

Improving care experience: Delivering The Promise: Written submission from Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor, The Promise Scotland, 1 December 2025



The Promise Scotland
1st Floor, Charlotte House
2 South Charlotte Street
Edinburgh, EH2 4AW
1st December 2025

To: Mr Richard Leonard MSP
Sent via email

Dear Mr Leonard,

Improving care experience: Delivering The Promise

Thank you for your letter dated 12 November 2025 requesting a response to the recommendations set out in the report.
Please find attached my response in my capacity as Independent Strategic Advisor.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Duncan
**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Chair - The Promise Scotland**

Written Evidence Submission:

To: The Public Audit Committee
On: Response to Improving Care Experience: Delivering The Promise Report
From: Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor, the promise

This written evidence is submitted to the Public Audit Committee at the request of the Convenor in his letter of 12 November 2025, which followed the evidence session on 5 November 2025 with the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission on the joint report: Response to Improving Care Experience: Delivering The Promise Report.

The Independent Strategic Advisor has been asked to provide written evidence on the recommendations made in the Report that relate to her role, as well as a response to any other issues raised in the report or during the evidence session, if she chooses.

1) Overall response

It is reassuring that the 'Delivering The Promise Report' appreciates, in keeping with the [Independent Care Review](#), that the experiences of children, young people and care experienced adults must be at the heart of any interpretation of successful delivery of the promise.

Recognising that previous reviews of Scotland's 'care system' had failed to deliver lasting, systemic change, the Independent Care Review adopted an intentionally unorthodox approach. Alongside undertaking all the work expected of a traditional review, it listened directly to more than 5,500 people – over 3,000 were children, young people, families, and adults with experience of Scotland's 'care system', with the remaining being members of the unpaid and paid workforce. By placing the insights and aspirations of the care community at the centre of its conclusions, the Review produced a vision for Scotland.

Assessing achievement of this vision requires a different approach, a move beyond the traditional views of accountability and ways of scrutiny, which in turn require different approaches to understanding responsibility and collective leadership – all illustrations of the need for wider systemic changes.

The Report's attempts to bring transparency to how public money is being invested in keeping the promise build on the Independent Care Review's human and economic modelling, as detailed in the ['Follow the Money'](#) report, and are welcome contributions on where and how to best invest public resources.

The Report's recommendations and the evidence session on 5 November recognise that several relevant programmes of work are already underway. With some moved on considerably since the fieldwork, meaning - in some instances - the recommendations are already being implemented.

For example, [Plan 24-30](#) was designed as a strategic planning framework for Scotland to keep the promise, intended to navigate the tension between organisations / people wanting to know what to do and the recognition that top-down plans have not led to long-lasting change.

Since the audit fieldwork, engagement with stakeholders on Plan 24-30 has increased, as scheduled. To engender a greater understanding of Plan 24-30's usage, whilst securing buy-in to its continuation as a live resource through to 2030, The Promise Scotland is taking a collaborative approach to populating web content. This is an innovative approach to planning *and* delivery and is, I believe, the best route to addressing the Committee's concerns about the need for wide-spread understanding about what must be done, by whom, and by when to keep the promise.

Plan 24-30 will be updated on an ongoing basis with further updates to each of the 25 route maps available this month, including outcomes and milestones.

Scotland's first plan, [Plan 21-24](#), published as a PDF in March 2021 was produced during the grip of COVID. It provided guidance to those responsible for delivering change during that three-year period. The Promise Scotland commissioned an [independent evaluation](#) of its effectiveness. The evaluation findings coupled with widespread consultation resulted in Plan 24-30. There has been significant planning activity – and learning from that activity – over the past five years.

2) Response to general recommendations in the Delivering The Promise Report

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.

Response: Plan 24-30 provides the platform for this work.

As the Report made clear, 'The Promise is not one single thing, entity, programme, or piece of legislation. It is a universal commitment across public bodies and political parties to deliver change that can be felt by all care-experienced people and families on the edges of care'. Delivering this requires a scale and breadth of coordinated transformation never attempted before in Scotland – straddling public-sector reform, system change, service redesign and coherent, aligned policy across multiple domains. And, as the Auditor General said in the evidence session on 5 November, "commitment of individuals and organisations to deliver the Promise remains strong"; "there is complete buy-in to delivery of its objectives"; and "there is an opportunity here, because it is rare that there is such universal commitment... People want to deliver on the national outcome of keeping the Promise."

