

Public Audit Committee
Wednesday 21 January 2026
3rd Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

Improving care experience: Delivering the promise

Introduction

1. At its meeting today, the Public Audit Committee will take evidence from Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Adviser – the promise and Chair of The Promise Scotland on the Auditor General for Scotland (AGS) and the Accounts Commission’s joint [Improving care experience: Delivering the Promise report](#), which was published on 8 October 2025.
2. The Committee previously [heard evidence from the AGS at its meeting on 5 November 2025](#). The Committee also heard evidence from the Scottish Government, COSLA, The Promise Scotland and the Oversight Board for Keeping the Promise at its [meeting on 10 December 2025](#).
3. The Committee has also received a written submission from Ms Duncan on 1 December 2025, which can be found at **Annexe A**.
4. A copy of the report can be found at **Annexe B**.
5. The Committee will decide any further action it wishes to take following the evidence session today.

Clerks to the Committee
January 2026

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The Promise Scotland
1st Floor, Charlotte House
2 South Charlotte Street
Edinburgh, EH2 4AW
1st December 2025

To: Mr Richard Leonard MSP
Sent via email

Dear Mr Leonard,

Improving care experience: Delivering The Promise

Thank you for your letter dated 12 November 2025 requesting a response to the recommendations set out in the report.
Please find attached my response in my capacity as Independent Strategic Advisor.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Duncan
**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Chair - The Promise Scotland**

Written Evidence Submission:

To: The Public Audit Committee
On: Response to Improving Care Experience: Delivering The Promise Report
From: Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor, the promise

This written evidence is submitted to the Public Audit Committee at the request of the Convenor in his letter of 12 November 2025, which followed the evidence session on 5 November 2025 with the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission on the joint report: Response to Improving Care Experience: Delivering The Promise Report.

The Independent Strategic Advisor has been asked to provide written evidence on the recommendations made in the Report that relate to her role, as well as a response to any other issues raised in the report or during the evidence session, if she chooses.

1) Overall response

It is reassuring that the 'Delivering The Promise Report' appreciates, in keeping with the [Independent Care Review](#), that the experiences of children, young people and care experienced adults must be at the heart of any interpretation of successful delivery of the promise.

Recognising that previous reviews of Scotland's 'care system' had failed to deliver lasting, systemic change, the Independent Care Review adopted an intentionally unorthodox approach. Alongside undertaking all the work expected of a traditional review, it listened directly to more than 5,500 people – over 3,000 were children, young people, families, and adults with experience of Scotland's 'care system', with the remaining being members of the unpaid and paid workforce. By placing the insights and aspirations of the care community at the centre of its conclusions, the Review produced a vision for Scotland.

Assessing achievement of this vision requires a different approach, a move beyond the traditional views of accountability and ways of scrutiny, which in turn require different approaches to understanding responsibility and collective leadership – all illustrations of the need for wider systemic changes.

The Report's attempts to bring transparency to how public money is being invested in keeping the promise build on the Independent Care Review's human and economic modelling, as detailed in the ['Follow the Money'](#) report, and are welcome contributions on where and how to best invest public resources.

The Report's recommendations and the evidence session on 5 November recognise that several relevant programmes of work are already underway. With some moved on considerably since the fieldwork, meaning - in some instances - the recommendations are already being implemented.

For example, [Plan 24-30](#) was designed as a strategic planning framework for Scotland to keep the promise, intended to navigate the tension between organisations / people wanting to know what to do and the recognition that top-down plans have not led to long-lasting change.

Since the audit fieldwork, engagement with stakeholders on Plan 24-30 has increased, as scheduled. To engender a greater understanding of Plan 24-30's usage, whilst securing buy-in to its continuation as a live resource through to 2030, The Promise Scotland is taking a collaborative approach to populating web content. This is an innovative approach to planning *and* delivery and is, I believe, the best route to addressing the Committee's concerns about the need for wide-spread understanding about what must be done, by whom, and by when to keep the promise.

Plan 24-30 will be updated on an ongoing basis with further updates to each of the 25 route maps available this month, including outcomes and milestones.

Scotland's first plan, [Plan 21-24](#), published as a PDF in March 2021 was produced during the grip of COVID. It provided guidance to those responsible for delivering change during that three-year period. The Promise Scotland commissioned an [independent evaluation](#) of its effectiveness. The evaluation findings coupled with widespread consultation resulted in Plan 24-30. There has been significant planning activity – and learning from that activity – over the past five years.

2) Response to general recommendations in the Delivering The Promise Report

In the next six months the Scottish Government and COSLA, with support from The Promise Scotland, should:

- 🌈 work together to identify where resources need to be targeted to deliver The Promise – and, in line with this, clearly set out which actions will be delivered, and how, over the next five years and beyond. This includes identifying any gaps both nationally and locally in funding, workforce, skills and infrastructure, and setting clear timescales for prioritisation.

Response: Plan 24-30 provides the platform for this work.

As the Report made clear, 'The Promise is not one single thing, entity, programme, or piece of legislation. It is a universal commitment across public bodies and political parties to deliver change that can be felt by all care-experienced people and families on the edges of care'. Delivering this requires a scale and breadth of coordinated transformation never attempted before in Scotland – straddling public-sector reform, system change, service redesign and coherent, aligned policy across multiple domains. And, as the Auditor General said in the evidence session on 5 November, "commitment of individuals and organisations to deliver the Promise remains strong"; "there is complete buy-in to delivery of its objectives"; and "there is an opportunity here, because it is rare that there is such universal commitment... People want to deliver on the national outcome of keeping the Promise."

Most strategic plans are written by the organisation responsible for implementing them - Plan 24-30 is intentionally different. It is designed as a collective framework for keeping the promise, built on and for collaboration. It provides a centralised, single plan - but not with centralised control. It is not a substitute for organisational plans - instead by making clear

destination statements, outcomes and milestones, it provides clarity on what actions are the responsibility of which organisations, by when. It both draws content from and drives content to organisational plans. The information flow to and from organisations, will make sure Plan 24-30 is continually updated, reflecting change as it happens. This dynamic approach matters to ensure the content of Plan 24-30 is owned by those who must make change happen for the promise to be kept; to maintain alignment across the breadth of change required by 2030; and to respond to complexity. The methodology behind Plan 24-30 seeks to harness the immense commitment recognised by the Auditor General and to translate this collective buy-in into coherent, coordinated action.

Whilst the Report's focus on gaps is welcome, many of these were recognised by the Independent Care Review with dedicated activities in Plan 24-30 to shore them up (see especially [Meeting in the Middle](#), that details the five recurring issues that are both barriers and bridges in terms of deep-rooted systemic change). Any additional activity must not pause or slow delivery at a time when pace needs to be increased.

- ♥ clarify and set out roles and responsibilities for overseeing, monitoring and reporting at a national level on local activity to inform the overall picture of progress.

Response: This work is well underway and is referenced in the Report, including its key messages, with further development of the Promise Progress Framework being underway to assess if care-experienced people feel the impact of change, a crucial step being led by The Promise Scotland.

- ♥ review and identify opportunities to streamline the remit, status, and expected impact of governance groups, boards and forums linked to The Promise; and agree collectively how to utilise the work carried out by The Promise Scotland on governance and accountability.

Response: The Independent Care Review called for an overhaul and reorientation of regulation and scrutiny. In [Report ONE](#) by The Oversight Board, published in May 2022, a graphic was produced to illustrate the cluttered governance landscape – this was reproduced in the Delivering The Promise Report. In the three years since, more groups have proliferated. There is a clear opportunity to link this recommendation to public service reform and use Scotland's commitment to keep the promise as a litmus test.

- ♥ through the recently established data and evidence group, work to coordinate various data projects under way.

Response: The data and evidence group must be a catalyst for increased pace and more effective measuring of experience, rather than an addition to an already cluttered landscape. The data work is at a key stage, and I urge the group to ensure experience is at the heart of evidencing progress.

In the next 12 months bodies within Children's Services Planning Partnerships should:

- ♥ where not already in place, set out in local plans how they will involve, seek and respond to views from care-experienced people.

- ♥ utilise the 25 supporting Plan 24–30 ‘route maps’ (due to be published by end of 2025) to enable collective responsibility and accountability for the promise, ensuring clarity of roles across all sectors.
- ♥ set out in local strategic plans priority areas for investment to deliver the promise, by 2030 and beyond.

Response: The Promise Scotland will continue to work with Children’s Services Planning Partnerships in 2026 and beyond to support the translation of Plan 24-30 route maps into local delivery plans.

3) Response to recommendations that relate to the Independent Strategic Advisor;

The Report contains two recommendations that relate to the Independent Strategic Advisor: In the next six months the Scottish Government should work with the Independent Strategic Advisor (ISA) to:

- ♥ ensure that their respective strategies on prevention are aligned and agree on the approach before further work takes place.
- ♥ agree a clear set of protocols which set out how the Scottish Government will respond to recommendations made by the ISA.

Response: I am working with Government to take these recommendations forward, building on the regular engagement I have had with Scottish Ministers over recent months and the publication of my [work programme](#) for the next 18 months.

4) Observations on the audit process and subsequent Report

I was encouraged by the Public Audit Committee’s session on 18 April 2024 with the Auditor General and his team, when the aspirations for this performance audit were discussed. The observation that “there are real challenges in getting change to happen when people have to work in partnership with others” is something that I recognise. With the idea that this could be “an interesting test case for us of how well public service reform is being delivered” felt timely and appropriate.

Although I agree with several of the recommendations, overall, I believe both the performance audit and the subsequent Report are missed opportunities. The “usual approach” was used to assess a moment in time towards a decade-long programme of transformational systems change – and has demonstrated that Scotland’s work to keep the promise cannot be effectively audited in the same way as a single policy or individual organisation - however complex.

I wrote to the Auditor General during the fieldwork and attach this letter for the committee’s reference. The subsequent publication of the Report has not alleviated the four main concerns I outlined in the letter, with it not:

- ♥ acting as a catalyst, adding pace and improving the quality of change;
- ♥ offering a realistic assessment of progress;
- ♥ providing a constructive assessment of the wider landscape,
- ♥ offering test case of how well public service reform is being delivered

Mr Boyle and I are meeting early in January, and I look forward to discussing these points, and how the headline in the news release influenced media coverage.

5) Specific response to the Public Audit Committee evidence session on 5 November

I am confident that the Public Audit Committee will cover off the issues they have greatest interest in at the evidence session on 10 December 2025 with The Scottish Government, COSLA, the Chief Executive of The Promise Scotland and the Chair of The Oversight Board. Both Fraser McKinlay and David Anderson will be able to respond to issues that relate to The Promise Scotland and The Oversight Board respectively.

In the evidence session on 5 November, questions were raised about the role of the Independent Strategic Advisor. With the Auditor General rightly clarifying that the appointment is a ministerial one, reporting to ministers. However, I do offer advice to all those who require it, as outlined in the recently [published work plan](#). The appointment includes chairing The Promise Scotland.

In a [speech](#) to parliament on 5 February 2020, the day the Independent Care Review concluded, the then First Minister committed to establishing The Oversight Board, specifically in recognition of the need for a different approach to accountability, as outlined in the report [the plan](#). From the outset it was specified that at least half of the Board members must be care experienced, something that will continue to be the case. As the Chair of the Independent Care Review, I was asked to chair this group, recruit and induct members.

In parallel, an Expert Group was established by the then Deputy First Minister to decide on optimum vehicle to take work to deliver the promise forward. Chaired by Sir John Elvidge, with members including Caroline Gardner, the then Auditor General, the group's recommendation was to set up The Promise Scotland as it is currently constituted – a limited company wholly owned by Scottish Ministers. This recommendation was accepted by Scottish Ministers and The Promise Scotland was incorporated in March 2021. My responsibility included chairing the organisation and supporting its set up.

Early in 2022, I felt that holding the three roles – 1) Chair of The Promise Scotland, 2) Chair of The Oversight Board and 3) Independent Strategic Advisor was not tenable, and therefore to avoid any potential for conflict, I took the decision to demit office as Chair of The Oversight Board. There was no resistance to this.

This was followed by a sensitive, careful and managed process to ensure that a care-experienced chair or co-chairs were appointed and is documented in [The Oversight Board minutes](#), which are published online. In February 2023, The Oversight Board elected two co-chairs, one of whom subsequently had to withdraw before being formally appointed to the role. This led to a more extended transition period than originally envisaged. During this time, The Oversight Board continued to meet and work, including writing and publishing [Report TWO](#).

Appendix - Letter to Auditor General from the Independent Strategic Advisor, 4 September 2025.

The Promise Scotland
1st Floor, Charlotte House
2 South Charlotte Street
Edinburgh, EH2 4AW

4th September 2025

To: Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland
By email:

CC: Andrew Burns, Member of the Accounts Commission
Angela Leitch, Member of the Accounts Commission
Alison Cummings, ED Performance Audit and Best Value

Dear Stephen

**Re: Audit Scotland performance audit
Improving care experience: Delivering The Promise**

I am writing about the performance audit clearance draft '*Improving Care Experience: Delivering the Promise*' and to reiterate an offer.

Both the audit process and the final report offer a significant opportunity to galvanise and build on progress made to date to keep [the promise](#) and is widely anticipated. It will be published at a critical moment for Scotland's children, families and care experienced adults - the midpoint between [the promise](#) being made and the date by which it must be kept (31st December 2030), and an inflection point in legislative reform.

In [Report THREE](#), published on 5th February 2025, the Oversight Board was clear that progress is: "behind schedule – but still on course. The destination is clear, and Scotland is heading in the right direction. It requires pace, renewed purpose, and for everyone to play their part to smooth the path ahead."

