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Aithisg Oifigeil

Education and Gaelic Committee

Comataidh an Fhoghlaim agus na Gàidhlig

Tuesday 15 September 2026

Session 7

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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION AND GAELIC COMMITTEE
3rd Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD)
*Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green)
*Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Ben Farrugia (Social Work Scotland)
Kay McKerrell (Who Cares? Scotland)
Fraser McKinlay (The Promise Scotland)

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Gaelic Committee

Tuesday 15 September 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Pre-budget Scrutiny 2027-28

The Convener (Karen Adam): Good morning, and welcome to the third meeting in 2026 of the Education and Gaelic Committee.

This morning, we will take evidence for our pre-budget scrutiny in advance of the budget documents being published on 3 December. This year, we will focus our scrutiny on progress towards children's care system reform and class contact time in school education. Today, we are taking evidence on the first of those themes.

I welcome Fraser McKinlay, chief executive, The Promise Scotland; Kay McKerrell, chief executive, Who Cares? Scotland; and Ben Farrugia, director, Social Work Scotland. Thank you for coming today.

We will go straight to questions, and I will kick us off before we open up to other members. A key role of the committee is scrutinising the role of delivery bodies in delivering legislation and policy that the Parliament has agreed. One of the challenges in doing so is the level of transparency on that delivery.

From the briefings that we received ahead of today's evidence session, it was difficult to get a clear picture of what has been done and what still has to be done to ensure that the Promise commitment is met by 2030. What are your views on how we can improve transparency on delivery to ensure appropriate levels of accountability for delivery of the Promise? Kay, I will come to you first.

Kay McKerrell (Who Cares? Scotland): Thank you very much, convener. I am here on behalf of Who Cares? Scotland, which is a membership organisation for care-experienced people. I do not speak on behalf of the whole care-experienced community, but I can give you an indication of what our members say and the evidence that comes through our organisation.

Since the Promise came into being in 2020, we have supported more than 5,600 individuals, and, during the past year alone, we have supported 1,700 individuals by assisting with more than 7,000 advocacy issues and helping to realise 15,000 rights. Even with those stats, we cannot tell you how the implementation of the policy is taking place. The amount that we do not know is quite striking. There are some things that we do know, but—and I stress this to the committee—how do we remedy what we do not know? There seems to be a data vacuum on a lot of this. Part of the issue is that there is not sufficient funding going into data capture. There is also no cross-policy organisation and no matrix of understanding across the organisations that work in the area.

However, I can tell you that the top advocacy issues remain the same. Different third sector organisations are working with care-experienced people on those, and they are working with different elements of the policy, but there is no way of linking with those organisations or knowing the information that they hold. The care-experienced community is therefore not yet feeling the cohesive effects of the policy or its implementation. We can give specific examples of that in our further evidence.

On the whole, I stress to the committee that, at this point, there is not sufficient cross-policy knowledge of the Promise to be able to give a proper answer as to how progress is being made and how it is felt by the care-experienced community.

Ben Farrugia (Social Work Scotland): Good morning. It is great to be here. Thank you for the invitation. I understood your question to be: how can transparency be improved to aid the assessment of delivery of the Promise? I hope that that is right.

As I hope was inferred from our written submission, I suggest that the starting point should be that the Scottish Government could loosen its control over its agenda somewhat. It has established an appropriate infrastructure to help us lead and understand what we need to do to deliver the Promise and monitor our progress so that we can see how quickly or slowly things are moving and how much is still to be done.

However, from where I sit in the system and based on my contribution, I find it difficult to see how that infrastructure is being allowed to do its job. I am referring to The Promise Scotland and other aspects, such as the Promise Oversight Board. I would like to see more power and control located outwith the Scottish Government to allow us to dictate the direction that we have to take. That would also allow care-experienced people to feel like they have got more control of the agenda.

That could be complemented if some of the noise was removed from the system. It is difficult for us to give you a clear assessment of progress because there is so much activity taking place in the children's sector continuously, simultaneously, in parallel and interdependently, which makes it difficult to understand the interdependencies and what will impact each aspect. I will give you an example that we could return to later, which is all

the activity around child protection, including mandatory reporting on issues to do with child sexual abuse and exploitation. We need to have a proper conversation about how that will impact the delivery of the Promise. As a result of the slightly political control of the agenda, it can be difficult to have a mature, reasonable conversation about how those things are going to interact with each other.

The Convener: I hope that we will dig into more of that in the session.

Fraser McKinlay (The Promise Scotland): I point to the work that we have been leading over the past few years on "Plan 24-30", which is the mechanism by which Scotland should be able to identify what needs to happen to keep the Promise by 2030. It is also the monitoring framework that allows Scotland to know how progress is being made. Essentially, it is made up of two parts. One is what we call the route maps. There are 25 themes that have been drawn directly from the Promise. Within those, there are clear outcome statements that set out what 2030 needs to look like, while a series of milestones sets out what needs to happen by when. It is fair to say that some of "Plan 24-30" is well developed, but some bits need a lot more work. I am happy to come back to that, convener.

The flipside of the coin is what we call the Promise story of progress, which is the mechanism by which we think that Scotland will be able to keep track of how the Promise is kept. To Kay McKerrell's point, we felt strongly that there needed to be three elements to that. The first element is the existing data, such as how many children and young people are in the care system. Importantly, it draws in wider data, such as that on housing and homelessness. As long as we have more than 10,000 children living in temporary accommodation in Scotland, the Promise will be harder to keep, so we think that that is an important measure. We have measures of poverty and other things, too. That gets you only so far.

There is a section about organisational learning and what organisations are doing to keep the Promise. Thirdly, and most importantly, there is a bit about experience. We worked closely with colleagues at Who Cares? Scotland last year to understand what data it holds through its advocacy work to inform the experiential aspect. There is a lot more work to do on that, but we need to look through multiple lenses at the question whether the Promise is being kept. As Ben Farrugia said, there is not a single question or number that can give you that answer.

All that information is in the public domain, and the planning, doing and reporting are happening in the open, which is challenging for many people, as they do not like it too much. We are quite used to doing stuff and then publishing things. The fact that the process is above the line, if you like, is one of the cultural challenges that we continue to grapple with, but we are confident that the model is correct.

Finally, as Ben has already mentioned, the Oversight Board, which, as you know, is an independent group of people, more than half of whom are care experienced, has the job of reporting to the Parliament and the care community on the extent to which the Promise is being kept. Its next report will be coming out in a couple of weeks on 29 September and I hope that you will see some clear conclusions about progress.

The Convener: I have a follow-up question. Audit Scotland made a number of recommendations on progress in delivering the Promise in a report that was published in October 2025. It is not clear what progress has been made in addressing those recommendations. Can you provide an update to the committee on how those recommendations are being taken forward?

Kay McKerrell: We understand from the Audit Scotland report and its key recommendations that it needs to be taken as a delivery checklist and not a suggestion of what needs to take place. A lot of the recommendations related to accountability and transparency, which leads back to the first question. We feel that there is an accountability vacuum. It is still not clear where the accountability lies. Where are care-experienced people going to get answers if they are not feeling the effects of the Promise? Who can they talk to, who is responsible and at what level? Who can they connect with and where is the remedy if the Promise is not being felt? Right now, that is too often the case across Scotland.

Steps are being taken and there is promise. Information has been provided about some of the accountability questions within the Promise Scotland, the Oversight Board and the independent strategic adviser, but those are not the questions that the care-experienced community was interested in.

It is encouraging to see progress being made on all of that, because it is important. However, that is just one step in a checklist of information that needs to be provided. As a community, we need to understand where we go to seek remedy and accountability and to ask questions, but that is still not clear.

Ben Farrugia: I am looking at a line in the report that was included in the papers for today's meeting. Audit Scotland said that the planning for the reforms

"did not give sufficient thought to"

how they would be delivered and resourced. That is the core of Social Work Scotland's frustration with the pace of progress and the approach to how we are all trying to deliver the Promise. Our hope and expectation is that the implementation planning will be well considered and thought through with the necessary resource assessment alongside it. That should then be brought back to the Parliament to show you all the working that says what it will take to deliver this or that change in the system. The approach should be owned by the Parliament, which is the core place for us in Scotland.

That line from the Audit Scotland report resonated with us. It reflected our experience, and such planning is what we would like to see happen next. I stress again that things such as the route maps are available, but the question is whether the organisations that hold responsibility for them have the permissions that they need to work those up into what they need to be, which is a worked-through implementation plan with the resource assessment next to them.

Fraser McKinlay: We have been working hard on addressing the recommendations since that report was published, and we will write to Audit Scotland at the 12-month point in October to give it a fuller update, which we will be happy to share with the committee. We have done a lot of work on stuff such as clarifying the roles of The Promise Scotland, the Oversight Board and the independent strategic adviser. We had already done a lot of work on that and we have done more since the report was published, so I hope that that will be a bit clearer.

