

Education and Gaelic Committee
Tuesday 29 September 2026
5th 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 from two panels. The first panel will focus on the second theme and the Committee will hear from:
 - Andrea Bradley, General Secretary, EIS;
 - Tara Lillis, Policy Official (Scotland), NASUWT;
 - David Barnett, General Secretary, School Leaders Scotland.
3. The second panel will focus on the first theme and the Committee will hear from:
 - Claire Burns, Director, CELCIS;
 - Alison Gordon, Member, Children's Services Planning Strategic Leads Network;
 - Simon Cameron, Chief Officer – Children and Young People Team, COSLA;
 - Joanna Macdonald, Chief Executive, National Social Work Agency;
 - David Anderson, Chair, The Oversight Board for The Promise.

Supporting information

4. SPICe has provided background briefings on both pre-budget scrutiny themes. The briefing for the first theme can be found in the paper for the meeting on [15 September 2026](#) and the briefing for the second theme can be found in the paper for the meeting on [22 September 2026](#). Written submissions from the witnesses are attached at **Annexe A**.

Next steps

5. The Committee will continue to take evidence on its pre-budget scrutiny on both themes from the Scottish Government at its next meeting on 6 October 2026.

Clerk to the Committee
September 2026

Annexe A

Written submission from Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)

Introduction

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teaching union, representing nearly 65,000 teachers and lecturers at all grades and in all sectors of Scottish education, welcomes this opportunity to provide written evidence to the Education and Gaelic Committee in relation to reducing teachers' weekly class contact time.

Alongside other recognised teaching trade unions the EIS is represented and has the majority of seats on the SNCT Teachers' Panel, which makes up the teachers' side of the tripartite Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT)- the national collective bargaining forum for teachers working in the public sector in Scotland.

The National Scheme of Salaries and Conditions of Service for Teachers and Associated Professionals is negotiated and agreed at the SNCT, with agreed conditions of service being set out in the SNCT Handbook. As well as national conditions of service, there are a number of designated devolved matters that are negotiated locally between local councils and teaching unions. These negotiations take place at Local Negotiating Committees for Teachers. The SNCT Handbook also makes clear a tripartite commitment across teaching unions, COSLA and the Scottish Government to the following:

- valuing the contribution of all who work within Scottish education;
- promoting equality and diversity within Scottish education and its communities;
- challenging discrimination;
- promoting core values of social justice, equality and diversity;
- integrating equality and diversity into all its activities; and
- reviewing and monitoring its procedures, agreements and policies to ensure legal compliance.

Furthermore, the SNCT has a stated commitment to upholding the principles of collegiality and professionalism embedded in *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* agreement.

The weekly class contact time for teachers forms a national condition of service and is outlined in Part 2, Section 3 of the SNCT Handbook. Currently and before the Joint SNCT Agreement on reducing weekly class contact time takes effect, the conditions of service outlined in the SNCT Handbook divide the 35-hour working week into three separate components:

- A maximum of 22.5 hours of class contact.
- A minimum of one third of a teachers' class contact time being protected for "preparation and correction".

- Five hours per week for collective activity (agreed collegiately at school level).

The [SNCT Working Time Code of Practice](#) already acknowledges, in the national criteria, the importance of preparation and correction as key elements of the work of teaching professionals:

“For most teachers, preparation and correction will be the most time consuming activities outwith class contact time. This requires to be reflected in the way that a teacher’s working time is deployed”.¹

Preparation and correction cover a wide range of activities and with the increasingly diverse profile of learners in our schools, the increased focus on meeting individual learners’ needs and inclusive pedagogy, these activities consume even more time.

Campaigning for the delivery of quality learning and teaching and addressing the unsustainable, unfair and unhealthy levels of workload being endured by teachers in Scotland’s schools have been longstanding goals of the EIS and form central aspects of the EIS’s Stand Up for Quality Education campaign.

As a result of EIS campaigning to bring Scottish teachers’ conditions of service more closely in line with OECD counterparts by reducing class sizes to a maximum of 20 and teacher class contact time to a maximum of 20 hours per week, the SNP’s 2021 election manifesto contained a commitment to reduce the weekly class contact time of teachers to 21 hours as a step forward in reducing teacher workload. This commitment came alongside a pledge to recruit 3,500 additional teachers, in recognition that the reduction would require increased numbers of teachers in schools across Scotland, and taking account of the overall reduction in teacher numbers since 2007.

The Educational Rationale for Reducing Class Contact Time

Scotland’s teachers, as evidenced in the OECD’s 2021 review of the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence, are contracted to deliver one of the highest rates of class contact across OECD countries. Highlighting that teachers in Scotland are curriculum leaders, the review points to the relatively high level of contact time and cites the ‘obvious tension’ between these levels and delivery of this role. By way of response, it recommended *“the provision of additional dedicated and ring-fenced time for all teachers, for curriculum planning, for monitoring of student achievement and in support of moderation of assessment outcomes”*.

The delivery of quality education goes beyond what takes place in the classroom. In order to ensure the best possible outcomes for young people, teachers must plan and prepare teaching, learning and assessment activities. In practice this covers a wide range of activities from sourcing appropriate resources, planning differentiated lessons, reflecting on learners’ engagement and outcomes, assessing progress and providing individualised feedback, using a variety of different tools. Such work is undertaken by Scotland’s teachers in the non-directed time for “preparation and correction” in Part 2, Section 3 of the SNCT Handbook.

With rising levels and complexity of need in schools across Scotland, and the systemic under-resourcing of Additional Support Needs (ASN) provision, the importance of reduced class contact time being devoted to the planning and preparation of learning, teaching and assessment is self-evident. In 2025, 43% of the school population were identified as having an identified additional support need. Critically, this rise in demand has not been reflected in resourcing. The EIS has long raised concerns over dramatically declining numbers of specialist staff and unsustainably large class sizes, as well as a lack of access to allied support professionals at the point of need, leaving significant gaps which are being filled by class teachers.

Inclusive education is dependent on adequate resourcing to meet the needs of all pupils but also crucially on teachers having sufficient time to plan for differentiated lessons; to implement inclusive pedagogy and support strategies; to reflect; to assess and evaluate progress on a continuing basis; to engage with parents and partner agencies in line with GIRFEC principles. Additionally, teachers are expected to complete ever-increasing levels of paperwork, much of which is superfluous to the real business of learning and teaching, but which is demanded for accountability reasons.

Independent research, commissioned by the EIS in 2024, made clear that Scotland's teachers were spending, on average, over 11 additional hours beyond their contracted 35 hour working week each week carrying out the tasks that should be undertaken in time for "preparation and correction".

The evidence drawn from this independent research also set out, in clear terms, the significant numbers of teachers reporting the negative impact unsustainable workload on their physical health, mental wellbeing and personal lives. OECD research and commentary has highlighted the very clear link between teacher wellbeing and the educational outcomes of young people. As such, the EIS is clear that significant steps to address unsustainable workload, such as reducing weekly class contact time, are imperative for both teachers and young people as learners. The Scottish Government has made eradicating the poverty-related achievement and attainment gap a key priority. However, ultimately identifying and closing the gap requires front-line interventions which can only be accessed as a result of teachers observing and evaluating, planning and implementing direct interventions at classroom level. Without this additional time, the gap will continue to grow.

