

Education and Gaelic Committee
Tuesday 15 September 2026
3rd Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Pre-budget scrutiny 2027-28

Introduction

1. The Committee will focus its pre-budget scrutiny 2027-28 on the following two themes:
 - Progress toward children's care system reform
 - class contact time within school education

Committee meeting

2. At this meeting the Committee will take evidence on the first theme from:
 - Fraser McKinlay, Chief Executive, The Promise Scotland
 - Kay McKerrell, Chief Executive, Who Cares? Scotland
 - Ben Farrugia, Director, Social Work Scotland

Supporting information

3. SPICe have provided a background briefing in relation to Scotland's public finances, public service reform and information on steps taken to reform the children's care system which is attached at **Annexe A**. Written submissions from The Promise Scotland, Who Cares? Scotland and Social Work Scotland and are attached at **Annexe B**.

Next steps

4. The Committee will continue to take evidence on its pre-budget scrutiny at its next meeting on 22 September 2026.

Clerk to the Committee
September 2026

Annexe A



Pre-budget scrutiny 2027-28: progress toward children's care system reform

The Committee is holding the first in a series of pre-budget scrutiny sessions. Today's session is the first of two looking at progress toward children's care system reform. This briefing provides context in relation to Scotland's public finances, public service reform and information on steps taken to reform the children's care system.

Pre-budget context

The upcoming 2027-28 Scottish Budget will be introduced at a time of challenge for public finances. Toward the end of Session 6, the Scottish Government began setting out the first steps to address these challenges. On 19 June 2025 the Scottish Government published [its Public Service Reform Strategy](#). This set out the Government's commitments to a public service system that is efficient, joined up, prioritises prevention, and is fiscally sustainable. Development and oversight of the strategy will be led by the Government's [Public Service Reform Directorate](#).

The [Fiscal Sustainability Delivery Plan](#), also published in June 2025, said that the Government expects to make savings through the following actions:

- Reducing the devolved public sector workforce – expected savings of £0.1 billion to £0.7 billion per annum over five years.
- Wider public sector efficiencies and productivity, reform, and revenue raising, with savings growing from £0.6 billion to £1.5 billion per annum over 5 years.
- “Increasing public value” through prioritisation of budgets to maximise outcomes in line with the Scottish Government's priorities.

The [Scottish Spending Review](#) (SSR) was published in January this year, setting out indicative spending plans up to 2028-29 for resource and up to 2029-30 for capital spending. **Table 1** is taken from the Education and Skills chapter of the SSR. It sets out resource and capital funding, as well as accounting for Financial Transactions.

Table 1: Spending Plans (Level 2) (£m)

Level 2	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29
Learning	530.6	554.6	554.8
Education Reform	84.7	84.9	84.7
Education Scotland	17.3	17.5	17.3
Children and Families	345.8	371.4	373.2
Higher Education and Student Support	313.1	308.2	308.1
Scottish Funding Council	2,010.60	2,004.70	2,000.60
Lifelong Learning and Skills	254	253.2	253.5
Total Education & Skills	3,556.10	3,594.50	3,592.10

of which

Total Fiscal Resource	3,102.40	3,127.20	3,125.20
<i>of which Programme Costs</i>	<i>3,056.60</i>	<i>3,081.90</i>	<i>3,080.80</i>
<i>of which Operating Costs</i>	<i>45.8</i>	<i>45.3</i>	<i>44.4</i>
Capital	465.2	477.9	477.4
Financial Transactions (FTs)	-11.5	-10.6	-10.5

Source: [Scottish Spending Review](#) 2026

The review also set out how portfolio efficiency savings are to be achieved, providing further detail about the planned £1.5 billion in public sector efficiencies and reforms.

Table 2 sets out the SSR savings plan for the Education and Skills portfolio. It is important to note that much of education and children's care services are delivered by organisations not directly in the scope of the funding in the Education and Skills portfolio - for example, by local government. A [February 2026 report from the Scottish Fiscal Commission](#) compared resource spending between 2025-26 (the year before the period covered by the spending review) and plans for 2028-29. It found local government is the area with the "largest planned reduction in real terms day-to-day spending", with spending expected to fall by £472 million in real terms over that period.