More broadly, we have done some work—certainly on our website—to try to explain the different responsibilities and accountabilities that exist in this whole enterprise. One of the most common questions that I have been asked, I think partly because I used to work for Audit Scotland, is, "Who is accountable for keeping the Promise?" The answer that everybody is responsible is not good enough, because if everybody is responsible, then nobody is.

However, responsibility cannot be pinned on a single individual or organisation, because the nature of the Promise is that accountability for specific things is spread across lots of different organisations. That is because the Promise must take into account things such as mental health support, support for people with drug and alcohol issues and housing and homelessness. Without those things, the Promise will be harder to keep. We have tried our best to spell that out in specific terms and we will continue to do that.

The Convener: I open questions up to members.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. Ben, how do you pronounce your second name?

Ben Farrugia: Farrugia.

George Adam: I know that everyone else was wondering that, so I thought that I would ask. Ben, you said that the Scottish Government should loosen its control. We know from the written evidence that we received from the other two organisations that the Promise involves a multi-agency approach, but we need to ensure that we get the details, so what would loosening control look like?

Ben Farrugia: I will give the worked-through example of the route maps, which Fraser McKinlay has already mentioned—he will be able to speak more about the process of their development. Loosening control would let organisations such as the one that I represent actively participate in the route maps and see our contribution reflected in the assessment of what it will take to effect change, which is what the route maps are for.

As I mentioned in my previous answers, running alongside the route maps should be clear and costed assessments of what it will take to effect change and what capacity will be needed in all the respective services—Fraser McKinlay is right that the Promise affects nearly every public service in Scotland. Those assessments will be complex documents that will enable members of the Parliament, the care-experienced community and the workforce to hold to account those who made the Promise and are responsible for delivering it.

We still lack a definition of the theory of change. I accept that circumstances change—Covid happens, and so on—and you will need to make adjustments. However, I think that we have an infrastructure in place that can do that well if we allow it to. That is what I was referring to when I talked about control. There is a sense of not wanting the power to dictate what happens next to sit elsewhere and of wanting to set the pace at which things happen. I appreciate that, if you hold the purse strings, that seems reasonable.

09:45

George Adam: If I had someone from the Scottish Government sitting here, they would probably say that the Government communicates well and gives you the voice to enable you to do what you are talking about. The Government would say that it is already doing that, and that that is the only way to deliver the aims. In what way do you feel that you should be contributing more?

Ben Farrugia: We feel that we get opportunities to contribute. What perhaps we do not see is our contribution reflected in the plan. Core to my written submission today and to all of the

contributions that we have made to Parliament over the past six years is the view that, unless there is a really coherent and aggressive plan to increase the capacity of the system, whether that involves carers, advocates, social workers or family support workers, we are not going to deliver the Promise. That is our assessment. Others might disagree, but until we see different evidence from our experience on the ground, that will be our view.

We do not see that reflected in any of the plans to date. Increasing capacity would involve setting out some worked-out plans that state that, over the coming years, money will be invested in a way that can feed through the system. Again, what underpins some of the emotion that I bring into these spaces is that we are now in 2026, but that work needed to happen in 2021, so that we would have the necessary people in place now to deliver the changes that we want to make around aftercare, family group conferencing and so on, as they all require people to do them well. However, we are in exactly the same position, if not worse, in some respects, than we were in at that point with regard to the number of people and the capacity that we have in the system. This is not an area in which technology is going to magically upload more capacity for us, even if we are doing innovative things with it.

George Adam: Public service reform is going to be a major part of just about everything that we discuss in this place over the next five years. Obviously, you will have to continue to have conversations around the issue, as social workers, who you represent, have a major role to play in the delivery of the service. What pitch do you see your organisation making in the context of public service reform in order to deliver the Promise? That is the difficult balancing act that the Government will have to perform in the next couple of years.

Ben Farrugia: I hope that it does not seem like I am just returning to the same answer again and again, but we will engage positively with the opportunity of public service reform. We will do that from a number of angles, but primarily our approach will be about the options that deliver more capacity in the system to deliver services for the people of Scotland and, in this particular instance, to care-experienced families and children. It is our responsibility to articulate reform proposals that can do that but, if people come to us with suggestions for radical reform that will do it, we will entertain those proposals seriously.

George Adam: The Government is saying that it does not have all the ideas and that it wants there to be a conversation about reform. What would your key ideas be? What do you think could radically change the system and make a difference with regard to the delivery of the Promise?

Ben Farrugia: To be clear, are you asking me what my position would be with regard to public service reform?

George Adam: Yes. It is important that everybody has an opinion on it and feeds into the process.

Ben Farrugia: It is indeed. I am conscious that I represent a group of people who are still digesting what the First Minister has said in this place and elsewhere, and we are in the process of forming some positions. However, we went through a similar set of conversations around the national care service proposals. Again, our position in that case was not that we must rigidly stick to the system that we have now. It was that, if the Government can give us confidence that changes, whether they involve local authority mergers or the adoption of new models, will increase capacity, we will engage in a constructive and positive conversation about them and will not stand in their way. However, we have not had that confidence in these present conversations.

Completely understandably, the language around the public service reform agenda has involved a discussion about reducing the size of the public sector workforce. That is a completely reasonable thing to do in the financial situation that the country is in, but it creates a tension. From our point of view—again I stress that not everyone has to agree with this—delivery of the Promise requires us to increase the capacity not just of the public sector workforce but of the third sector, but how can we do that while shrinking the size of the public sector workforce? Those are two difficult things to marry together.

George Adam: What I find a bit frustrating about this discussion is that the Government always ends up with a problem here. You talk about its giving up some control on this issue. It always gets accused of having already decided what the plan is and what it is going to do, but then it will ask, “What’s your idea? How do we work together on this?” Ben, I am sorry to pick on you, but you keep coming back to the question of what the Government says and what it does. In this case, it is quite clearly saying, “Let’s have a conversation about this. We’re not going to impose anything on anyone. We’re just looking for some feedback here.”

Ben Farrugia: I am trying very consciously not to make the things that I say to you a hostage to fortune, particularly given that I work for a representative organisation and I do not want to put words in the mouths of the people I represent who have not yet formed their own perspective. However, we absolutely will have that conversation, when we get an invitation from the Government.

George Adam: When you do, will you give the committee some indication of that?

Ben Farrugia: I give you a full commitment to do so. We would absolutely welcome such an invitation.

George Adam: Does anyone else want to comment on PSR?

Fraser McKinlay: I am happy to chip in, Mr Adam.

Fiona Duncan, the independent strategic adviser, has already written to the Government on this, but whatever the structural reform piece looks like, its focus has to be on wrapping public services around communities and families. That is what public service reform has to do this time, because that, in a nutshell, is the bit that we have never cracked. In families, I include babies, children, young people, and—thinking of our interests—care-experienced adults.

Public services are too often still being delivered in policy, funding and service silos, and families and communities have to navigate their way around an enormously complex landscape. That is the bit that we need to crack.

George Adam: But we have been saying that for years.

Fraser McKinlay: Exactly—and it might well be that structural change needs to happen to make that more likely.

I am hesitating slightly, because I do not think that structural change on its own will do this either—it also has to be about holding people to account and incentivising them. One of the really interesting recommendations in the Audit Scotland report was on the role of children's services planning partnerships and community planning in all of this. We have had community planning partnerships since 2003, but I do not think that we have ever really backed them as the main vehicle for driving public services and public service reform in local communities.

One of the questions that I ask all the time—to the point that people are bored of hearing me ask it—is what is going to be different this time? As you have said, we have been talking about this for quite a long time now. The financial position and the experiences of communities and families mean that we have now reached a tipping point. My sense is that, this time, we really need to do this, and it might be that structural reform will help.

At the time of the debate about the national care service, Fiona Duncan published a series of articles under the "One question and one question only" heading about whether the changes would mean that we were more or less likely to keep the Promise. That will be our lens over the next few months as the debate unfolds.

As I have said, all the research will tell you that the structures on their own ain't gonna do that. The question, then, is what else is there?

George Adam: My take is that this is about the delivery of services and, in the case of the Promise, how the families and individuals involved actually feel. The fact is that, at the end of the day, they are not connected to institutions. They do not care whether it is Renfrewshire Council, the City of Edinburgh Council, Glasgow City Council or whatever that delivers the services—they just want them to be delivered. That is the stage in the conversation that we need to get to. I do not know what you think about that.

Fraser McKinlay: I totally agree. As I have said, we think that, if you wanted to start somewhere, intensive family support is where it would be. However, that takes us back to the issue of investment—which in turn brings us back to Ben Farrugia's point—so it does not solve anything. You still need to figure out where and how you are spending your money.

However, the end goal has to be a focus on shaping public services for families and communities. Otherwise, we end up shifting the deck chairs, and having a different configuration but facing the same problem.

George Adam: Nobody wants that.

Ben Farrugia: To come back to your point, Mr Adam, I think that people do care who delivers the service. They might not care whether it is, say, Renfrewshire Council or the City of Edinburgh Council, but they do care that the service is designed and delivered by people who understand their community. After all, the communities here in Edinburgh are not identical to those in Renfrewshire—Scotland, and its communities, are not monocultures. That is where some of the debate has got a bit sticky.

