

Education and Gaelic Committee pre-budget scrutiny

Written evidence from The Promise Scotland ahead of oral evidence on 15th September 2026

Introduction

[The Promise Scotland](#) is the organisation set up to support Scotland to implement the findings of the Independent Care Review. This evidence should be read alongside the seven reports produced by the Independent Care Review, specifically [the promise](#) and [the rules; Plan 24-30](#), Scotland's plan to keep the promise; and the [Promise Story of Progress](#), Scotland's framework to understand progress.

Background

In 2020, following a root and branch review of the so-called 'care system', Scotland made the promise, a clear commitment to transform the way it supports children, families, and care experienced adults. Since then, real progress has been made. Most recently, the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026, creating important new duties and rights.

With four years remaining until 2030, the urgent challenge now is to build on the widespread and genuine commitment to reform across Scotland and deliver consistent, sustainable change in the lives of children, families, and care experienced adults across the entirety of the promise made.

For the purposes of the Committee's pre-budget scrutiny, The Promise Scotland has focused on the three specific areas referenced in the invitation for written and oral evidence, highlighting:

1. The progress being made keeping the promise across Scotland.
2. The alignment of accountability, responsibilities, planning and resources, so that change can be felt in the lives of all children, families and care experienced adults and the workforce feels better supported.
3. The expansion of aftercare and the introduction of a statutory return, as set out in the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026. The wider operating context must be considered – keeping the promise requires a shift towards prevention and early and ongoing help and support and sustainable support for the workforce, rather than continuing to fund systems that only react when needs have become more acute.

1. Progress towards reforming the 'care system' by 2030

The scale of activity since the Independent Care Review concluded in 2020 should not be underestimated. Scotland has made changes across legislation, policy, practice, and culture that have both directly and indirectly affected the lives of children, families and care experienced adults.

Some of these changes are significant and readily identified. For example, the work to transform the Children's Hearings System (including legislative changes that must be commenced and practice changes that are currently underway); major legislative reforms such as the Children (Care and Justice) Act which, amongst other things, ended the imprisonment of children in Scotland; the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) Act which will introduce a wide range of duties, rights and entitlements; the Scottish Recommended Allowance for foster and kinship carers; and practice changes such as a focus on early and ongoing help and support in local areas.

Some of the most important changes are less visible. Language has changed. There is greater permission in many parts of the system to work relationally alongside children and their families. There are examples of young people receiving increased support as they leave care. These cultural and relational shifts matter because the promise was fundamentally about changing how children, families and care experienced adults experience services, not simply changing structures or legislation.

The picture of progress is nevertheless uneven. The pace of change varies significantly between policy areas and local areas, and there remains a substantial gap between what has been committed to and what is consistently experienced by children, families, and care experienced adults. This is why progress cannot be judged simply by counting new legislation, strategies, programmes or groups. The test is whether children, families, and care experienced adults are experiencing different outcomes and relationships with the systems around them.

There are now mechanisms in place to better understand this progress. Plan 24-30 sets out [the outcomes that must be reached](#), the milestones to reach them, and the progress underway across 25 route maps - though work is still underway to bring greater clarity and accountability processes. The [Promise Story of Progress](#) brings together national quantitative data, understanding of organisational learning, and the experiences of the care community. [Keeping the promise: A local perspective](#) provided visibility of activity across Scotland's 32 local areas.

The [Independent Strategic Advisor](#) is currently visiting all 32 local authority areas to better understand progress and barriers to change. The [Oversight Board](#) reports on the progress being made in keeping the promise, and will publish its next report on the 29th of September.

Taken together, the evidence tells us that a lot is happening, progress is being made and that activity is not yet translating into consistent change everywhere, all of the time.

There are also significant pressures which make the next four years more difficult. These include [the availability of safe and loving homes for children](#), foster carer recruitment, recruitment and retention across the unpaid and paid workforce, particularly children's social work, and the wider financial and demand pressures across public services.