You and your team rightly set high expectations when you described this performance audit at the [Public Audit Committee on 18th April 2024](#) as "an interesting test case" for the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission "of how well public service reform is being delivered", so were "thinking carefully about how we shape our approach".

In his [follow up letter to you on 26th June 2024](#), the Convenor cemented this when he noted "The Committee is particularly encouraged that this work provides an opportunity to test how

well public service reform is being delivered, recognising the importance of partnership working in delivering The Promise”.

Furthermore, the recent, progressive approaches to performance audits make absolutely clear the key role the Auditor General, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland could play in supporting Scotland to focus attention on what is required over the coming five years to keep [the promise](#).

I read the clearance draft with this in mind. In short, whilst it sets the scene well and some aspects are helpful, I am concerned about the opportunities the clearance draft misses to drive pace and progress and to provide the test case for an assessment of public sector reform.

I have outlined my thoughts on its content in more detail below, organised by the outcomes I am sure we both hope the report will achieve:

a. act as a catalyst adding pace and improving the quality of change:

As it stands, the lead recommendation in the clearance draft creates a significant and entirely unnecessary risk to children, families and care experienced adults.

It was the input of 5,500+ children, families, care experienced adults, and members of the unpaid and paid workforce over three years that crafted [the promise](#). When accepted in full in February 2020, by all parties in the Scottish Parliament, [the promise](#) was made to all who'd taken part in the Independent Care Review and many thousands more who had experience the 'care system'.

It was this inclusive methodology that enabled a deep and detailed understanding of the impact of Scotland's 'care system' (in human and financial terms) and those 'systems' experienced simultaneously, in turn making clear the collaboration required across many aspects of Scotland's public sector and beyond to keep [the promise](#).

Placing principal responsibility with one of the many bodies who made – and have responsibility to keep - [the promise](#) to “carry out a transparent appraisal of the deliverability of the remaining work” introduces a risk that would slow progress and more concerningly could result in changes to [the promise](#) beyond the recognition of the care community - from [the promise](#) that was made to one that is easier to keep.

Five years, the focus of the performance audit must be protecting the vision of [the promise](#) and supporting its realisation.

With this intent at the centre, the performance audit would fulfil your aspiration to “make a difference in people's lives through public audit” and build on your track record of reform.

b. as a realistic assessment of progress:

You have observed the “implementation gap” between “political ambition and how things are actually delivered.”

Although the clearance draft acknowledges sustained commitment of public bodies, it overlooks five years of progress and achievements through change that are closing the implementation gap. Instead, it takes a very narrow view of the 'system' and only offers an assessment of delivery against [the promise](#) at the point in time of the performance audit.

To embed positive changes to practice everywhere and to support an end to poor practice, to up the pace of change and to support greater collaboration and co-designed innovation, the performance audit needs to grasp the opportunity to develop an understanding of both what it has taken to get to this point and what is needed next.

With an evidence-based analysis of the bridges and barriers to change experienced by those working to keep [the promise](#), the performance audit has the potential for insights into both why the gap between ingenuity and implementation persists and how to close it.

c. as a constructive assessment of the wider landscape:

You have noted "Without an increase in the scale and pace of reform... the cycle will remain unbroken". My introduction in [the promise](#) notes that in the seven preceding years (before 2017), Scotland had carried out six reviews into how it cares for its children.

However, in the clearance draft, a number of innovations specifically designed to break the cycle, to help overcome deep-rooted, systemic barriers and contribute to public sector reform are appraised at a static point. They are, therefore, characterised as shortcomings and not recognised as essential, long-term reforms that - by their very nature - take time to have an impact.

d. as a test case of how well public service reform is being delivered:

Whilst aspects of the clearance draft are helpful and surface many of the well-known barriers to public sector reform, the clearance draft does not assess *how well* public service reform is being delivered.

It would be helpful if the performance audit was able to offer a benchmark of current progress to keep [the promise](#) against the shortcomings of other attempts at major public sector reform.

You are aware that I have requested to get more involved in supporting the Audit Scotland team. I appreciate this is not the usual process or procedure but believe it could help ensure the final report realises its potential, meets expectations and builds on momentum. My requests were declined with an assurance that the "usual audit approach" will result in a "robust report". Government then sought and secured approval from Audit Scotland to share their draft clearance report with me (and The Promise Scotland Chief Executive), and it is based on my reading of this that I felt compelled to write.

Simply put, as it stands the clearance report will not renew purpose across the breadth of sectors required to change, instead risks thwarting progress, or worse still changing the destination. It will not accelerate pace of change, instead risks slowing the current one. It will

not provide insights into how to build on the existing bridges or overcome the deep-rooted barriers into public sector reform, instead risks diminishing innovative efforts and successes.

In short, at worst, the report could derail Scotland's progress towards keeping the promise.

With further analysis, it could still provide Scotland with a catalyst to keep [the promise](#) and I respectfully urge you and colleagues to work differently with me and others to ensure the framing and recommendations grasp the rare chance to add genuine value - to hold (all) public bodies to account, to strengthen reform, and to ensure Scotland remains on course and ups its pace to keep [the promise](#).

My offer is an open one and I am willing to work with the team to ensure my experience and skills are utilised appropriately, and in keeping with the independent nature of the performance audit. You can be assured this includes working to identify the challenging areas and work required, not simply areas where progress is smoother.

My tenacity is entirely focused on helping ensure the opportunity this performance audit report presents is not missed and recognises the unique responsibility the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission have in terms of bringing clarity and pace to Scotland's ambition to keep [the promise](#).

Yours sincerely

Fiona Duncan

**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Chair - The Promise Scotland**

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Improving care experience

Delivering The Promise



ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
October 2025

Contents

Key facts	3
Key messages	4
Recommendations	6
Introduction	8
1. Governance and accountability for The Promise	14
2. Data, measurement and reporting	24
3. Resources to deliver The Promise	32
Endnotes	49
Appendix	50



Accessibility

You can find out more and read this report using assistive technology on our website www.audit.scot/accessibility.

Audit team

The core audit team consisted of:
Jillian Matthew,
Claire Tennyson,
Jessica Pringle,
Becki Lancaster
and Lorna Munro,
under the direction of
Mark MacPherson.

Key facts



150

Organisations with Corporate Parenting¹ duties in Scotland, spread across 26 different types of organisation



11,842

Looked-after children on 31 July 2024



88.8%

Proportion of looked-after children in community care



£20.6m

Value of grants distributed through The Promise Partnership Fund between 2021 and 2025



£1.2bn

Identifiable spending on care experience by local authorities in 2023/24



£148m

Funding allocated out of a total of £500 million Whole Family Wellbeing funding since 2022/23 – 70 per cent still to be allocated



£2.9m

Funding allocation available for The Promise Scotland in 2024/25

Note 1. A good corporate parent will want the best outcomes for their looked after children, accept responsibility for them, and make their needs a priority.

Key messages

- 1 The Promise is a national commitment to improve Scotland's 'care system'.** It was made by the Scottish Government in 2020 in response to an independent care review which engaged widely with care-experienced people and the paid and unpaid workforce. Delivery of The Promise requires a partnership approach across a wide range of bodies spanning national and local government. Initial planning for The Promise by the Scottish Government and COSLA did not give sufficient thought to the work that would be needed to deliver its aims over a ten-year period – including the resources required, and how success would be defined and measured. This has meant that public bodies across Scotland were not given a strong foundation to deliver on the care review ambitions, and work since then has been slow. Further development of plans and a monitoring framework are due at the end of 2025. These must provide a catalyst for greater pace and momentum.
- 2 Over five years on, organisations and individuals remain supportive of and dedicated to delivering The Promise by 2030.** To date, overarching plans – 'Plan 21–24' and subsequently 'Plan 24–30' – have not given the clarity needed by individual bodies and sectors. This has meant there has not been a consistent and shared understanding of what delivering The Promise would look like, and how this would be achieved, by 2030. Plan 24–30 was published in a web-based format, which organisations have found challenging to navigate. A series of route maps to support public bodies to deliver the ambitions of Plan 24–30 are being developed, due for completion by the end of 2025.
- 3 New structures – The Promise Scotland, The Oversight Board and an Independent Strategic Advisor – were set up to help deliver The Promise.** But there has been a lack of clarity about their roles and responsibilities. A confusing policy and legislative environment is not enabling public bodies to deliver The Promise. Complex governance arrangements mean collective responsibility and accountability is challenging and actions to address this have been insufficient.

- 4 The Scottish Government was slow to develop a framework to measure progress.** It was developed in partnership by the Scottish Government, COSLA, and The Promise Scotland and finalised in December 2024. Further development of the framework is under way which will aim to assess if care-experienced people feel the impact of change – a crucial next step. Available data is not sufficient to assess if services are improving the lives of care-experienced people at a national level, but improvements are under way to enable long-standing data barriers to be addressed.
 - 5 The absence of a clear assessment of the resources and skills required to deliver The Promise by 2030 at the outset has created a significant delivery risk.** Given the substantial and complex programme of work identified, without an evidence-based assessment of resource requirements, it will be difficult for the Scottish Government, local government, and partners, to prioritise investment to deliver The Promise by 2030. Local authorities spent £1.2 billion on care experience in 2023/24, a 1.2 per cent increase in real terms since 2017/18. Scottish Government funding for The Promise has increased. But funding is difficult to quantify and track, and the short-term and complex nature of multiple disparate funding streams is a barrier to effective use of resources.
 - 6 The Scottish Government introduced a £500 million Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF) in 2022/23 to help deliver The Promise.** It is unclear how the £500 million was arrived at and only £148 million of this has been allocated. Public bodies and the third sector have worked hard to support local and national change through this funding, but needed time to create the infrastructure to use this investment. There are strong arrangements in place to evaluate the fund and to share positive learning.
-

Recommendations

In the next six months the Scottish Government and COSLA, with support from The Promise Scotland, should:

- work together to identify where resources need to be targeted to deliver The Promise – and, in line with this, clearly set out which actions will be delivered, and how, over the next five years and beyond. This includes identifying any gaps both nationally and locally in funding, workforce, skills and infrastructure, and setting clear timescales for prioritisation
- clarify and set out roles and responsibilities for overseeing, monitoring and reporting at a national level on local activity to inform the overall picture of progress
- review and identify opportunities to streamline the remit, status, and expected impact of governance groups, boards and forums linked to The Promise; and agree collectively how to utilise the work carried out by The Promise Scotland on governance and accountability
- through the recently established data and evidence group, work to coordinate various data projects under way to identify and align actions, timescales, impact and how it informs the Story of Progress.

In the next six months the Scottish Government should:

- following on from the resource assessment with partners (described above), evaluate the appropriateness and adequacy of the £500 million Whole Family Wellbeing Fund which contributes to the delivery of The Promise
- provide clearer reporting on spending on care experience and support to delivery bodies on priorities and areas to focus funding on how best to deliver The Promise.

In the next six months the Scottish Government should work with the Independent Strategic Advisor (ISA) to:

- ensure that their respective strategies on prevention are aligned and agree on the approach before further work takes place

- agree a clear set of protocols which set out how the Scottish Government will respond to recommendations made by the ISA.

In the next 12 months bodies within Children's Services Planning Partnerships should:

- where not already in place, set out in local plans how they will involve, and seek and respond to views from care-experienced people
- utilise the 25 supporting Plan 24–30 'route maps' (due to be published by end of 2025) to enable collective responsibility and accountability for The Promise, ensuring clarity of roles across all sectors
- set out in local strategic plans priority areas for investment to deliver The Promise, by 2030 and beyond.



Children's services planning partnerships – the local authority and health board are jointly responsible for children's services planning. Other partners represented on the partnership may vary across Scotland but include: third sector and private sector providers, the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Scotland, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, Children's Hearings Scotland, the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service, and Integration Joint Boards.

Introduction

1. In 2016, the Scottish Government commissioned an independent care review (the Care Review) to identify changes needed to improve Scotland's **care system**. In February 2020, the [Care Review published seven reports](#) outlining improvements it said that need to happen by 2030 to 'ensure that Scotland's children and young people grow up feeling loved, safe, and respected, so that they can realise their full potential'. The findings were based on over 5,500 experiences, and the conclusions received universal, cross-party support. The Scottish Government immediately committed to implementing the Care Review's wide-ranging conclusions, known as The Promise, in full by 2030.

2. The Promise is not one single thing, entity, programme, or piece of legislation. It is a universal commitment across public bodies and political parties to deliver change that can be felt by all **care-experienced people** and families on the **edges of care**. It is built on children's human rights and [The Promise's five foundations](#): Voice, Family, Care, People and Scaffolding.

3. Considerable work occurs through partnership working across local government, Scottish Government, national bodies, the third sector, and oversight bodies, to deliver on the Care Review ambitions. Although not an exhaustive account of activity, recent progress reports outline the breadth of work under way across local areas. In July 2025, The Promise Scotland published [Keeping the promise – A local perspective](#) reporting on work under way across Scotland's 32 local authorities. [COSLA has reported](#) on local authority progress, challenges, and good practice – most recently in June 2024. While the commitment to delivering The Promise remains strong and progress is being made, national reports have also outlined the need for faster progress.

4. Several bodies and governance structures exist to support delivery of The Promise. [The Oversight Board Report One](#) sets out the various entities operating within the cluttered landscape of the 'care system' ([Exhibit 1, page 9](#)). Since committing to delivering The Promise, the governance landscape surrounding care experience has evolved further, with both new and existing structures in place ([Exhibit 3, page 16](#)).



Care system

A collection of legislation, policy, and practice, designed to support babies, infants, children, young people, adults and families who need extra care and support. The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 defines 'looked after children' as those in the care of their local authority.