Professor Ken Muir, in his report, "Putting Learners at the Centre", reflected the importance of structural education reform being accompanied by cultural change. This was also acknowledged in the final report of the National Discussion¹, which made a call for human centred educational improvement to be led by the education profession, using their professional expertise and judgement to inform decisions and actions. This approach and an Empowered School System is underpinned by principles of professional trust and teacher autonomy. If teachers are to be supported to design a curriculum which is responsive to the needs of the learners in their class, they need to be supported to do so through the provision of sufficient

¹ "All Learners in Scotland Matter: the national discussion on education"

time and by being afforded the professional trust to determine how best to use that time for delivery of quality teaching and learning.

The Joint SNCT Agreement on Reducing Weekly Class Contact Time

Despite the manifesto commitment made to the Scottish electorate by the SNP who were returned as the Scottish Government in 2021, SNCT negotiations were protracted and lasted until the final days of the 2021-2025 parliamentary term and only days before EIS members were due to commence a sustained programme of industrial action, including strike action and action short of strike.

From the outset of negotiations, the EIS and subsequently the SNCT Teachers' Panel, maintained the position that the 1.5 hours' reduction that would result from reducing weekly class contact time to 21 hours must be used to increase the time required for the preparation of learning, teaching and assessment (what was termed time for "preparation and correction" within the SNCT Handbook). This position was informed by the educational rationale detailed earlier in this document.

The final agreement reached, ratified by the SNCT in March 2026, committed the Scottish Government, COSLA and the Teachers' side to the following:

- A reduction of weekly class contact time to a maximum of 21 hours.
- A redefinition of time for "preparation and correction" as "undirected Professional Time" in the SNCT Handbook.
- The 1.5 hours resulting from reducing weekly class contact time to 21 hours, being used to set a minimum of 9 hours "Professional Time" each week.
- Implementation of the revised conditions of service from the commencement of the academic year in August 2027 for primary and special schools.
- Implementation of the revised conditions of service from the commencement of the academic year in August 2029 in secondary schools.
- A reaffirming of the principles of *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century*.
- An agreement that the Scottish Government will provide the full funding required to implement the reduction in weekly class contact time to 21 hours.

This joint SNCT agreement represents a step forward in tackling unsustainable, unfair and unhealthy levels of teacher workload, by increasing the time each week that teachers have available to undertake the preparation of learning, teaching and assessment, in turn enhancing educational outcomes for young people. The staggered implementation, between primary/special schools in August 2027 and secondary schools in August 2029, was agreed in recognition that there requires to be significant recruitment of secondary teachers across Scotland in order to implement class contact time reduction.

Current Position

Work has now commenced, at the SNCT, on implementing the Joint Agreement on Reducing Weekly Class Contact Time.

Under the direction of the SNCT, the SNCT Joint Secretaries have agreed the

changes required within the relevant sections of the SNCT Handbook that will come into effect from the commencement of the academic year in August 2027. A Joint Secretaries' letter of advice, one of the mechanisms by which information is shared from the SNCT nationally to each of the 32 LNCTs, will be issued advising that this work has been undertaken.

The SNCT has also agreed to establish a working group focused on the implementation of the reduction in weekly class contact time to 21 hours. The agreed terms of reference for this group are:

- To develop an SNCT delivery plan which sets out key milestones and steps for implementation of reduced class contact time, in line with the agreed phased delivery schedule.
- Set out the local and national workforce implications of delivering this schedule.
- Consider broader dependencies which will allow and support implementation.
- Identify key risks to implementation and develop a joint plan to mitigate those risks, where possible.
- Provide a forum to receive regular updates on modelling work being undertaken both locally and nationally.
- Receive updates and assess progress of all workforce planning being undertaken to ensure implementation as agreed.

Through what has been reported to the SNCT, the EIS understands that discussions between the Scottish Government and COSLA have been taking place over recent months to ensure that the Scottish Government's commitment to fully fund the reduction in weekly class contact time is met. The EIS further understands that these discussions have involved consideration of modelling of the teacher numbers required to implement the agreement. Given the role of the SNCT in overseeing implementation, the EIS looks forward to engagement with this modelling work through the SNCT implementation working group.

The Teachers' Side of the SNCT has received assurances from the Scottish Government that said modelling is predicated on in-person teaching, as opposed to any default to digital delivery of teaching and learning. Such assurance is welcome, as the EIS remains steadfast in its view that quality education is and must continue to be delivered through human centred, in-person teaching and learning. Given the centrality of this to young people's social, emotional and cognitive development, this should not be replaced by pedagogically substandard models of digital delivery. In relation to the implementation of the agreement on 21 hours, the EIS notes that significantly more detail than has been reported to the SNCT, has been provided by COSLA and ADES on the work already being undertaken by COSLA and the Scottish Government, within the written evidence they have presented to the Scottish Parliament's Education and Gaelic Committee. The SNCT Joint Agreement on Reducing Class Contact Time commits all three sides of the SNCT to the following:

"... the central role of the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT) in overseeing the implementation of this Agreement and developing detailed implementation plans, with engagement continuing through LNCTs to

ensure that implementation is responsive to local contexts while aligned to national principles.”

The effective implementation of the Joint SNCT Agreement on Reducing Weekly Class Contact Time will require constructive collegiate working between all sides of the SNCT. As such, the EIS expects that future discussions at the SNCT will include all relevant work, in all areas of the Scottish Education system, and that this will be considered appropriately.

In the coming months and years, the EIS, through the SNCT Teachers' Panel, will seek to engage constructively and collegiately in the work of the SNCT in ensuring the effective implementation of the class contact time agreement on 21 hours. It is the expectation of the EIS that both the Scottish Government and COSLA engage in a similarly constructive and collegiate manner to implement what will represent a significant step forward in addressing the unsustainable, unfair and unhealthy levels of workload being endured by teachers across Scotland at present.

Written submission from NASUWT

NASUWT evidence to the Education and Gaelic Committee

The NASUWT's submission to the Scottish Education and Gaelic Committee sets out the Union's views on the key issues which should be explored by the Committee during their focus on class contact time within school education: exploring how plans to reduce contact time are progressing; highlighting any potential issues in delivering this; and considering how the number of teachers that local authorities employ and the distribution of these teachers (geographically and across subjects) will impact on delivery of a reduction of contact time.

The NASUWT's evidence is informed directly by serving teacher and headteacher members and also by the work of its representative committees and consultative structures, made up of practising teachers and school leaders working in the education system.

For further information, parliamentarians may contact:

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

Context

Data from the OECD shows the class contact time figure in Scotland as 855 hours (38 weeks x 22.5 hours) which is higher than most other OECD countries. The commitment to reduce class contact time was part of the SNP's 2021 election manifesto and was then enshrined in the Programme for Government that same year. The commitment on class contact time was a recognition by the Scottish Government that additional time away from the classroom was necessary to give teachers sufficient time and space to plan, prepare and assess pupils' work in order to help students achieve their best and raise attainment.