Table 2: Education & Skills Portfolio Efficiency and Reform Plan (£m)

	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29
Efficiencies and Productivity,	19.7	10.6	12.8
<i>of which:</i>			
<i>Workforce Savings</i>	<i>18.4</i>	<i>7.4</i>	<i>9.5</i>
<i>Shared Services and Digital Improvements</i>	<i>1.3</i>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>3.3</i>

The [Programme for Government](#) (PfG) was announced in Parliament on Tuesday 1 September 2026, setting out the policy direction for the next five years.

The PfG identifies eradicating child poverty as one of four overarching priorities. The four overarching priorities sit within the wider programme of public service reform and efficiency savings outlined above. The PfG highlights the role of the Scottish Government Prevention Unit, set up in June this year, to “focus spending on preventative actions”. Improved family support from pre-birth onwards is mentioned as an area in which work is already taking place. The PfG also states that a Scottish Prevention Investment Framework will be developed to:

“...provide a consistent approach to identifying, assessing and prioritising investment in prevention and early intervention, helping direct resources towards actions that improve outcomes for people and reduce future demand on public services.” – [PfG 2026-2031](#)

The PfG also commits to engaging with local government over the next three months to discuss the future of local governance in Scotland. A “shared direction for reform” is planned by the end of 2026, with early changes reflected in the first Budget of Parliament. As local authorities have duties and responsibilities around social work, there may be impacts depending on how the reforms progress.

The [Scottish Fiscal Commission \(SFC\)’s August 2026 Fiscal Update](#) identified challenges for the Scottish Government in balancing future budgets, calling for the Scottish Government to:

“...update and be transparent on the progress made towards its planned efficiency savings to identify any new or changing pressures in the 2026-27 and 2027-28 Budgets.” – [SFC Fiscal Update, August 2026](#)

The 2027-28 Budget Bill is expected to be introduced by the Scottish Government on [Thursday 3 December 2026](#).

The Independent Care Review and care system reform

The children's care system in Scotland is going through a period of reform. This began with the [Independent Care Review](#), commissioned in 2017. The review findings, set out in [The Promise](#), were published in 2020 and accepted by the Scottish Government.

The Independent Care Review was commissioned in February 2017 to carry out a 'root and branch review' of the children's care system. A key purpose of the review was to look at how Scotland might address the inequality of outcomes care experienced people face in many areas of their lives, such as health and education. People with experience of the care system represented half of the review group's co-chairs and working group members. During the lifetime of the review, the views of over 5,500 care experienced children and adults, as well as parents, carers and the care workforce, were listened to.

The review findings were [published in February 2020](#). The main findings were set

out in The Promise. The Promise gives a vision for a Scotland where, by 2030, all children grow up loved, safe and respected with effective support reducing the need for children to go into care. This vision is built on five foundations:

- **Voice:** Children must be listened to and involved in decisions about their care.
- **Family:** Children feel loved and safe in their families and families are given the support they need.
- **Care:** Children must not be separated from their brothers and sisters wherever possible.
- **People:** Care experienced children must be supported to develop relationships.
- **Scaffolding:** Children, families and the workforce must be supported by an accountable system that provides help and support when required.

Steps following review

The Scottish Government [accepted the recommendations of the review in February 2020](#). Following publication of the recommendations:

- [The Promise Scotland](#) was set up by Ministers as an independent organisation to oversee change. Its goal is to enable Scotland to 'keep the promise' to care experienced children and young people by 2030.
- Independent Review chair Fiona Duncan was appointed to the role of Independent Strategic Advisor. This role currently includes chairing The Promise Scotland and providing strategic advice to civil servants, though the role is independent from the Scottish Government.
- [The Oversight Board](#) was set up to review progress and has so far [published three progress reports](#). Further information on these can be found under the 'Oversight Board progress reports' below. A fourth report is due to be published on 29 September 2026.