Care-experienced people

People with experience of being in care, regardless of the type or length of care. This includes babies, infants, children, young people and adults.

Edges of care

A baby, infant, child or young person who needs support to avoid becoming care experienced.

Public sector organisations that support delivery of The Promise

The landscape surrounding The Promise is complex, with its ambitions linked to 26 of 40 Scottish Government Directorates and 49 of 117 policy areas.





Source: [Report One, The Oversight Board](#), published May 2022

5. February 2025 marked five years since the Care Review, and nearly the halfway point for when The Promise should be delivered. A timeline of key events since 2020 is set out at [Exhibit 2 \(page 10\)](#). To support delivery and oversight of The Promise, the Scottish Government has a leading role in supporting and enabling delivery bodies at a national level. It established new structures, including a central team of 12 staff within the Scottish Government, whose role is to connect and coordinate activity across government directorates. New structures have been established to support oversight and improvement for local authorities, such as the Local Government Programme Board.

Exhibit 2.

Timeline of key events relating to The Promise 2020 to 2030

New bodies and governance structures have been set up and a range of reports have been published to support delivery of The Promise.

 Date	 Events and activities
February 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Care Review findings published, and Scottish Government commits to delivering The Promise by 2030
May 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent Strategic Advisor on The Promise appointed
January 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Promise Oversight Board is established, renamed The Oversight Board in 2024
March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Promise Scotland is established • The first plan Plan 21–24 published
August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Hearings System Working Group is established (redesign of the Children’s Hearings System) facilitated by The Promise Scotland
September 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Scottish Government commits to investment of £500m in Whole Family Wellbeing funding by the end of Parliament
November 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scottish Government Promise Programme Board established
March 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Scottish Government publishes its Implementation Plan • Local Government Programme Board is established
April 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Local Government annual report on The Promise
May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Oversight Board publishes Report One
June 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promise Collective first meeting. Its key aim is to align improvement work under way, through linking research and evidence to practice and policy
April 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COSLA & Improvement Service publish local government progress update
May 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearings System Working Group’s Redesign Report published
June 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Oversight Board publishes Report Two
October 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cabinet subcommittee for The Promise meets for the first time

Cont.

	Date	 Events and activities
	April 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 is passed. It introduces changes to the care of children involved in care and the criminal justice services, such as: ending of under 18s being placed in Young Offenders' Institutions (implemented in September 2024); and raising the age of referral to Children's Hearings from 16 to 18 (not yet implemented)
	June 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Promise Scotland/Independent Strategic Advisor sets out Plan 24–30 • Progress update: COSLA publishes a snapshot of progress and challenges across the 32 local authorities
	July 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United Nations Convention (UNCRC) on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 is in effect. It gives children access to legal redress if their rights are not upheld in relation to laws originally made in the Scottish Parliament
	September 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Scottish Government publishes progress update against Implementation Plan – contains a 'theory of change' and additional actions including key milestone for Whole Family Wellbeing Fund investment approach
	December 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Promise Progress Framework published as the first part of The Promise Story of Progress • Scottish Government Integrated Governance Board established
	February 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Oversight Board publishes Report Three
	March 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scottish Government Data and Evidence Group established
	June 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Children and Young People (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill introduced – aims to make further legislative changes to deliver the commitments of The Promise. Four consultations informed by care-experienced people supported the bill's development
	July 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Promise Scotland publishes Keeping the promise: A local perspective report
	August 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Data and Evidence group publishes its work plan • A new Deputy Chair for The Oversight Board appointed
	December 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Promise Scotland, the Scottish Government and COSLA are due to publish the next part of The Promise Story of Progress • Plan 24–30 route maps to be published by The Promise Scotland, in collaboration with a range of partners
	End of 2030	The Promise is due to be delivered in full

6. At ministerial level the Scottish Government has established a cabinet subcommittee for The Promise, and the ‘Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise’ has responsibility for The Promise. Additional external structures have also been established:

- **The Oversight Board (formerly The Promise Oversight Board)** – established in January 2021, now comprises 18 members. At least half, including the chair, are care experienced. It monitors, reports, and identifies calls to action on progress in delivering The Promise but has no legal powers.
- **The Promise Scotland** – established in March 2021 as a non-statutory company with no legal powers.¹ It is not a traditional public body. It is time-bound – intended to be obsolete by 2030. Its role is to support implementation of the Care Review’s conclusions with three functions: set out what needs to happen for Scotland to ‘Keep The Promise’; provide support for organisations working for change; and support The Oversight Board to monitor progress.
- **Independent Strategic Advisor (ISA)** – the Chair of the Care Review was appointed to this role by the First Minister from May 2020. The role includes chairing The Promise Scotland and providing strategic advice to civil servants while operating independently from the Scottish Government. Further, it includes meeting regularly with and reporting to ministers, setting the strategic direction for The Promise Scotland in line with the vision of the Care Review, and providing support to organisations on implementation – with support from The Promise Scotland. (See [paragraph 13](#) for other roles the ISA held from February 2020.)

About this report

7. This performance audit draws on existing national progress reports, with recommendations to support improvement. It does not seek to examine individual public bodies in detail, nor provide a detailed assessment of progress. It assesses the enablers and barriers to improving people’s care experience by delivering The Promise (summary outlined in [Appendix, page 50](#)) and how public bodies are responding to these. The audit looked at three main areas:

- To what extent are governance and accountability arrangements supporting all partners to work together, and to demonstrate collective accountability for delivering The Promise?
- How well are the Scottish Government, oversight bodies, Children’s Service Planning Partnerships (CSPPs), and partners, measuring and reporting progress on delivering The Promise?
- What are the trends in spending and resourcing by the Scottish Government, CSPPs, and national bodies to deliver The Promise, and what would support a shift to prevention?

8. Our findings draw on a range of published documents, including statistical and financial data, and supplementary information provided by national bodies. We have considered this information alongside interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders across national and local government. We refer to key plans throughout this report:

- [Plan 21–24](#) – published in 2021 by the ISA and The Promise Scotland. It was the first plan to deliver change for the first three years of delivery. It was not delivered in full.
- [Plan 24–30](#) – the current plan to deliver The Promise. It sets out 25 themes and associated ‘bridges and barriers’ to aid public bodies in delivering The Promise.
- [Keeping The Promise Implementation Plan](#) (March 2022) and [progress update](#) (September 2024) – the Scottish Government’s plan for delivering The Promise containing over 200 actions and 15 key commitments.

9. We have drawn on published information which draws on the views and experiences of care-experienced people. Throughout this report we refer to quotes and extracts from care-experienced young people from: an evidence session held in March 2024 to the [Education, Children and Young People Committee](#); and a report by CELCIS on [the views and experiences of the children’s services workforce](#), November 2023.

10. We acknowledge that this is a very personal and emotive topic. We recognise the importance of language, and refrain from using language with negative connotations where possible, but may use specific terminology when referring to legislation or to statistical publications.

1. Governance and accountability for The Promise

Over five years on there is still confusion about the individual and collective roles and responsibilities across organisations, sectors, and new entities

11. Responsibility for The Promise cuts across various sectors ([paragraphs 30–33](#)) making it difficult to distribute accountability and ensure each sector is responsible for its role in contributing to delivering The Promise. On committing to deliver The Promise, the Scottish Government did not give sufficient thought as to how new and existing entities would interact to deliver it. This has made it challenging for The Promise team within the Scottish Government, and The Promise Scotland, to gain the traction needed to support delivery bodies.

The Scottish Government as an ‘enabler’ for delivery bodies

12. The Scottish Government’s role is to enable and facilitate delivery bodies to deliver change. New structures established within Scottish Government civil service and at ministerial level have helped The Promise to remain high on the agenda at all levels, supporting a cross-sector approach. However, some stakeholders are less clear on how these new arrangements are supporting delivery of The Promise.

The Promise Scotland, The Oversight Board and the ISA

13. The roles of The Promise Scotland, The Oversight Board and the ISA are different to traditional entities that operate within the public sector. These were not clearly distinguished or defined from the outset – including how they relate to each other, and their respective governance and accountability arrangements. For example:

- The ISA chaired The Oversight Board until 2024, while advising government on strategy and chairing The Promise Scotland. The ISA previously held a post at **Corra Foundation (Corra)**, as chief executive up to late 2022. From February 2017, the ISA’s role was split between Corra and chairing the Care Review.
- From May 2020 the ISA was seconded from Corra to take up the ISA role and in late 2022 their role at Corra changed to Strategic Director. Since taking up the post of chair of the Care Review, the ISA was recused from all grant-making processes and decisions



Corra Foundation (Corra) is a Scottish grant-making charity that distributes funding on behalf of the Scottish Government to support delivery of The Promise. In 2023/24, Corra received £35.6 million of income as grants from the Scottish Government.

at Corra. The ISA left Corra in May 2025 to continue in the ISA position for a further five years up to May 2030.

- The ISA has led on developing Plan 24–30 with support from The Promise Scotland. It is unclear who holds ownership of Plan 24–30.

14. Changes have been made which aim to provide more clarity on respective roles. For example, The Promise Oversight Board is now ‘The Oversight Board’ and it now has [its own website](#). This has supported a clearer distinction between it and The Promise Scotland.

15. In August 2022, The Oversight Board agreed the ISA should step down as chair following revisions to the ISA role and responsibilities for Scotland’s strategy on The Promise. However, it took several meetings to agree a new approach to appointing two co-chairs and in June 2023 a new co-chair was appointed, with the ISA becoming the other co-chair. The ISA stepped down as co-chair in February 2024.

16. The Oversight Board agreed to postpone recruiting a new co-chair until after Report Three was complete to ensure full focus on producing the report. There was a delay in appointing a new co-chair, and a decision was taken to move to a different model with a chair and a deputy chair. A deputy chair was appointed in August 2025. Until August 2025, the latest minutes available on The Oversight Board’s website were from December 2024.

Children’s Services Planning Partnerships (CSPPs)

17. The Scottish Government and local government set the environment for **delivery bodies** – namely bodies represented within CSPPs, and other [corporate parents](#) who are among those tasked with implementing changes ([Exhibit 3, page 16](#)). CSPPs report to the area Community Planning Partnership on children’s services more widely, but there is no formal mechanism for CSPPs to be held accountable specifically for delivering The Promise. The approach taken by CSPPs to incorporating The Promise varies:

- Some CSPPs are adopting cross-sector approaches, with The Promise being considered in tandem with wider policy such as inequalities and **Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)**.
- Thirty Children’s Services Plans for 2023–26 referenced The Promise and 15 areas included The Promise as a strategic priority.²



Delivery bodies

Organisations who have a responsibility to care for and support children and young people who are looked after by the local authority.



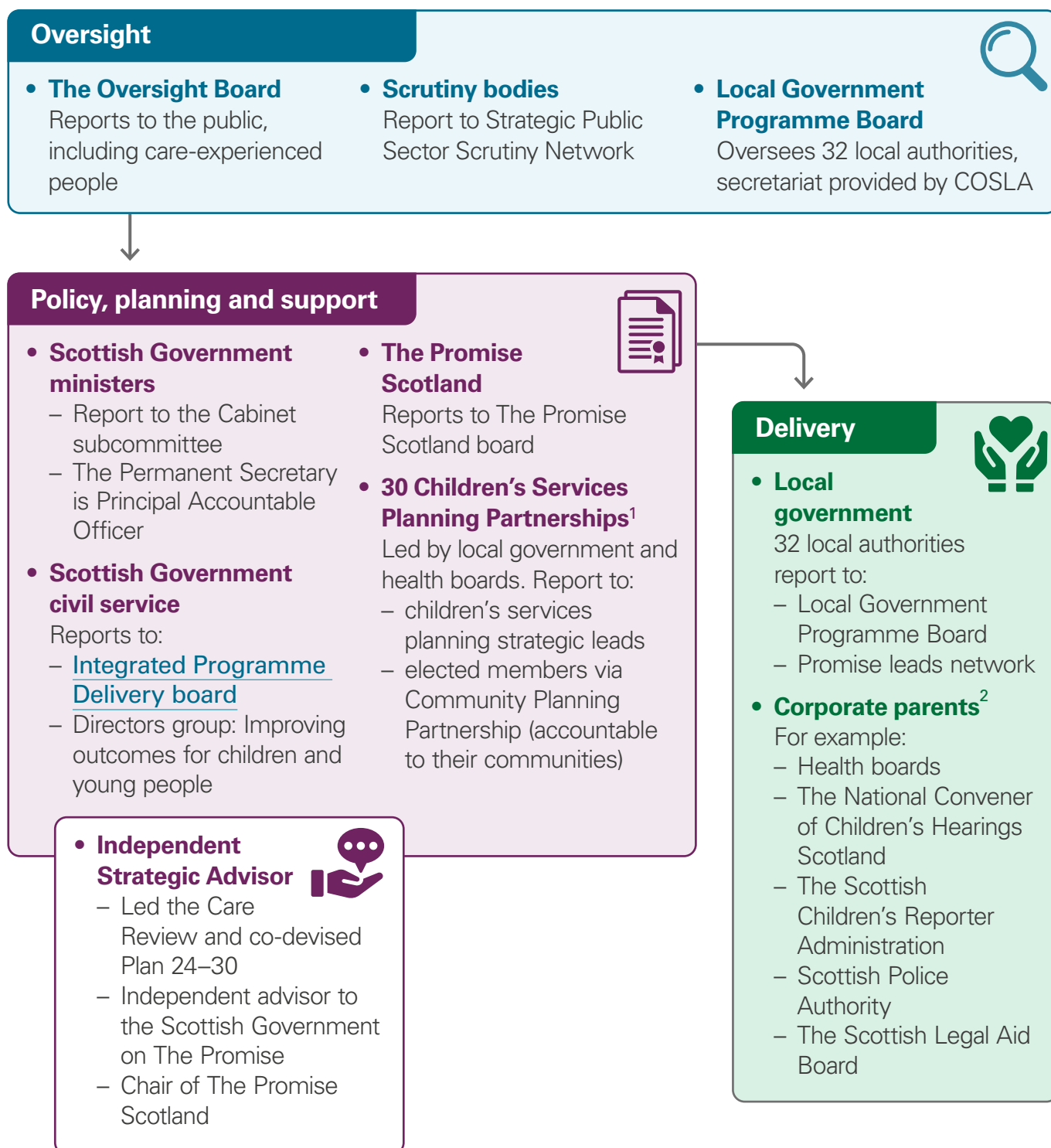
Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)

The Scottish Government’s framework for improving the wellbeing of children and young people based on receiving the right support at the right time.

