

Education and Gaelic Committee Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2027-28: Progress towards children's care system reform

Written Submission from COSLA

Introduction

COSLA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's pre-budget scrutiny on progress towards children's care system reform.

Scotland's local authorities remain fully committed to improving the lives of babies, children, young people and families with experience of care and to delivering the transformational change envisaged by the Independent Care Review. Across Scotland, the Promise is firmly embedded within local planning arrangements, governance structures and service improvement activity. Local authorities continue to demonstrate leadership, innovation and determination in driving this work forward.

However, as we move closer to 2030, the key question is no longer whether Scotland is committed to keeping the Promise. The question is whether the financial, workforce and system conditions required to deliver that commitment are being created.

Keeping the Promise was never intended to be delivered through the efforts of individual services or organisations acting alone. It requires a whole-system shift across public services, sustained over many years, supported by investment, workforce capacity, effective partnership working and policy coherence.

As the Committee considers the role of the Scottish Budget in supporting delivery, COSLA would highlight three overarching messages:

- Progress is being made, and local government continues to take active steps to drive change and improve outcomes, but progress is increasingly constrained by workforce pressures, financial challenges and a complex reform landscape.
- Ambition must be matched by the resources, workforce capacity and delivery conditions needed to realise change in practice.
- Public service reform should strengthen preventative approaches, local democratic accountability and partnership working rather than creating additional complexity or centralisation.

From a pre-budget perspective, this requires consideration of whether investment is aligned with the scale of ambition, whether the workforce has the capacity to deliver the changes expected, whether reform activity is being appropriately prioritised and

sequenced, whether local systems have sufficient flexibility to respond to local need, and whether responsibility and accountability for delivery are clear across all partners. These issues will be critical in determining the pace of future progress.

Progress Towards Keeping the Promise

Evidence from across Scotland demonstrates that the Promise continues to drive change at both strategic and operational levels within local government. COSLA's annual Promise reports, alongside publications such as Keeping the Promise: A Local Perspective from The Promise Scotland, highlight activity underway across all 32 local authority areas and provide examples of how councils and their partners are working to improve outcomes for babies, children, young people and families. These reports show continued progress in embedding rights-based and relationship-based approaches, strengthening participation and voice, developing trauma-informed practice, expanding whole family support, and improving multi-agency collaboration.

While the approaches adopted by individual local authorities may differ, the evidence suggests a high degree of alignment regarding the outcomes being sought and the changes required to achieve them. Variation in local delivery should not automatically be viewed as a concern. Local authorities operate in different contexts, with varying demographics, geography, levels of need, workforce challenges and existing service provision. The ability to respond to these differing circumstances is an important feature of local democratic accountability and supports services being designed around the needs of local communities rather than a one-size-fits-all model. As a result, while there should be consistency in ambition and outcomes, progress at a local level must be understood and assessed within the context of individual communities, their needs, and the challenges they face.

At a national level, COSLA, Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland are jointly developing the Promise Story of Progress, which is the agreed mechanism for understanding and measuring progress towards keeping the Promise. The Story of Progress recognises that no single measure can adequately reflect the scale and complexity of the change being sought. Instead, it brings together information from three complementary perspectives: national indicators, organisational change, and the experiences of care experienced children and young people. Considered together, these provide a richer and more meaningful understanding of progress than any individual source could provide in isolation. Work on the Story of Progress continues, with further development underway across all three elements as our collective understanding of progress evolves.

It is important that discussions about progress reflect the complexity of the change being sought. The Promise represents long-term system transformation rather than the

delivery of a single programme or policy. Understanding progress therefore requires consideration not only of national trends and performance measures, but also of how services are changing, how decisions are being made locally, and how those changes are experienced by children, young people and families

The issue for Scotland is therefore not whether progress is taking place, but how the pace of progress can be sustained and accelerated over the period to 2030.

Funding, Capacity and Delivery Conditions

The most consistent message from local government is that there is growing tension between ambition and deliverability.

