



Councillor Tony Buchanan
Children and Young People Spokesperson

8 December 2025

Stephen Boyle
Auditor General for Scotland
Audit Scotland 4th Floor
102 West Port
Edinburgh
EH31 3DG

By email

Dear Stephen,

Re: Improving care experience: delivering the promise

COSLA welcomes Audit Scotland's recent report on delivering the promise and appreciates its focus on accountability, governance, and progress in transforming Scotland's 'care system'. The report raises important questions about roles, responsibilities, and resource planning, and we support the direction of its recommendations.

Local Government remains committed to working collaboratively with the Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland to ensure that the ambitions of the promise are realised. We recognise the complexity of this work and the need for clear national direction, sustainable funding, and streamlined governance, balanced with local flexibility to meet the needs of diverse communities.

The attached response sets out COSLA's reflections on the report and addresses each recommendation. We look forward to continuing constructive dialogue as we continue to deliver meaningful change for children and families across Scotland.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like to discuss any aspect of our response further.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Tony Buchanan
Children and Young People Spokesperson

Improving Care Experience: Delivering the Promise, Audit Scotland

COSLA Response

Overall Response

COSLA welcomes Audit Scotland's focus on delivering The Promise and recognises the importance of collaborative action between the Scottish Government, COSLA, and The Promise Scotland. The report asks key questions in relation to accountability, governance, measuring progress and spending. We support the direction of the recommendations and agree that clarity on priorities, roles and responsibilities is essential to ensure progress is realistic and sustainable.

We recognise the report's observation that initial planning for the promise did not fully anticipate the scale of work required over a decade. Delivering transformational change across Scotland's care system is a complex, multi-agency endeavour. Local authorities are key to this and generally well positioned to deliver on this commitment. They have shown their ongoing commitment to improving outcomes for those with care experience, embedding the promise within strategic plans, investing in family support and working collaboratively to share learning and address barriers. We agree that clear national direction and resource planning are essential. This must be balanced with local flexibility to ensure that the needs of specific communities are well understood and represented in local planning.

The report accurately reflects the importance of preventative approaches. Local government has long advocated for shifting investment upstream to support families early and reduce the need for crisis intervention. Councils continue to invest significantly in family support, early help, and community-based services. These initiatives aim to reduce the number of children entering care and improve outcomes for those who do. However, delivering preventative work at scale requires sustainable funding and workforce capacity. Current budgets are under significant pressure, which limits our ability to invest in early intervention. We have consistently called for a shift in national funding models to enable this preventative focus.

We share the concern highlighted in the report that the current policy and legislative environment is overly complex. While the promise rightly calls for streamlining, the reality on the ground is that councils are being asked to implement an increasing number of overlapping strategies, frameworks, and statutory duties, often without clear alignment or prioritisation. Each brings its own governance and reporting demands. This creates duplication, consumes resources, and risks pulling focus away from direct work with children and families. We strongly support the call to declutter and simplify this landscape. Local Government is ready to work with Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland to review and rationalise existing policies and legislation.

COSLA remains committed to working collaboratively to address the challenges highlighted in the report and to ensure that the ambitions of the promise are realised. The next section sets out our reflections and responses to the specific recommendations.

Response to Recommendations

In the next six months the Scottish Government and COSLA, with support from The Promise Scotland, should:

Work together to identify where resources need to be targeted to deliver The Promise – and, in line with this, clearly set out which actions will be delivered, and how, over the next five years and beyond. This includes identifying any gaps both nationally and locally in funding, workforce, skills and infrastructure, and setting clear timescales for prioritisation.

Local Government is committed to working with partners to identify where resources should be targeted to deliver The Promise. It is important to note that councils operate within diverse structures and contexts, making a single national costing exercise impractical. In light of the recently published Public Service Reform Strategy, COSLA would be reluctant to divert time and resource into attempting to cost all changes required. Instead, we advocate for a focus on prioritisation and sequencing, informed by frontline experience.

Funding considerations must extend beyond local authorities to include all community planning partners. Councils make annual budget decisions based on local needs and circumstances, and COSLA cannot comment on gaps within each of our 32 councils. We will continue to work with Scottish Government to ensure funding decisions reflect the complexity of local delivery.

