

Inquiry into Progress Towards Care System Reform and Aftercare Provision

Submission from Social Work Scotland to the Scottish Parliament Education and Gaelic Committee

15th September 2026

Introduction

The vision for Scotland's care system, articulated in The Promise, is one which social work leaders whole-heartedly endorse. A future in which there is a robust infrastructure of community-based support, focused on the whole family, easily accessible and enduring. A future where, when children need to be cared for away from their parents, the care provided is of the highest quality, aligned to individual needs, and is loving and nurturing. Social Work leaders fully appreciate the opportunity which the Promise presents; and not least to the workforce which they lead, made up of people who chose careers to make a positive difference in their community, and who all too often feel unable to do so.

Over the past six years there has been significant activity focused on delivering the Promise, including the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 and the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026, the redesign of the Children's Hearings System, the Whole Family Support programme, etc. Alongside these developments, there has been increasing emphasis on relationship-based practice, trauma-informed approaches, and the participation of children and young people in decisions affecting their lives. We have, on behalf of our members, been publicly critical of much of the recent legislative activity¹, disconnected as it has been from any considered and properly resourced plan for how to realise change on the ground. But Scotland has made meaningful progress towards realising the Promise in several important ways, and while that success should not mask how far there is still to go, it should be acknowledged and celebrated.

If the vision set out in the Promise is the destination, and where we were in 2020 the starting point, Social Work Scotland's assessment is that we are less than half-way there. We reach this conclusion principally because there has been so little progress on expanding and strengthening the capacity of the care system to provide care and support. For our members this is the most important component of reform. It is a

¹ Social Work Scotland (March 2026), [Joint letter to MSPs re: Children \(Care, Care Experience, and Services Planning\) \(Scotland\) Bill at Stage 3](https://socialworkscotland.org/briefings_statements/joint-letter-to-mmps-re-children-care-care-experience-and-services-planning-scotland-bill-at-stage-3/) [https://socialworkscotland.org/briefings_statements/joint-letter-to-mmps-re-children-care-care-experience-and-services-planning-scotland-bill-at-stage-3/]

prerequisite condition, achievement of which is essential if we are to make possible much of the rest of the vision. For families, that capacity is reflected in the availability of whole-family and intensive support options. For children, that capacity is reflected in there being enough carers to make matching possible, and enough social workers, support workers, advocates, etc. (holding small enough caseloads) with which they can form meaningful relationships. For carers, and the children they care for, the capacity needed is often in universal services, or in getting access to additional support around education or mental health. The care system is a web of interconnected human systems, and success or failure depends largely on the capacity of the humans that make up these systems. Legislation and policy matter, but they are insignificant factors in comparison to the capacity of the workforce.

Progress towards realising the Promise

In assessing progress Social Work Scotland believes there are three key questions.

- Can today's children, young people, families and care experienced adults access the care and support they need (and are often entitled to)?
- Does the workforce which makes up the care system have the capacity to deliver what care and support is required now, and the capacity to meet future needs (as required by societal or policy developments)?
- Are responsibilities and accountability (for delivering the Promise) sufficiently clear?

For each of these, the follow up "why" questions are critical. If children and young people do not have access to the care and support they need now, why is that? It is only with a deep and nuanced understanding of the reasons *why* that we will identify the right solutions.

The views and experiences of Scotland's children, young people and families must provide the core data for answering these questions. How close is their day-to-day experience to the vision set out in the Promise? Second to that data must come the views and experiences of those people that make up the care system: the volunteers, professionals and practitioners, across all sectors. In this space Social Work Scotland can offer some thoughts on the three key questions above.

Are people accessing the care and support they need?

Levels of need in many of Scotland's communities are very significant, and the nature of the need is increasingly complex (e.g. trauma, neurodiversity, poverty, involvement in the justice system, all in one family). In this context, the positive work of colleagues across the third and public sectors must be noted. Many people are receiving care and support, often of amazing value and impact. The people who make up the system are not only preventing children's and families' situations from

deteriorating, therefore avoiding further harm, they are actively making things better. This is happening across Scotland.

But it is also true that too many people are not getting the care and support (including services such as mental health and education) they need, at the right time and in the right place. Any sample of care experienced people, carers or parents will make this fact plain. And the insight shared by those who work in the system backs it up. We are only reaching a proportion of the need out in communities and families. A relevant urgent issue for our members is the challenge many local authorities are experiencing in securing safe placements for children and young people (who require to be cared for away from their birth parents). Scotland's thirty-two Chief Social Work Officers recently took the unusual step of issuing a joint public statement describing the situation as an emergency.² Children to whom the promise was made are currently being cared for in situations which they, and their social workers, would not choose if there were more appropriate options. And we are aware that the immense pressure on care placements is encouraging some young care experienced people to move out from home before they planned to, in order to "free up my bed for someone who needs it more". The Promise will only be realised when we have a range of placement options available for each child needing to come into care, based on which social work and / or the Hearings system can make the best possible decisions. Decisions in which children and families have meaningful voice and agency. We are far from that situation currently.