Exhibit 3.

Overview of the main care experience governance structures and forums

Various bodies, reporting lines, and governance forums exist to support The Promise.



Notes: This is not an exhaustive list of groups and forums (Exhibit 1). Cross-government groups are wide ranging and include: The Chairs Group, National Leadership Group and The Promise Collective.

1. CSPPs cover Scotland's 32 local authorities. Angus, Dundee and Perth and Kinross form one CSPP.

2. Corporate parents listed are examples. A [full list as defined in legislation is here](#).

Source: Audit Scotland

The Promise Scotland has led a series of outputs. It has had to evolve the focus of some of its work which risks its ability to demonstrate significant impact

18. The Promise Scotland has had to evolve since its inception, and its focus and work programme took time to get under way, partly delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic. To date its work has focused on leading various outputs to support policy work. This includes: developing resources to support public bodies; supporting The Oversight Board to produce Report Three; and supporting the ISA in developing Plan 24–30. It has also led a series of smaller-scale pilot-based projects. A detailed [summary of work carried out between August 2023 to March 2025](#) has been published by The Promise Scotland.

19. Much of The Promise Scotland’s work aims to support longer-term change. This means its impact will require time, for example through contributions which will inform policy and legislative change and national resources such as the Promise Progress Framework ([paragraph 56](#)), and by working with local areas.

20. The Promise Scotland has acknowledged that its initial work programme was too ambitious, in part due to the resource required to deliver locality-based work. For the first part of 2025 it redirected resources to produce a local perspectives report, requested by Scottish ministers. As a new organisation, there is a risk that The Promise Scotland’s need to be agile, and the nature of short-term projects, could detract from it having a tangible impact at the scale required to support significant public sector reform.

National plans to deliver The Promise lack clarity and direction, contributing to barriers in distributing collective accountability

21. The challenge of implementing collective accountability is well established, with multiple bodies responsible for delivering joint outcomes under The Promise. The aspiration of improving the lives and outcomes for care-experienced people is an ambition that all public bodies endorse – and one that pre-dates The Promise.

22. However, national delivery plans lack the clarity and direction required to ensure that these aspirations can be realised. Delivery bodies are not always clear on priorities, timescales, and to whom they are accountable. There is evidence of delivery bodies assessing what The Promise means for them, and this needs to be supported by clarity and guidance set nationally.

Plan 24–30 lacks detail for individual sectors and route maps to support delivery are not expected to be available until the end of 2025

23. Plan 24–30, described as ‘Scotland’s plan’, follows on from Plan 21–24 which was not delivered in full and lacked detail. Plan 24–30 was published in an interactive web-based format and is designed to be a collaborative tool to guide delivery bodies. While there is evidence of local areas and sectors using this to develop plans, the format of the plan has made it challenging for organisations to navigate.

24. Plan 24–30 provides clear destination statements linked to The Promise report from the Care Review, and a foundation for individual areas and sectors to develop their own plans – but it did not provide the clarity needed to understand their respective roles and actions required. From the outset, there was confusion about whose role it was to provide this direction, such as whether one of the new entities would lead the way, or if individual sectors and organisations should self-assess what was needed.

25. There has been recognition by both those tasked with policy and planning, and those delivering services, that further specific guidance is needed. Without this, individual bodies who have both a direct, and indirect role in delivering The Promise lack clarity on how they will deliver The Promise. The Promise Scotland is developing 25 ‘route maps’ to support the thematic areas from Plan 24–30. It plans to publish these by the end of 2025 – nearly six years on since the Scottish Government committed to delivering The Promise.

The Scottish Government has published a detailed implementation plan with over 200 actions

26. The Scottish Government’s second iteration of its Implementation Plan contained a ‘theory of change’. This was developed in October 2022 after the first plan was published and derived from ongoing policy work. It seeks to map out how it is delivering the changes required. The absence of this in the first plan makes it difficult to show the intended approach or direction of travel for its programme of work.

27. We assessed a small number of the actions from the Implementation plan relevant to the scope of this work and identified some key issues ([paragraphs 33, 37 and 108](#)). For example, some have been included without proper consultation or planning, or have lacked clarity.

28. These issues have led to confusion around how the actions are implemented and by whom, as well as their intended impact in supporting The Promise ambitions. The large number of commitments across government and sectors demonstrates the scale and breadth of work needed to deliver The Promise. For example, the redesign of the children’s hearings system is one strand of the Scottish Government’s Implementation Plan, and it alone contains 97 recommendations, as set out in the Hearings for Children report.

29. The Scottish Government maintains a tracker of the actions from its Implementation Plan. For the Scottish Government to fully fulfil its role as an enabler of change, it needs to work with partners to prioritise actions and clarify timescales and who will lead them.

The role of some sectors is clearer than others

30. A lack of clear plans has been a barrier for different sectors. Some have a clearer role – for example social work provide services to support and protect children, families and adults, and some other sectors have a more contained role in terms of delivering The Promise, such as:

- **Justice and children’s hearings** – The Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA) and Children’s Hearings Scotland (CHS), among others, are tasked with implementing the recommendations from the Children’s Hearings Redesign. While delivery itself is challenging, there are defined programmes of work, deliverables and timescales.
- **Education** – schools have a clear role in working to reduce exclusions rates and improving attainment for care-experienced children and young people. A Virtual School Headteacher Network (VSHN) has been established to provide additional support to care-experienced learners ([Case study 1, page 20](#)).

31. The remit of other sectors is less clear. For example, our audit work found that the health sector has had less presence in national plans and discussions, even though it is a key partner in CSPPs at a local level. Health board corporate parenting plans are also not easily accessible or routinely monitored. In October 2024, a **Promise NHS network** was established, but this was overdue.

32. Similarly, scrutiny bodies have an important role, but some scrutiny organisations’ roles are more clearly defined than others. For example, the Care Inspectorate has a well-developed work programme to support The Promise, relative to others, such as the Scottish Housing Regulator, whose work is compliance based.

33. The Scottish Government Implementation Plan identified an action to develop a ‘new, holistic framework for inspection and regulation that values what children, young people and families value’. A wider review of inspection, scrutiny, and regulation has taken place,³ but this specific action has not been completed.



Promise NHS network

Facilitated by The Promise Scotland, it brings together representatives from health boards across Scotland to share insights.

Case study 1.

Virtual school head teacher (VSHT) network

The network has been linked to positive educational experiences

Background

A VSHT is a senior education staff member who takes responsibility for supporting care-experienced learners, in addition to the traditional school model. In some cases, the support may be provided by a care-experienced team rather than an individual.

Aberdeen City was the first local authority in Scotland to introduce a VSHT in 2015, and funding for wider rollout has been available since 2018 as an element of the Scottish Attainment Challenge. In 2024, 19 of 32 local authorities had a VSHT.

A VSHT case study published by Education Scotland looked at Inverclyde Council and demonstrated positive impact including:

- improved processes and data accuracy to improve working and data sharing between schools and children and families social work departments
- the exclusion guidance and protocols were updated and the number of exclusions of care-experienced learners halved in 2022–23
- schools reported feeling more confident in knowing and tracking learners, and pupils felt more supported.

The Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS) has had a key role in overseeing the network and promoting learning since 2020. More information is available on the [Virtual School Head Teachers' Network](#) page hosted by CELCIS.

Source: Audit Scotland, CELCIS, Education Scotland



The complexity of The Promise, with several bodies tasked with delivery, means there are multiple routes of governance, which risks confusing and weakening accountability mechanisms

34. The diverse range of organisations and associated accountability structures which surround The Promise means that governance is inherently complex. While there is a need for all bodies and sectors across national and local government to take responsibility for their role in delivering The Promise, accountability for delivering The Promise at a national level ultimately lies with Scottish ministers, supported by the civil

service. Within the Scottish Government, a new integrated approach to governance was established in December 2024, replacing the Promise Programme Board which was established in November 2021 (Exhibit 3).

35. The Promise is now integrated into the Scottish Government's wider public sector reform agenda. A new integrated approach to governance brings together programmes of work across whole-family-support including The Promise, Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and Early Child Development. This new approach is a positive development but some gaps in governance arrangements from the outset means there have been gaps in risk management. For example:

- A **Risk Potential Assessment (RPA)** was not carried out until March 2025 – three years after the Implementation Plan. The Scottish Government notes this will likely lead to an independent assurance review later in 2025.
- A Promise Programme Board risk register was established in November 2021, but updates do not appear until 2023, and review dates and decisions are not clearly logged.

36. There is opportunity to streamline governance groups and reduce duplication. Our analysis found around 40 groups with direct and indirect links to care experience across national and local government, but the actual number may be higher. The value and progress of some structures is unclear. For example, **The Promise Collective** has not been active for several months leaving a key gap in the coordination of cross-government improvement activity. While there are multiple layers of governance, there is also opportunity for strengthened cross-government oversight ([paragraph 38](#)).

There is a need to streamline the governance and accountability landscape, but actions taken by the Scottish Government to address this have not yet enabled the required shift

37. Locally and across sectors, there is complexity where delivery bodies have competing demands, policies and resources that are not easily aligned. The Promise spans 26 out of 40 Scottish Government Directorates, and a range of overarching **policy frameworks and guidance** apply to different sectors, some of which are out of date. The Care Review report [The Rules](#) identified over 60 pieces of primary and secondary legislation relating to children's care services and called for greater clarity. The Scottish Government Implementation Plan included commitments to:

- **Scope a new, holistic framework for governance and accountability.** In 2024, The Promise Scotland published a paper to support this commitment, but it does not constitute a framework. This provides recommendations to enable collective accountability



Risk Potential Assessment (RPA)

The Scottish Public Finance Manual mandates that an RPA be carried out for major investment projects to determine the level of assurance and support a project needs.



The Promise Collective

A strategic forum established to support a cohesive approach to activities related to The Promise.



Policy frameworks and guidance

The Scottish Social Services Council has produced a [resource to support staff](#) to link the SSSC Codes of Practice, the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and The Promise.

for the range of partners delivering The Promise, including national bodies, scrutiny bodies and CSPPs.

- **Undertake a review of the legislative framework.** The Promise Scotland has undertaken work to support this, but a formal review has not taken place, and it is unconfirmed if this will go ahead.⁴
- **Introduce a Promise Bill to make the required legislative change to 'Keep The Promise'.** In June 2025, the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill was introduced. Limited detail on the content of the Bill was given in advance. The Scottish Government produced a financial memorandum, which estimates the Bill will cost up to £23.8 million by 2029/30 (recurring).⁵ If passed, the Bill will not be fully enacted until 2026, only four years before 2030. It is unclear how the Bill in its current form will address the challenges around the complex legislative landscape.

'... does GIRFEC sit above The Promise or does The Promise provide a framework in which GIRFEC then sits?'

Children's services workforce member

38. The governance paper produced by The Promise Scotland suggests how governance can be improved. The Scottish Government has not yet worked with partners to take the recommendations forward.⁶ It identified enabling actions that could be taken, for example: CSPPs should have clear structures in place to ensure robust accountability and monitoring; and the Scottish Government and scrutiny bodies need to hold partnerships to account for collaborative governance, beyond focusing on individual organisations.

There are examples of engagement with care-experienced people, but it is not always clear how their voice is being systematically embedded in service design or delivery

39. There is recognition among stakeholders of the need to avoid asking repetitive questions of care-experienced people. The Scottish Government commissioned Barnardo's and Who Cares? Scotland to lead on engagement for a series of consultations, which were used by the Scottish Government to inform the development of the Children and Young People (Care) (Scotland) Bill. The Scottish Government has indicated that co-production with care-experienced people will be a key part of future developments of the provisions in the bill.

More direct engagement from the Scottish Government is needed; participants want to hear from the First Minister and Deputy First Minister directly and want to know what changes ministers could list since The Promise was published.

Extract from engagement session with care-experienced young people

40. Local accountability structures have been established to involve care-experienced people, for example Promise **Champions Boards**. In March 2025, an evidence session to the Education, Children and Young People Committee recorded that the number of Champions Boards has decreased, now with fewer than ten.⁷ Some areas may not have a Champions Board specifically but have established alternative participation groups and approaches.

41. The extent to which the views of care-experienced people are used is mixed, with some young people indicating they feel seen and heard through the Champions Boards and more widely. Other evidence suggests that practice could be more meaningful.⁸ Further, a review of progress against Plan 21–24 found there to be progress in supporting children and families in decision-making, although gaps remained in consistently prioritising their voices.⁹

‘Children’s views are gathered and noted on assessments and care planning, but I am not sure to what extent they are taken seriously?’