George Adam: What I mean when I say that people do not care is that they do not lose sleep over who delivers the service; what they lose sleep over is the service not being delivered. If we are talking about the council—the thing that everybody interacts with—the fact is that people do not care who picks up their bins, as long as that actually happens.

Ben Farrugia: I agree, but we have to engage with the complexity, in that people want services that are tailored to their needs. What infrastructure do we need in order to do that properly? Conceivably, we could run a bin service at a national level, but can we deliver family support in a really effective way at a national level?

George Adam: Don't say that to the binmen.

Kay McKerrell: The public sector reform strategy is prioritising efficiency, prevention and fiscal sustainability. One of the key aspects is to ensure, as we do that, that the dilution—for want of a better word—of control into different areas happens, and that we are not cutting corners on the Promise. We need to ensure that the strategy is not accompanied by implementation purgatory, whereby nobody is quite sure who is accountable and responsible for delivering it. In a sea of change, that is one of the likely outcomes and consequences that has to be planned for.

If you are asking what we want to see, I can tell you that we have a checklist. It is not fully comprehensive, but I would happily provide further written evidence to the committee on it.

I have touched on data and funding. As the changes take place, it is crucial that we understand how they are landing with the care-experienced community and how they are being felt. Some amazing things are happening, but is the progress that has already been made being affected? Are some things being brought forward that were not happening before? We need to understand, through data, how that is happening.

As part of that, we also need an end to the short-term funding cycles to which the third sector is subject. Those are not conducive to creating an environment for implementing a strategy that will sustain change and deliver the Promise. We also need to see a commitment to preventative measures—as mentioned in the Audit Scotland report and in Social Work Scotland's written evidence—getting the full focus of the funding. As the process comes into effect, what is put in place needs to encapsulate the theory, practice and delivery of preventative measures.

Many people in the third sector are coming in to fill the gaps left by the lack of resources and capacity; they are doing amazing things. However, because of the short-term funding cycles, those things are not getting picked up again. Given the restriction on things being repeated, measures need to be innovative—it needs to be new things that are coming through and getting funded. Some of the outcomes are very short term, and there is a need to evidence what is happening; we do not get funding for five-year or 10-year strategies. However, that is what keeping the Promise means. That is what it will feel like to care-experienced people—having investment in their education at the early stages that is committed to throughout their time in education, into post-education and employment.

It is quite right to say that the issue of which individual or organisation is delivering the measures is not going to be felt by the care-experienced community; the issue is whether delivery is happening and whether there are clear lines of accountability and remedy if it is not. That is what we need to see.

We need the restrictive funding criteria to be removed. We need the pots of money that are open to be used to fully embrace the preventative measures that are being designed and implemented in the community with the people who want them. I am talking about all the measures that the third sector is trying to put in place as a direct result of the evidence of the impact on the people we are working with. Those things need to be fully taken into account as public sector reform is delivered. Accountability, and the transparency of who is doing what, when and why, need to be a priority.

George Adam: I am quite sure that the Scottish Government feels your pain on short-term funding. That is why we go through this budget process every year.

We are discussing a multi-agency approach to the delivery of the Promise. It is probably a perfect example of what we have been talking about for years in terms of finding a way to deliver a service nationally. Where are we doing that well? The best way to ask is probably this: in which areas has better progress been made on the Promise, and in which areas are we still struggling, and why is that?

Fraser McKinlay: That is a question that I am often asked. I promise that I am not trying to duck it, but I do not think that there is a simple answer to it. Every part of the country does some things well and other things not so well. I am not sure that you would find one place that is at the top of a league table and others that are further down. The same can be said in policy terms as in geographical terms. I think that we are making better progress in some places than in others.

10:00

There are many great examples. There are now nearly 50 Promise groups in schools across Aberdeenshire, which are all about breaking down the stigma of care and care experience. That is about ensuring that those children and young people have a sense of connection and belonging as part of the school community, not as a separate group. There is some brilliant stuff happening.

The work that the team in Renfrewshire Council is doing around the Promise keepers network is brilliant. It involves training up people from across the council, not just in social work or children and families but in planning, economic development or housing—I could go on—to understand what the Promise is and to really think about how it can be kept.

You might also be aware that Fiona Duncan is currently doing visits around all 32 local authority areas. She has done about eight so far, and she will be done by the end of the year. The purpose of that exercise is, first, to meet not just the council but all the partners in that area—children, young people, care-experienced adults, families and staff—to get a sense of what is going well and of the genuinely systemic issues that are getting in the way; and, secondly, to pose a bit of a challenge locally by asking, "Are you absolutely sure that you are pulling all the levers that you have at your disposal?"

To go back briefly to the public service reform question, because we have public service reform coming, I think that there is a bit of a risk that, locally, people think that they cannot make progress or do not want to make a decision on something. My job is to ensure that the work continues as the world around us changes yet again.

I do not know whether that answers your question terribly well, but that is one of the reasons why the story of progress that I mentioned earlier—

George Adam: It is just that the evidence that we have been given in the past has been pretty patchy.

Fraser McKinlay: Yes, I would agree. It is patchy, but not in a consistently patchy way, if you know what I mean. Even within the same area, some bits can be going really well and some bits can be going less well.

George Adam: If I listened to my sister, who is a councillor in Renfrewshire, she would say that they do everything really well—she has just got totally involved in the council.

Sorry, Kay, did you want to say something?

Kay McKerrell: We spoke about education previously. Our communities that care programme, which is a similar programme, is in every school in Renfrewshire. It is now being picked up in 38 schools in Edinburgh and in 18 schools in Clackmannanshire. It is designed to create an environment in which the entire school community creates a holistic approach to embracing their care-experienced peers and ensuring that they can thrive in education.

Through the package of interventions that has been put in place, there are documented big reductions, if not reductions to zero, in the number of exclusions and reduced timetables. That programme is hugely effective, because it will impact someone's entire life. If you are in education, you can thrive. You can take advantage of other in-school programmes such as mentoring, hobbies, activities, groups and social events. You can create friendships and peer support. You can go on to create a thriving employment environment for yourself, and you can attain and achieve your potential. The programme creates a positive care identity and long-term solutions for people, but it is not being picked up and rolled out nationally. For those reasons, the isolated pockets and the funding restrictions that we see have an impact.

I am repeating the data point, but the other point that I wanted to make is that we must evidence this through participation, by which I mean safe participation. How the Promise is being realised and identifying what is good are not easy topics to discuss. They relate to interventions in people's lives that are happening right now, which are very difficult for some people to talk about, and that depends particularly on their age. Participation needs to be safe and it needs to be done in a therapeutic and trauma-informed way with experts in the community, in trusted relationships; however, it is still not getting sufficient funding. As we look at how we collect the data, understand what is happening and map the patchiness—to use that word—of that, and as we consider what is good, what is not so good and where good practice can be picked up in one place and put into another environment, we must speak to the care-experienced community through safe participation. We are not seeing sufficient funding coming in to allow that to happen, which is one of the reasons why we have the data gaps.

Ben Farrugia: I will—

The Convener: I apologise for interjecting, but I remind everyone that quite a few members wish to ask questions, so please can we have succinct questions and answers?

Ben Farrugia: Yes, absolutely. The issue goes deeper than the complexities of the inconsistencies within and between areas, because there is differential experience among children who are experiencing the same service. These are human systems. In my experience, when people talk about this, they sometimes say that providing care is not rocket science. It is a lot more complicated than rocket science. Rocket science is maths. This is not maths—it is human work with two people in a relationship; it can not work, and it can be difficult.

We see inconsistencies with regard to people having a fantastic service experience. What drives me and brings me and others back to this table time and again is that although there are some amazing care experiences in Scotland, not everybody gets those. We need to ensure that anybody who needs the intrusion and support of the state in their lives experiences a fantastic benefit from that.

The Convener: Thank you.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): I come from a private sector background, and I was quite surprised to see that, with a project of this scale—in terms of its complexity and including our complex care system landscape, with more than 40 bodies and a multitude of funding streams—it was quite late in the day when we got the national performance framework, route maps and the clarity that seemed to be missing earlier. We did not get those until around 2025.

With regard to the overarching approach, the project management was not effective, and accountability comes into play in that regard. With regard to effective project management, I would have been thinking of things such as agile feedback loops, in addition to clear accountability, and a risk register.

In the documentation, I noted that we had a risk register in 2021, but that it was not updated until 2023 and it did not contain a lot of detail. Given that there are four years remaining of the plan to deliver the Promise, who is ultimately accountable? There are some suggestions in the documentation that it is the Scottish Government, but, in your eyes, who is ultimately accountable for driving this work forward and reaching success by 2030? Did we miss out on a clear project management strategy that would have saved us a lot of time, because a risk register would have identified early on that there was not accountability?