Most strategic plans are written by the organisation responsible for implementing them - Plan 24-30 is intentionally different. It is designed as a collective framework for keeping the promise, built on and for collaboration. It provides a centralised, single plan - but not with centralised control. It is not a substitute for organisational plans - instead by making clear

destination statements, outcomes and milestones, it provides clarity on what actions are the responsibility of which organisations, by when. It both draws content from and drives content to organisational plans. The information flow to and from organisations, will make sure Plan 24-30 is continually updated, reflecting change as it happens. This dynamic approach matters to ensure the content of Plan 24-30 is owned by those who must make change happen for the promise to be kept; to maintain alignment across the breadth of change required by 2030; and to respond to complexity. The methodology behind Plan 24-30 seeks to harness the immense commitment recognised by the Auditor General and to translate this collective buy-in into coherent, coordinated action.

Whilst the Report's focus on gaps is welcome, many of these were recognised by the Independent Care Review with dedicated activities in Plan 24-30 to shore them up (see especially [Meeting in the Middle](#), that details the five recurring issues that are both barriers and bridges in terms of deep-rooted systemic change). Any additional activity must not pause or slow delivery at a time when pace needs to be increased.

- ♥ 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.

Response: This work is well underway and is referenced in the Report, including its key messages, with further development of the Promise Progress Framework being underway to assess if care-experienced people feel the impact of change, a crucial step being led by The Promise Scotland.

- ♥ 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.

Response: The Independent Care Review called for an overhaul and reorientation of regulation and scrutiny. In [Report ONE](#) by The Oversight Board, published in May 2022, a graphic was produced to illustrate the cluttered governance landscape – this was reproduced in the Delivering The Promise Report. In the three years since, more groups have proliferated. There is a clear opportunity to link this recommendation to public service reform and use Scotland's commitment to keep the promise as a litmus test.

- ♥ through the recently established data and evidence group, work to coordinate various data projects under way.

Response: The data and evidence group must be a catalyst for increased pace and more effective measuring of experience, rather than an addition to an already cluttered landscape. The data work is at a key stage, and I urge the group to ensure experience is at the heart of evidencing 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, seek and respond to views from care-experienced people.

- ♥ 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.
- ♥ set out in local strategic plans priority areas for investment to deliver the promise, by 2030 and beyond.

Response: The Promise Scotland will continue to work with Children’s Services Planning Partnerships in 2026 and beyond to support the translation of Plan 24-30 route maps into local delivery plans.

3) Response to recommendations that relate to the Independent Strategic Advisor;

The Report contains two recommendations that relate to the Independent Strategic Advisor: In the next six months the Scottish Government should work with the Independent Strategic Advisor (ISA) to:

- ♥ ensure that their respective strategies on prevention are aligned and agree on the approach before further work takes place.
- ♥ agree a clear set of protocols which set out how the Scottish Government will respond to recommendations made by the ISA.

Response: I am working with Government to take these recommendations forward, building on the regular engagement I have had with Scottish Ministers over recent months and the publication of my [work programme](#) for the next 18 months.

4) Observations on the audit process and subsequent Report

I was encouraged by the Public Audit Committee’s session on 18 April 2024 with the Auditor General and his team, when the aspirations for this performance audit were discussed. The observation that “there are real challenges in getting change to happen when people have to work in partnership with others” is something that I recognise. With the idea that this could be “an interesting test case for us of how well public service reform is being delivered” felt timely and appropriate.

Although I agree with several of the recommendations, overall, I believe both the performance audit and the subsequent Report are missed opportunities. The “usual approach” was used to assess a moment in time towards a decade-long programme of transformational systems change – and has demonstrated that Scotland’s work to keep the promise cannot be effectively audited in the same way as a single policy or individual organisation - however complex.

I wrote to the Auditor General during the fieldwork and attach this letter for the committee’s reference. The subsequent publication of the Report has not alleviated the four main concerns I outlined in the letter, with it not:

- ♥ acting as a catalyst, adding pace and improving the quality of change;
- ♥ offering a realistic assessment of progress;
- ♥ providing a constructive assessment of the wider landscape,
- ♥ offering test case of how well public service reform is being delivered

Mr Boyle and I are meeting early in January, and I look forward to discussing these points, and how the headline in the news release influenced media coverage.

5) Specific response to the Public Audit Committee evidence session on 5 November

I am confident that the Public Audit Committee will cover off the issues they have greatest interest in at the evidence session on 10 December 2025 with The Scottish Government, COSLA, the Chief Executive of The Promise Scotland and the Chair of The Oversight Board. Both Fraser McKinlay and David Anderson will be able to respond to issues that relate to The Promise Scotland and The Oversight Board respectively.

