced urgently and for a unified workforce strategy capable of supporting delivery of the promise. That did not happen.

Work now underway through the National Social Work Agency and its partners is necessary, but creating a new route to address the problem does not reset the commitment or the clock.

The Scottish Government and local authorities must establish what workforce is needed to keep the promise, where it is needed and what must change to recruit, retain and support those people. This must address the wider workforce needed by children and families, not social work in isolation.

The resulting workforce plan must lead to action on the conditions already known to affect delivery, including workload, continuity, supervision, administrative pressure and time for direct work.

Scotland needs enough skilled people, in the places they are needed, with the time and support to do their jobs well.

**Families
should not
have to rely
on luck,
persistence
or a charity
stepping in
to get help
already known
to be needed.**



Calls to action

Children growing up now do not get that time back.



8. CHANGE HOW SCOTLAND FUNDS AND WORKS WITH THE THIRD SECTOR

The Scottish Government must use the developing Third Sector Partnership to change the way government and public bodies work with organisations providing essential support to children and families.

Where support is established, effective and meeting continuing need, multi-year funding must become normal rather than exceptional. Funding must reflect the realistic cost of delivery, allow organisations to retain skilled staff and protect relationships, and be agreed early enough for services to plan with confidence.

The partnership must also address problems repeatedly identified by the sector: organisations being brought into decisions too late, disproportionate funding and reporting requirements, commissioning arrangements that work against collaboration and inconsistent approaches across government and public bodies.

Children and families should not lose trusted support because an organisation is waiting for another annual funding decision or because the way services are commissioned makes continuity impossible.

The Scottish Government must act now to show that more of the support it funds is multi-year, sustainable and agreed in good time, and that third sector organisations are involved earlier in designing the services and reforms they are then expected to deliver.

9. SHOW THAT RESOURCES ARE MOVING TOWARDS PREVENTION

Scotland has committed repeatedly to shifting resources towards prevention and earlier support. The Scottish Government and local authorities must now be able to show where that shift has actually happened.

By our next report, they must show what has changed through Whole Family Wellbeing Funding and the new Whole Family Support arrangements: what support has been built or protected, whether resources have moved from crisis response towards earlier help, and what difference that has made for children and families.

This must include practical support that can determine whether families remain stable, including housing and homelessness prevention.

Money announced or allocated is not the same as support reaching a family.

10. TREAT THE REMAINING YEARS TO 2030 AS A DELIVERY TERM

The Scottish Parliament, Scottish Government and local authorities must treat the remaining period to 2030 as a period for delivery.

That means making decisions, implementing them and dealing with barriers when they arise. When an agreed action slips, another timetable is not enough. Someone must be responsible for getting it back on track.

Parliament must scrutinise not only what has been announced or completed, but what has changed for children and families, where progress is behind and what is being done about it.

Elections and changes in leadership are part of government. They cannot become reasons for commitments to stall or start again. Local authorities must continue making the decisions required before the May 2027 elections, and those elected afterwards inherit responsibility for delivering the promise.

Before our next report, there must be far more evidence of decisions implemented, barriers removed, resources moved and people experiencing better support as a result.

Neither a change of Government nor a change of council administration resets the commitment Scotland made in 2020. Children growing up now do not get that time back.

Conclusion

The promise was never meant to be kept in reports. It was meant to be kept in the lives of babies, children, young people, families and care experienced adults.

Six years on, Scotland knows considerably more about what needs to change and has more legislation, structures, services and evidence to work with. There are people and organisations across Scotland showing every day what good support can look like. That is real progress.

Scotland enters the final years with real progress, but also with commitments still undelivered, action that came too slowly and major work whose effect is not yet consistent. Too many people are still waiting for support that should already be there, and too much still depends on where someone lives, who they meet or whether a service has the capacity to respond.

There are things Scotland still needs to learn. But there are also things it already knows and has simply not done.

For a child, none of this is abstract. It is about whether help reaches their family before things get worse, whether someone they trust stays alongside them, whether their rights mean anything in practice and whether decisions about their life are made in time.

Scotland does not lack reform principles. Prevention, collaboration, relationships, evidence, a supported workforce and resources directed towards need have been repeated commitments for years and are again reflected in current public service reform. The challenge is making them the normal way Scotland works.

The opportunity to keep the promise by 2030 has narrowed considerably since our last report, but it has not gone. By then, the support, rights and relationships the promise describes must be something people can ordinarily rely on, not exceptional good practice.

Scotland cannot spend another cycle rediscovering what it already knows. Now is the time to act on that knowledge and keep the promise.



**The
opportunity
to keep the
promise by
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Glossary

Advocacy

Independent support that helps a child, young person or adult understand their rights, say what matters to them, and be properly heard in decisions about their life— separate from the people making those decisions.