The Promise Scotland does not hold statutory powers or responsibilities; its role is to oversee, drive and support change. It works with organisations and individuals all over Scotland to help others deliver change for care experienced children and young people. The Promise Scotland publishes plans setting out steps toward reform. The latest of these is [Plan 24-30](#). The [Promise Scotland's Story of Progress](#) sets out how work toward Plan 24-30 is progressing. This is organised into four parts: [Experience of the care community](#); [Organisational Progress](#); [National Progress](#) and [What Matters](#). Under each part there are several different headings and an overview of progress is not available.

The Scottish Government published an [implementation plan in 2022](#), followed by an [update in 2024](#). The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic Màiri McAllan MSP [told this Committee at its 8 September meeting](#) that she was "very

keen” for the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise Siobhian Brown MSP to set out an updated implementation plan “as soon as we can”.

Steps taken towards implementing the recommendations of the Independent Care Review in the years following its publication include:

- [Legislation to help siblings in care stay together](#) came into force in July 2021. This is set out in the Children (Scotland) Act 2020.
- The [2021-22 PfG](#) committed to a [Whole Family Wellbeing Fund](#). Further information on this is available in the ‘Whole Family Support’ section of this briefing.
- The Hearings System Working Group (HSWG) facilitated by The Promise Scotland [published its report setting out recommendations for the redesign of the children’s hearings system](#).
- [The Scottish Recommended Rate](#) of allowance for foster and kinship carers was introduced. Local authorities are at various stages of implementing this.
- The Scottish Government introduced the [Care Leaver Payment](#) from April 2026 - a one-off payment of £2,000 for those leaving care.
- The [Children \(Care and Justice\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#) raised the age of referral to the Children’s Hearings System from 16 to 18 and ended the placement of 16- and 17-year-olds in young offenders’ institutions.
- The [Children \(Care, Care Experience and Services Planning\) Act 2026](#) was passed at the end of Session 6. Once enacted, this will extend eligibility for aftercare support for young people leaving care to those leaving prior to their 16th birthday, extend corporate parenting duties, require Independent Fostering Agencies to become charities, give Scottish Ministers powers to make regulations requiring non-local authority residential care providers to provide financial and operational information, make various changes to the children’s hearings system and add integration joint boards to the list of bodies required to plan children’s services.

Oversight Board progress reports

The Oversight Board reviews progress toward implementing The Promise and has published progress reports monitoring change. [Report One](#) was published in May 2022. [Report Two](#) was published in June 2023, and it concluded that delivering Plan 21-24 commitments would be challenging due to “worsening circumstances for many and the current pace of change”.

[Report Three](#) was published in February 2025 and found “issues impacting the workforce and whole family support have meant the promise is not halfway to being kept”, and some people, organisations and systems “are not yet doing enough”. The report concluded that The Promise can still be kept, given progress so far and continuing commitments made.

The report found people cannot access family support when needed, due to issues including housing barriers and gaps in data to help understand what matters to children and families. Short-term funding cycles for whole family support projects were also highlighted.

Recruitment and retention issues facing the workforce, along with falling foster care numbers, were highlighted as ongoing challenges.

The development of a Community of Practice for Siblings and the introduction of a Scottish Rate of Allowance (SRA) for kinship and foster carers were among examples highlighted as positive.

The Oversight Board set out recommendations calling for:

- Corporate parents (as set out in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014) to detail in their corporate parenting plans how they will keep the promise.
- The development of a more detailed plan for progress from 2024-2030, led by Independent Strategic Advisor Fiona Duncan.
- Move toward long-term funding for public services, led by the Scottish Government, with the Independent Strategic Advisor developing a strategic approach to help inform decisions about investment and disinvestment.
- The Scottish Government and COSLA to produce the Joint Workforce Improvement Plan “as a matter of urgency”. Scottish Government officials mentioned the development of this plan at a [March 2025 meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee](#), but it is unclear what progress has been made to date.
- Ways of working to be reviewed, with duplicated and wasted effort removed.

Then-Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise Natalie Don [gave a Parliamentary Statement following the publication of the third report](#), however a further update on progress toward the recommendations has not been given as far as SPICe is aware. The Oversight Board’s fourth report is due to be published on 29 September 2026.

Audit Scotland report: Promise progress

Audit Scotland published the report [Improving Care Experience: Delivering The Promise](#) on 8 October 2025. The report looked at governance and accountability arrangements, measuring and reporting of progress and trends in spending and resourcing. A timeline of key events relating to The Promise can be [found on page 10 of the report](#).