Children’s services workforce member

42. Within the Scottish Government, care-experienced people are not represented on internal accountability and reporting groups. As an external structure to government, membership of The Oversight Board comprises at least 50 per cent care-experienced members. Through support from partners, the Scottish Government utilises engagement with care-experienced people carried out through wider policy work. For example:

- **The Bairns’ Hoose model** – is adopting a child-centred approach, with involvement of children and young people into the Bairns’ Hoose standards. The work is in the ‘pathfinder’ phase which has been extended to 2027 when national rollout will take place.
- **Hearings System Working Group (HSWG)** – established to oversee the redesign process for the Children’s Hearing System, independently chaired and facilitated by The Promise Scotland. Care-experienced people and staff have fed into the HSWG, helping to identify both issues and solutions to inform the further work of the HSWG.



Champions Boards

A group of care-experienced young people who represent and advocate for other children and young people in care.



Bairns’ Hoose

Scotland’s approach to the Icelandic ‘Barnahus’, which means ‘children’s house’. It offers holistic, child-centred support to those who have been victims or witnesses of abuse and to children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour has caused harm. [Bairns’ Hoose website](#) provides more information.

2. Data, measurement and reporting

From the outset, the Scottish Government did not adequately plan how it would define, measure and monitor progress

43. While the Care Review highlighted what needs to change, the scale and complexity of The Promise means it is difficult to know if positive change is felt for each individual and family. Linked to the National Performance Framework (NPF), the Implementation Plan committed to developing a subset of indicators to support the national outcome 'we grow up loved, safe, respected and that we realise our full potential'. However, work to support how this is measured has been slow. The NPF is currently under review and is expected to be relaunched in mid-2026.

44. The theory of change in the updated Implementation Plan determined that having fewer children in care is an indicator of success, alongside people reporting a positive experience of care. In 2024, there were 11,844 children recorded as 'looked after', a 17 per cent fall since 2019.¹⁰ A greater proportion of children are living with family in kinship care, and there are fewer children under the age of five entering care – trends that would indicate a positive shift. The Scottish Government considers other information, such as child protection data but these measures are limited:

- **Diversity of success** – The Promise means different things for different people, and clear measures to address this were not defined from the outset
- **Complexity of need** – there are indications that the complexity of need is increasing but current established metrics do not capture this.

'I'm considered a success story; people talk about how far I've come but I'm constantly struggling with things.'

Care-experienced young person

The lack of clearly defined roles has contributed to gaps in national oversight and monitoring of local activity

45. Delivery of a major change programme like The Promise requires robust monitoring arrangements, clearly defined from the outset, to assess if it is delivering the intended outcomes and any wider

implications. CSPPs monitor and report on progress locally, and elected members are responsible for monitoring progress at a local authority level – and are accountable to their communities. A lack of robust planning as to how The Promise would be measured means that information is not routinely or robustly collated nationally:

- COSLA represents local government and since 2022, it has reported examples of progress and activity across local authorities. It has jointly led the development of the Promise Progress Framework, together with Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland ([paragraph 56](#)) but it is not responsible for monitoring progress in relation to The Promise, or policy more widely
- The Oversight Board progress reports are not based on a detailed assessment of local activity. The methodology applied for Reports One and Two was not clearly set out, but the methodology applied for Report Three, was clearer.

46. Variability across the country also makes it difficult to know to what extent The Promise is being delivered. Research by Who Cares? Scotland has highlighted the lack of consistency across Scotland and the need for more progress across priority areas, such as in education, restraint and profit from care. It also reported the dilution of some key ambitions, for example varied interpretations of the use of restraint. Work is under way to improve the understanding of restrictive practice ([paragraph 49](#)). This lack of consistency is a barrier in understanding, measuring and delivering progress overall.

47. The Scottish Government recognised the gap in local visibility. In May 2025, The Promise Scotland produced a ‘Keeping the Promise – A local perspective’ report for ministers and COSLA which draws on activity under way across Scotland’s 32 councils. As the first attempt to provide a country-wide narrative on progress, the report is clear on its limitations. This included that the findings were based only on publicly available information and that it does not draw on experiences of care-experienced people. The report highlights that it does not capture work carried out by other partners, such as health, police and the third sector. This limits the extent of the report’s reliability and value.





Improvements are under way to address long-standing data barriers

48. The Care Review highlighted that data relating to care-experienced people reflects the ‘system’ and its processes, rather than the true outcomes and experiences of those who move through it. The Oversight Board has reported that data still does not offer a clear and linked picture for care-experienced people. Our audit work has highlighted some thematic issues in the data landscape for care experience ([Exhibit 4, page 26](#)).

Exhibit 4.

Key challenges for public sector data

Data gaps, consistency of recording, and information sharing challenges present barriers to using information effectively to support The Promise.

Barrier	Example in practice	Enabler
 Inconsistent equalities monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The core children's social work statistics dataset includes data on demographics, such as age and sex, but data on disability and ethnic background contain high percentages of unknown. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social and demographic information can enable inequalities to be understood and action taken.
 Incomplete data and data gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulties in identifying care-experienced people in wider data sets, such as in health or justice, as this is not a standard recording field. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More specific data could enable greater protection for care-experienced people, while enhancing data collection, and can help to assess progress.
 Limited cross-sector data sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children's Hearings Scotland (CHS) information on Compulsory Supervision Orders is held by local authorities, and data on decisions from hearings is held by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA). General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) means that data sharing between the bodies can be challenging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-sector data sharing can support more effective decision-making which impact the lives of care-experienced people, and support whole system service delivery.
 Limited capacity for increased data requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local authorities are required to contribute to over 30 public data reporting requirements, and for over 30 requiring bodies. Annually, children's services alone are required to support national data reporting through four reporting duties and submit eight different data returns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced time spent on time intensive and often duplicative data handling can allow other work to be prioritised. For example, preventative work and building relationships.

Source: Audit Scotland

49. Since the Care Review, work has been done to improve data – although some of this was due to begin before the Care Review. The Scottish Government and partners have made some improvements to existing data, for example:

- **Looked-after children’s data** – from spring 2023 data collection included statistics in development for information on sibling groups.
- **National Hub for reviewing and learning from the deaths of children and young people** – created in 2021. It aims to channel learning to reduce future preventable deaths by promoting consistent, quality child death reviews (CDRs) into deaths of all live born children up to the age of 18 years, and care leavers up to age 26 in receipt of continuing care or aftercare services at the time of their death.
- **Kinship care data** – in July 2025, the Scottish Government published [data on kinship care](#) linked to Scotland’s census, providing a clearer account of the number of children being cared for in kinship care.
- **Data published on restraint** – from November 2024, the Care Inspectorate has published annual data on the use of physical restraint and seclusion in residential child care services. From July 2025, the publication has included [data on other restrictive practices](#). This follows on from work carried out by the Scottish Physical Restraint Action Group around definitions, recording and reporting. It aims to support with providing a clearer picture of the use of restrictive practice.

Work is under way to enable better use of existing data, including longitudinal research and data linkage

50. It is widely recognised that public bodies in Scotland collect a lot of data, but it is not always used to understand a person’s journey and experiences. **Data linkage** has the potential to unlock access to more useful and joint information that already exists, to show how different factors in a person’s life interact ([Case study 2, page 28](#)).

51. The need to look at longitudinal data around care experience was highlighted before the commitment was made to deliver The Promise.¹¹ In collaboration with Administrative Data Research UK, the Scottish Government developed the [Looked After Children longitudinal dataset \(CLAS dataset\)](#) in 2022. This has led to multiple research projects to understand different areas, such as pathways for care-experienced people, kinship care, health, and placement patterns.

52. In March 2025, the Scottish Government established a Data and Evidence Group. It is an analytical group which aims to adopt a cross-sector approach to understanding the data landscape across different population groups, including families on the edges of care. As part of its



Data linkage is the process of combining data from different sources that relate to the same person or entity, through ‘administrative’ or ‘routine’ data, eg attending a GP, school or court.

remit, The Promise Collective ([paragraph 36](#)) also has a role to look at data and evidence, and so the work of each group should be aligned to enable the value of both to be realised fully.

Case study 2.

Data linkage has supported educational outcomes data

Broader improvements to data linkage are at an early stage, impeding further progress.

Scottish Government Educational outcomes for looked-after children

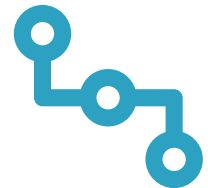
Data linkage is used to link educational data with social work data using a child or young person's **Scottish Candidate Number (SCN)** to provide an understanding of the education experiences of children in care.

This enables a greater understanding of how education and social care are interacting. Recent data now reports on children who have been looked after at any point rather than just in the previous year, and reporting also now includes attendance and exclusions.

Challenges

The SCN method cannot be used to match children below school age to other data sets, such as health. This means a core group of children cannot be identified – estimated by CELCIS as approximately 30 per cent of children.¹² This is a gap in assessing outcomes for pre-school children, particularly as early years are key to supporting prevention. Work to enhance data linkage is at an early stage.

Source: Audit Scotland and CELCIS



All candidates going through the Scottish education system are allocated a **Scottish Candidate Number (SCN)** from Primary 1.

Some local areas are working to improve data

53. In East Lothian, the council used Scottish Government Whole Family Wellbeing funding ([paragraphs 80–85](#)), under its 'Families Together' programme to build a 'change and practice team'. This included a Community Researcher post to support data analysis. As a fast-growing local authority, the additional capacity has supported a better understanding of the needs and experiences of local family support.

54. Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership and the Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector undertook a mapping exercise to inform a Family Support Strategy. This looked at families' risk factors and demographics such as child poverty, mental health, and use of services, to provide a baseline for understanding the impact of future systems change.

The Promise Scotland is leading work to support improved data, but progress has been slower than planned

55. The Promise Scotland is leading on two data projects – each aimed to support better use of data and identify resolutions to data sharing. The timelines attached to the projects demonstrate the time that is needed to improve data infrastructure at scale:

- **Information sharing project** – a collaboration with the Data for Children Collaborative and Scottish Government, launched in October 2024. The project is seeking to provide an understanding of the barriers to data and information sharing and identify tangible actions for organisations to take forward. It is expected to publish in December 2025.
- **The Promise Data Map** – a collaboration with the Scottish Government, Edinburgh University and **UNICEF**. It aims to support organisations to better understand what information they hold and how they use it, but it will not hold the data itself. The tool has been tested in South Ayrshire with positive feedback. Further rollout was due by summer 2022, but because of the complexity and changes to the design, it has been delayed and will not be available until the end of 2025.



UNICEF

United Nations Children's Fund is a United Nations agency dedicated to improving the lives of children worldwide.

The Scottish Government was slow to develop a framework to measure progress

56. In 2020, upon committing to deliver The Promise, insufficient thought was given as to how progress would be measured, including the time needed to develop a monitoring approach. [The Promise Progress Framework](#) (PPF), was published in December 2024, following a year of work to refine and agree relevant measures. It was developed by Scottish Government, COSLA, and The Promise Scotland, and through engagement with other partners.

57. The framework is supported by ten vision statements taken directly from The Promise, each with a set of outcomes and indicators that public bodies should work towards. These provide a foundation for individual sectors and bodies, with some outcomes providing greater clarity than others, for example, in justice, the ending of young people in youth offending institutions – with clear indicators to support this. However, in other areas such as health, the outcome is broader, focusing on improving access and with no supporting indicators. The framework makes up a third of 'The Promise Story of Progress' based on three questions:

- How is Scotland doing in its progress towards keeping The Promise? (**National progress** – The Promise Progress Framework)
- Does the care community feel the impact of The Promise being kept? (**Experiential progress** – due by end of 2025)
- How are organisations doing in their work to keep The Promise? (**Organisational progress** – due by end of 2025).

58. The PPF has been populated with national progress data focused on a set of existing core (directly related to The Promise and change), and contextual (wider social and wellbeing) indicators, from a wide range of quantitative sources and collated in one place, for the first time. It uses 2020 as a baseline for most indicators in line with when the Care Review concluded and acknowledges factors which could impact this as a starting position – namely the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The remaining two parts of the Story of Progress will focus on qualitative data.

59. In September 2025, The Promise Scotland published an interactive dashboard which presents national level data. It does not show local variations which may impact national trends, but local areas will collect, monitor and report on their own data locally.

60. The current framework does not yet capture the experiences of care-experienced people, or the workforce. The next iteration of the PPF will seek to include this, based on 'what matters' to children and families. There is little information on what the other two parts of the framework will look like, and how the qualitative information will be captured. The recently established data and evidence group has now set out an approach and identified key milestones across 2025 and 2026. Five years on, this is overdue and is a significant risk to understanding progress.

Public bodies are working to implement child rights in line with The Promise. An approach to measurement of UNCRC articles is being developed

61. The Care Review found that there was a focus on policy, process and procedure to the detriment of upholding children's rights. Since then, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) legislation has been introduced in Scotland. Some organisations have active programmes of work in implementing child rights under way. For example, both SCRA and CHS are focused on upholding **UNCRC Article 12** as part of the children's hearings redesign work.

62. Advocacy support can enable care-experienced people to realise their rights, but the level of unmet need for advocacy support is unknown – therefore it is unclear to what extent care-experienced people are aware of their rights. As part of the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, work is under way to consider a potential national lifelong advocacy service for people and families with care experience.¹³



UNCRC Article 12

Respect for the views of the child to be listened to and heard.

'At the beginning, I didn't know what an advocacy worker was.'

Care-experienced young person

63. A comprehensive monitoring framework for UNCRC is not yet in place, and wider evidence suggests that the extent to which the rights of care-experienced children are upheld is mixed. Research by the Care Inspectorate outlines that where rights are not being upheld, the availability of resources is often a barrier.^{[14](#)}

64. From 31 March 2026, CSPPs will be required to report on how they are embedding UNCRC. The Scottish Government is considering how it will formally measure delivery against UNCRC. It is scoping the development of initial indicators relating to youth justice (Articles 37 and 40). This will inform the development of indicators across other articles.