Significant reforms are already underway across [the children's legislative review](#), [reimagining secure care](#), the [Kinship Care](#) and [Adoption Visions](#), the [flexible fostering approach](#) and [the Children's Hearings System](#). These reforms need to be sequenced and coordinated with sufficient capacity and resource, and via a process that facilitates the joining together of all reforms affecting children, families, and care experienced adults. Without this, there is a risk of confusing and overwhelming children, families, care experienced adults and the workforce with multiple initiatives while failing to address the underlying systemic barriers that prevent change.

2. Funding, roles, and responsibilities for delivering reform

Responsibility for keeping the promise does not lie with one single person, organisation or body. Implementation responsibility is distributed across Scottish Government, local government, local partnerships, health and social care, education, justice, the third sector and others. No single organisation can keep the promise alone.

That does not, however, mean that accountability for change is diluted - rather that the breadth of those working together for change is a strong indication of the seriousness Scotland has placed on the commitment made to change and the breadth of the promise, which touches on all aspects of children, families and care experienced adults' lives.

Each corporate parent and duty bearer has specific actions and responsibilities that, combined, represent significant change.

Responsibility for making changes - and overcoming the systemic barriers that get in the way - sits with each of these duty bearers in different ways, including

the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government, local authorities, the wider public sector and the voluntary sector.

In order to support this work, the Independent Care Review was deliberately different to other reviews. Responsibility for change was not left to individual organisations following publication of a report. Following the advice of an independent expert group, Scottish Ministers established a new and innovative structure to support change and provide oversight, including:

- The Independent Strategic Advisor (Fiona Duncan), who advises Scottish Government and other duty bearers on the work required.
- The Promise Scotland, which supports those working across 'the care system' to make change.
- The Oversight Board, which provides independent oversight of whether change is happening, whether the pace is sufficient, and whether the promise is being kept.

Audit Scotland's October 2025 report (['Improving care experience, delivering the promise'](#)) identified some uncertainty about these roles and responsibilities, and changes have been made to be clearer about the differences.

Plan 24-30 provides an important organising framework for the work of change, setting out the outcomes that need to be delivered by 2030. The focus is now on making the route maps increasingly practical: identifying the changes required, the organisations responsible, the dependencies between reforms, the resources required, and the measures that will demonstrate whether implementation is working.

This should also inform budget decisions. Where a reform requires new duties or responsibilities, there needs to be a clear understanding of the implementation resource required - not only the immediate cost of the legislative change but the capacity, workforce and infrastructure needed to make it work sustainably.

This is particularly important in relation to the 2026 Act. The Act represents an important milestone and passing legislation is the beginning of implementation, not the end of the policy process. The next stage requires a strategic approach to implementation, along with coherent plans for sequencing, resourcing, prioritisation and delivery.

In terms of funding, The Independent Care Review's [follow the money](#) work demonstrated that Scotland spends approximately £942 million each year in relation to the 'care system'. The analysis also estimated approximately £875

million each year in costs associated with adjacent systems, alongside around £732 million in lost potential revenue through the under-representation of care experienced adults in well-paid employment. The Audit Scotland report identified that, in 2023/24, local authorities alone reported that they spent £1.2 billion on services related to care experience.

These figures demonstrate that a significant amount of public money is already invested in the 'care system'. It illustrates the need to spend differently, not simply to spend more. The promise requires a systematic shift from crisis intervention towards prevention and early and ongoing help and support, with investment decisions based on the needs of children and families rather than organisational boundaries. The national budget and local planning processes must take account of this.

There are positive examples of this shift, including work to align the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and the Fairer Futures Partnership, and longer-term funding for initiatives such as Bairns' Hoose. However, The Promise Scotland continues to hear about short-term funding arrangements, restrictive eligibility criteria and commissioning practices which prevent effective support from being sustained. This can mean that successful approaches are unable to grow, or that support closes when funding ends.

Budget processes, locally and nationally, need to become active mechanisms for reform. They should enable organisations to plan beyond annual funding cycles, pool resources where this makes sense, invest in prevention and measure value across systems rather than within individual organisational budgets. Keeping the promise is therefore not an additional programme sitting alongside public service reform. It is public service reform in action.