In respect of the support Scotland provides to care experienced people as they transition into adulthood, the story is very similar. Real progress has been made, and provision is better than it was a decade ago. But the distance from where we are now and what is envisaged is considerable. And that is partly because there has not been sufficient attention given, in national policy discussion, to the availability of suitable housing options, and of the people who are needed to provide practical support and trusted relationships.

Does the workforce which makes up the care system have the capacity to deliver?

Scotland's care workforce does an incredible job, in some extremely difficult circumstances. National discussion is often focused, understandably, on situations where things have not gone right, and where the support for families, children and young people has not been good enough. But while such cases demand our close attention, they are not representative of the protection, care, advocacy and love that the workforce provides every day, in every part of the country.

² Social Work Scotland (June 2026) [Joint statement re: Emergency in availability of alternative care options for children](https://socialworkscotland.org/briefings_statements/joint-statement-re-availability-of-alternative-care-options-for-children/) [https://socialworkscotland.org/briefings_statements/joint-statement-re-availability-of-alternative-care-options-for-children/]

However, it has long been Social Work Scotland's public position that the workforce does not have the capacity to deliver what the population's current level of need requires, and the current legislative duties demand. And we have argued that, if the workforce is unable to satisfactorily fulfil its current responsibilities, it makes little sense to extend the responsibilities, increasing what is required of them. Indeed, our position on the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 was that it had the potential to be harmful to delivery of the Promise, introducing new duties into a system with no capacity to deliver them. Such an environment creates moral distress and disillusion in the workforce, as a feeling grows that they are simply being set up to fail.

As previous evidence to Parliament has made clear, our members are concerned about the cumulative impact of national reform activity in children's services, not all of which is as connected and sequenced as it needs to be. And most critically, for reform objectives to be realised there needs to be the workforce capacity necessary to make the change, and then, subsequently, to sustain the change.

We have also, in previous evidence, shared concerns regarding the increasing complexity of the legislative and policy landscape affecting children's services. Legislative developments can help create the conditions in which the workforce can improve outcomes. But they can also create a system that is incoherent (in terms of underlying principles) and difficult to navigate (for children, families and practitioners). The challenge for law makers is therefore ensuring that the legislative framework remains coherent, understandable and enabling of effective practice. The Children's Legislative Review, led by Professor Kenneth Norrie and hosted by CELCIS, is a very welcome development, and we encourage Committee members to engage seriously with its recommendations.

Are responsibilities and accountability (for delivering the Promise) sufficiently clear?

There feels to be genuine, shared commitment to deliver the Promise among partners, and agreement on national priorities. There is constructive collaboration (and challenge) built on awareness that no single organisation or service can deliver this on its own. However, Social Work Scotland members continue to report uncertainty regarding "governance" of the Promise change programme, and relatedly, questions of accountability. Who, for example, is responsible for ensuring that the care workforce has the capacity it needs to deliver the services and outcomes we expect it to (through legislation and policy)? And if new national priorities pull the attention of system leaders away from the Promise, who should be held accountable for that?

The reform programme to deliver the Promise is informed and / or directed by several national organisations, but responsibility for delivery continues to sit largely with local authorities and their local partners (in the wider public sector, and in the

third sector). During the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act debates we and other local government partners raised a concern that the gap between national policy ambition and local delivery capacity was continuing to grow. We do not believe that the true extent of implementation costs is fully understood at a national level, and we do not support the increasing use of guidance and secondary legislation to prescribe practice, rather than developing human capacity and skills. Such strategies (e.g. guidance writing) are undoubtedly cheaper than investing in the people who make up the care system, but the evidence around change and implementation makes clear that they are of limited value on their own.

The Promise Scotland and the associated Promise Oversight Board could help resolve some of the issues profiled above. If empowered to undertake and publish independent, expert assessments of what capacities (locally and nationally) are needed to deliver specific changes, and then subsequently the construction of implementation plans which not only reflected best available evidence about making change, but which could also be contextualised (as each local area is different), the prospects for delivering the Promise would improve.

Conclusion

In this submission we have made several references to capacity. This is likely a reflection of the fact that, within the discussions of our members, the lack of capacity among social workers, carers, families, partners, leaders, etc. is the subject most frequently returned to. Where are we going to find safe, nurturing placements for infants? Is our provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (or those trafficked to Scotland) fit for purpose to meet their needs? Are our social work staff equipped to manage the risks in a family, so that a child can remain at home with their birth parents?

But rather than this being simply a question of people / headcount, it is a matter of time. The time needed to build trust and relationships. Time to respond to the issues which emerge with a child, family or young person, with patience and persistence. Time to allow for high-quality professional supervision, and peer-support. Time to lead a team or service through a process of improvement and / or evolution. The care system envisaged by the Promise is rich in time. In assessing whether we are making progress towards realising the Promise, Social Work Scotland will continue to reflect on the extent to which the capacity in our system has changed, for better or worse.