Ben Farrugia: I will make a distinction between who is accountable and who does the delivery, because that is important for this question. I feel that we and I should be held accountable, because I have a role of influence in relation to helping to deliver the Promise. I think that I can speak with confidence for all my members who are senior social workers in local government and say that they should be held accountable for that delivery, too. However, ultimately, as is reflected in our contributions at this table and others, it was the Scottish Government that stood up and created the Promise for care-experienced people—and rightly so. Our expectation of the Government was that, having created the Promise, it would move everything necessary to deliver it.

There is a distinction to be made, and I think that we are accountable because we are responsible for some of the delivery. The Scottish Government cannot deliver the Promise on its own. To return to my answer to the first question, that is why we feel strongly about this, because my reference to letting go is an appreciation of the fact that the Government cannot deliver this without letting go and appreciating that we, as other people around the table, need to feel that we have the means with which to deliver our responsibilities and to be held to account for those. At the moment, we can take shelter in the fact that we do not feel that. This work is being driven elsewhere and not by us and others who have the delivery responsibility, so we are trapped in this slightly odd place. I do not know whether that made any sense, but I am happy to be pressed on it further, if I can make it clearer.

Fraser McKinlay: To respond to a few of your points, I have thought long and hard about whether we should have taken a more programmatic approach, as you described.

We have had some very reasonable challenge in the past about the fact that, for example, a budget was not set in 2020 for the delivery of the Promise. I am sure that the independent care review and what came immediately after could have come up with a very big number that said the Promise would cost X hundred millions of pounds, but I am not sure that it would have been terribly meaningful. It would have given an illusion of control rather than something more concrete.

I will come back to your risk register point, because a similar principle applies, and to the multiple public service systems that need to shift in order for the Promise to be kept. I am not sure that you can craft a risk register that would cover all those bases. There is also the fact that the care review was launched in February 2020 and then, in March 2020, the country went into lockdown and every risk register in the land had a large hole put in it. I do not use that as an excuse—it is just what happened.

Even within the Promise, if we take just one example, the redesign of the children's hearings system is a pretty significant change programme in its own right. The redesign board for that has all those things around project and programme governance that you would expect. For me, it is about the level at which that programme rigour applies. It makes much more sense to do it at that level, where you can reasonably run those kinds of programmes in the same way as other projects that you would recognise. You could try to do that for the Promise as a whole, but I am not sure that it would take you very far. I accept some of the challenge and criticism that we still can do so collectively.

With regard to Ben Farrugia's point, this is not just The Promise Scotland's job, but we can certainly play our part by being clearer about what capacity and workforce are required, and how much that particular thing will cost. I would rather do that on individual bits of the programme than try to do it for the Promise as a whole.

Angela Ross: Ben Farrugia, what is the biggest risk going forward? We have four years.

Ben Farrugia: The biggest risk is that we do not grow the capacity of the system and we have the same amount of capacity as we do now, or worse. I think that we will be invited back here to talk about why we have reached 2030 without making as much progress as we would have liked.

I hope that there is nothing in my contribution today that says that we are not making progress. Having been involved in efforts to improve the care system up here since 2008-09, I am not confident that, since 2020, the rate of that progress—because there was plenty of progress in the decade before—has accelerated sufficiently to the level of ambition that is articulated in that document and is articulated and held by everyone sitting at this table today. The main risk is that we do not do anything about that and we try to parse the reasons for why we are still struggling to do it.

Angela Ross: It is also about the cost and the human impact. We have four years left. So far, with the progress that you are talking about, have we achieved enough impact on care-experienced people? Up to this point, has the cost been worth it?

Ben Farrugia: Do you mean the cost of the investment in the system?

Angela Ross: Yes.

Ben Farrugia: Yes. I sit here with the view that we should be allocating more public resource to this population of children and to families. That is a political position, but it is my view. I think that the spend is absolutely worth it. We are talking about trying to secure positive life outcomes, and the evidence is strong that, if we can get it right for children, that will have a long-term, lifetime impact that is in the fiscal interests of Scotland. Money spent on this population and all children and families is a good choice. When you have a limited amount of money, there are difficult political choices about where you spend it, but this programme and others that are primarily focused on children and young people are ones that we should be prioritising.

Angela Ross: I will quickly ask Kay McKerrell about the aim of the Promise. Obviously, it is about allowing children in those settings to feel loved, safe and respected. With all the detail from freedom of information requests that you put into your report, we can measure things such as health, attainment and employment, but we cannot really measure that feeling of love and we cannot even define it, according to the Promise. How secure are we in being able to achieve that as an outcome? Are we getting the process right? Are we asking enough questions of care-experienced people?

10:15

Kay McKerrell: If, by that final point, you mean are we asking them, “How is this being felt by you?”, then no, we are not asking enough yet. We need to understand that—we need to see it. To some extent, it is too early to be able to see some of that being realised. To go back to your previous question, it is difficult. This is huge, and it impacts on so many things, and there are so many elements that need to change. However, one of the issues that I have touched on several times is that there appears to be an accountability vacuum here. There seems to be implementation failure, if not purgatory. The question is, how do we bring that accountability back?

Implementation strategies, feedback loops and the risk register might help to tie in some of what we are trying to achieve, even if it is those smaller bits, but the bits that are being changed right now—the policy, the legislation, the guidance and the regulations that are going to come in—are not the things that people feel. People feel the changes that are happening in their lives. They feel the intent at trying to keep them as children and create a positive child environment, including the entirety of the SHANARRI—safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included—indicators. It is about asking not just, “Are you safe?” or “Are you healthy?”, but, “Is everything about your life helping develop you to the best of your potential?” Those are the things that we are not going to feel. We need to get those underlying governance strategies and frameworks right in order to move to the next stage, but it is not happening fast enough.

As we say, there are pockets of excellence and brilliance. There are people whose care experience is really positive right now, but our advocacy issues are still the same as they were before this started. They are the same as they were when we gave evidence to the previous committee two years ago. That excellence and that brilliance are not being felt by the whole care-experienced community, so we need to keep asking them, in ways that involve safe participation. We need to collect that information. Anything that would help to move us forward on this is worth trying.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): Good morning, and thank you for the really detailed evidence that you have given so far. It is pretty clear that there is an issue with the implementation and delivery of the Promise.

My question is on whole family wellbeing. It is hugely important that we have early interventions and that we prevent children from going into care in the first place. According to Audit Scotland, £500 million was pledged for the Promise but only £148 million was spent. What prevented money from

getting to the people who needed it? The paper outlines progress on the recommendations. Further, although there is no mention of whole family wellbeing in the programme for government, a £20 million whole family support third sector delivery fund is included. What does that mean? What is the change there?

Fraser McKinlay: I am happy to pick up on both parts of the question. In answer to the first part, a combination of factors existed. When it was announced that £500 million would be spent on the whole family wellbeing fund—I think that it was in the 2021 programme for government, in the previous session of Parliament—the challenge was that the money was to be repurposed. As Ben Farrugia mentioned earlier, there was, in a sense, no new money. That became a challenge, because the Government was already pretty well committed in what it was spending. The result was a series of investments of £50 million a year into the whole family wellbeing fund. At the time, I made the case that that was not going to do it. There is something there about how the Scottish Government works and how commitments in the programme for government are translated into budgets. Obviously, there is a parliamentary part of the process, too.

The whole family wellbeing fund has produced two or three evaluation reports, as the Government has looked quite closely at the experience of trying to roll out even just that £148 million, but it is fair to say that those on the ground found it challenging to get the money spent quickly enough. I have said in the previous committee that that is partly because the system gets in the way of itself. The first thing that local systems tend to do when they get that kind of money is recruit for a whole family wellbeing support programme lead. Lo and behold, such recruitment is quite difficult and then you are six months down the line before you get someone. I know that it sounds a bit simplistic and pejorative, but some of that money could have just been given to families. Some of it could have been spent by using a cash-first approach and got into the pockets of families straight away, but that tends not to be how we think about work.

I would argue that the whole system needs to loosen control a little bit and trust families and communities, because cash-first approaches evaluate brilliantly pretty much every time that they are used—we have had a lot of experience during the Covid pandemic and at other times when those approaches have worked.

There were different ways of approaching the delivery of that fund, which I think could have had more impact locally. I do not underestimate the scale of the challenge locally, because doing proper engagement and participation work and genuinely trying to build partnerships takes time and investment. I guess that I am saying that I buy some of that but some of it is, I think, a symptom of how the system works.

On the second point, my understanding is that the Government is bringing together three of its main whole family funds: the whole family wellbeing fund, the fairer futures partnerships, which have a very strong poverty focus, and another one whose name escapes me. The idea is to bring those three funds together, including money, governance and all that stuff, and that the new fund will be live as of April. Having said that, I do not think that any formal announcements have been made about the money yet. Ben Farrugia's colleagues, and people I speak to locally, are desperately keen to find out what will happen there, because contracts and, more importantly, work with families will be funded only until March of next year.

On the short-term funding point, there is a real risk that people will have to be let go and that important support for families will stop, because we have not got ourselves sorted out at a bureaucratic level to figure out how the fund will work. It is really critical that people are given assurance that that money will be coming next year and, ideally, beyond. The issue is a really fascinating example of both the genuine complexity of doing that work and also the stuff that we make more difficult for ourselves.