3. Resources to deliver The Promise

Local authorities recorded spending £1.2 billion on care experience in 2023/24, a 1.2 per cent increase in real terms since 2017/18

65. In 2023/24, local authorities reported that they spent £1.2 billion on services related to care experience, a 1.2 per cent increase in real terms since 2017/18. Most of this spending is for services provided by children and families social work, and a further £0.8 million on children's panel costs. Core areas of spending include:

- case management and assessment (£323 million)
- fostering and family placement (£260 million)
- care homes (£155 million)
- residential schools (£152 million)
- third party payment to private companies (£198 million).

66. The robustness of data provided by local authorities varies, making it difficult to meaningfully assess spending. Local authority spending is recorded through the national Local Financial Returns (LFR) data set, where spending categories do not always reflect how services are delivered. As such, there can be variability in how councils record information, and this is often based on 'best estimates'. The LFR data set has changed over time, meaning that data especially in earlier years may not be directly comparable.

67. For local areas where children's services are delegated to the Integration Joint Board (IJB), this is not recorded in sufficient detail within the LFR data set. For example, contributions to/from social care is a single pot of money and cannot be split into specific categories for children's panel or children and families, and so spending on care experience may be higher. IJBs do not have a consistent method of recording care experience spend. Proportions of universal services that are spent on care and care-experienced children, families and adults, eg education, justice, health, are also excluded.

There are examples of local authorities and partners redirecting resources to improve outcomes and realise cost savings

68. Early intervention has the potential to significantly reduce public spending. The Accounts Commission [Briefing: Local government budgets 2024/25](#) reported that councils' total budget gap in 2025/26 had increased by £52 million since 2024/25.

69. Approaches to realigning spending on care experience have pre-dated The Promise. For example, in 2019 Perth and Kinross Council utilised existing service funding alongside £1.7 million earmarked reserves to fund the **REACH** multi-disciplinary team. The team provides intensive support to families with multiple complex needs, where the young person is at high risk of becoming accommodated away from home. This has enabled young people to be looked after in community settings. In August 2021, the council estimated that since its inception, REACH had helped to reduce costs by at least £4.2 million.

70. In Glasgow in 2016, the council established a programme to transform children's services through intensive support to vulnerable families and shifting how the service approaches risk. The council informed us that funding from the Glasgow Integrated Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) has increased from £2.7 million to now £6.7 million per annum and a new tendered contract for up to seven years. The council reports benefits such as:

- a 62 per cent reduction in the numbers of children entering care, and 70 per cent fewer placement moves
- savings of £32 million in care placement costs and at least a further £70 million savings across a nine-year period for associated costs of keeping children in care.

71. In 2024, the Independent Strategic Advisor (ISA) led work to develop a strategic approach to investment and disinvestment. Building on the human and economic cost modelling from the Care Review ([Follow the Money report](#)), it aimed to identify areas across multiple systems where spending associated with care experience could be 'disinvested' and re-directed towards prevention. For example, for mothers in prison on remand or short-term sentences, reducing resources in prisons and the need for their children to go into care can avoid costs for both the justice and care systems. Resources can be redirected into community-based supports instead ([Case study 3, page 34](#)).

72. The ISA worked with leaders in different areas to develop proposals for this work, but the Scottish Government has not provided support to take this forward. Some innovative approaches are being taken forward, but the work has had limited impact to date.



Resilient, Engage, Achieving, Confident and Healthy (REACH) brings together a range of expertise from different services across the council.

Case study 3.

Aberlour Intensive Perinatal Support Service

A focus on prevention has enabled families to stay together and delivered cost savings. Building strong, trusted relationships has been key to the service's success.



Background

Since April 2021, Aberlour Children's Charity has been delivering an intensive support service to pregnant women and new mothers who are affected by problematic substance and/or alcohol use. Its aim is to help keep families together when safe to do so. The service is funded through the Corra foundation, Falkirk Alcohol and Drugs Partnership and Falkirk Council.

The service provides person-centred, practical and emotional support seven days per week from 7am–7pm, for the first year of a baby's life. In the first three years of operation, Aberlour Children's Charity supported 34 mothers and babies – all at high risk of being separated.

Impact

Mothers were positive about the service and provision of flexible wrap-around support. The service supported mothers in their recovery journey. Mothers built strong and trusting relationships with support workers, which helped them to rebuild relationships with their babies, other children and services – helping to keep families together. From April 2021 to March 2024:

- eight babies were de-registered from the child protection register
- two babies who had been accommodated at birth returned to their mother's full-time care.

The focus on prevention has enabled financial savings of £411k in avoiding care costs with the babies being supported. This exceeded the cost of the service (£221k). An evaluation estimated that every £1 invested in the intensive Perinatal Support Service had a future value of almost £15 over the childhood period of supported children.

Source: Audit Scotland, Aberlour Children's Charity and Social Value Lab

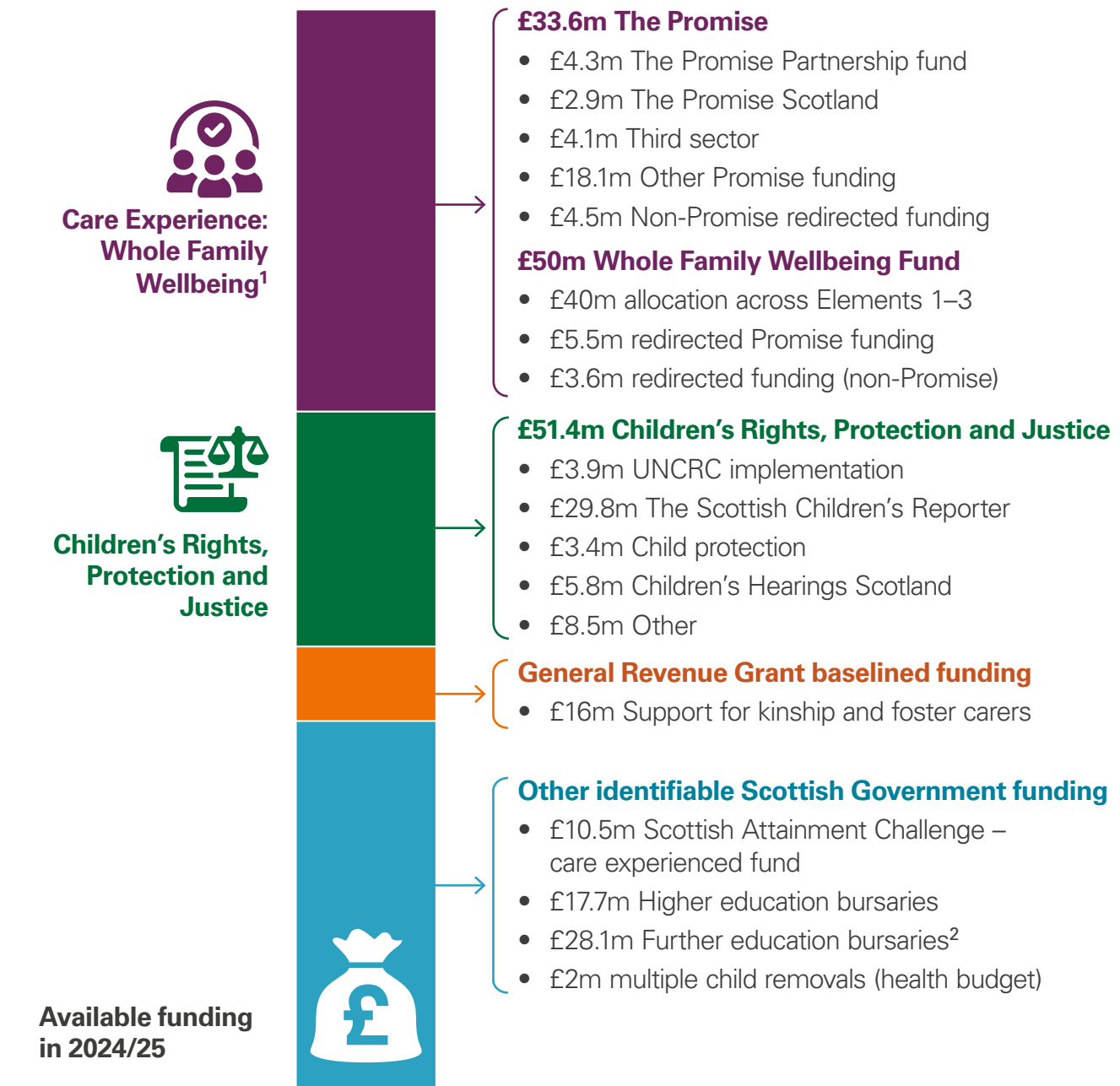
Multiple disparate funding streams present barriers for bodies to utilise funding, and to assess the impact of investment

73. There is no single source of funding for The Promise and multiple bodies have a role to play, which makes it difficult to track spending ([Exhibit 5, page 35](#)). There will also be significant work that contributes to care experience but is not specifically recorded, for example preventative spending in child poverty, and police resources to support The Promise.

Exhibit 5.

The funding landscape for delivering The Promise

Funding is complex with disparate pots making it difficult to identify the total funding available.



Notes: This is annual funding. The exhibit presents the budgeted amounts for 2024/25 when known. Amounts for the WFWF breakdown are based on actual spend and do not equal the budget line total.

1. Within year changes may be made to budget lines in response to changes to projected spends. These will be agreed by ministers and will appear as transfers at the spring or autumn budget revision. These transfers have been used for Promise related work or to address non-Promise Scottish Government priorities.

2. Further Education bursaries are based on 2023/24 allocations to colleges via the Scottish Funding Council.

Source: Scottish Government and Audit Scotland

74. CSPPs delivering The Promise are impacted by parameters set by the Scottish Government. Individual bodies within CSPPs receive funding through various sources, each with its own criteria and reporting requirements. This can be a time-intensive process which increases the burden on local areas. For example, CSPPs (via local authorities) receive funding as part of Element 1 of the WFWF. They may also apply for and receive funding from the Promise Partnership Fund ([Case study 4](#)), and the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund as part of the **Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC)**.

‘The way in which funds are allocated from the Scottish Government in a time limited and ring-fenced format means that there is often uncertainty about whether funding will be baselined. There can also be a heavy burden in relation to reporting for different funding streams and this can result in duplication...’

Children’s services workforce member



The **Scottish Attainment Challenge** is a source of funding to local authorities to support closing the attainment gap in education and includes a specific funding stream for care-experienced children and young people.

Case study 4. Promise Partnership Fund (PPF)

The PPF aimed to support capacity building to deliver The Promise.

Background

In January 2021, the Scottish Government commissioned Corra Foundation to administer the PPF which aimed to help realise the ambitions of The Promise. Corra worked in partnership with the Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland to develop the funding approach. All funding decisions were made by an independent panel comprised entirely of people with care experience. Projects were not intended to support core service delivery, but focused on building infrastructure to enable structural change, in line with The Promise. For example:

- Scottish Borders Council worked with Children 1st to utilise £160k over two years. Children 1st created the Brothers and Sisters Project which has enabled a focus on sibling relationships across different areas of practice, such as social work sibling assessments and sibling tracing.
- Highland Strategic Partnership received £99.5k to appoint a change manager to review Highland’s current system of moving on support, in collaboration with Aberlour.



Funding allocation

An initial funding allocation of £4 million was to be spent by March 2021. Further rounds of funding meant the PPF totalled £20 million between 2021 and 2025, across seven funding streams. A further £700k was provided by charitable organisations. At November 2024, a total of £20.56 million had been administered in total across all funding rounds, with over 400 applications made by local authorities and third sector organisations. A total of 201 grants were distributed with a success rate of 48 per cent.

Evaluation

Corra Foundation has led evaluative work on the PPF and has produced annual reports. Since the funding was announced 95 per cent of grant holders report changing their systems and support for children and young people with care experience; and 80 per cent of grant holders report involving care-experienced people in the design and delivery of services. In an interim evaluation for 2023/24, Corra reported that 68 per cent of projects were on track with progress, and the flexibility of the funding has been valued in supporting change. However, it is too early to see the longer-term impact of the work, with many projects being part of a wider journey.

Areas of success include:

- Partnership working – connections, relationships and trust have built across partners.
- Embedding participatory approaches to service design and delivery.

Challenges include:

- The initial allocation of £4 million to be spent between January and March 2021 was particularly challenging.
- Staffing and recruitment due to availability of suitably qualified staff and challenges filling short-term posts. Organisations reported time constraints and short-term funding cycles, alongside recruitment challenges as creating a barrier to innovative improvement work.
- Time-intensive application process meant CSPPs had limited time between receipt of funds and projects concluding. In three cases, this has contributed to the return of funds.

Source: Audit Scotland and Corra Foundation

75. Multiple funding streams also make it more difficult for delivery bodies to join up funding from different sources, and to measure their impact in terms of outcomes for care-experienced people across their lives. This links to challenges with collective accountability (Part 1). Some targeted evaluations have allowed the early impact of specific funding to be assessed (Case study 4).

76. The cost of The Promise Scotland is funded from the £33.6 million budget line 'The Promise' (Exhibit 5). The Promise Scotland has been staffed since summer 2022, with the appointment of the chief executive in September 2022. It employs an average of 26 people. In 2021/22, there was £2.39 million in grant funding available but The Promise Scotland spent £1.7 million due to start up delays. The grant funding commitment has remained flat across 2023/24 and 2024/25, with £2.9 million available. In 2023/24, The Promise Scotland spent £2.6 million including:

- £1.7 million in staff team costs
- £0.3 million direct project costs
- £0.5 million core costs, including premises, IT, accountancy, legal and other professional fees.