The report highlighted issues with planning for reforms, stating the Scottish Government and COSLA did not “give sufficient thought” to how it would be delivered and resourced. As a result, public bodies were not given a strong foundation to work from and progress has been slow.

It also found The Promise Scotland's Plan 21-24 and Plan 24-30 have not provided clarity needed for change, and there has not been a "consistent and shared understanding" of what delivery of The Promise would look like and how it would be achieved.

A lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities of The Promise Scotland, The Oversight Board and an Independent Strategic Advisor was also highlighted. Insufficient data meant that the impact of change could not be easily measured and funding was difficult to quantify and track.

Audit Scotland also said a complex policy and legislative environment, along with complex governance arrangements, meant "collective responsibility and accountability is challenging and actions to address this have been insufficient". In relation to funding, Audit Scotland found this was 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".

Audit Scotland concluded it was unclear how the £500m pledge figure for the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund was initially arrived at, and at the time of the report only £148m had been allocated. However, the report also found: "There are strong arrangements in place to evaluate the fund and to share positive learning."

The report made recommendations to be addressed within the following year. These were:

- **In the next six months (by April 2026), the Scottish Government and COSLA, with support from The Promise Scotland,** should work to identify where resources need to be targeted, setting out which actions will be delivered and how. Roles and responsibilities for overseeing and monitoring progress at national level should also be clarified. Work to streamline the remit and status of governance groups and to coordinate and align various data projects underway and align this with the story of overall progress.
- **In the next six months the Scottish Government should** evaluate the "appropriateness and adequacy" of the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund. It should also provide clearer reporting on spending on care experience and support to enable effective focus of funding.
- **In the next six months the Scottish Government should work with the Independent Strategic Advisor (ISA)** to align strategies and approach and establish clarity as to how the Scottish Government will respond to recommendations made by the ISA.
- **In the next 12 months (by October 2026) bodies within Children's Services Planning Partnerships should** set out in local plans how the views of care experienced people will be sought, and priority areas for investment to deliver The Promise. Plan 24-30 Route Maps should also be used to ensure clarity of roles and improve accountability.

Following the report, The Promise Scotland, the Independent Strategic Advisor on

the Promise, Scottish Government, COSLA and SOLACE [issued a joint statement in response](#), stating the recommendations would be reviewed and responded to, and the organisations remained “steadfastly committed to working in partnership to keep the promise”.

In [evidence to the Session 6 Public Audit Committee](#), Scottish Government Director-General Education and Justice Neil Rennick said the government accepted the report recommendations, and Chief Executive of The Promise Scotland Fraser McKinlay said it was intended that the actions set out in the Audit Scotland report would be taken. Ahead of the meeting, Independent Strategic Advisor Fiona Duncan [provided a submission to the Committee](#), setting out concerns about the report. [The Public Audit Committee wrote to the Education, Children and Young People Committee](#) in March 2026 recommending close monitoring of progress toward the recommendations and recognising the need to address the report’s resourcing recommendations in order to deliver The Promise.

The [Promise Scotland published updates on areas highlighted in the Audit Scotland report](#), setting out planned actions for the coming months. This includes the development of a data map, an information sharing project, information about updates to Plan 24-30, and clarity around roles and protocols. Further information is [available on The Promise Scotland website](#).

Whole Family Support

Among the recommendations of the Independent Care Review was a call for intensive family support. The review said support should be community based, responsive and timely, flexible, and underpinned by Children’s Rights.

During Session 6 of Parliament, the Scottish Government committed to a [Whole Family Wellbeing Fund](#) (WFWF) to offer support to families at an early stage, rather than at crisis point. The [2021-22 PfG](#) stated this fund was to total £500m over Session 6, and that from 2030, at least 5% of community-based health and social care spend should be focused on preventative measures. However, WFWF [budget allocations by the end of Session 6 totalled just under £200m](#).

[Analysis of year 3 \(2024 to 2025\) of the WFWF found](#) that local partnerships were making progress in the development of family centred, preventative support services, though challenges around workforce, funding sustainability and rising demand were highlighted.