Katherine Sangster: Bringing those pots of money together will not solve the problem of recruitment, which relates to your first point.

Do you want to add anything on barriers to whole family support, Kay?

Kay McKerrell: We have experienced frustration about the restrictive criteria and objectives and also the priority that is given to groups that span the whole family system. Elements in the third sector who are experts at specific parts of the work are prevented from accessing those funds because of the criteria and the outcomes that need to be demonstrated. That is a deep frustration, because so much good work could be done.

Moreover, we have not seen a commitment to linking work done across the third sector. A lot of what organisations do there is complementary—we support one another. Many of the things that we do necessarily follow on from, support and complement the work of others, yet we are competing for the same pots of money. Then the sharp elbows come out, which is not conducive to making things work. There needs to be funding to allow the third sector to come together to look at what we are delivering and the areas in which we are delivering it, and to allow some of the work to complement and support the rest, to link the work

through to create a mesh of support that feels like a safety net around the care-experienced community. We have seen some frustration over the lack of that.

As I said, the short-term nature of funding really impacts on staff. It is really difficult to recruit in the third sector, because we are not able to offer the same salary levels that people might be able to achieve elsewhere, and yet—I see this in our staff constantly—we have the heart, soul and dedication. It is very frustrating to not be able to give staff a sense of security and to have to race to the cheapest ways of delivering services so that we might get picked up, because of the need for best value. It is not always about the money; it is genuinely about what the best value service is. Although that could be about linking two third sector programmes, we are not given the opportunity to work to that but are constantly trying to deliver what we already do with meagre means to try to hold that support around the people we currently serve.

Those are some of the restrictions that we have seen to the fund. We need it to be opened up and we need a far more holistic approach to be taken, which will allow people to be experts in a small area where they can achieve huge, really impactful things that will be felt by the care-experienced community.

Katherine Sangster: Fraser McKinlay mentioned a cash-first approach. Would you agree with that, Ben? It sounds really interesting. Will you expand on what that might look like?

Ben Farrugia: It is interesting, yes. I want to endorse both my colleagues' contributions. I do not have much to add in relation to the whole family wellbeing fund, because their answers have been really comprehensive.

The cash-first approaches are great. Fraser and I are probably thinking of similar examples in which they were evaluated really well. They require a really good degree of trust to exist in the system. We have to trust our professionals to make those judgments, because an element of managing the risks is involved. We have seen examples of good progress in areas where people have confidence in their professionals and are allowing, for example, social workers to make decisions about what they will do for families and giving them the money.

As an organisation, we are very supportive of that, partly because it speaks to what we are trying to achieve, which is a system that pushes power and trust right down through the system to families, but that can come only if the system lets go. Kay McKerrell touched on that. Factors such as restrictive criteria represent the opposite of trust. They involve saying to people, "We need you to report on this, that and everything." That sucks trust out of the system and makes people wary of having things such as cash-first programmes.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Good morning, everybody. I am sorry to do this, but I would like to go back to the beginning, because I am not clear. What is the specific metric of success that will be met if Scotland delivers on the Promise? I do not think that we can just have a range of things. What is the specific thing that we should expect for all children?

Ben Farrugia: I do not think that there is a specific measure. I think that that would narrow it too much. I think it is about hearing consistent feedback from the care-experienced community that they have seen the change. Because it is a human system, not everyone is going to experience everything brilliantly all the time, but if Kay McKerrell and others from the community can come to this place and say confidently that they have seen the change, I think that that is the measure.

For me, there is a subset of measures. If the people that I represent can say to me, "Yes, we really feel that we are in a position where we are able to do the work as expected in the Promise" but the care-experienced community is saying that things are still suboptimal, we need to engage with that. The irony is that the people I represent are saying, "We do not have the capacity and resources to deliver the Promise or the system that is envisaged," and the care-experienced community is reflecting that in what it feeds back about its experience, from what I hear.

I do not know whether that answers your question. I would not want to focus on a metric—

Duncan Dunlop: It does not, Ben. When we are looking at a care and protection system, what is the bigger goal that we are trying to achieve? From what I understood, the intention of the Promise was to give every child a stable, lifelong, loving relationship so that they can go on to live a successful life, whatever that may be, from where they begin, and particularly for those who are at risk. I thought that we were in agreement that that is what we are trying to achieve. We can think about all children, but let us consider those who are at risk. Is that a fair overarching metric for that we are trying to achieve?

Fraser McKinlay: May I comment on that?

Duncan Dunlop: Yes.

Fraser McKinlay: I think that that draws it slightly narrowly. At the top level, it is about all of Scotland's children growing up loved, safe and respected and being able to fulfil their potential. That is the strap line, if you like. At the top level, that is the metric. How we go about measuring that

is, of course, quite complex, but the reason why I think that you have described it slightly narrowly is that, in simple terms, the Promise is about two things. One is about keeping families together wherever it is safe to do so, and one of the measurement challenges in the Promise is that there should be a whole generation of children who do not know what the Promise is—who have no contact with the care system even though, otherwise, they may have had to have contact with it—because they are getting on and living their lives in their families, in the same way that my kids do. I do not think that that group of people is captured by your definition. For the—

Duncan Dunlop: It is not, but hang on a minute. We are expecting them to be held by a stable, lifelong, loving relationship in their own birth families.

Fraser McKinlay: Indeed. The second part, then, is for the children and young people and families for whom that is not possible—there will always be some of those—to have an experience that is as close as it can possibly get to that family experience.

Duncan Dunlop: Again, that is a stable, lifelong, loving relationship, even if it is not in their birth family.

Fraser McKinlay: Yes, exactly. It is about them going on and thriving, feeling safe and respected and fulfilling their potential. In a nutshell, those things are what the Promise is about.

Duncan Dunlop: That, for me, is the core issue. For all our children, it is about a stable, lifelong, loving relationship. If we zone in, that is what we are trying to achieve for children and young people, because, if they have that, they are held, guided, grown, developed and nourished. That is exactly what you are saying about being safe and respected.

However, somehow, we seem to lose focus on that, and we are left with a feeling that, although we are sometimes meeting the Promise in one area, there is evidence that we are nowhere near meeting it in another. We have not even implemented reforms that predate the Promise, and it feels like a boorach, because we do not have everyone in the system working towards that goal. A child needs to be cared for in a stable, lifelong, loving relationship. Who will provide that, and what are we doing to enable that to happen?

10:30

A resolute focus on that would be helpful, because I am left with the question of who is responsible for delivering on the promise that such a relationship will be provided. Saying to a child that someone is going to love them and that it is our job to make sure that they are loved is quite a basic promise. However, we are saying that the Promise can be delivered by various people, that the Government has too much control, that we will give responsibility to local authorities, and that many different agencies will be involved, from justice to housing to addiction services and so on.

When she was First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon told us that the Promise was the biggest priority for Scotland, and that it was an overarching policy on a level with independence and climate change for the Government at the time. Therefore, the Government should have overarching power over every other agency and institution to say what should happen. If it is the case that the policy has that level of priority for the country, who should be responsible for delivering on it?

Fraser McKinlay: I am happy to come in briefly on that. I agree with about 90 per cent of what you have said. The bit where we differ slightly is in relation to how we go about delivering meaningful change in the long term. I do not believe that central Government telling people what to do is the way to do that.

We are completely focused on 2030 as a delivery date. That is hugely important to me, and the work of keeping the Promise needs to continue beyond 2030. There is no version of this where we all down tools, say that the Promise has been kept and move on. It will continue to need the kind of focus that you have just described.

For me, the only way of achieving that—I speak as the chief executive of an organisation that will not exist in 2030—is to ensure that, regardless of who the First Minister is, regardless of which party is in power and regardless of what the structure is, the work continues to achieve the outcome that you have so neatly described. I am not at all sure that pinning on one bit of the system the responsibility for driving through change across the system is the way to go. It has to be owned by everyone. That approach will be messy at times and it does not feel terribly satisfactory, because it is not. However, although I accept that bringing about change that way might take longer, my argument is that, in the long run, the change is much more likely to stick.

Kay McKerrell: I will respond on that point and on how what will be done is going to be felt. I appreciate that time is against us, but I will say that the committee may or may not be aware that I am care experienced. I got into this policy area to try to prevent my experiences from being replicated for the next generation.

Over the past couple of weeks, I have met two young people from what I now have to describe as the generation below me who have come into the environment of trying to deliver the Promise for

exactly the same reason as I did. That is heartbreaking to me. I think that we will know that the Promise has been realised and is being kept if we manage to save a future generation of care-experienced people from coming in and desperately trying to save the ones that follow them. That is how we will know that we have achieved our aim: when we reach a point at which care-experienced people can get on with their lives, meet their potential and not have to try to undo the things that have happened.

Duncan Dunlop: I totally respect that, but who should be responsible for making sure that that happens? As you said earlier, the situation seems to be a bit of a mess. Who should be responsible for making sure that all the things that we have discussed actually happen?