Workload

Teachers' working conditions are children's learning conditions. The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and the conditions in which they work.

The Scottish Government needs to ensure that it is 'Getting It Right For Every Teacher' if it wants to achieve its ambitions of 'Getting It Right For Every Child'. As part of our 2025 manifesto calls, NASUWT advocated for the next government to inter alia:

- deliver the promised reduction in class contact time;
- establish a workload taskforce to review why key recommendations from the Curriculum for Excellence Working Group on Tackling Bureaucracy (2015) were not fully implemented, with a particular focus on: Forward Planning in the Primary Sector; Assessment in the Secondary Sector; Self-Evaluation and Improvement Planning; Monitoring and Reporting;

- implement a revised and improved approach to rebuild and transform Additional Support Needs (ASN) provision so pupils and teachers receive the support they should be entitled to expect and which recognises the important role of off-site provision;
- commit to lower staffing ratios for specialist provision and support a review of staffing ratio formulas in mainstream classes, dependent upon the number of pupils with an identified ASN in each class;
- agree a consistent and publicised national approach to supporting supply teachers across local authorities, recognising the vital contribution they make to securing high educational standards for all children and young people.

Excessive workload has a huge impact on teachers' health, safety and wellbeing and undermines teachers' ability to teach effectively.

Data and assessment requirements, admin and clerical tasks and pastoral care continue to be the biggest three drivers of excessive workload, according to teachers in our Big Question annual survey.

Workforce

Four in every five teachers in our Big Question Survey say that their workload and the stress of the job have increased, over half of teachers say that their job has negatively affected their physical health in the last twelve months and four in five say their job has adversely affected their mental health. Two thirds of teachers tell us that they are seriously considering leaving the profession because of concerns about excessive workload.

88% of teachers in Scotland have seen their workload increase in the past year, up from 79% in 2025. This includes 92% of teachers in Scotland aged 25 to 29 years old and 98% of teachers aged 30 to 39 years old

Two thirds of teachers (67%) in Scotland have seriously considered leaving the profession, up from 56% in 2025. Only 11% would recommend teaching as a career

76% of primary school teachers have considered leaving the profession compared to 60% of secondary school teachers

Teachers responding to the Big Question survey reported a sharp increase in their typical working hours per week, from an average of 41 hours per week in 2025 to an average of 53 hours in 2026.

Teacher workforce planning

Criticisms of workforce planning processes in Scottish education are not new. In the Education and Skills Committee 'Inquiry on Recruiting and Training New Teachers' in February 2020 NASUWT stated:

The key to identifying appropriate training places is workforce data. Simply put, there needs to be a solid evidence base on which to determine how many teachers

should be recruited. The NASUWT has significant concerns that the data available is not robust, nor easily accessible to policymakers.

The NASUWT shares the concerns of the UK Government Migration Advisory Committee that there is very limited data to draw on to assess the shortage of teachers by subject in Scotland. Improved data is necessary to support accurate teacher workforce planning, including any assessment of diversity, and this data should be reviewed regularly and be open and transparent to all the workforce.

The Union is calling for a review of the way in which teacher workforce data is collected and reported as a matter of urgency.

At our 'Education at a Crossroads' fringe meeting at the SNP Conference in 2024, we urged the then Cabinet Secretary, Jenny Gilruth, to address weaknesses in workforce planning.

Motions at NASUWT Scotland Conferences in 2025 and 2026 also set out the Union's deep concerns which were thereafter picked up with Scottish Government, SBTE and others:

Scotland Conference 2026: Scrutiny and Fairer Workforce Planning

Conference is appalled at the absence of national workforce planning data.

Conference believes that a national mechanism is urgently required to collate and analyse workforce data.

Conference calls on the Scotland Executive Council to lobby Scottish Government to adopt a national system for workforce data collection which:

- (i) Is transparent;*
 - (ii) Coordinates data from across Scottish Government, local authorities and GTCS*
 - (iii) Is able to provide accountability for national spending on education*
- Conference further calls on the Scotland Executive Council to lobby for a system where:*
- (a) local authorities who have failed to uphold nationally funded and agreed teacher numbers, will have the allocated funding unused revoked;*
 - (b) education funding is ring-fenced; and*
 - (c) teaching is no longer part of the gig economy.*

Conference finally considers that

- (i) the current model of education inhibits some schools and local authorities from being able to provide equitable education for all children; and*
- (ii) a more centralised model would have benefits for planning processes, maintaining teacher numbers and securing ASN resources due to economies of scale.*

Conference therefore calls on the Scotland Executive Council to lobby Scottish Government to reform school education, starting with a full audit and review of the appropriateness of maintaining 32 employers within Scottish education.

Scotland Conference 2025: Staffing: a crisis covered up?

Conference welcomes commitments made by almost all local authorities to maintain 2023 teacher numbers.

Conference is concerned however that inconsistent data approaches between local authorities may mean that this headline is masking the reality on the ground and inhibiting a coordinated national approach to workforce planning.

Conference believes that:

- a. vacancies in key shortage subjects, such as Maths and Computing, are being covered by numbers elsewhere;
- b. vacancies are constantly filled with probationary staff, leading to instability and inconsistency in classrooms & departments;
- c. acting positions are becoming more common, and more embedded as a systemic approach;
- d. teachers seconded, or working across the Local Authority, are being counted as 'front line'

Conference believes that urgent action is needed to gain a true picture of the workforce in Scotland and further that without such clarity solutions will be unable to be found.

Conference calls on the Scotland Executive Council to:

- (i) lobby Scottish Government and SBTE to move with operational urgency to a system with robust data that allows for longer-term planning;
- (ii) engage with members, schools, local authorities and Scottish Government to identify clear categories, which for example allow for supply, non class contact teachers, shared headships to be identified, in order to better support national data collection;
- (iii) highlight nationally the challenges with only utilising a pupil/teacher ratio approach to workforce planning, including the different ratios which apply to specialist ASN settings;
- (iv) seek clarity from Scottish Government and local authorities around the variety of different approaches which are being used across each local authority;
- (v) raise with the Scottish Government and COSLA the current challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, particularly in some subject specialisms, and seek significant and genuine improvements to teachers terms and conditions via SNCT as a vehicle for bringing more people in to teaching;
- (vi) press the GTCS, Scottish Government and local authorities for a national stated approach to temporary, short-term cover of teachers beyond their registration category and employed role, supporting the GTCS statement that 'even where something is temporary, assessment should be made about whether the teacher has the appropriate knowledge and skills to teach what they are being asked to. This is why it is expected that as far as possible even temporary cover is managed within subject cognate groups'.