Scottish Government funding for care experience has increased but this is difficult to track due to changes in how funding is recorded over time

77. Scottish Government funding specifically for care experience and The Promise is recorded across two distinct budget lines. The budget now labelled 'Care Experience: Whole Family Wellbeing' is the main source for The Promise ([Exhibit 6, page 39](#)). The creation of new funding lines within this budget is difficult to track over time. This is because of the way information is presented in the budget, with previous funding for care experience being merged and included under new headings. The Children's Rights, Protection and Justice Budget contains funding that is also linked to The Promise.

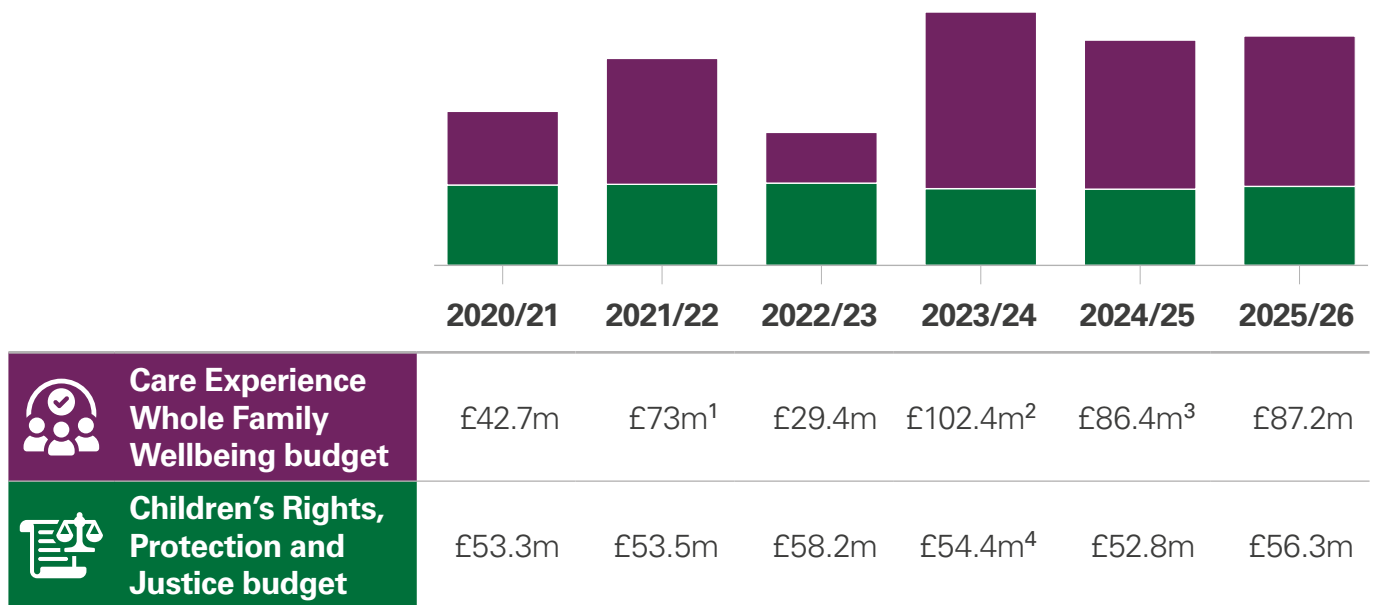
78. The care experience Whole Family Wellbeing budget has seen a significant increase, ie 196 per cent since 2022/23 (Exhibit 6). Total funding across both budgets combined has increased in real terms by 49 per cent since 2020/21; and by 64 per cent since 2022/23 when previous funding that was not directly related to The Promise was removed. The budget increased in 2023/24 when the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund ([Exhibit 7, page 41](#)) and Recommended Scottish Allowance for foster and kinship carers were introduced.

79. While Scottish Government funding for care experience has increased, actual annual spending has been lower than amounts indicated in the published budget. Starting budgets have often been revised in-year, or funding has been transferred to support other areas. In 2020/21 and 2022/23, spending variances against the budget were more prominent. The Scottish Government records its spending but variances can be difficult to track.

Exhibit 6.

Scottish Government Budget and areas of key funding, 2020/21 to 2025/26

Funding for activities contributing to the delivery of The Promise under key Scottish Government budget lines has increased in real terms.



Notes: Care Experience Whole Family Wellbeing was previously 'Care and Protection'; and 'Strategy, GIRFEC and The Promise' with different sub-headings contained over time. Figures have been rounded and refer to budgets (level 4) published in December of each year (starting budget).

1. In 2021/22, £31 million of redress and Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry funds (cash terms) were moved to another level 4 budget line, but this does not show until 2022/23.

2. £50 million (cash terms) of Whole Family Wellbeing Funding has been allocated since 2022/23 but for 2022/23 this appeared in the Autumn Budget Revision.

3. In 2024/25, £16 million (cash terms) of foster care funding was baselined in the General Revenue Grants for Local Authorities.

4. Child protection moved from Care Experience Whole Family Wellbeing to Children's Rights, Protection and Justice budget in 2022/23 (with retrospective application for 2021/22 budget re-statement).

Source: Scottish Government and Audit Scotland

The Scottish Government established a £500 million Whole Family Wellbeing Fund to enable a shift to prevention

80. In 2021/22, the Scottish Government introduced a £500 million **Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF)** over the course of this Parliament ([Exhibit 7, page 41](#)). The funding has three distinct elements, spread across local and national bodies. The highest proportion was given to CSPPs through Element 1, distributed via a funding formula which considers factors such as deprivation and rurality.

81. Since 2022/23, the Scottish Government budget has included an allocation of £50 million per year but only £148 million has been committed until 2025/26. A minimum of £38 million has been committed for 2026/27 for Element 1. The remaining 70 per cent of the fund will need to be allocated beyond this Parliament. This is at risk if a future government does not commit to this through future budget rounds.

82. Aligned to WFWF, the 2021/22 Programme for Government outlined an ambition, that by 2030, five per cent of all community-based health and social care spend will be invested in preventative whole family support. The Scottish Government has not established a trajectory to achieve this. It intended that the £500 million WFWF would provide a dual source of funding to enable CSPPs to realign resources to meet this ambition.

83. The Implementation Plan update published in September 2024 outlines the Scottish Government's investment approach to the £500 million WFWF to support delivery of The Promise, covering the period 2024/25–2031/32. However, it is unclear how this sum was arrived at when first introduced in the 2021/22 Programme for Government, and so it is unknown if this is the optimal amount of investment needed.

84. While the total amount allocated by the Scottish Government has been lower than planned, so too has actual spending by CSPPs for Element 1. Funding not spent in-year can be rolled forward to future years. This flexibility has been valued by CSPPs, given delays at the beginning to commence activities. Similarly for Element 3, funding was delayed for many projects with challenges linked to recruitment and identifying locations to deliver support. As a result, a high proportion of overall funding to date was for 2024/25.

85. The Scottish Government's approach to distributing the remainder of the WFWF for future years has incorporated feedback from stakeholders. This feedback highlighted that additional time would be needed to enable local areas to establish the system and cultural conditions to utilise funding, and informed the Scottish Government's evolving investment approach.



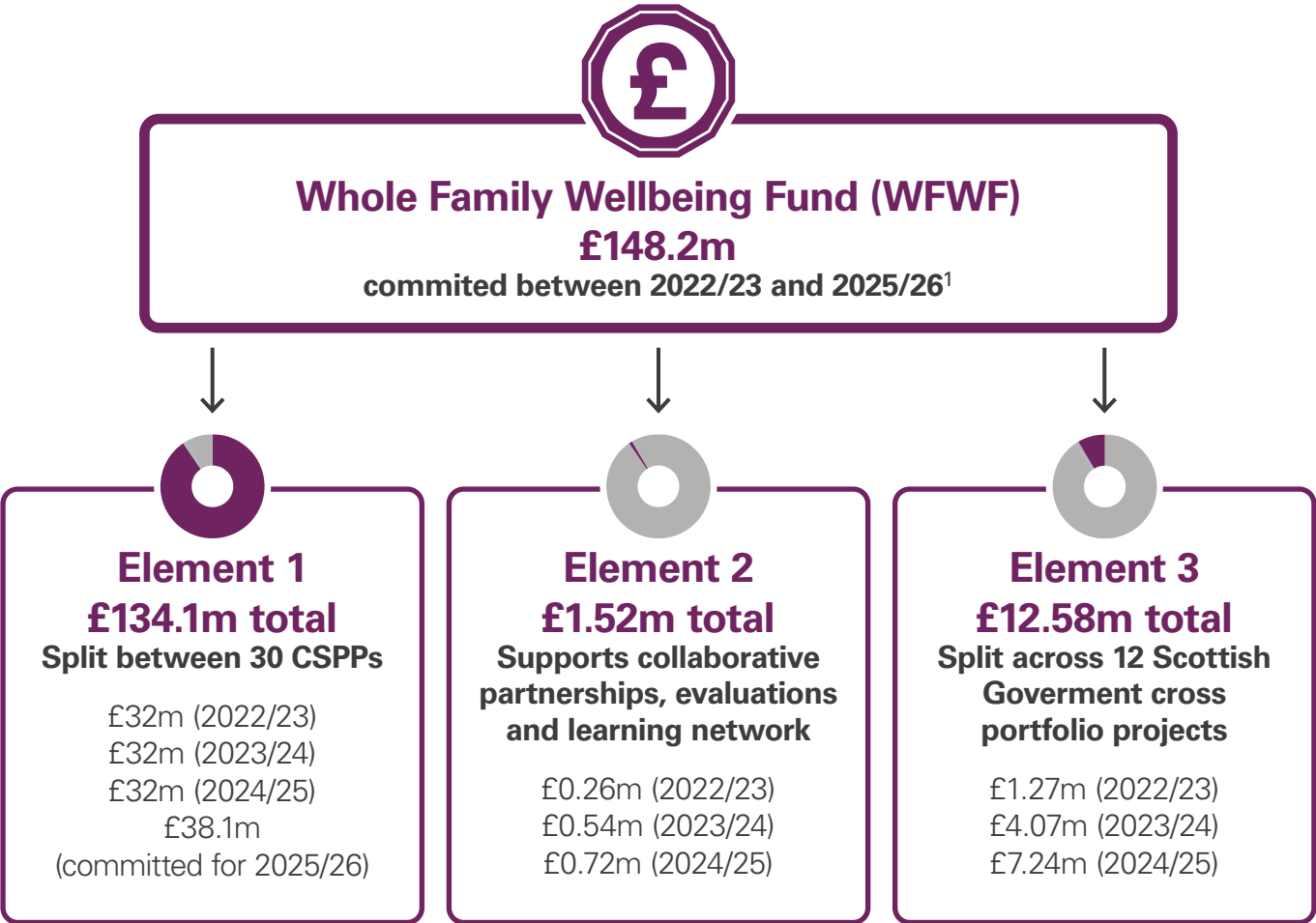
Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF)

Aimed to enable the development of holistic support services, to give families the help they need, when they need it and reduce reliance on crisis services. The WFWF criteria required funds to be utilised for new or scaled up services, rather than for existing ones.

Exhibit 7.

Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF)

The £500 million Whole Family Wellbeing Fund is spread across three elements. £148 million has been allocated, with the remainder to be allocated beyond the current parliament.



Note 1. There is additional projected spend for 2025/26 for Elements 2 and 3 which is not included in the £148.2 million.

Source: Scottish Government and Audit Scotland

The Scottish Government has a robust approach to guidance, monitoring, and sharing of learning for the WFWF

86. The Scottish Government issued clear guidance to CSPPs on criterion for using the funds – including the need for projects to be based on local need, informed by consultation and equality and children’s rights impact assessments carried out. The Scottish Government developed a model to support use and oversight of the WFWF, which identified short-, medium- and longer-term outcomes to be achieved. Element 2 funding has supported learning and evaluation, where the Scottish Government:

- **commissioned evaluations of the fund** – the first evaluation assessed CSPPs progress against the outcomes for Elements 1 and 2; the second assessed all three elements
- **established a Learning in Action Network** – brings together representatives from CSPPs to share learning and provides support offerings to individual areas.

It is too early to assess the long-term impact of the WFWF

87. The impact of prevention in terms of both outcomes and cost takes time. Initial evaluations of the WFWF have identified some early progress such as increasing access to support services for families, and enhanced collaborative working. Progress against outcomes relating to leadership and culture were less progressed, which are longer term in nature. For Element 1, there was evidence of CSPPs consulting with children, young people and families for service delivery. However, this level of co-design was not present for broader service design.

88. CSPPs are not required to report on how they will utilise savings generated by the investment to move towards prevention, and use of savings is at the discretion of each area. It is unclear how savings made from WFWF are utilised and there is a risk that savings could be absorbed within wider council budgets.

Short-term funding is a barrier to effective planning, delivery and impact

89. Our audit work has highlighted short-term funding as a key barrier which impacts how funding is planned for and used, for example, The Promise Partnership Fund (Case study 4). Similarly, the CECYP element of the SAC had been useful in providing bespoke support for care-experienced children and young people in education, but single-year funding allocations was a barrier in how the funding could be used.¹⁵

90. The short-term nature of the WFWF has been a key barrier for CSPPs' ability to utilise the funding, leading to challenges filling temporary posts associated with the fund. Other barriers identified relate to:

- **existing infrastructure** – this varies across Scotland, including the maturity of CSPPs' information systems; and relationships with third sector partners, as the third sector were viewed as an enabler
- **capacity** – the time required to apply for funding and scale up new services while maintaining service delivery. For example, these factors were among the challenges cited for East Lothian, which received additional Element 2 funding, as part of its status as one of three **collaborative partnerships**.

