

CELCIS Response to the Education and Gaelic Committee's request for evidence for pre-budget scrutiny: reforming the care system for looked after children in Scotland

CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection is a leading improvement, innovation and research centre. Based at the University of Strathclyde, we improve the lives of children and young people in need of support, care and protection by working hand in hand with the workforce and the organisations who care for and protect them.

Every infant, child and young person has the right to grow up safe, nurtured and free from harm. For some families, persistent challenges like poverty can create overwhelming stress and increase risks to children's wellbeing. When living with their birth parents is not possible, children should feel safe, valued and loved, whether they are cared for by wider family and friends in Kinship Care, by foster carers, in Residential Child Care or in Secure Care.

The language of the 'care system' can be stigmatising for care experienced people. Where possible, we have tried to use non-stigmatising language other than where it is necessary to refer to the legal context, in which case terms such as 'looked after' are used.

This response to the Committee draws on research evidence, as well as knowledge from our extensive experience gathered through long-standing partnerships, working across children and family services, as well as with children, their families and carers, and adults with lived experience of care.

The progress of the Scottish Government's commitment to reform the care system for 'looked after' children in Scotland by 2030

The current context: responding to the needs of children and families

The Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government have long recognised the impact poverty has on people's health, wellbeing and life chances, not least demonstrated by the cross-party commitment to the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and in repeated Programmes for Government.

Evidence has shown that there is a complex link between poverty, child abuse and neglect (Bywaters et al. 2022). The cumulative effect of the stresses and difficulties of living with poverty mean that for some families, there is an impact on children's care (Galloway, 2020). Children are continuing to grow up in a context where poverty, mental health, addiction, disability and additional support needs often intersect, placing increasing demand on support services. For The Promise of the Independent Care Review to be kept by 2030, Scotland needs to work

towards preventing and easing poverty, removing the impact this has on too many families (The Independent Care Review, 2020).

The children's services workforce is a passionate and highly committed workforce, but it is a workforce in crisis. The children's workforce is experiencing longstanding capacity challenges and services are operating under significant financial pressures (Ottaway et al, 2023). High-quality services, and reform of services, requires a well-resourced and skilled workforce within a range of universal, targeted and intensive supports to respond to the needs of children and families. The workforce crisis and their capacity to respond to the needs of children and their families is further exacerbated by a lack of suitable homes and carers for children and young people, as set out in the recent Chief Social Work Officers joint statement on the emergency concerning a lack of suitable homes and carers for children and young people (Chief Social Work Officers, 2026).

The development of legislation has also been a part of Scotland's drive for reform to achieve meaningful improvements for children and their families and this forms part of the enabling context for change. Legislation alone is not sufficient to enact the changes required: implementation is key. The expansion of services or eligibility will require detailed modelling, investment and implementation support, against the backdrop of current resourcing challenges, and this is relevant to the recent Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026.

Where has there been change

The focus on holistic whole family support, providing families with a combination of practical, emotional and financial support, has been a positive step in response to meeting the needs of Scotland's children and their families. However, the funding pledged to date through the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, for example, has not been fully allocated and can create difficulties in resourcing sustainable, long-term services. Where it has been allocated, it is often compensating for cuts in core services rather than allocated to the transformational task.

We welcome efforts within the Whole Family Support System Change Programme to bring together multiple reform programmes (including Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, Fairer Futures Partnerships and Child Poverty programmes). This could provide a more co-ordinated and aligned response to improving outcomes and reducing inequalities for children and young people.

Financial support is integral to how any family is able to thrive. The introduction of a Scottish Recommended Allowance for fostering and kinship families offers parity for how children, their families and carers are financially supported, regardless of where they live in Scotland. This is making a vital contribution in supporting carers to provide the best care

for children and young people. Likewise, efforts to support children and families with income maximisation, including help with social security support, the Scottish Child Payment, Best Start payments, the Care Experienced Bursary, and direct payment programmes, have all been working to meet families' needs.

CELCIS is currently undertaking the Independent Review of Scotland's Legislative Framework for Children's Care for the Scottish Government, led by Professor Kenneth Norrie. This is in recognition by parliamentarians, the government, the Independent Care Review and practitioners of the cluttered and challenging legislative landscape concerning the duties and responsibilities for the care and protection of children in Scotland. There is strong evidence of a need for the legislative landscape to be made easier for practitioners to understand and navigate in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities to children and their families and upholding their rights.

Through our Children's Services Reform Research in 2023, we also found that progress has been made in upholding children's right to be involved in decisions affecting them, including enhanced advocacy provision, more flexible and strengths-based approaches to engagement, and the use of digital technology. However, concerns remain about the pace and consistency of this progress (Ottaway et al., 2023).

What needs to improve

Keeping The Promise of the Independent Care Review requires a sustained focus on addressing the implementation gap between existing legislation, policy and practice across Scotland. The Children's Services Reform Research (Ottaway et al., 2023) found that despite Scotland's strong vision to support children and families, implementation is inconsistent across services and local areas. More needs to be done to ensure the full and consistent implementation of GIRFEC, including services that support children and young people's transition to adulthood, as well as services for adults which are often a crucial part of the support needed by families.