Process Ongoing

An RCCT Implementation Group has been established via the SNCT. This working group will look to develop an SNCT delivery plan which sets out key milestones and steps for implementation of reduced class contact time, in line with the agreed phased delivery schedule. It will also look at local and national workforce implications. It is expected this forum will receive regular updates on modelling work being undertaken both locally and nationally by Scottish Government and COSLA. It is appropriate that all negotiations on implementation will take place within the SNCT.

Written submission from School Leaders Scotland

School Leaders Scotland (SLS) welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the Education and Gaelic Committee as part of its pre-budget scrutiny on the planned Reduction in Class Contact Time (RCCT).

SLS is a professional association and trade union which represents those in school leadership positions in secondary schools – headteachers, depute headteachers, principal teachers and school business managers. We are part of the teachers' side on SNCT.

The Scottish Government's policy, following an SNP manifesto commitment in 2021, is to reduce the class contact time of a full-time teacher by 90 minutes per week, from 22.5 hours to 21 hours. The rationale for this RCCT was to allow for additional professional time – activities like preparation and marking – as well as collegiate activities such as school improvement work. An agreement was reached through SNCT that all 90 minutes should be used for professional time at the discretion of the teacher. SLS would be supportive of looking again at some collegiate use of time at an appropriate point in the future, to maximise the opportunity for strategic and collaborative planning to improve outcomes for children and young people.

However, SLS is committed to the principle of supporting RCCT to support our teachers to experience a more manageable workload. Reduced workload should mean less work-related stress and more time to plan high-quality learning and teaching experiences, in turn leading to improved outcomes for children and young people. It may be hard to quantify this, but continuing as we are currently does not seem to be a viable option. Scotland needs a dedicated, motivated and physically and mentally well teaching workforce. Whilst RCCT is not a panacea for all issues, it will help. There are, however, a number of factors that may limit the extent to which these workload benefits are experienced consistently across the country.

Feedback from SLS members

There is a great deal of concern among SLS members about the deliverability of RCCT for secondary schools, even with an implementation date of August 2029. Whilst the necessary changes to the structure of the school day and to school timetables will undoubtedly present challenges, these are not insurmountable. The much larger issue is the availability of appropriately qualified teaching staff.

We currently have a live SLS member survey on teacher shortages, their implications, and readiness for RCCT, with 171 responses (at the time of writing) representing 31 local authorities. The results thus far focus specifically on the interaction between existing teacher shortages and the implementation of reduced class contact time in secondary schools.

- The survey depicts a staffing system already operating with substantial pressure: 108 of 171 respondents (63%) report unfilled teaching vacancies, while 117 (68%) report fewer or far fewer supply teachers than in previous years.
- Members' central concern is a practical one: reducing individual teachers' class contact time creates additional teaching periods that must be staffed somewhere else. In schools already unable to fill posts, members repeatedly question where the additional teaching capacity will come from.
- The problem is not simply the total number of teachers. Secondary staffing is organised by subject specialism, so RCCT can create many multiple small staffing requirements that are individually difficult to recruit to. This is particularly acute in small schools and one-teacher departments.
- Members anticipate a range of possible consequences if additional capacity is not available: narrower curriculum choice, reduced provision in smaller/shortage subjects, more combined or split classes, greater use of non-specialists, increased dependence on supply staff, and additional teaching/cover by senior leaders.
- The survey also highlights implementation pressures beyond recruitment: timetable and school-day redesign, funding, accommodation, transport constraints, and the capacity of local authorities and schools to plan sufficiently early and effectively.
- Taken together, these findings suggest that the intended workload benefit of RCCT will not be experienced consistency across schools and local authorities across Scotland unless additional staffing capacity is available in the subjects and locations where it is needed. Several respondents identify a potential feedback loop whereby staff shortages result in increased cover and leadership demands, further exacerbating workload and retention pressures.

Implications for the Implementation of RCCT

Theme 1: Staffing constraints

The dominant message from respondents is that RCCT cannot be implemented simply through changes to teachers' timetables. Reducing class contact time does not reduce the amount of teaching required: the released periods must be taught by someone else. Members repeatedly describe schools already carrying vacancies and struggling to **secure** supply cover. This creates a fundamental implementation challenge: RCCT generates additional staffing requirements at a time when many schools report that they do not have sufficient capacity to meet existing needs.

SLS Survey 2026: 108/171 respondents report current vacancies; 117/171 report fewer/far fewer supply teachers. In the RCCT responses, 'staffing/recruitment capacity' is the most frequently identified theme in the indicative coding (136 of 171 responses).

Theme 2: Complexities of subject specialisms

The survey suggests that secondary schools cannot treat additional staffing as interchangeable capacity. Many members describe one-teacher departments or shortage subjects where the released time equates to only a small fraction of a full-time post. A school may therefore need several small pieces of subject-specific staffing rather than a single, recruitable full-time post.

The practical implication is that aggregate staffing numbers can overstate the actual capacity available to schools. A teacher who is available cannot necessarily cover Physics, Technical Education, Music or another specialist subject simply because there is a timetable gap.

Theme 3: Risks to curricular breadth and pupil choice

Members frequently connect staffing constraints directly to curriculum decisions. The survey records reduced provision, a narrower subject range, fewer classes, fewer opportunities to study Advanced Higher, and a more limited curricular offer. In the RCCT comments, schools describe a risk that the curriculum is increasingly shaped by the availability of staff, rather than by the educational offer schools would wish to provide to meet the diverse needs of the young people they serve.

This is particularly significant for smaller subjects, practical subjects and the senior phase, where a small reduction in specialist availability can affect whether a class or course is viable.

Theme 4: Managing Staffing Shortfalls

Where recruitment does not keep pace, respondents anticipate a range of alternative approaches, including non-specialists taking classes, combined or split classes, creative timetabling, senior leaders providing teaching or cover, and increased reliance on supply teachers. While these approaches may enable timetables to operate, members associate them with concerns about curriculum quality, continuity and workload.

The survey therefore presents RCCT implementation as a capacity issue, not simply a contractual-hours issue. If sufficient staffing capacity is not available, the released time may simply be displaced elsewhere in the system.

Theme 5: Implications for small schools and rural schools

Members in smaller and rural schools repeatedly highlight the particular challenges created by their size and location. A one-teacher department may already be fully timetabled; reducing that teacher's class contact time therefore creates a small, subject-specific staffing requirement that may be difficult or impossible to recruit to locally. Rural respondents also cite transport, housing and location as barriers to recruitment, alongside competition for staff from other areas.

*This creates a distributional issue: the same headline reduction in contact time may **demand** materially different staffing solutions depending on school size, subject mix and geography.*

Theme 6: Timetable and restructuring of the school day

A number of members say that the proposed reduction does not fit neatly within existing period structures. They identify period length, the shape of the school day, registration, transport arrangements, accommodation and course structures as interrelated constraints. Some describe the need for significant timetable redesign rather than a simple staffing adjustment.

The implication is that implementation planning needs to test whole-school timetable models, rather than simply calculating the additional FTE required.