Continuation of the WFWF is not mentioned in the 2026-2031 PfG, though there is a commitment to provide a £20m Whole Family Support Third Sector Delivery Fund, and to build on existing work to “progress an integrated Whole Family Support programme”. This will provide multi-year funding to organisations providing support. The [Public Service Reform Directorate](#) of the Scottish Government lists Whole Family Support as an area it leads on. The PfG states that the newly created Prevention Unit, set up to [lead on the ‘prevention pillar’ of the Public Service Reform Strategy](#), will also have a role in strengthening support for families.

In evidence to this Committee on 8 September 2026, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic described family support centres as “physical and

tangible manifestation of whole family support in the community”. She added:

“The spend that has been invested to date was helpful and useful, but we understand that we need to go further. I am working with Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing, on pulling budgets together and working across Government on budgets more than ever before to support whole family support. Siobhian Brown [Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise] and I will drive all that work in respect of the objectives of the Promise.” – [Official Report, 8/09/26](#)

Care system: carers and workforce

Pressures on the social work system were highlighted during Session 6, and the [Education, Children and Young People Committee heard evidence](#) on workforce issues in December 2024.

In June this year, Scotland’s 32 Chief Social Work Officers [issued a joint statement highlighting](#) “an acute shortage of suitable homes and carers for children who are unable to remain in the care of their family”. The statement went on to say:

“The capacity of the care system is saturated, and it is only thanks to the incredible efforts of Scotland’s carers, social work staff and other professionals that we have been able to prevent the system collapsing entirely.” – [Joint statement, June 2026](#)

[Responding to a question in Parliament](#) on 3 September, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise Siobhian Brown MSP said a multi-agency roundtable was held in August to identify local and national level actions.

The Scottish Government set up the [National Social Work Agency](#) (NSWA) earlier this year to support the social work profession and coordinate national policy. The PfG 2026-2031 commits to:

“...work with NSWA and partners, including local government, to ensure a sustainable social work workforce and the best support for them to help deliver on our shared priorities.” – [PfG 2026-2031](#)

Aftercare

The [Children \(Care, Care Experience and Services Planning\) Act 2026](#) contains provisions that, once implemented, will extend eligibility for assessment for aftercare support to young people leaving care to those leaving prior to their 16th birthday. The [Financial Memorandum \(FM\) accompanying the Bill](#) estimated that 484 young people would be supported in 2027-28, rising to 1,144 in 2028-29 and 1,872 in 2029-30. The summary costs to local authorities of providing aftercare support are estimated to be £2,511,000 in 2027-28, £4,954,000 in 2028-29 and £7,435,000 in 2029-30.

During the Education, Children and Young People Committee’s scrutiny of the Bill, [concerns were raised that the Bill’s Financial Memorandum did not provide sufficient](#)

[resources for the extension of aftercare support](#). In a [supplementary Financial Memorandum prior to Stage 3](#), the Scottish Government stated that updated data from local authorities and COSLA along with updated modelling on eligibility found:

“... an increase to the additional costs associated with extending Aftercare as introduced at Stage 1 are projected to be between £5 million higher in year 1 (2027-28) to £23 million in year 3 (2029-30) than previously estimated.” -
Supplementary Financial Memorandum, 9 March 2026

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Date: 09/09/2026

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Annexe B

Education and Gaelic Committee pre-budget scrutiny

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

Introduction

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

Background

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

With four years remaining until 2030, the urgent challenge now is to build on the widespread and genuine commitment to reform across Scotland and deliver consistent, sustainable change in the lives of children, families, and care experienced adults across the entirety of the promise made. For the purposes of the Committee's pre-budget scrutiny, The Promise Scotland has focused on the three specific areas referenced in the invitation for written and oral evidence, highlighting:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Significant reforms are already underway across [the children's legislative review](#).

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

2. Funding, roles, and responsibilities for delivering reform

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

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

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

Responsibility for making changes - and overcoming the systemic barriers that get in the way - sits with each of these duty bearers in different ways, including the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government, local authorities, the wider public sector and the voluntary sector.