Our work with local areas highlights the following factors as important in supporting implementation of reform:

- A focus on upholding rights and ensuring the participation of children, young people, their families and carers;
- Workforce planning to address recruitment and retention across the relevant workforces;
- Measures that support collaborative leadership and multi-agency working across workforces;
- Accurate financial modelling to ensure that there is sufficient funding available to invest in services and workforces to support policy aspirations;

- Improved data collection and analysis to understand the experiences and needs of children, young people and families, as well as those who care for them, and to inform planning and decision making.

Although there has been progress in some of these areas, these have not been sequenced, funded or facilitated effectively or consistently applied to enable substantive progress to date. Further information can be found in our recent [response to the Call for Views](#) to the Public Sector Reform Committee (CELCIS, 2026).

Progress on improving clarity around funding

Lack of access to early help and preventative family support services, and to specialist health, mental health and disability support have been identified as longstanding service gaps and weaknesses in Scotland (Ottaway et al., 2023). The lack of secure, long-term funding for services, particularly early help and preventative family support services in the third sector, are highlighted as contributing to these gaps and hampering policy aspirations.

There remains a lack of clarity about how different funding streams that support implementation of The Promise fit together - both now and beyond the current funding period. Programmes including the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and Fairer Futures Partnerships are increasingly aligned in their ambition and are due to form part of an integrated Whole Family Support programme from April 2027. However, greater clarity is needed about the resources that will underpin this transition, the relationship between existing and emerging funding streams, and how investment will support local partnerships to move from testing and short-term programme activity towards sustainable, preventative approaches.

The Scottish Government should build on the longer-term direction provided through its five-year Programme for Government by setting out how existing and emerging funding streams will align over the parliamentary term. This would provide greater certainty for local government and partners and reduce the administrative and strategic burden on local partnerships of navigating multiple funding streams, reporting requirements and short-term funding arrangements.

Progress on improving clarity around roles and responsibilities

Through our Children's Services Reform Research, we heard examples of strong working relationships between practitioners from different services, however barriers to such multi-agency working were also shared. These included: short-term funding and job instability; siloed working; and professional hierarchies and power imbalances, with third sector and early learning and childcare practitioners reporting that their views and expertise are given less weight when decisions are made (Ottaway et al., 2023). These are the systemic issues that will require explicit attention if

the aspirations of The Promise and public services reform are to be realised.

Practitioners and frontline staff play a vital role in building trusting relationships with children and families and responding to their needs early and their expertise is crucial to planning service improvements. However, it is strategic leaders across Children's Services Planning Partnerships (CSPPs) who have the pivotal role in driving and sustaining whole-system reform and ensuring that practitioners have the structure, permissions and resources they need to deliver support, as well as fostering collaboration across services.

For The Promise to be realised, leaders require the time, space and specialist support to develop a shared understanding of the local system and the experiences of children and families; agree a collective ambition and approach to change; create the conditions for learning to inform ongoing decisions; take collective action to align resources; address barriers and adapt approaches as learning emerges. This requires sustained collaboration between leaders rather than responsibility sitting within individual programmes or services.

Funding and local preparations for extension of aftercare

We welcome the provision to expand the eligibility to apply for aftercare through the new Children (Scotland) Act 2026. However, this is a good example of where financial and interlinked workforce considerations must serve to refocus us in how we translate legislative aspirations into effective implementation and real change for people.

We are supporting Scottish Government in their development of guidance for the new aftercare provisions by facilitating a network of social work practitioners to ensure this guidance is informed by the expertise of those who will implement it, including the implementation challenges and opportunities. We know that practitioners are currently struggling to meet the aftercare needs in their areas at present so consideration must be given to the new population of children and young people now entitled to apply for aftercare support. This population will be significantly larger than the currently eligible population which is children and young people who were 'looked after' on or after their sixteenth birthday. Our understanding is that this population could include anyone who was looked after for any length of time in their childhood. COSLA have stated that they are concerned that the level of support required could be higher than anticipated (Scottish Government, 2026, page 11). It is vital that there is a clear understanding of who the newly eligible population is. That will allow for accurate modelling which is essential in order to assess what the funding allocation and workforce required will be.

Inadequate financial modelling will be detrimental to the implementation of the Act. The Supplementary Financial Memorandum, states that the support costs “do not include any recruitment, training or other costs which might be required to expand capacity to provide aftercare.” (Scottish Government, 2026, page 11, footnote 11). We are concerned that these crucial costs have not been accounted for. As this provision will bring additional responsibilities to social work practitioners who would conduct most of the assessments, including supporting people to understand if they were looked after at any point in their childhood, the capacity of this workforce would also need to increase. As it stands, there are considerable vacancies across the social work profession, and the highest vacancy rates within children and families social work teams, a total of 16.7%, with 9.7% in ‘main’ and 7% in ‘senior’ roles (Scottish Social Services Council, 2025). A plan is required for how the workforce will be grown and sustained. The extension of aftercare *must* be matched with all the resources required for it to make the difference intended.

Supporting reform

Delivering the scale of transformational change envisaged by The Promise requires sustained investment over time, and there remains a need to ensure resources are aligned with the pace and breadth of reform required. CELCIS remains committed to working with local and national partners to improve support for children, young people and their families. We look forward to working with the Committee and all parliamentarians as they further consider the reform of children’s care and of public services more broadly.

References

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