Theme 7 — Funding and resource displacement

Members repeatedly raise the cost of additional teachers and the difficulty of funding them within existing local-authority and school budgets. Some also express concern that, within a fixed education budget, funding for RCCT could displace other staffing or support, including ASN provision. These concerns remain despite the Government's commitment to fully fund RCCT.

The issue raised by respondents is therefore not only how many additional teachers are required, but how that additional capacity will be funded without reducing capacity elsewhere in the education system.

Theme 8: Planning and communication

A sizeable group of members describe limited visibility of local authority planning and uncertainty about staffing allocations. The survey suggests that planning activity is under way in some areas, but there is significant disparity across Scotland in levels of readiness and communication between local authorities and schools

Survey Response Conclusions

Taken together, the responses highlight the interaction between RCCT and existing teacher shortages: RCCT is intended to reduce individual teachers' class-contact time, while teacher shortages limit the capacity available to staff the resulting timetables. Where sufficient additional capacity is not available, schools may respond by narrowing curriculum provision, reallocating classes, increasing non-specialist teaching, drawing on leadership capacity, or changing the structure of the school day. Several members also associate these responses with increased workload and pressures on morale and retention. These are the consequences school leaders anticipate if sufficient subject-specialist capacity is not available. The risks to sustainability in the profession, highlighted in the recent publication of the Sustainable School Leadership National Technical Report for Scotland (Greany et al., 2026) cannot be underestimated.

Requirements for Effective Implementation Planning

- Subject-by-subject staffing modelling, rather than relying **solely on** aggregate FTE modelling.
- School-level assessment of one-teacher departments, shortage subjects and small-FTE staffing requirements.
- Explicit modelling of curriculum consequences: BGE breadth, senior-phase choice, Advanced Highers, practical subjects and wider curricular provision.
- Stress-testing of staffing scenarios that include vacancies, long-term absence and reduced supply availability included.
- Consideration of specific implications for small, rural and island schools, where recruitment and transport constraints may limit flexibility.
- Whole-school timetable and school-day modelling, including period length, transport, accommodation, registration and shared staffing across schools.

- A clear funding model that identifies the additional staffing required and implications for existing ASN, support and school staffing budgets.
- A clear and transparent implementation timetable, with effective communication arrangements, so that school leaders and timetablers can plan staffing and recruitment sufficiently far in advance.

In conclusion, SLS supports the principle of RCCT and its intended positive impact on teacher workload. However, as outlined above, significant concerns remain, particularly around the availability of appropriately qualified teachers and the potential impact on the curriculum available to Scotland's children and young people.

There is also a clear need for sufficient time for detailed planning and modelling at school and local authority level. The proposed implementation of RCCT coincides with the Curriculum Improvement Cycle; a period of significant wider education reform, which places substantial demands on education leadership and requires careful consideration of the cumulative burden on schools and their leaders. SLS therefore emphasises that successful implementation of RCCT will depend not only on urgent action to improve teacher recruitment and secure sufficient appropriately qualified, subject-specialist staff across Scotland, but also on realistic timescales, effective planning and recognition of the wider reform context in which schools are being asked to deliver it.

David Barnett
General Secretary
School Leaders Scotland

Appendix One: Anonymised comments from members

Small school / one-teacher departments: Who will cover the classes... in a small school with single teacher subject... the person can't possibly cover all subjects.

Specialist shortages / non-specialist risk: We cannot get full time staff never mind part time. It will result in more non specialists taking classes or more creative timetabling...

Curriculum shaped by staffing: There is a huge danger that our curriculum will be shaped by staffing availability and not by what we want our young people to learn and experience.

Fragmented specialist demand: The FTE time required in each separate specialist subject is so small that a school like mine would need about 2 teachers... each one

qualified in about 8 subjects!

Timetable structure: The proposed 90-minute reduction does not align with the current timetable model... significant structural change... alongside recruitment.

Small-school curriculum trade-off: We have 1 teacher in Music... We may have to look at a reduced provision of music in S1/S2.

Existing absence / cover pressure: We are struggling with staff absences already... Finding even more contact time... is going to be nigh on impossible unless we get new staff.

Potential alternative staffing models: Could we look creatively at partners as well - Active Schools, Youth workers... FE...?

Curriculum follows available staff: Schools have to run with curriculum based on the teachers that they can get rather than what the pupils need.

Scale of additional staffing: There are nowhere near enough teachers in the system... A rough calculation would suggest around 100 additional teachers needed in a large city's state schools just for secondary...

Single-teacher subjects / redistribution: Only one teacher in a subject... Additional staff may need to be recruited, but we struggle to recruit anyway.

Tiny staffing increments: Finding staff where there is a small amount of additionality required... I worry we will have more non specialist provision to cover for RCCT.

Rural recruitment / SLT burden: Rural schools simply will not be able to recruit the teachers needed... This will lead to either SLT having to fill gaps... or... reduction in choice.

Physics example: We have some one teacher departments e.g. Physics... the only

option will be to reduce sets in Physics or reduce options.

Distributed small requirements: In total we would need around 10 FTE... but this is made up of every department in the school.

Breadth / senior phase: Maintaining breadth across experiences in BGE and subject choice in senior phase will be the biggest challenges...

Specialist staffing vs generic provision The reality is that you cannot recruit someone to cover several different subjects without significant changes to curriculum structure...

Written submission from CELCIS

CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection is a leading improvement, innovation and research centre. Based at the University of Strathclyde, we improve the lives of children and young people in need of support, care and protection by working hand in hand with the workforce and the organisations who care for and protect them.

Every infant, child and young person has the right to grow up safe, nurtured and free from harm. For some families, persistent challenges like poverty can create overwhelming stress and increase risks to children's wellbeing. When living with their birth parents is not possible, children should feel safe, valued and loved, whether they are cared for by wider family and friends in Kinship Care, by foster carers, in Residential Child Care or in Secure Care.

The language of the 'care system' can be stigmatising for care experienced people. Where possible, we have tried to use non-stigmatising language other than where it is necessary to refer to the legal context, in which case terms such as 'looked after' are used.

This response to the Committee draws on research evidence, as well as knowledge from our extensive experience gathered through long-standing partnerships, working across children and family services, as well as with children, their families and carers, and adults with lived experience of care.

The progress of the Scottish Government's commitment to reform the care system for 'looked after' children in Scotland by 2030

The current context: responding to the needs of children and families

The Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government have long recognised the impact poverty has on people's health, wellbeing and life chances, not least demonstrated by the cross-party commitment to the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and in repeated Programmes for Government.

Evidence has shown that there is a complex link between poverty, child abuse and neglect (Bywaters et al. 2022). The cumulative effect of the stresses and difficulties of living with poverty mean that for some families, there is an impact on children's care (Galloway, 2020). Children are continuing to grow up in a context where poverty, mental health, addiction, disability and additional support needs often intersect, placing increasing demand on support services. For The Promise of the Independent Care Review to be kept by 2030, Scotland needs to work towards preventing and easing poverty, removing the impact this has on too many families (The Independent Care Review, 2020).

