



the oversight board

for the promise

Report FOUR: What Scotland
promised, what we found, and what
needs to happen now



In 2020, Scotland made a promise 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. That promise followed the Independent Care Review and must be kept by 2030.

The Oversight Board for the promise is an independent body that reports on whether Scotland is doing that. More than half of our members have direct experience of care, alongside experience in social work, education, health, law, research and public services. Our role is to examine the evidence, listen to people across Scotland, recognise progress, challenge where change is too slow or uneven, and report on what still needs to happen.

Report FOUR finds 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.

Important legislation has been passed, services and approaches have developed, and there are places where children and families are receiving the kind of support the promise envisaged. But too much still depends on where someone lives, whether the right service is available, whether there are enough people to provide it, or whether a worker can find a way around barriers that should not be there.

Scotland now has more of the laws, structures and delivery arrangements needed to keep the promise, but they are not yet producing change consistently enough in people's lives. Six years into a 10 year commitment, that is the central concern of this report.

Experiencing Care at Home

Report FOUR looks closely at children who are legally 'looked after' while continuing to live at home with their parents. At the end of July 2025 there were 2,411 children in this position, around one in five of all 'looked after' children in Scotland.

There is good practice, strong relationships and committed workers. But children and families still cannot consistently rely on the support identified as necessary, being available when it is needed and sustained for as long as required.

A child can have a plan that clearly says what they need and still be left without it. A plan is not progress if the support is not there. Services must have the resources to respond, and someone must be responsible for making sure the help actually arrives.

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.

Education gives us an important warning. In 2024/25, children experiencing care at home had an attendance rate of 69.8%, the lowest of any 'looked after' group. Attendance matters, as do qualifications and destinations, but these measures cannot tell us whether an individual child feels safe, belongs, is coping, has someone they trust, or whether support is helping them through a difficult period.

Scotland already holds a great deal of information about children through education, health,

social work, housing and other services. Some important information is missing, but some already exists and is not being linked or used well enough. Services can support children well, but when information and responsibility are split between them, important parts of a child's life can be missed.

Report FOUR therefore calls for funded long-term work that follows children over time and connects their circumstances, relationships, support and outcomes. It should look at what support was available, when it arrived, whether it helped and what happened afterwards. It must build on evidence Scotland already holds and produce findings early enough to influence support before 2030. Better evidence must run alongside action, not become another reason to wait where the problem is already understood.

Voice, influence and lived experience

The promise exists because people with experience of care, children and families told Scotland what needed to change. There is now a great deal of participation and consultation, but Scotland still cannot show clearly enough what changes because people speak.

Being listened to and being able to influence what happens are different things. People should be able to see whether what they said changed a decision, brought support, made a right usable or led to resources being moved. Where a decision does not change, they should be told why.

National statistics can identify important inequalities, but they cannot by themselves tell us what life feels like for an individual child or whether support is helping. Scotland needs to combine what people say with the information already held across services and use that evidence to change decisions where something is not working.

Delivery, workforce and the remaining time

The workforce is central to whether any of this succeeds. Social workers, teachers, health staff, third-sector workers, carers and others are trying to deliver substantial change while dealing with high workloads, vacancies, limited capacity, insecure funding and services that are not always available when children and families need them.

Commitment from the workforce is not the main problem. A social worker cannot create a mental-health service that does not exist, suitable housing that is unavailable or enough foster carers simply by working harder. Responsibility for those conditions sits with those who decide resources, staffing, priorities and how services are organised.

Scotland has committed for many years to supporting families earlier and preventing problems from escalating. Whole Family Wellbeing Funding has supported valuable work, but the wider shift in budgets, services and decision-making towards earlier help has not happened at the scale intended.

The 2026–31 Programme for Government again puts prevention, whole-family support, workforce, data and investment reform at the centre of public service reform, and the First

Minister has renewed the commitment to keep the promise by 2030. The proposed Scottish Prevention Investment Framework and new Implementation Strategy could help, but only if they lead to resources moving, clearer responsibility and practical change for children and families.

The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 creates important new rights and duties. However, serious concerns about affordability and deliverability persisted during the Bill's passage, including from COSLA and Social Work Scotland, while communication with delivery partners came too late on important issues.

Those problems now need to be resolved quickly. Government must publish a clear, costed and sequenced route from the Act to delivery so that new rights are usable when they come into force.

Report FOUR makes ten calls to action. Scotland must:

1. get necessary support to children and families when it is identified;
2. follow children's lives over time;
3. use existing evidence to change what is not working;
4. reduce avoidable delay in permanence;
5. turn progress on kinship care into practical change;
6. make the new Act deliverable;
7. complete the workforce planning already needed;
8. change how the third sector is funded and involved;
9. show that resources are genuinely moving towards earlier support;
10. treat the remaining years to 2030 as a period for delivery.

Scotland is not short of knowledge about what good support looks like, and there are places showing that change is possible. But what works well still cannot be relied upon by every child and family who needs it. By the time the Oversight Board reports again, there must be much clearer evidence that decisions have been implemented, barriers removed, resources moved and support is reaching people when it can still make the greatest difference.

Progress on paper only matters if it becomes progress in people's lives.