Kay McKerrell: It would help to have a single point of focus, even if the intention of that single point of focus is then to delegate that authority to very clear, recognised individuals. At the moment, we cannot find the source of the accountability, so it might be helpful to bring it back to a single point in order to then break it back down again. That would be clear and transparent, and would help us to be able to point to who is responsible for what needs to be done.

Ben Farrugia: I think that the Scottish Parliament is responsible for the delivery of the Promise. It is a huge success and we should be deeply proud of the fact that this is a country where a succession of MSPs has come to this place and whole-heartedly endorsed the aspirations and the vision of the Promise. They did so again in March, when the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026. That is all endorsement of the Promise.

There have been reflections on the implementation gap. I think that this place is responsible for them, given that people like me and others who represent the delivery bits of the system have come and said, “We are not able to deliver this—we do not have what is needed.”

Time is what is needed. I do not have a huge problem with Duncan Dunlop’s proposed metric, although I see it not as a metric but as a description of the aim. However, a loving relationship is built through time. The system needs to be immensely rich in time to achieve what you described, and we have repeatedly told this place that that does not exist in the system. It is no surprise that there is an implementation gap when those who are responsible for implementation are coming here saying, “We will not implement this.” We have said that for three or four years now, so it should be no surprise.

Duncan Dunlop: The Scottish Parliament’s job is to hold to account the Scottish Government and extensions of it, including social work, to ensure that they are delivering on the ambitions that are set out in the great rhetoric that we have around the Promise. I am worried by the evidence that you have given and by your press release in the summer, in which you said that we have reached breaking point and have, I think, three-year-olds in residential care.

Ben Farrugia: Yes.

Duncan Dunlop: We have a situation where social workers are having to take children home. The system is creaking.

For me, this process began 10 years ago. The origins were in a care review in New Zealand. We saw that ambition to change the whole care system and we said, “Why does Scotland not have that ambition?” It was actually nine years and 11 months ago, on 15 October 2016, when Nicola Sturgeon stood up at the Scottish National Party conference and declared that she would rip up the care system if necessary.

I do not see which bits of the system have been ripped up. We do not have direction from a person, organisation or body saying, “Here’s how we go forward,” or saying that some things have to stop and some things have to start. I am hearing good evidence on the ground that only half the people who should be getting throughcare and aftercare support are getting it. Some care leavers cannot even get the council tax exemption, because local authorities do not have the paperwork in place. That is fairly basic stuff.

There has been success on further and higher education and the bursary, but the system looks very similar to how it looked 10 years ago, when we said that, from that day forward, it would change. That is an entire childhood, from the age of five to 15 years, and we have the crisis that you have talked about.

We have not even touched on residential care. I do not see how someone can form a lifelong loving relationship when there is a staff rota pattern that involves 20 people going through their house every week. We have children as young as three in residential care, and I know of five and eight-year-olds in there, too.

My question is: why are we stuck? There have been many different people sat round committee tables, scrutinising many people in similar roles who are accountable for the non-delivery that is happening. What is happening is tragic, but we are told, “We don’t know what’s working, but it’s great rhetoric—let’s sell that.”

What has to change? The Audit Scotland report is clear that there is, at best, a guddle in terms of

who is driving this forward. We have the different Promise accountability mechanisms, with the strategic adviser, the Promise group and the Oversight Board. Then there are others such as the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection and the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland that are associated with the work. Then there are local authorities saying that they do not have the resource to deliver—

Ben Farrugia: May I try to answer the question?

Duncan Dunlop: Sorry.

Ben Farrugia: I think that there is a question in there, which is about how we get to a position in which we know what we need to do to deliver in certain areas—you mentioned aftercare and throughcare.

Fraser McKinlay made a point about not having a programme for delivery of the Promise. That was absolutely right, and I endorse what he said. He gave the example of the children's hearings redesign work, which had a programme approach.

What I find frustrating—to again use that word—is that that is unusual. For instance, we should have a programme for throughcare and aftercare that is built on a similar model. That would set out what we are going to do, our structure of improvement, the steps that we are taking, the vision, the changes and some of the legislative and non-legislative measures that we are taking. There would also be a risk register—to go back to an earlier question—and other such things. We see that only in patches, but we should have it all. The Promise Scotland or another organisation should, to a degree, hold the interdependencies, although the accountability for that is with the Scottish Government, because it creates many of the interdependencies.

That is possible. It would enable you and others to interrogate me and others and to say, "Is this right? Are you making progress? If not, why not?" I hope that that would be part of an answer to the problem that you are articulating.

Duncan Dunlop: Fraser McKinlay, what is your solution?

Fraser McKinlay: So—

The Convener: I want to ensure that we are cognisant of the time, because other members still have to come in. We can always come back if we have time after that.

Duncan Dunlop: Okay. Can I just put that last question to Fraser?

The Convener: Absolutely.

Duncan Dunlop: What is your solution, Fraser?

Fraser McKinlay: I will be brief, convener.

As I have said, my solution would not be to appoint one single person who is accountable. Although doing so might make us feel a bit better, it would not, in fact, deliver the change that is required. Accountabilities are, in lots of ways, really clear. For example, local authorities are clearly accountable in statute for very specific things, and if those things are not being upheld, that is where accountability lies. We then get into the question of what the remedy is and what we can do about that, but it is not the case that accountabilities are not clear. It is simply that it is not down to one person or one organisation.

We have not talked about power in this debate. We have talked a lot about accountability, but power is what really matters. The Scottish Government has powers to do some things, Ben Farrugia's colleagues in social work have power to do some things, and I have power to do some things. It is about ensuring that everyone is using the power and levers that they have at their disposal to the end that has been described.

I completely agree with Mr Dunlop's point about the absolutely laser-sharp focus on building relationships. On the point that I made earlier, if public service reform does anything, it needs to focus on that. I encourage us all to think about what power people have, as well as who is accountable for it.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): We have heard a lot of frustration, including from the witnesses, about the disjointed operations in relation to the Promise. There are multiple funding streams for various things that are all worth while in their own right. We have a crowded landscape and we need a holistic approach, which a few of you have talked about.

Audit Scotland has pointed out the data gap on several occasions. That point has also been made in some of your submissions. If we do not have data, we cannot measure what we are doing, how we are doing it or how close we are to getting to what we want to achieve. Without data, we cannot measure anything. What are the barriers to capturing the data that we need, so that we can measure what we are doing and how much further we have to go?

It strikes me that we have all these different organisations and, thrown into that mix, we have 32 local authorities. Perhaps none of those organisations or local authorities are working together and talking to each other as they should. Would a national database that tracks and monitors the progress of children through the system help?

Fraser McKinlay: I will start, and then I am sure that Kay McKerrell and Ben Farrugia will want to come in.

In fact, we have quite a lot of data about some things. The Promise progress framework that I mentioned has 10 outcome statements with a whole series of objectives and 80-odd indicators. They use existing data, which ranges from stuff that is specifically around the care system—such as the number of children in care and where they are—to data around education. The most recent education statistics came out in the summer. As I mentioned, we have also included temporary homelessness for children, poverty and other things.

To answer the question, the biggest gap—the bit that we do not have—is the experiential bit. That is the bit where we are starting from scratch, to go to Kay McKerrell's point. We have been working with Who Cares? Scotland and others to build a picture of the extent to which the Promise is being felt in people's lives. It is about testing and understanding that. We deliberately have not gone out to care-experienced people and asked them again, because we need to be careful about asking people the same questions all the time. However—Kay may be better placed than me to speak to this—there may come a point when we decide that we need to do that and that a primary research exercise is required.

Patricia Gibson: One point struck me as I was listening to the exchanges before. I do not know whether you already do this, and forgive me if you do. Does each child in your system have a file, such that it does not matter which part of Scotland, or even the United Kingdom, they live in or move to? I am thinking about simple things such as council tax bills. If we had such a database, all the data about someone's life, their needs and the support that they require, whether through the national health service or mental health services, would be in there. Do we, or can we, do that?

Ben Farrugia: It is technically possible to do that. However, we could easily find lots of people who would say, "I do not want you to do that. This is my private information."

Patricia Gibson: Obviously, the people who could access such a file would be very limited.

10:45

Ben Farrugia: The situation with the council tax exemption, which Mr Dunlop spoke about, is absolutely true. I cannot say that that is because people move between areas, but there are a lot of data issues.

Our environment is quite data rich, but the understanding and analysis of the data is quite poor. This is largely an experiential system, which data does not tell you about, so you have to go out and do primary research and rely on organisations such as Who Cares? Scotland to help you. That is data in the rich sense of the word; it is not numbers. Sometimes, I feel that the data issue can pull us towards holding the really mechanistic attitude that that is what holds us back, but I am not convinced that it is, given the amount of information that social work collects about things.

Are there opportunities for data linkage? Absolutely. Can we have a system in which individuals say that they are happy for their information to be passported between different areas? Absolutely. All that is technically possible, if we are willing to invest in it and make choices about the interoperability of systems.