The children's services workforce is a passionate and highly committed workforce, but it is a workforce in crisis. The children's workforce is experiencing longstanding capacity challenges and services are operating under significant financial pressures (Ottaway et al, 2023). High-quality services, and reform of services, requires a well-resourced and skilled workforce within a range of universal, targeted and intensive

supports to respond to the needs of children and families. The workforce crisis and their capacity to respond to the needs of children and their families is further exacerbated by a lack of suitable homes and carers for children and young people, as set out in the recent Chief Social Work Officers joint statement on the emergency concerning a lack of suitable homes and carers for children and young people (Chief Social Work Officers, 2026).

The development of legislation has also been a part of Scotland's drive for reform to achieve meaningful improvements for children and their families and this forms part of the enabling context for change. Legislation alone is not sufficient to enact the changes required: implementation is key. The expansion of services or eligibility will require detailed modelling, investment and implementation support, against the backdrop of current resourcing challenges, and this is relevant to the recent Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026.

Where has there been change

The focus on holistic whole family support, providing families with a combination of practical, emotional and financial support, has been a positive step in response to meeting the needs of Scotland's children and their families. However, the funding pledged to date through the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, for example, has not been fully allocated and can create difficulties in resourcing sustainable, long-term services. Where it has been allocated, it is often compensating for cuts in core services rather than allocated to the transformational task.

We welcome efforts within the Whole Family Support System Change Programme to bring together multiple reform programmes (including Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, Fairer Futures Partnerships and Child Poverty programmes). This could provide a more co-ordinated and aligned response to improving outcomes and reducing inequalities for children and young people.

Financial support is integral to how any family is able to thrive. The introduction of a Scottish Recommended Allowance for fostering and kinship families offers parity for how children, their families and carers are financially supported, regardless of where they live in Scotland. This is making a vital contribution in supporting carers to provide the best care for children and young people. Likewise, efforts to support children and families with income maximisation, including help with social security support, the Scottish Child Payment, Best Start payments, the Care Experienced Bursary, and direct payment programmes, have all been working to meet families' needs.

CELCIS is currently undertaking the [Independent Review of Scotland's Legislative Framework for Children's Care](#) for the Scottish Government, led by Professor Kenneth Norrie. This is in recognition by parliamentarians, the government, the Independent Care Review and practitioners of the cluttered and challenging legislative landscape concerning the duties and responsibilities for the care and protection of children in Scotland. There is strong evidence of a need for the legislative landscape to be made easier for practitioners to understand and navigate in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities to children and their families and upholding their rights.

Through our Children's Services Reform Research in 2023, we also found that progress has been made in upholding children's right to be involved in decisions affecting them, including enhanced advocacy provision, more flexible and strengths-based approaches to engagement, and the use of digital technology. However, concerns remain about the pace and consistency of this progress (Ottaway et al., 2023).

What needs to improve

Keeping The Promise of the Independent Care Review requires a sustained focus on addressing the implementation gap between existing legislation, policy and practice across Scotland. The Children's Services Reform Research (Ottaway et al., 2023) found that despite Scotland's strong vision to support children and families, implementation is inconsistent across services and local areas. More needs to be done to ensure the full and consistent implementation of GIRFEC, including services that support children and young people's transition to adulthood, as well as services for adults which are often a crucial part of the support needed by families.

Our work with local areas highlights the following factors as important in supporting implementation of reform:

- A focus on upholding rights and ensuring the participation of children, young people, their families and carers;
- Workforce planning to address recruitment and retention across the relevant workforces;
- Measures that support collaborative leadership and multi-agency working across workforces;
- Accurate financial modelling to ensure that there is sufficient funding available to invest in services and workforces to support policy aspirations;
- Improved data collection and analysis to understand the experiences and needs of children, young people and families, as well as those who care for them, and to inform planning and decision making.

Although there has been progress in some of these areas, these have not been sequenced, funded or facilitated effectively or consistently applied to enable substantive progress to date. Further information can be found in our recent [response to the Call for Views](#) to the Public Sector Reform Committee (CELCIS, 2026).

Progress on improving clarity around funding

Lack of access to early help and preventative family support services, and to specialist health, mental health and disability support have been identified as longstanding service gaps and weaknesses in Scotland (Ottaway et al., 2023). The lack of secure, long-term funding for services, particularly early help and preventative family support services in the third sector, are highlighted as contributing to these gaps and hampering policy aspirations.

There remains a lack of clarity about how different funding streams that support

implementation of The Promise fit together - both now and beyond the current funding period. Programmes including the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and Fairer Futures Partnerships are increasingly aligned in their ambition and are due to form part of an integrated Whole Family Support programme from April 2027. However, greater clarity is needed about the resources that will underpin this transition, the relationship between existing and emerging funding streams, and how investment will support local partnerships to move from testing and short-term programme activity towards sustainable, preventative approaches.

The Scottish Government should build on the longer-term direction provided through its five-year Programme for Government by setting out how existing and emerging funding streams will align over the parliamentary term. This would provide greater certainty for local government and partners and reduce the administrative and strategic burden on local partnerships of navigating multiple funding streams, reporting requirements and short-term funding arrangements.

Progress on improving clarity around roles and responsibilities

Through our Children's Services Reform Research, we heard examples of strong working relationships between practitioners from different services, however barriers to such multi-agency working were also shared. These included: short-term funding and job instability; siloed working; and professional hierarchies and power imbalances, with third sector and early learning and childcare practitioners reporting that their views and expertise are given less weight when decisions are made (Ottaway et al., 2023). These are the systemic issues that will require explicit attention if the aspirations of The Promise and public services reform are to be realised.

Practitioners and frontline staff play a vital role in building trusting relationships with children and families and responding to their needs early and their expertise is crucial to planning service improvements. However, it is strategic leaders across Children's Services Planning Partnerships (CSPPs) who have the pivotal role in driving and sustaining whole-system reform and ensuring that practitioners have the structure, permissions and resources they need to deliver support, as well as fostering collaboration across services.

For The Promise to be realised, leaders require the time, space and specialist support to develop a shared understanding of the local system and the experiences of children and families; agree a collective ambition and approach to change; create the conditions for learning to inform ongoing decisions; take collective action to align resources; address barriers and adapt approaches as learning emerges. This requires sustained collaboration between leaders rather than responsibility sitting within individual programmes or services.

Funding and local preparations for extension of aftercare

We welcome the provision to expand the eligibility to apply for aftercare through the new Children (Scotland) Act 2026. However, this is a good example of where financial and interlinked workforce considerations must serve to refocus us in how we translate legislative aspirations into effective implementation and real change for

people.

We are supporting Scottish Government in their development of guidance for the new aftercare provisions by facilitating a network of social work practitioners to ensure this guidance is informed by the expertise of those who will implement it, including the implementation challenges and opportunities. We know that practitioners are currently struggling to meet the aftercare needs in their areas at present so consideration must be given to the new population of children and young people now entitled to apply for aftercare support. This population will be significantly larger than the currently eligible population which is children and young people who were 'looked after' on or after their sixteenth birthday. Our understanding is that this population could include anyone who was looked after for any length of time in their childhood. COSLA have stated that they are concerned that the level of support required could be higher than anticipated (Scottish Government, 2026, page 11). It is vital that there is a clear understanding of who the newly eligible population is. That will allow for accurate modelling which is essential in order to assess what the funding allocation and workforce required will be.