In the evidence session on 5 November, questions were raised about the role of the Independent Strategic Advisor. With the Auditor General rightly clarifying that the appointment is a ministerial one, reporting to ministers. However, I do offer advice to all those who require it, as outlined in the recently [published work plan](#). The appointment includes chairing The Promise Scotland.

In a [speech](#) to parliament on 5 February 2020, the day the Independent Care Review concluded, the then First Minister committed to establishing The Oversight Board, specifically in recognition of the need for a different approach to accountability, as outlined in the report [the plan](#). From the outset it was specified that at least half of the Board members must be care experienced, something that will continue to be the case. As the Chair of the Independent Care Review, I was asked to chair this group, recruit and induct members.

In parallel, an Expert Group was established by the then Deputy First Minister to decide on optimum vehicle to take work to deliver the promise forward. Chaired by Sir John Elvidge, with members including Caroline Gardner, the then Auditor General, the group's recommendation was to set up The Promise Scotland as it is currently constituted – a limited company wholly owned by Scottish Ministers. This recommendation was accepted by Scottish Ministers and The Promise Scotland was incorporated in March 2021. My responsibility included chairing the organisation and supporting its set up.

Early in 2022, I felt that holding the three roles – 1) Chair of The Promise Scotland, 2) Chair of The Oversight Board and 3) Independent Strategic Advisor was not tenable, and therefore to avoid any potential for conflict, I took the decision to demit office as Chair of The Oversight Board. There was no resistance to this.

This was followed by a sensitive, careful and managed process to ensure that a care-experienced chair or co-chairs were appointed and is documented in [The Oversight Board minutes](#), which are published online. In February 2023, The Oversight Board elected two co-chairs, one of whom subsequently had to withdraw before being formally appointed to the role. This led to a more extended transition period than originally envisaged. During this time, The Oversight Board continued to meet and work, including writing and publishing [Report TWO](#).

Appendix - Letter to Auditor General from the Independent Strategic Advisor, 4 September 2025.

The Promise Scotland
1st Floor, Charlotte House
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4th September 2025

To: Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland
By email: sboyle@audit-scotland.gov.uk

CC: Andrew Burns, Member of the Accounts Commission
Andrew.Burns@accounts-commission.gov.uk
Angela Leitch, Member of the Accounts Commission
angela.leitch@accounts-commission.gov.uk
Alison Cummings, ED Performance Audit and Best Value
acumming@audit-scotland.gov.uk

Dear Stephen

**Re: Audit Scotland performance audit
Improving care experience: Delivering The Promise**

I am writing about the performance audit clearance draft '*Improving Care Experience: Delivering the Promise*' and to reiterate an offer.

Both the audit process and the final report offer a significant opportunity to galvanise and build on progress made to date to keep [the promise](#) and is widely anticipated. It will be published at a critical moment for Scotland's children, families and care experienced adults - the midpoint between [the promise](#) being made and the date by which it must be kept (31st December 2030), and an inflection point in legislative reform.

In [Report THREE](#), published on 5th February 2025, the Oversight Board was clear that progress is: "behind schedule – but still on course. The destination is clear, and Scotland is heading in the right direction. It requires pace, renewed purpose, and for everyone to play their part to smooth the path ahead."

You and your team rightly set high expectations when you described this performance audit at the [Public Audit Committee on 18th April 2024](#) as "an interesting test case" for the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission "of how well public service reform is being delivered", so were "thinking carefully about how we shape our approach".

In his [follow up letter to you on 26th June 2024](#), the Convenor cemented this when he noted "The Committee is particularly encouraged that this work provides an opportunity to test how

well public service reform is being delivered, recognising the importance of partnership working in delivering The Promise”.

Furthermore, the recent, progressive approaches to performance audits make absolutely clear the key role the Auditor General, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland could play in supporting Scotland to focus attention on what is required over the coming five years to keep [the promise](#).

I read the clearance draft with this in mind. In short, whilst it sets the scene well and some aspects are helpful, I am concerned about the opportunities the clearance draft misses to drive pace and progress and to provide the test case for an assessment of public sector reform.

I have outlined my thoughts on its content in more detail below, organised by the outcomes I am sure we both hope the report will achieve:

a. act as a catalyst adding pace and improving the quality of change:

As it stands, the lead recommendation in the clearance draft creates a significant and entirely unnecessary risk to children, families and care experienced adults.