We are getting there. In the next decade, a lot of people will have systems that speak to each other in real time.

Patricia Gibson: Do you agree that the landscape is crowded due to all the different organisations and funding streams? They are all designed to help in different ways, but they muddy the waters, which means that things get lost.

Ben Farrugia: I absolutely agree. A common frustration among my members is that social workers who could be doing casework are, for example, spending all their time navigating different funding streams. They entirely understand that problem. I am not able to quickly propose the solution, because I understand why we have ended up where we have, but I agree with the analysis that the landscape is crowded and messy.

Patricia Gibson: Looking at it from the outside, the system seems hugely bureaucratic, which can only create barriers for the people who we need to help and the people who are trying to help them.

Kay McKerrell: I cannot answer your question directly on whether a single database would help, because so many variables are involved. However, there are aspects of the system that might be positively or negatively impacted by such a change.

On 29 September, we will have the Oversight Board report, which will give a further indication of where we are and the extent to which the Promise has been kept. That might indicate some of the data gaps, and it might be worth meeting again afterwards so that we can discuss in more depth the particular issues that have been raised, as well as some of the matters that have been touched on today, such as residential care.

We can already see, through some of the existing data, that there is a lack of curiosity. We get information and then there are not resources in place to do anything about it. Aftercare is a particular issue—we have reports on the level of uptake of aftercare that should shock corporate parents and instil in them a sense that they need

to find out what is happening and remedy it immediately. We have seen no such action. I have not seen up-to-date information on that, and I cannot comprehend a world where a corporate parent would not want to know such information, yet it appears that they do not.

One thing that would help is people not having to repeat their stories. As Patricia Gibson said, if that information were held centrally, they would not have to do so. We have heard from our members that they do not want to keep retelling their stories. A child would not need to inform their parents by saying, "This is where I am living, this is where I am educated, this is what I want to do for a career and I am struggling with money." Currently, a care-experienced young person might have to have that conversation with five different people, even though a child would not normally have that experience.

Holding the information centrally would help with that, but there is also the aspect that Ben Farrugia touched on, which is that people might not want that information to be shared. They are very personal worries, fears and concerns, and the trusting relationship is not yet there for people to feel comfortable with a stranger knowing that information. We have not created an environment in which they feel safe sharing it. Ought they to have that ability? It is another factor that needs to be considered.

For those reasons, I cannot really answer Patricia Gibson's question. A single database might help, but it might also create barriers.

Patricia Gibson: I want to go back to the workforce capacity issue, which was a big theme in Social Work Scotland's written submission. I suppose that this question is for you, Ben, because you repeatedly talk about it in the submission. We know that there are workforce issues in a range of sectors, and the care sector seems to suffer from them at all levels. Do you have any ideas about what can be done to tackle them?

Ben Farrugia: The answer to your question will be slightly different for different components of the workforce. For instance, how we retain or evolve our foster care workforce, say, involves slightly different issues than it would for the social work workforce. That said, we are talking about work, in the main, and work responds to some fairly understandable and often discussed things such as pay, terms and conditions, a person's experience of work and the support that they get in it. All of those problems are tractable ones that we can move on.

We do create new social work roles, new third sector roles and so on. I think that Kay McKerrell made a really important point when she talked about a race to the bottom in some third sector organisations with regard to how cheap they can be, and we need to think about the impact of that on, say, wages and other aspects of that service.

I think that that is why we are struggling to deliver the Promise. The Promise Scotland, and the independent care review, did great work. There is loads of money in the system—I will never, ever pretend otherwise—but to get from where we are now to where we want to be will require the leveraging of additional resource. I hope that in time—over, say, 10, 20 or 30 years—that overall number will come down, because we will be achieving much better outcomes for children and families. However, it has been our position from the beginning that we are not going to get there without systematic above-inflation investment in the workforce, and ultimately in the children and families who benefit from that workforce—by which I mean the workforce in all its forms, both the third sector and the public sector.

I am sorry to be prosaic, but we will retain and grow capacity by offering better terms and conditions and work experiences for all of those people. We need to ensure, for example, that we are not saying to foster carers, "Please, can you take a fourth child?" We are having to do that at the moment, but that will only encourage that foster carer to leave. It is the opposite of what we should be doing—and, arguably, it gets in the way of what Mr Dunlop was talking about when he asked how we can create the conditions for a single loving relationship.

We in social work need to be able to say, "Okay, we have a child who needs alternative care away from their family. What are our six options? What is going to be the best option that will guarantee this child the best experience in life?" Right now, there are no options in some areas, so you have a combination of a social work team or nursery worker taking that child home. That is where we are in delivering the Promise.

Patricia Gibson: Are we training enough social workers?

Ben Farrugia: In my view, no, we are not. However, the only way in which we are going to induce more people to be interested in doing a social work course is if they feel that it offers them a really positive career. The feedback that we get from quite a lot of social workers is that it can be an immensely rewarding, satisfying and important career. Fraser McKinlay mentioned power; it is a position with power, and that is important. People are not drawn to it for that reason, but it creates value, and people appreciate the contribution that they are making.

However, the feedback that we are also getting from people at the moment is that it is an awful job most of the time; the moral distress of feeling that

you are continually letting families, children and care-experienced adults down is awful. As a result, some people say, "I've had enough of this," and actively choose either to move to another part of social work where the moral distress is not so great, or to do something else.

That is the general feeling out there about social work, and it is why it can be difficult to hold on to people. That is what students experience when they do placements, so perhaps it is no surprise when they decide that they want to do a different kind of social work that does not involve children and families.

Patricia Gibson: Do any of the other witnesses want to come in on that?

Kay McKerrell: I am grateful to Ben Farrugia for making those points. It is really hard to retain capacity and good staff in the third sector. Our staff are amazing—I am sure that any third sector organisation sitting here would say that it was immensely proud of its staff and workforce, given the work that they do every day.

Putting together tenders is really hard in the current funding climate; the issue of best value really comes into it—for example, you have to decide whether you can afford pay rises if they might impact on your being scored appropriately in the tender process. You have to look at the funding and make sure that that does not happen. We have people who have the skill sets, the desire and the capacity to deliver these things but it is really hard to retain them, because there is a cost of living crisis and they feel that sense of moral distress. That is something that we see every day.

One thing that we never hear from the care-experienced community is, "I don't want my social worker." Instead, what we hear is, "We want more social work, because that is what makes us feels good and safe." We have to fully invest in that, because we need to create that sort of environment for the child.

Patricia Gibson: The challenges that you have highlighted run right across the care sector and affect all age groups.

Kay McKerrell: Absolutely.

Patricia Gibson: It is about recruitment and retention.

Kay McKerrell: It applies to the lifelong side of care experience, too. There needs to be investment in the support structures and staffing in the sector to offer lifelong help for care-experienced adults.

Patricia Gibson: I will ask one more question if I am allowed to. Mr McKinlay, at the end of your submission, you talk about the challenging environment and disinvestment—I am sorry if it was not you who wrote that but somebody else from your organisation. The submission says that we will need to make

"difficult choices"

that

"may require disinvestment from approaches that are no longer delivering sufficient value to release resources for prevention and earlier support."

Can you be specific? I know that you spoke earlier about structural change and incentives, but can you give us a bit more detail or be more specific about which approaches no longer deliver sufficient value?

Fraser McKinlay: That comes from the fact that there will not be a lot more additional money coming in, so we have to have an honest conversation. If we want to invest in some public services, we will probably have to start disinvesting in some others. That is not an easy thing to do and, as Ben Farrugia mentioned, we need to find investment to bridge the gap.

Duncan Dunlop made a point about residential care. You would want fewer children to be living in residential care and in children's houses, but you cannot just close them overnight because that is where those people are currently living, so you need to find a way of transitioning away from that and building capacity in the community in order to begin closing down some of the places that you would not want.

Even that is not straightforward. One success that we have had in Scotland is the fact that we do not send children to prison any more. That means that under-18s no longer go to Polmont, but we cannot just close down the part of Polmont that was the young offenders institute, because other prisoners have moved in and are being housed there. It is absolutely right to take children out of the adult prison estate, but that has not necessarily saved us any money—it is not simple.

There is one thing that we do need to do and that the Government has really committed to in the programme for government: the prevention investment framework. I hope that we will be closely involved in shaping that because it is something that we have talked about in Scotland for a long time. How do we move money away from crisis intervention and towards prevention? The way to do that is by really getting into specific policy areas, such as women in prisons. If we could find ways of not sending women to prison, that would have a direct knock-on effect on the number of children in care. The trick is to identify the key policy areas where, relatively speaking, we can begin making reasonably quick shifts away from acute intervention and towards prevention. There is no silver bullet for that. We wrote about

that in our response because we need to be honest about the fact that we cannot just spend our way out of the problem. Difficult decisions will have to be made.

Patricia Gibson: As you said, children cannot be moved out of residential care overnight. One solution might be to try to grow the number of foster placements in the community, but my understanding is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to do that.