Inadequate financial modelling will be detrimental to the implementation of the Act. The Supplementary Financial Memorandum, states that the support costs "do not include any recruitment, training or other costs which might be required to expand capacity to provide aftercare." (Scottish Government, 2026, page 11, footnote 11). We are concerned that these crucial costs have not been accounted for. As this provision will bring additional responsibilities to social work practitioners who would conduct most of the assessments, including supporting people to understand if they were looked after at any point in their childhood, the capacity of this workforce would also need to increase. As it stands, there are considerable vacancies across the social work profession, and the highest vacancy rates within children and families social work teams, a total of 16.7%, with 9.7% in 'main' and 7% in 'senior' roles (Scottish Social Services Council, 2025). A plan is required for how the workforce will be grown and sustained. The extension of aftercare *must* be matched with all the resources required for it to make the difference intended.

Supporting reform

Delivering the scale of transformational change envisaged by The Promise requires sustained investment over time, and there remains a need to ensure resources are aligned with the pace and breadth of reform required. CELCIS remains committed to working with local and national partners to improve support for children, young people and their families. We look forward to working with the Committee and all parliamentarians as they further consider the reform of children's care and of public services more broadly.

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Written submission from COSLA

Introduction

COSLA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's pre-budget scrutiny on progress towards children's care system reform.

Scotland's local authorities remain fully committed to improving the lives of babies, children, young people and families with experience of care and to delivering the transformational change envisaged by the Independent Care Review. Across Scotland, the Promise is firmly embedded within local planning arrangements, governance structures and service improvement activity. Local authorities continue to demonstrate leadership, innovation and determination in driving this work forward.

However, as we move closer to 2030, the key question is no longer whether Scotland is committed to keeping the Promise. The question is whether the financial, workforce and system conditions required to deliver that commitment are being created.

Keeping the Promise was never intended to be delivered through the efforts of individual services or organisations acting alone. It requires a whole-system shift across public services, sustained over many years, supported by investment, workforce capacity, effective partnership working and policy coherence.

As the Committee considers the role of the Scottish Budget in supporting delivery, COSLA would highlight three overarching messages:

- Progress is being made, and local government continues to take active steps to drive change and improve outcomes, but progress is increasingly constrained by workforce pressures, financial challenges and a complex reform landscape.
- Ambition must be matched by the resources, workforce capacity and delivery conditions needed to realise change in practice.
- Public service reform should strengthen preventative approaches, local democratic accountability and partnership working rather than creating additional complexity or centralisation.

From a pre-budget perspective, this requires consideration of whether investment is aligned with the scale of ambition, whether the workforce has the capacity to deliver the changes expected, whether reform activity is being appropriately prioritised and sequenced, whether local systems have sufficient flexibility to respond to local need, and whether responsibility and accountability for delivery are clear across all partners. These issues will be critical in determining the pace of future progress.

Progress Towards Keeping the Promise

Evidence from across Scotland demonstrates that the Promise continues to drive change at both strategic and operational levels within local government. COSLA's

annual Promise reports, alongside publications such as Keeping the Promise: A Local Perspective from The Promise Scotland, highlight activity underway across all 32 local authority areas and provide examples of how councils and their partners are working to improve outcomes for babies, children, young people and families. These reports show continued progress in embedding rights-based and relationship-based approaches, strengthening participation and voice, developing trauma-informed practice, expanding whole family support, and improving multi-agency collaboration.

While the approaches adopted by individual local authorities may differ, the evidence suggests a high degree of alignment regarding the outcomes being sought and the changes required to achieve them. Variation in local delivery should not automatically be viewed as a concern. Local authorities operate in different contexts, with varying demographics, geography, levels of need, workforce challenges and existing service provision. The ability to respond to these differing circumstances is an important feature of local democratic accountability and supports services being designed around the needs of local communities rather than a one-size-fits-all model. As a result, while there should be consistency in ambition and outcomes, progress at a local level must be understood and assessed within the context of individual communities, their needs, and the challenges they face.

At a national level, COSLA, Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland are jointly developing the Promise Story of Progress, which is the agreed mechanism for understanding and measuring progress towards keeping the Promise. The Story of Progress recognises that no single measure can adequately reflect the scale and complexity of the change being sought. Instead, it brings together information from three complementary perspectives: national indicators, organisational change, and the experiences of care experienced children and young people. Considered together, these provide a richer and more meaningful understanding of progress than any individual source could provide in isolation. Work on the Story of Progress continues, with further development underway across all three elements as our collective understanding of progress evolves.

It is important that discussions about progress reflect the complexity of the change being sought. The Promise represents long-term system transformation rather than the delivery of a single programme or policy. Understanding progress therefore requires consideration not only of national trends and performance measures, but also of how services are changing, how decisions are being made locally, and how those changes are experienced by children, young people and families.

The issue for Scotland is therefore not whether progress is taking place, but how the pace of progress can be sustained and accelerated over the period to 2030.

Funding, Capacity and Delivery Conditions

The most consistent message from local government is that there is growing tension between ambition and deliverability.

Analysis undertaken through the Local Government Promise Programme Board, drawing on engagement with local authorities across Scotland, found widespread agreement that the Promise is well embedded in local priorities, but that stronger

alignment is needed between ambition, resourcing and delivery conditions. For COSLA, the conditions required to sustain and accelerate delivery of the promise are clear: sustainable funding, a confident and capable workforce, realistic prioritisation and sequencing of change, effective partnership working, and sufficient local flexibility to respond to community need.

Sustainable Funding

Keeping the Promise requires long-term transformation, yet local authorities continue to operate within annual budget cycles and increasing financial pressure.

While additional funding is important, the issue is not solely the amount of money available. It is also whether funding arrangements support prevention, early intervention and longer-term service redesign rather than short-term responses to immediate pressures.

There is a growing concern that policy ambitions are frequently agreed before implementation costs are fully understood or funding arrangements are clear. Where this occurs, local authorities can find themselves carrying significant delivery risk while remaining fully accountable for outcomes.

From COSLA's perspective, successful delivery depends on realistic and agreed costings, sustainable multi-year funding arrangements, and investment that is aligned with implementation expectations. Longer-term funding approaches that support prevention, whole family support and service redesign would provide greater confidence for local partners to invest in the changes required to keep the Promise. This would build on the significant efforts already underway across local government to protect and strengthen preventative services despite growing financial pressures. Successful delivery also requires recognition that local authorities are operating from different starting points and within different circumstances, and that funding approaches must be sufficiently flexible to reflect the varying needs, pressures and priorities of local areas.

Workforce Capacity

The workforce remains one of the most significant risks to successful delivery. Recruitment and retention challenges continue across social work, social care, housing, education and mental health services. These pressures affect not only frontline capacity but also leadership and strategic capacity within local government.