3. Funding for aftercare provisions and preparations for expansion

The Independent Care Review heard from care experienced young people and adults about the 'cliff edges' of care and the lack of support they felt when their legal orders ended before their sixteenth birthday. The promise concluded that 'aftercare' must take a person-centred approach, with thoughtful planning so that there are no cliff edges out of care and support. It was clear that the current system does not ensure that those who leave care prior to their sixteenth birthday are able to access legal entitlements, even though they have been removed from their families by a decision of the state. The Independent Care Review also concluded that "young adults for whom Scotland has taken on parenting responsibility must have a right to return to care and have access to services and supportive people to nurture them" (Pg 92).

The extension of aftercare within the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 to children and young people who left care prior to their sixteenth birthday is therefore an important step towards meeting the promise. So too are the changes relating to accommodation, continuing care and returning to care.

Taken together, these changes are a significant step forward in changing the poor outcomes too often experienced by care experienced adults.

The next test is implementation. The Scottish Government produced Financial Memorandums during the passage of the legislation. The Promise Scotland and others raised concerns about [how these figures were derived](#) and about the need to consider the wider financial implications of implementation.

The key issue is not simply whether a particular funding allocation is sufficient in isolation. It is whether local authorities and other delivery partners have the resources and capacity required to implement the statutory duties consistently and sustainably.

This matters because Scotland has experience of legislation being implemented inconsistently. Research - [including by CELCIS](#) - has demonstrated for many years that existing legislation is not being implemented consistently between local authorities or being felt consistently by children and young people.

The [Programme for Government 2026-2031](#) commits to implementing these provisions and The Promise Scotland is strongly supportive of these provisions within the Act.

Preparation is already underway between local authorities, Scottish Government, Social Work Scotland and others to understand the implications of the legislation and the barriers to implementation. This collaborative work is essential and should continue at pace.

Many of the changes introduced by the Bill will not be straightforward and must be accompanied by clear plans for sequencing, resourcing, prioritisation and implementation. For the Act to be translated into real change in people's lives, policy and legislation must be accompanied by coherent plans for sequenced implementation, with clarity on how resourcing will be prioritised and allocated. Only then, those to whom the promise was made will know when all aspects of it will be kept. And those charged with keeping the promise will know what is expected of them, by when and how they will deliver.

The aim should not be to create an additional, isolated funding stream for aftercare while the wider system continues to generate avoidable demand. The long-term objective must be to ensure that children and families receive the

right support earlier, that young people leaving care have stable relationships and support, and that public services work together around their needs.

The expansion of aftercare is therefore both a new statutory responsibility and an opportunity to demonstrate a different approach to public service delivery: relational, preventative, person-centred and designed around the needs of the individual rather than organisational boundaries.

What this means for the 2026-27 budget and beyond

The Promise Scotland recognises the exceptionally difficult financial environment facing the Scottish Government, local government and wider public services. Demand, complexity and workforce pressures are increasing while public bodies are being required to make significant savings.

This makes reform more important, not less. The promise cannot be kept simply by protecting existing patterns of expenditure. The evidence and learning from the Independent Care Review is that Scotland needs to change what it spends its money on, how it commissions services and how it measures value. In line with the public service reform agenda, the budget should therefore support five shifts:

From crisis to prevention.

Resources should increasingly be directed towards early and sustained help for children and families, reducing the need for more intensive and costly intervention later.

From short-term projects to sustainable provision.

Where approaches are shown to work, funding arrangements should enable organisations to plan, retain skilled workforces and sustain relationships over the longer term.

From organisational budgets to whole-system value.

Investment decisions should recognise that expenditure in one part of the system can prevent costs elsewhere. This requires greater collaboration and, where appropriate, pooled or aligned budgets.

From policy commitments to implementation capacity.

New legislation and reform commitments need realistic implementation plans, including workforce, infrastructure, data and local delivery capacity.

From measuring activity to measuring impact.

The ultimate test of investment should be whether children, families and care experienced adults experience better outcomes and better relationships.

By 2030, Scotland should have moved towards a system in which public services work as a coherent whole around children, families and communities. This will require difficult choices. It may require disinvestment from approaches that are

no longer delivering sufficient value to release resources for prevention and earlier support. The budget process can either enable these changes or make them harder. It should be used deliberately as a lever for reform.

For further information about our response please get in touch with our Policy Lead, Chloe Riddell.