Analysis undertaken through the Local Government Promise Programme Board, drawing on engagement with local authorities across Scotland, found widespread agreement that the Promise is well embedded in local priorities, but that stronger alignment is needed between ambition, resourcing and delivery conditions. For COSLA, the conditions required to sustain and accelerate delivery of the promise are clear: sustainable funding, a confident and capable workforce, realistic prioritisation and sequencing of change, effective partnership working, and sufficient local flexibility to respond to community need.

Sustainable Funding

Keeping the Promise requires long-term transformation, yet local authorities continue to operate within annual budget cycles and increasing financial pressure.

While additional funding is important, the issue is not solely the amount of money available. It is also whether funding arrangements support prevention, early intervention and longer-term service redesign rather than short-term responses to immediate pressures.

There is a growing concern that policy ambitions are frequently agreed before implementation costs are fully understood or funding arrangements are clear. Where this occurs, local authorities can find themselves carrying significant delivery risk while remaining fully accountable for outcomes.

From COSLA's perspective, successful delivery depends on realistic and agreed costings, sustainable multi-year funding arrangements, and investment that is aligned with implementation expectations. Longer-term funding approaches that support prevention, whole family support and service redesign would provide greater confidence for local partners to invest in the changes required to keep the Promise. This would build on the significant efforts already underway across local government to protect and strengthen preventative services despite growing financial pressures.

Successful delivery also requires recognition that local authorities are operating from different starting points and within different circumstances, and that funding approaches must be sufficiently flexible to reflect the varying needs, pressures and priorities of local areas.

Workforce Capacity

The workforce remains one of the most significant risks to successful delivery. Recruitment and retention challenges continue across social work, social care, housing, education and mental health services. These pressures affect not only frontline capacity but also leadership and strategic capacity within local government.

The impact of these challenges extends beyond individual vacancies. It affects the ability of local services to lead change, redesign services, implement new legislation and sustain improvement activity over time. Local authorities are working collectively with partners to respond through workforce planning, recruitment and retention initiatives, and leadership development activity. While national work is progressing through structures such as the Scottish Social Work Partnership, and local efforts continue across Scotland, meaningful improvement will take time to reach local services and communities.

A key point of consideration is therefore not only what changes should happen, but whether sufficient workforce capacity exists to deliver them.

The Importance of Prioritisation and Sequencing

One of the strongest themes from engagement with local authorities is concern regarding the volume of policy, legislative and reform activity currently underway.

The same workforce responsible for delivering the wide range of changes required to keep the Promise is also responsible for implementing a broad range of other reforms and responding to increasing demand and complexity within services. Local government continues to raise concerns regarding the cumulative impact of these developments and the absence of clear sequencing and prioritisation.

Recent engagement with local authorities found broad alignment between local priorities and the ambitions set out in the Promise route maps. However, authorities also reported that the route maps are not yet functioning as a shared planning framework to support local delivery. This reinforces the need for clearer prioritisation, sequencing and alignment between ambition, delivery expectations and the resources available to support implementation.

The challenge is not the ambition itself. The challenge is ensuring that ambition is matched by the capacity, resources and delivery conditions required to achieve it. These considerations are particularly relevant where significant legislative changes or service expansions are proposed. Local Government has consistently emphasised the

importance of ensuring workforce, funding and wider enabling conditions are in place before implementation expectations are set. Without this, there is a risk that the ambition of reform outpaces the system's ability to deliver it sustainably and effectively.

This highlights the need for government and Parliament to give greater consideration to the sequencing of reform, ensuring that the workforce, funding and wider enabling conditions required for successful delivery are in place before additional expectations are placed on local systems.

Collective Responsibility and Partnership Working

Keeping the Promise requires coordinated action across a wide range of organisations and sectors. While local authorities play a central role, many of the factors influencing delivery sit beyond local government alone.