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

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

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

Plan 24-30 provides an important organising framework for the work of change, setting out the outcomes that need to be delivered by 2030. The focus is now on

making the route maps increasingly practical: identifying the changes required, the organisations responsible, the dependencies between reforms, the resources required, and the measures that will demonstrate whether implementation is working.

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

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

In terms of funding, The Independent Care Review's [follow the money](#) work demonstrated that Scotland spends approximately £942 million each year in relation to the 'care system'. The analysis also estimated approximately £875 million each year in costs associated with adjacent systems, alongside around £732 million in lost potential revenue through the under-representation of care experienced adults in well-paid employment. The Audit Scotland report identified that, in 2023/24, local authorities alone reported that they spent £1.2 billion on services related to care experience.

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

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

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

3. Funding for aftercare provisions and preparations for expansion

The Independent Care Review heard from care experienced young people and adults about the 'cliff edges' of care and the lack of support they felt when their legal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

them, by when and how they will deliver.

The aim should not be to create an additional, isolated funding stream for aftercare while the wider system continues to generate avoidable demand. The long-term objective must be to ensure that children and families receive the right support earlier, that young people leaving care have stable relationships and support, and that public services work together around their needs.

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

What this means for the 2026-27 budget and beyond

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

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

From crisis to prevention.

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

From short-term projects to sustainable provision.

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

From organisational budgets to whole-system value.

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

From policy commitments to implementation capacity.

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

From measuring activity to measuring impact.

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

By 2030, Scotland should have moved towards a system in which public services

work as a coherent whole around children, families and communities. This will require difficult choices. It may require disinvestment from approaches that are no longer delivering sufficient value to release resources for prevention and earlier support. The budget process can either enable these changes or make them harder. It should be used deliberately as a lever for reform.

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



**WHO
CARES?**
SCOTLAND

EQUALITY | RESPECT | LOVE



Education and Gaelic Committee

Submission for pre-budget scrutiny session on the Promise.

15 September | 9.30am | Scottish Parliament

Who We Are

Who Cares? Scotland is Scotland's only national independent membership organisation for Care Experienced people, with around 2000 members. Our mission is to secure a lifetime of equality, respect, and love for Care Experienced people in Scotland.

By 'Care Experienced people', we mean anyone who is currently in care or has been for any length of time regardless of their age. This care may have been provided in many different settings, such as:

- Kinship Care – Living with a relative who is not your mum or dad. This includes both formal and informal.
- Looked After at Home – With the help of social work.
- Residential Care – Living in a residential home or school.
- Foster Care – Living with foster carers, including Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children.
- Secure Care – Living in a secure accommodation.
- Adoption – Living with adoptive parents.

At the heart of Who Cares? Scotland's work is the rights of Care Experienced people, and the power of their voices to bring about positive change. We provide individual, relationship-based independent advocacy, and a range of participation and connection opportunities for Care Experienced people across Scotland.

Every year, our advocacy workers support around 1,600 people with around 6,000 individual advocacy issues across all 32 Local Authorities in Scotland. As we take a human rights-based approach to our work, around 10,000 individual rights are logged every year in supporting these issues. We bring Care Experienced people together to connect and shape the world around them. Around 700 unique individuals come together every year to take part in around 800 of our activities across Scotland.

We work alongside Corporate Parents and various communities to broaden understanding and challenge stigma faced by Care Experienced people. We work with policy makers, leaders, and elected representatives locally and nationally to shape legislation, policy and practice. We do this collaboratively to build on the aspirations of The Promise and to secure positive change.

Reports for the Committee's Attention:

Who Cares? Scotland's response to Programme for Government 2026-31, September 2026

- Welcomes PfG recommitment to keeping the Promise by 2030 and developing an updated implementation strategy this year.
- Highlights the five asks in our Connected by Care manifesto, informed by Care Experienced people.
 - **Ensure the Promise is kept in full and fully resourced, with processes to track its delivery up to and beyond 2030.**
 - The most recent Oversight Board report in 2025 found that “some people, some organisations and some systems are not yet doing enough, and this risks the country as a whole failing.”
 - **Keep Care Experienced people's voice at the heart of the Promise, implementing the statutory right to independent, relationship-based, lifelong and accessible advocacy for all Care Experienced people who need it.**
 - We celebrate the right to independent advocacy being included in the CCESP Bill, and are keen to see successful resourcing and implementation to realise these rights.
 - **Introduce the Scottish Human Rights Bill which includes Care Experienced people within the Equality section.**
 - We believe the law must recognise Care Experienced people as a group of rights holders who face barriers to enjoying their rights across their lifetime. It would also provide a clearer legal route to challenge discrimination and hold public bodies to account when Care Experience creates barriers to accessing rights.
 - **Our members voted mental health and education as areas requiring more focus.**