Fraser McKinlay: It is. The Government ran a national campaign last year but I do not think that it had very much effect. Having more foster carers is one option, but I would come back to the idea of family support. We should create much more support for families in the broadest sense of the word by thinking about kinship care, family friends and the broader network of people who would be able to step up and care for children. That leads us to areas such as family group decision making and lifelong links, which underpin things and are what we need to invest in if that work is to happen. If you look at the communities around children and young people, you are much more likely to be able to identify the places where they can stay and be loved. That is why the stuff in the 2026 act that deals with FGDM is welcome, but we need to properly invest in that process because it is some of what will provide the answer.

I have another point to make before I finish. I completely recognise and accept the challenges, but the Promise is not another thing that we have to do on top of those other things—doing the stuff that is in the Promise is the way that, in the long term, we can manage some of those pressures.

Patricia Gibson: Can I have one last question, convener?

11:00

The Convener: We still have Laura Moodie waiting to come in on that point. We have been looking forward, which is a good space for you to bring in your theme, Laura.

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): Thank you, convener—I want to look ahead. I am conscious that 2030 is before the end of the current session of Parliament, so I am keen that we look beyond that.

I am curious as to what long-term indicators you all think we should be tracking for care-experienced young people as they go through their lives. What would a Scotland that has fully realised the Promise look like in 2040? What is your vision for what will be happening 10 years after the Promise has been delivered, if it is delivered? What reforms should we, as a Parliament, be prioritising after 2030 to ensure that there is prevention and whole family support, and that we keep care-experienced young people at the centre?

I have tried to wrap several questions into one there. Overall, looking ahead, what do you feel is the future in this space beyond 2030?

Fraser McKinlay: I will go first—I can see colleagues looking in my general direction.

We have a document on our website that is called “What will Scotland look like when the promise is kept?”, which basically contains all the outcome statements that we have pulled from “Plan 24-30”. The focus of that document is 2030, but I think that those outcome statements will all apply in 2040, for sure. The work to deliver those outcomes and to maintain and continually improve them will need to continue, so—as I said earlier—it is not that we will all down tools and stop working on the Promise in 2030.

I suppose that the difference, by the time we get to 2040, is that we will not really be talking about the Promise any more, because it will be just how things happen. The whole intention of the Promise—this is why the Promise Scotland will cease to exist in 2030—is that the system and public services will maintain a focus on keeping children loved, safe and respected and on enabling them to fulfil their potential simply as part of how we do things. It will become the norm—that will be the big change by the time we get to 2040.

I think that the biggest change in investment that we need to crack in order to achieve that is around community-based intensive family support. It is tricky because everything is interconnected. However, as I said earlier—and to go back to what Ms Gibson said earlier about the cluttered landscape—that will happen by wrapping public services around the needs of babies, infants, children, young people and families in communities, rather than continuing to organise the world around money, policy and service silos, because people do not live their lives in that way.

In order for that to be making a big difference in 2030, and for it to be just the way things are in 2040, we need to make those decisions now. That is why the public service reform agenda is critically important. There probably are some structural changes that could help with that, but it has to be about much more than that. There must be a relentless focus on what we are trying to achieve and, to some extent, on just sweeping the other stuff out of the way.

Just a few weeks ago, we were at a round-table event talking about the placement crisis, and there was quite a lot of chat about the parallels with the Covid pandemic. At a time of genuine national emergency, things can go faster and be opened

up. I am a wee bit wary of that view, because I suspect that we did some stuff during Covid that we would not want to do in normal times, even though we could do it. However, there is a point about mindset there. Right now, there is a mindset that says that something might normally take 12 months, because we need to set up a working group, produce terms of reference and draw up a plan, and, before we know it, we are nine months in. I see that happen quite a lot. We need to stop doing all that stuff and say, "How do we get this working group actually doing stuff and delivering things within the next three months?" In my view, a mindset shift is pretty critical to that.

Kay McKerrell: I am grateful to Fraser for giving me enough opportunity to write some notes. I will try to answer each part of the question.

The indicators need to span the lifelong aspect of care experience, too. We speak a lot about children and young people because they receive a lot of the focus, but the impact of care experience is lifelong. We need indicators for lifelong care experience outcomes to be put in place and properly analysed. Those outcomes must include, for example, education, the removal of exclusions, the reduction of reduced timetables and aftercare being properly utilised—to take issue with the term "aftercare", children growing up in a family setting would not normally be categorised as having aftercare needs. All of that can lead to successful employment and sustainability in employment, with those positive outcomes being maintained throughout life.

There are certain key indicators that we can look at, and a lot of them require real investment in preventative measures. We talked about stopping investing in some things and reinvesting in others, and that needs proper evaluation. There must also be a full commitment to preventative measures that do not give quick wins but deliver the long-term societal change that we are looking for.

We need loving relationships, so how do we create them across Scotland? That is about recognising the full range of the SHANARRI indicators. A lot of the time, we focus on the S and the H, and it can feel as though the acronym is really just "SH". That needs to stop. The whole child, the whole person and the whole adult need to come out of this with every aspect of their wellbeing being taken care of. That is what we need to do, and that is what it will look like.

Ben Farrugia: I quickly scribbled down "getting it right for every child" because, until Kay mentioned it, I had not thought about it. It is true that the realisation of that vision in 2040 underpins the Promise. The articulation of that is Scotland's greatest contribution to children's services.

On the question of what Scotland will look like in 2040, I see it in a storytelling sense. I would want to see a family, independently or with a social worker, accessing the support that they need when they need it, rather than at the point of crisis. That requires the removal of stigma, threat and risk for a family in coming forward and reaching out for support, or for family members reaching out for support on their behalf.

People and families are complex, so there will continue to be situations in which we need to find somewhere else for a child to live, whether for a time or for the rest of their life. Ideally, picking up on the points that Fraser and Kay mentioned, we would be able to wrap around all the support that is necessary to make that home with an uncle or a grandparent really work.

However, I was with some kinship carers recently and that is not their experience. They are stepping up because they are family members, and they are stepping up for all of us, yet we are not providing them with the support that they need. We can and must do better.

Again, speaking parochially for those I represent, I want those who work in the system not to feel that moral distress but to feel able to contribute something positive. They do so every day, but that is outweighed by those situations in which they feel that they did not give enough time to something, were unable to make an additional visit or could not spend the time needed to build a loving relationship. When I receive such feedback, my sense is that this is, in the main, the experience of people working in social work.

Laura Moodie: I will quickly follow that up. It is interesting that the discussion is focused on prevention rather than on crisis intervention. I am mindful that we are carrying out pre-budget scrutiny work, and I am curious as to what budget decisions could be made that would most effectively shift resources from crisis intervention to prevention and whole family support. It is often the case that, when budgets are tight, crisis support is maintained and preventative work goes, which simply perpetuates the cycle. That has very much been the case over the past 20 years or so. What budget decisions would you like to see considered that might help to make that shift?

Ben Farrugia: You have given us an unenviable invitation to put ourselves in the shoes of the finance secretary. It is an enormously difficult job—I do not envy having to do that at all.

For us, it is not so much about the spending decisions that come out of this Parliament and the Government, which are presented to you; rather, it is about the trust and capacity that they give us, as local government or social work, to determine how best to spend that money.

It goes back to where I started, and perhaps I will end here. It is about stepping back a little and understanding that those of us who have responsibility for delivering the Promise need to be given the space to do so. We must be able to engage freely, and we freely articulate our view that we are not able to do a lot of this work. However, it does not really feel as though that is making much difference in terms of how this is being progressed.

I do not know whether that answers your question. If we really felt that we were able to make choices without there being retribution, such as prioritising the family support element, that would have an impact, because this is about making difficult choices. We will come and account for those choices to you and to others. However, at the moment, we are told to do everything, everywhere, all at once, so there are no choices.

Kay McKerrell: Longer-term funding solutions would help. In relation to preventative measures specifically, we will not have immediate outcomes and impacts to demonstrate. There must be a commitment to investing in understanding what is being achieved and how those outcomes are linked. There are lots of supports available, but they tend to be funded through small pots for specific groups. We need to link those together to create a fully preventative safety net around people. Looking at that, and at the removal of restrictive criteria, would help.

Fraser McKinlay: My contribution to the question is to highlight the other part of the 2021 programme for government announcement, on whole family wellbeing. It is sometimes forgotten that the longer-term commitment was to spend, by 2030, 5 per cent of all community-based health and social care expenditure on preventative whole family approaches. I might not have the wording exactly right, but it is something like that—I think the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing mentions it.

That big number is a game-changing amount of money. It is probably £500 million to £700 million a year, depending on how you measure locally based community funding. What we have never seen, and what would be an interesting thing to test through the budget process, is the strategy for getting there. You cannot just turn on the tap overnight, but we should be setting out how we get from £50 million through the whole family wellbeing fund to whatever that figure looks like in 2030. That would be a useful and important element of scrutiny to bring to the budget process this year.

The Convener: Thank you so much for your contributions this morning. That brings our session to a close.

Meeting closed at 11:11.

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