The Promise requires meaningful contributions from all corporate parents, Community Planning Partners, national public bodies and the Scottish Government. This includes shared responsibility for creating the conditions required for success, including workforce planning, housing, health provision, prevention and family support, data and evidence, and wider public service reform. As national organisations increasingly play a role in supporting delivery, it is also important to consider how effectively national priorities, programmes and agencies connect with local partnerships and planning arrangements, including through Community Planning structures.

Delivery is also dependent on wider system factors, including housing supply, placement sufficiency and the availability of specialist provision, which require collective action at both local and national level.

Clarity regarding roles, responsibilities and accountability remains important. Local authorities have embedded Promise activity within existing planning, governance and scrutiny arrangements and remain accountable to their communities through elected members. However, keeping the Promise depends on contributions from a wide range of partners and agencies. Understanding both the distinct and shared responsibilities across the system will be important in supporting collective progress towards 2030.

Effective partnership working is therefore not an optional extra but a fundamental condition for delivery. Progress will be strongest where responsibilities, accountability and resources are clearly understood, aligned and shared appropriately across partners, and where national and local organisations work together effectively to support delivery in communities.

Local Flexibility and Trust

Local authorities operate within significantly different contexts, reflecting varying demographics, geography, levels of need, workforce availability and existing service provision.

Keeping the Promise requires a clear national ambition, but it does not require identical approaches in every area. Local authorities must retain the flexibility to prioritise, plan and deliver services in ways that respond to local circumstances and community needs. National frameworks should support and enable local delivery, rather than create additional parallel processes or constrain local innovation.

This is particularly important where difficult prioritisation decisions are required. Prioritisation is not a sign of reduced commitment to the Promise, but a necessary and responsible part of local leadership within finite resources.

Public Service Reform and Keeping the Promise

Public service reform and keeping the Promise should be viewed as mutually reinforcing agendas. Many of the changes required to keep the Promise, including earlier intervention, stronger support for families, better partnership working and a focus on long-term outcomes, are also central to meaningful public service reform.

The success of reform should be judged not by organisational arrangements alone, but by whether it improves outcomes for children, young people and families. Reform should strengthen prevention, collaboration, local democratic accountability and decision-making as close as possible to communities, building on existing local partnerships and strengths.

Realising these ambitions requires the same delivery conditions that underpin keeping the Promise, including investment in workforce capacity, preventative services, digital capability and wider system reform. Reform also provides an opportunity to address barriers identified by local authorities, including fragmented funding arrangements, workforce challenges and growing demand pressures. The financial case for public service reform and the moral case for keeping the Promise are closely connected; both depend on shifting resources and effort towards prevention, earlier intervention and support that reduces the need for crisis responses later.

However, reform programmes themselves require leadership attention, workforce capacity and implementation effort. If not carefully aligned, there is a risk that reform activity or structural change could divert focus and capacity away from Promise delivery. Scottish Government should therefore ensure that public service reform actively supports, rather than inhibits, progress towards keeping the Promise.

As the Committee considers future budgets, COSLA would encourage public service reform and keeping the Promise to be viewed together. The key question is not simply whether reform is taking place, but whether it is creating the conditions that enable local systems to deliver the changes envisaged by the Promise.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of commitment to keeping the Promise. Local government remains fully committed, and evidence from across Scotland demonstrates continued progress in transforming services, systems and support in line with the aims and ambitions of the Promise.

As Scotland moves towards 2030, the challenge is increasingly not one of ambition, but of delivery. The key question is whether the financial, workforce and system conditions required to support delivery are being created and sustained.

The evidence from local government is clear: progress will be strongest where funding supports long-term transformation and prevention, workforce capacity is strengthened, reform is appropriately prioritised and sequenced, partners work collectively towards shared outcomes, and local areas have the flexibility to respond to community needs.

Public service reform has an important role to play, but only if it strengthens prevention, partnership working and local delivery rather than creating additional complexity.

Ultimately, keeping the Promise will depend not only on the commitments that are made, but on the collective willingness of national and local partners to create the conditions that make those commitments achievable.