The Scottish Social Work Partnership provides a national forum for workforce planning, though its scope is limited to social work and adjacent professions. Broader workforce issues are being addressed through the Children and Families National Leadership Group and similar forums. COSLA supports ongoing dialogue to ensure a competent and confident workforce, while recognising the significant pressures currently faced by staff.

Infrastructure needs vary significantly across local areas. National proposals, such as those relating to profit in residential childcare, will have implications for provision. Secure care is an area where a national approach is essential, given the small number of children requiring this service and the variation across the four units.

Local Government continues to raise concerns about the cumulative impact of policy, practice, and legislative changes on the same workforce. COSLA is keen to work with Scottish Government on sequencing and prioritisation to ensure changes

are achievable and do not exacerbate existing pressures. This will require open and honest discussions about what can be de-prioritised. Those supporting children and families are increasingly expected to deliver more with fewer resources, and this trend is unsustainable. Effective prioritisation must go hand in hand with de-prioritisation.

Clarify and set out roles and responsibilities for overseeing, monitoring and reporting at a national level on local activity to inform the overall picture of progress.

Councils remain accountable to their communities, with scrutiny and decision-making through elected members. At a national level, the joint “Story of Progress” provides an overview of progress and will be strengthened by additional organisational and lived experience perspectives by the end of 2025. COSLA supports the evolution of this work as data and analysis mature.

Review and identify opportunities to streamline the remit, status, and expected impact of governance groups, boards and forums linked to The Promise; and agree collectively how to utilise the work carried out by The Promise Scotland on governance and accountability.

COSLA recognises the need for clearer alignment and communication regarding governance structures linked to The Promise. Within Local Government, the COSLA CYP Board, Local Government Promise Programme Board, and Promise Leads Network provide key structures. We welcome opportunities to streamline governance and utilise work undertaken by The Promise Scotland.

Through the recently established data and evidence group, work to coordinate various data projects under way to identify and align actions, timescales, impact and how it informs the Story of Progress.

COSLA is represented on the recently established data and evidence group, which aims to coordinate data projects and align actions, timescales, and impact. This work will inform the Story of Progress.

In the next 12 months bodies within Children’s Services Planning Partnerships should:

Where not already in place, set out in local plans how they will involve, and seek and respond to views from care-experienced people.

Local Government is committed to ensuring that the voices of children and young people with care experience are central to planning and decision making. There is a significant amount of work already underway in relation to this with councils

developing mechanisms to embed meaningful engagement and partnership working with families. At an individual level this means partnering with families to produce meaningful care plans. In terms of service design and delivery, this is about ensuring the experiences of those working with supports are central to developments and improvements. At a strategic level, councils have various mechanisms in place, such as CHAMPS boards and lived experience panels, to support meaningful engagement and participation. More detail, including examples of work underway, is included in the Local Government annual report on The Promise and The Promise Scotland's Local Perspectives report.

As Children's Services Planning Partnerships move into the planning phase for the 2026-29 children's services plans, there will be opportunities to build on this work and consider how best to articulate this in future plans.

Utilise the 25 supporting Plan 24–30 'route maps' (due to be published by end of 2025) to enable collective responsibility and accountability for The Promise, ensuring clarity of roles across all sectors.

COSLA recognises the complexity of system wide change and the need for collective responsibility and accountability. The forthcoming 25 route maps, expected by the end of 2025, will provide a valuable framework for aligning national and local priorities. While we are hopeful these will support clarity of roles, we acknowledge that it will take time to see their full impact. COSLA will work with partners to ensure discussions on how these route maps drive local planning and delivery progress from 2026.

Set out in local strategic plans priority areas for investment to deliver The Promise, by 2030 and beyond.

This will be another area of consideration as Children's Services Planning Partnerships move into the planning phase for the 2026-29 children's services plans. This will require collaboration not only within Children's Services Planning Partnerships but also across community planning partners, including local authorities, NHS Boards, police divisions, and other public services.