It was the input of 5,500+ children, families, care experienced adults, and members of the unpaid and paid workforce over three years that crafted [the promise](#). When accepted in full in February 2020, by all parties in the Scottish Parliament, [the promise](#) was made to all who'd taken part in the Independent Care Review and many thousands more who had experience the 'care system'.

It was this inclusive methodology that enabled a deep and detailed understanding of the impact of Scotland's 'care system' (in human and financial terms) and those 'systems' experienced simultaneously, in turn making clear the collaboration required across many aspects of Scotland's public sector and beyond to keep [the promise](#).

Placing principal responsibility with one of the many bodies who made – and have responsibility to keep - [the promise](#) to “carry out a transparent appraisal of the deliverability of the remaining work” introduces a risk that would slow progress and more concerningly could result in changes to [the promise](#) beyond the recognition of the care community - from [the promise](#) that was made to one that is easier to keep.

Five years, the focus of the performance audit must be protecting the vision of [the promise](#) and supporting its realisation.

With this intent at the centre, the performance audit would fulfil your aspiration to “make a difference in people's lives through public audit” and build on your track record of reform.

b. as a realistic assessment of progress:

You have observed the “implementation gap” between “political ambition and how things are actually delivered.”

Although the clearance draft acknowledges sustained commitment of public bodies, it overlooks five years of progress and achievements through change that are closing the implementation gap. Instead, it takes a very narrow view of the 'system' and only offers an assessment of delivery against [the promise](#) at the point in time of the performance audit.

To embed positive changes to practice everywhere and to support an end to poor practice, to up the pace of change and to support greater collaboration and co-designed innovation, the performance audit needs to grasp the opportunity to develop an understanding of both what it has taken to get to this point and what is needed next.

With an evidence-based analysis of the bridges and barriers to change experienced by those working to keep [the promise](#), the performance audit has the potential for insights into both why the gap between ingenuity and implementation persists and how to close it.

c. as a constructive assessment of the wider landscape:

You have noted "Without an increase in the scale and pace of reform... the cycle will remain unbroken". My introduction in [the promise](#) notes that in the seven preceding years (before 2017), Scotland had carried out six reviews into how it cares for its children.

However, in the clearance draft, a number of innovations specifically designed to break the cycle, to help overcome deep-rooted, systemic barriers and contribute to public sector reform are appraised at a static point. They are, therefore, characterised as shortcomings and not recognised as essential, long-term reforms that - by their very nature - take time to have an impact.

d. as a test case of how well public service reform is being delivered:

Whilst aspects of the clearance draft are helpful and surface many of the well-known barriers to public sector reform, the clearance draft does not assess *how well* public service reform is being delivered.

It would be helpful if the performance audit was able to offer a benchmark of current progress to keep [the promise](#) against the shortcomings of other attempts at major public sector reform.

You are aware that I have requested to get more involved in supporting the Audit Scotland team. I appreciate this is not the usual process or procedure but believe it could help ensure the final report realises its potential, meets expectations and builds on momentum. My requests were declined with an assurance that the "usual audit approach" will result in a "robust report". Government then sought and secured approval from Audit Scotland to share their draft clearance report with me (and The Promise Scotland Chief Executive), and it is based on my reading of this that I felt compelled to write.

Simply put, as it stands the clearance report will not renew purpose across the breadth of sectors required to change, instead risks thwarting progress, or worse still changing the destination. It will not accelerate pace of change, instead risks slowing the current one. It will

not provide insights into how to build on the existing bridges or overcome the deep-rooted barriers into public sector reform, instead risks diminishing innovative efforts and successes.

In short, at worst, the report could derail Scotland's progress towards keeping the promise.

With further analysis, it could still provide Scotland with a catalyst to keep [the promise](#) and I respectfully urge you and colleagues to work differently with me and others to ensure the framing and recommendations grasp the rare chance to add genuine value - to hold (all) public bodies to account, to strengthen reform, and to ensure Scotland remains on course and ups its pace to keep [the promise](#).

My offer is an open one and I am willing to work with the team to ensure my experience and skills are utilised appropriately, and in keeping with the independent nature of the performance audit. You can be assured this includes working to identify the challenging areas and work required, not simply areas where progress is smoother.

My tenacity is entirely focused on helping ensure the opportunity this performance audit report presents is not missed and recognises the unique responsibility the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission have in terms of bringing clarity and pace to Scotland's ambition to keep [the promise](#).

Yours sincerely

Fiona Duncan

**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Chair - The Promise Scotland**