- o Our 2022 mental health report '[Tend Our Light](#)' found that 100% of participants felt that their care experience had negatively impacted their mental health and 70% had been unable to access mental health support. Two years later, the impact of care experience on loneliness was also highlighted by participants who informed our [2024 Belonging and Connection issue paper](#). 75% of respondents reported struggling with loneliness, and around half felt that their time in care had negatively impacted on their sense of belonging and connection. We need a more proactive effort to change these outcomes and experiences.
- o We urge the Scottish Government to commit to the national roll-out of the Communities that Care Whole School Approach across Scotland, ensuring every school has the knowledge and culture to support Care Experienced children and young people to achieve their aspirations.
- o **We urge the Scottish Government to be bolder and braver in keeping the Promise to Care Experienced people. We want to see MSPs from every party work together across the chamber to ensure that policy and public investment deliver real change for those who need it most.**

'Exclusion Labelled as Support' Education Report, June 2025.

- **Barriers leave Care Experienced children struggling to access right to education**, says report published by CYPCS, written by Who Cares? Scotland.
- For Care Experienced people, receiving a good education can be a route to overcome socioeconomic barriers and enable them to pursue their goals and aspirations. Yet, [the most recent statistics](#) show that educational outcomes for Care Experienced children continue to be much lower than average including on attendance, school leaving age and SCQF level 5 attainment.
- Part-time timetables are being used to informally exclude Care Experienced students from their right to education, with some receiving as little as one hour a week of education.
- Care Experienced students described the difficulties in receiving the support they required in schools.
- We call for the Promise's recommendation for formal and informal exclusions to be banned for Care Experienced students to be upheld.
- We urge the Scottish Government to commit to the national roll-out of the Communities that Care Whole School Approach across Scotland, ensuring every school has the knowledge and culture to support Care Experienced children and young people to achieve their aspirations.

The Promise Scotland's Plan 24-30, June 2024

- 25 route maps intended to provide a detailed plan over several years of what must be delivered, by who, when and how.
- Updated Dec 2025 to translate all actions in the Promise into 'clear, measurable outcomes with timebound milestones', following [Audit Scotland report](#).
- **Many route maps have no actions planned beyond 2027, and many actions summarise what has been done instead of what should be happening.**
- **Has not been updated to reflect work needed following CCESP Act.**

Who Cares? Scotland's FOI Research Report on Scotland's Progress to Keep the Promise, February 2024.

- Compiled by Freedom of Information requests to all 32 local authorities.
- Warned about the **lack of progress, data gaps, and dilution in aims** on the fourth anniversary of the Promise.
- Unveiled **positive progress on areas such as keeping brothers and sisters together, addressing stigma in the care system and the work underway to reshape the youth justice system.**
- However, it highlighted that much more work needs to be done within all the priority areas. With **key concerns on the lack of progress in education, restraint and the monetisation of care.**

Care Experienced people's views on the Promise, May 2024.

- Views on the Promise from 37 Care Experienced people, shared in participatory sessions with the Education, Children and Young People Committee in 2024.
- Key message that **Care Experienced people did not feel enough had changed since the Promise was made, and had little confidence in the Promise being fully achieved.**
- They described the gaps between what was promised and what they had experienced in practice: inadequate resources, unstable relationships with professionals and a high turnover of social workers, issues with education and stigma, poor communication, disrupted relationships with brothers and sisters, lack of suitable support after leaving care and inappropriate use of secure care and restraint.

Inquiry into Progress Towards Care System Reform and Aftercare Provision

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

15th September 2026

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Progress towards realising the Promise

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

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

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

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

Are people accessing the care and support they need?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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