Audit Scotland

The independent public body that checks how public money is managed and spent in Scotland, including on keeping the promise.

Care Experienced Children and Young People Funding

Scottish Government funding given to schools specifically to support the attainment and wellbeing of care experienced pupils.

Care Inspectorate

The improvement body that regulates and inspects care services in Scotland, including services for ‘looked after’ children.

‘Care system’

The network of laws, organisations and services involved when a child is looked after, whether at home, with kinship carers, in foster care or in residential care. We use quotation marks because this is a system built and named by adults, not a term care experienced people chose for themselves.

CELCIS

The Centre for Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection, a research and improvement organisation based at the University of Strathclyde that carries out research on the ‘care system’.

Chief Social Work Officers

Senior officers in each local authority with statutory responsibility for the standard of social work practice in their area.

Compulsory measures / compulsory supervision order (CSO)

A legal order, made by a children’s hearing, that requires specific things to happen for a child’s support and protection.

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)

The organisation that represents Scotland’s 32 local authorities (councils) and speaks on their behalf.

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)

A way of planning support for a child that is led by the family itself, bringing together relatives and people who matter to the child to agree a plan.

Independent Care Review

The national review, completed in February 2020, that spoke to thousands of care experienced people, families and the workforce, and set out everything that needs to change for Scotland to keep the promise.

Independent Strategic Advisor

The role, currently held by Fiona Duncan, that advises Scottish Ministers and works with organisations across the ‘care system’ to help make sure the promise is kept by 2030.

Kinship care

When a child is cared for by a relative or close family friend who is already known to them. This can be a formal legal arrangement or an informal one.

‘Looked after’

The legal status given to a child when a local authority has formal responsibility for their care— whether that means living at home, with kinship carers, in foster care, or in residential care.

‘Looked after’ at home

Children who are in care but who continue to live at home with their parents while a local authority remains formally involved.

MSP

Member of the Scottish Parliament.

National Social Work Agency

A national body set up in March 2026 to provide national leadership, coordination and support for the social workforce.

Permanently Progressing?

A longitudinal research study (CELCIS/University of Stirling) following children through care, tracking their outcomes over time to understand what helps children achieve safety and stability.

Plan 21-24

Scotland’s first delivery plan for keeping the promise, covering 2021 to 2024.

Plan 24–30

The delivery plan that followed Plan 21–24, setting out the remaining work needed to keep the promise by 2030.

Poverty-proofing

Checking and changing policies, plans or services so that they do not put extra costs or barriers in the way of children and families experiencing poverty.

Programme for Government

The Scottish Government's annual statement of its policy priorities and plans for the year ahead.

Pupil Equity Funding

Scottish Government funding given directly to schools to close the poverty-related attainment gap between pupils.

Register of Interests

A published record of Oversight Board members' financial and other interests, kept to identify and manage any conflicts of interest.

Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC)

The regulator for the social work and social care workforce in Scotland.

Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA)

The national body that decides whether a child needs to be referred to a children's hearing, and provides the reporters who manage each case.

Social Work Scotland

The social work leadership body working to influence policy and legislation, and to support the development of the social work and social care workforce.

Promise Story of Progress

A framework developed by The Promise Scotland with the Scottish Government and COSLA that asks three questions of any work to keep the promise: what is being done, how do we know, and what difference is it making?

The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026

Scottish Parliament legislation, passed in 2026, that puts elements of the promise into law, including a lifelong right to advocacy for all care experienced people.

The Oversight Board

The independent board – also referred to as 'we' and 'our board' throughout this report – that checks whether Scotland is keeping the promise. We do not deliver services ourselves; we hold those with responsibility to account and report publicly on progress.

The promise

Scotland's commitment, made in 2020, that every baby, child, young person and adult with experience of care should grow up, or have grown up, loved, safe and respected, with the relationships, stability and support they need to thrive. It must be fully kept by 2030.

The Promise Data and Evidence Group

A group working to strengthen the quality and use of data and evidence on progress in keeping the promise.

The Promise Scotland

An organisation that supports people and organisations to make the changes the promise requires. It provides secretariat support to the Oversight Board, but our conclusions are independent of it.

Third Sector Partnership

A developing agreement between the Scottish Government and third sector organisations, intended to secure a more sustainable, longer-term funding relationship for services that support the promise.

Who Cares? Scotland

An independent membership organisation for care experienced children, young people and adults.

Whole Family Wellbeing Funding (WFWF)

Scottish Government funding intended to help families get support earlier. From 2027, this is intended to move into a single Whole Family Support programme.



**the oversight
board**

for the promise