Staff delivering services for care-experienced people are committed to delivering The Promise, but more is needed to enable the workforce to optimise its commitment

91. All children need loving relationships and a stable home to thrive. The workforce remains dedicated to delivering The Promise, but long-standing barriers persist ([Exhibit 8, page 44](#)), inhibiting the ability for these relationships to thrive. These challenges are not specific to the children's services workforce, for example the wider workforce across education, health and social care, and police are also under strain.

'All social workers do is write reports.'

Care-experienced young person

'[There's] no time to fit everything in. Staff are exhausted and expected to take on more. We are over-scrutinised and feel like whatever we do it's never enough. So many good practitioners are leaving the workforce due to this and the poor pay.'

Children's services workforce member

The Scottish Government and partners are developing initiatives to support the workforce, with slow progress in some areas and barriers to delivery and the expected impact

92. Plan 24–30 calls for support for the workforce to be 'available, effective, flexible and regular'. People fulfilling these roles require the right conditions to ensure they can provide a nourishing environment for babies, infants, children, young people, adults and families to build a better future.






The **collaborative partnerships** were between a Scottish Government-led transformation team and three CSPPs to drive a whole systems approach to family support at the local and national level.

The three CSPPs were East Ayrshire, Glasgow City and East Lothian, although East Ayrshire concluded early due to local capacity constraints.

Exhibit 8.

The workforce for The Promise is experiencing a range of challenges

Increasing administrative burdens, recruitment and wellbeing are among the key risks.

Competing priorities and increasingly complex roles	Recruitment and retention	Wellbeing
 <p>Over 60 pieces of legislation and competing policies</p>  <p>High volume of caseloads and greater expectations on less experienced staff</p>  <p>Time-intensive administrative work with less time for training, reflective practice and preventative work</p>  <p>45% of foster carers said at least one child they foster is either receiving or is on a waiting list for mental health or wellbeing support</p>	 <p>10% vacancy rate for main grade social workers</p> <p>2% WTE decrease in children's services social workers since 2020</p>  <p>20% of kinship carers are over age 65</p>  <p>8% decrease between 2022 and 2023 in approved foster care households</p>  <p>55% of foster carers have considered or are still considering resigning</p>	 <p>81% of chief social work officers report always working beyond contracted hours</p>  <p>13% of social workers are very likely to leave the role in the next 12 months</p>  <p>49% of foster carers experienced burnout or poor wellbeing</p>  <p>59% of children and young people social care staff feel safe at work</p>



While focus tends to be on the children's social work sector, roles across education, health, housing, justice and the wider community are integral.

Children's services workforce

93. The Scottish Government and Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) are working to support new and enhanced training and development for the social work sector across a number of initiatives. Examples include:

- **Newly Qualified Supported Year in practice programme** – launched in October 2024. The SSSC are assessing the continuous professional learning requirements associated with the programme, to feed into future evaluative work. However, the programme has placed pressures on staff delivering the support.
- **Graduate Apprenticeship in Social Work** – the Scottish Government, Skills Development Scotland and the University of West of Scotland (UWS) have developed a graduate apprenticeship in social work to provide an additional work-based learning route into the profession. Delivery of the Graduate Apprenticeship by UWS was recently approved by SSSC, subject to conditions to be finalised during the 2025/26 academic session.
- **A refreshed common core training framework** – for the integrated children and families workforce. It will focus on the core values, skills and learning to deliver family support and rights-based practice. It is expected to publish in autumn 2025.

Foster and kinship care

94. The availability of support on offer for kinship and foster carers can vary across Scotland. The Scottish Government and partners are working to improve the support available. In August 2023, the Scottish Government introduced the Scottish Recommended Allowance (SRA) for foster and kinship carers to cover costs of a child or young person, in line with commitments from the first implementation plan.

95. Discussions around the need for the SRA have been ongoing for some time, and Scotland was the last UK nation to set a national minimum allowance. Local authorities now receive this through the **General Revenue Grant**. Provision and uplifts of the SRA in line with inflation, as well as carer fees, is up to each provider. Independent research commissioned by the Scottish Government on the SRA received responses from 30 of Scotland's 32 local authorities, reporting:¹⁶

- All local authorities state they are paying foster carers the SRA, or higher, for all children; and 29 reported they are paying formal kinship carers the SRA, or higher, for all children but there was more variability for informal kinship carers.
- The recording of implementation of the SRA across local authorities' websites vary and is not always transparent. COSLA told us that many local areas were already providing the SRA prior to it being set, and so its impact may be limited.



General Revenue Grant

This is part of the grant provided to local government by Scottish Government to support their spending. The General Revenue Grant is not connected to a specific policy initiative so local authorities can decide how they want to use it.

96. The Scottish Government has other work under way to address the significant challenges in foster care. More time is needed to assess their impact. In 2024, it launched a consultation on 'The future of foster care' which aims to develop a flexible approach to foster care; and in May 2025 it launched a national recruitment campaign for foster carers.

97. Keeping brothers and sisters who need care together is a key ambition of The Promise, but challenges in implementation are often due to the availability of accommodation to support family groups. In 2023:

- 79 per cent of fostering services reported difficulties recruiting households who could support family groups
- 32 per cent of children waiting to be matched to adoptive households were part of a family group that services were trying to keep together.

The application and confidence in trauma-informed practice is mixed

98. The Promise calls on all care settings to take a relationship-based approach and underlines the importance of a **trauma-informed** workforce. In 2018, the Scottish Government commissioned NHS Education for Scotland (NES) to lead on a National Trauma Transformation Programme (NTTP), delivered in partnership with COSLA, the Improvement Service and the Resilience Learning Partnership.

99. The rollout of the NTTP is intended to be public sector wide. Nationally, there is no data to measure what proportion of the workforce is 'trauma informed', so it is unclear how well equipped the workforce is. Survey data from March 2024 provides an indication of self-assessed confidence, knowledge, skills and understanding of trauma-informed practice across a range of services from the public, private and third sector. While an improvement from the 2021 survey, responses suggest that there is still work to do with time and capacity cited as barriers:

- 54 per cent of respondents felt very confident or extremely confident in understanding the impact of psychological trauma
- 39 per cent of respondents felt confident or extremely confident in applying the principles of trauma-informed practice.¹⁷



Being **trauma-informed** means being able to recognise when someone may be affected by trauma, collaboratively adjusting how we work to take this into account and responding in a way that supports recovery, does no harm and recognises and supports people's resilience.

'While staff work hard to develop relationships with the children and young people, the limitations around time, consistency and longevity of involvement often works to reinforce the inconsistencies and mistrust they [children and young people] have developed in adults.'

Workforce member

100. The Scottish Government is also delivering specific trauma initiatives for the social work profession, such as the Trauma Responsive Social Work Services Programme (TRSWs). This is being tested across four local areas, with rollout across Scotland planned by 2026.

The third sector plays a crucial role in delivering The Promise and its value should be optimised

101. Third sector organisations often form part of the wider CSPP and is invaluable in delivering The Promise. Services provided span across early intervention and community support, foster, residential and secure care, as well as advocacy and research, but the sustainability of many bodies are at risk due to budgetary pressures and the nature of short-term funding.

102. The third sector often leads the way in delivering change and demonstrates strengths in relationship-based practice, with opportunities for other bodies to develop stronger collaboration with third sector partners. Our audit work highlighted that the third sector is also often not held in the same esteem as other sectors. The Scottish Government review of Children's Services Plans underlines this:

- 24 out of 30 recorded that the third sector had been involved as a partner in CSPP structures.
- The inclusion of the third sector in planning how resources are utilised is an area for development, as only eight out of 30 plans included information on collective resources and how these would be utilised across different services and partners.

103. Work is under way to improve the inclusion of the third sector in CSPPs more widely. In 2014, the Scottish Government commissioned Children in Scotland to lead on the **Supporting the Third Sector Project**. In January 2024, the project published a self-evaluation tool which aims to help CSPPs collaboratively assess their representation of the third sector and identify areas for improvement.

There is no strategic assessment of the resources required to deliver The Promise

104. Upon accepting the Care Review recommendations in 2020, the Scottish Government did not assess the deliverability of the commitments, including the finances, workforce and wider infrastructure required. The Oversight Board has further outlined a need for alignment between planning, delivery, and governance structures. Without an assessment of the collective resources needed to deliver The Promise, it is not possible to provide assurance that it can be delivered in the proposed timescale.



Supporting the Third Sector Project

A national project which aims to support the third sector to become more involved and influential in local and national planning and decision-making related to improving outcomes for children, young people, and families.

105. The Promise called for a significant initial investment plan to ensure there was the necessary resource in place. The Care Review report 'The Plan' stated that a budget would be developed to support the plan in 2021/22,¹⁸ but this did not take place. No assessment has been carried out since then to assess how the change in context has impacted delivery, for example to assess how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted delivery or prioritisation of actions.

Total current spending on care experience is unknown

106. The Care Review 'Follow the money' report estimated that in Scotland £942 million per year is spent on the operational costs of the 'care system', but wider costs are much higher, including the costs of universal services and the costs of associated failures.

107. The Scottish Government does not track all spend linked to care experience, with limited capacity to do so. For example, there is no routine monitoring of local authority spending, which accounted for £898 million in the operational costs recorded in the Follow the money report, and data is limited. This makes it difficult to determine the impact of spending and inform decisions on resources.

A workforce plan has not been produced

108. The Scottish Government Implementation Plan committed to producing a joint workforce plan with COSLA in 2024, but this was not developed. The Scottish Government has stated that with support from COSLA and Social Work Scotland, a National Social Work Agency as an executive agency of Scottish Government is due to be set up by spring 2026 and workforce planning for the entire social work profession will be within its remit. This ad hoc approach means that the size, definition, and needs of the workforce required to deliver The Promise across all sectors is unclear.

109. The Scottish Government is starting to assess workforce requirements. A national assessment will provide a foundation for workforce assessments at a local level. However, workforce planning varies across councils. This means that the application of a national workforce strategy will be challenging:

- The Accounts Commission's [Best Value Thematic work in 2023/24](#) on workforce innovation outlined the need for improved workforce planning, including improvements to ensure that councils are fully aligning workforce plans with council priorities.
- The Improvement Service 2024 survey of council's workforce identified variability across councils:
 - 69 per cent had workforce plans at council wide and service level
 - 13 per cent only had service level plans
 - 22 per cent were only at local authority level.¹⁹

Endnotes

- 1** The Promise Scotland is a limited company, established by Scottish ministers and funded by the Scottish Government.
- 2** Review of Scotland's Children's Services Plans (2023–2026): Improving outcomes for children, young people and families, Scottish Government, February 2025.
- 3** Social care: Independent Review of Inspection, Scrutiny and Regulation, Scottish Government, September 2023.
- 4** Current laws around the 'care system', The Promise Scotland, 2024.
- 5** Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, Financial Memorandum, June 2025.
- 6** Resetting public services: Governance and accountability to keep the promise, The Promise Scotland, September 2024.
- 7** Education, Children and Young People Committee, The Promise – Voice online session, March 2025.
- 8** Children's services reform research: Scotland's children's services landscape: The views and experiences of the children's services workforce, CELCIS, November 2023; Education, Children, and Young People Committee and Who Cares? Scotland – informal evidence session, March 2024; Care Inspectorate, Joint inspections of services for children and young people at risk of harm. Review of findings from the joint inspection programme 2021–2025, August 2025.
- 9** The Promise: Plan 21–24 Evaluation Report by The Diffley Partnership, October 2024.
- 10** 2019 referenced as a baseline year to remove the impact of the pandemic on the trend, as the number of looked after children increased in 2020 compared with 2019. Using 2020 as a baseline shows an 18 per cent fall.
- 11** Looked After Children Data Strategy 2015, Scottish Government, 2015.
- 12** Data Linkage: What is it and what can it tell us about children's lives and experience, CELCIS, November 2024.
- 13** Scoping and delivering a national lifelong advocacy service for care-experienced children, adults and families, The Promise Scotland, 2023.
- 14** Cross border thematic review, Care Inspectorate, July 2024; Transitions for care-experienced young people – a thematic review, Care Inspectorate, November 2024.
- 15** Attainment Scotland fund evaluation: Implementation and impact report 2024, Scottish Government, December 2024.
- 16** Foster and kinship carers – Scottish Recommended Allowance: Implementation review, Scottish Government, July 2025.
- 17** National Trauma Training Programme Survey, Scottish Government, September 2024.
- 18** Independent Care Review, The Plan, February 2020.
- 19** Scotland's Local Government Workforce Report 2024, Society of Personal Development Scotland, Improvement Service, SOLACE, 2024.

Appendix

Thematic enablers and barriers to delivering The Promise

	Enablers	Barriers
 Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly defined roles and plans for sectors and organisations Existence and effective use of 'champions boards' or similar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of direction and/or input from some sectors Non-meaningful engagement
 Policy and legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Promise integrated across strategy locally and nationally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several competing policy demands Numerous legislative frameworks
 Establishment of new entities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports The Promise to remain high on the agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of clarity around key roles reduces trust and impact
 Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexibility of new funds to use beyond current year Sharing of learning Robust evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short-term nature of funding Various disparate funding sources Challenge in measuring prevention Absence of strategic assessment of total current / future funding
 Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value of third sector and relationship-based practice Dedication of workforce 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time intensive administrative tasks impact time available for training Recruitment and retention No clear definition of workforce or assessment Wellbeing and burnout
 Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New and improved data sets providing insights into key issues Using data to understand population needs and measure impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time for data infrastructure to embed Data sharing and gaps Analytical capacity and skills

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Delivering The Promise



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