The impact of these challenges extends beyond individual vacancies. It affects the ability of local services to lead change, redesign services, implement new legislation and sustain improvement activity over time. Local authorities are working collectively with partners to respond through workforce planning, recruitment and retention initiatives, and leadership development activity. While national work is progressing through structures such as the Scottish Social Work Partnership, and local efforts continue across Scotland, meaningful improvement will take time to reach local services and communities.

A key point of consideration is therefore not only what changes should happen, but

whether sufficient workforce capacity exists to deliver them.

The Importance of Prioritisation and Sequencing

One of the strongest themes from engagement with local authorities is concern regarding the volume of policy, legislative and reform activity currently underway. The same workforce responsible for delivering the wide range of changes required to keep the Promise is also responsible for implementing a broad range of other reforms and responding to increasing demand and complexity within services. Local government continues to raise concerns regarding the cumulative impact of these developments and the absence of clear sequencing and prioritisation.

Recent engagement with local authorities found broad alignment between local priorities and the ambitions set out in the Promise route maps. However, authorities also reported that the route maps are not yet functioning as a shared planning framework to support local delivery. This reinforces the need for clearer prioritisation, sequencing and alignment between ambition, delivery expectations and the resources available to support implementation.

The challenge is not the ambition itself. The challenge is ensuring that ambition is matched by the capacity, resources and delivery conditions required to achieve it. These considerations are particularly relevant where significant legislative changes or service expansions are proposed. Local Government has consistently emphasised the importance of ensuring workforce, funding and wider enabling conditions are in place before implementation expectations are set. Without this, there is a risk that the ambition of reform outpaces the system's ability to deliver it sustainably and effectively.

This highlights the need for government and Parliament to give greater consideration to the sequencing of reform, ensuring that the workforce, funding and wider enabling conditions required for successful delivery are in place before additional expectations are placed on local systems.

Collective Responsibility and Partnership Working

Keeping the Promise requires coordinated action across a wide range of organisations and sectors. While local authorities play a central role, many of the factors influencing delivery sit beyond local government alone.

The Promise requires meaningful contributions from all corporate parents, Community Planning Partners, national public bodies and the Scottish Government. This includes shared responsibility for creating the conditions required for success, including workforce planning, housing, health provision, prevention and family support, data and evidence, and wider public service reform. As national organisations increasingly play a role in supporting delivery, it is also important to consider how effectively national priorities, programmes and agencies connect with local partnerships and planning arrangements, including through Community Planning structures.

Delivery is also dependent on wider system factors, including housing supply,

placement sufficiency and the availability of specialist provision, which require collective action at both local and national level.

Clarity regarding roles, responsibilities and accountability remains important. Local authorities have embedded Promise activity within existing planning, governance and scrutiny arrangements and remain accountable to their communities through elected members. However, keeping the Promise depends on contributions from a wide range of partners and agencies. Understanding both the distinct and shared responsibilities across the system will be important in supporting collective progress towards 2030.

Effective partnership working is therefore not an optional extra but a fundamental condition for delivery. Progress will be strongest where responsibilities, accountability and resources are clearly understood, aligned and shared appropriately across partners, and where national and local organisations work together effectively to support delivery in communities.

Local Flexibility and Trust

Local authorities operate within significantly different contexts, reflecting varying demographics, geography, levels of need, workforce availability and existing service provision.

Keeping the Promise requires a clear national ambition, but it does not require identical approaches in every area. Local authorities must retain the flexibility to prioritise, plan and deliver services in ways that respond to local circumstances and community needs. National frameworks should support and enable local delivery, rather than create additional parallel processes or constrain local innovation. This is particularly important where difficult prioritisation decisions are required. Prioritisation is not a sign of reduced commitment to the Promise, but a necessary and responsible part of local leadership within finite resources.

Public Service Reform and Keeping the Promise

Public service reform and keeping the Promise should be viewed as mutually reinforcing agendas. Many of the changes required to keep the Promise, including earlier intervention, stronger support for families, better partnership working and a focus on long-term outcomes, are also central to meaningful public service reform.

The success of reform should be judged not by organisational arrangements alone, but by whether it improves outcomes for children, young people and families. Reform should strengthen prevention, collaboration, local democratic accountability and decision-making as close as possible to communities, building on existing local partnerships and strengths.

Realising these ambitions requires the same delivery conditions that underpin keeping the Promise, including investment in workforce capacity, preventative services, digital capability and wider system reform. Reform also provides an opportunity to address barriers identified by local authorities, including fragmented funding arrangements, workforce challenges and growing demand pressures. The

financial case for public service reform and the moral case for keeping the Promise are closely connected; both depend on shifting resources and effort towards prevention, earlier intervention and support that reduces the need for crisis responses later.

However, reform programmes themselves require leadership attention, workforce capacity and implementation effort. If not carefully aligned, there is a risk that reform activity or structural change could divert focus and capacity away from Promise delivery. Scottish Government should therefore ensure that public service reform actively supports, rather than inhibits, progress towards keeping the Promise.

As the Committee considers future budgets, COSLA would encourage public service reform and keeping the Promise to be viewed together. The key question is not simply whether reform is taking place, but whether it is creating the conditions that enable local systems to deliver the changes envisaged by the Promise.

Conclusion

There is no shortage of commitment to keeping the Promise. Local government remains fully committed, and evidence from across Scotland demonstrates continued progress in transforming services, systems and support in line with the aims and ambitions of the Promise.

As Scotland moves towards 2030, the challenge is increasingly not one of ambition, but of delivery. The key question is whether the financial, workforce and system conditions required to support delivery are being created and sustained.

The evidence from local government is clear: progress will be strongest where funding supports long-term transformation and prevention, workforce capacity is strengthened, reform is appropriately prioritised and sequenced, partners work collectively towards shared outcomes, and local areas have the flexibility to respond to community needs.

Public service reform has an important role to play, but only if it strengthens prevention, partnership working and local delivery rather than creating additional complexity.

Ultimately, keeping the Promise will depend not only on the commitments that are made, but on the collective willingness of national and local partners to create the conditions that make those commitments achievable.

Written submission from National Social Work Agency

The National Social Work Agency was launched on 17 March 2026, as a new executive agency of the Scottish Government, led by the National Chief Social Work Adviser (NCSWA), a role outlined in the Care Reform (Scotland) Act 2025. The Chief Executive has a dual role also as Chief Social Work Adviser to Scottish Ministers, providing advice on social work policy and on protecting people at risk of harm. The Act also required Ministers to establish the National Social Work Agency to support the NCSWA in carrying out these responsibilities.

The Agency's [Corporate Plan \(interim\) 2026 to 2027: Leading excellence, driving change in social work](#) sets out a number of strategic objectives:

- drive national leadership of social work
- provide impartial social work advice across government
- promote continuous improvement in design and delivery of social worker education and learning
- plan for a sustainable future workforce
- strengthen improvement and implementation across social work
- foster excellence in our organisation.

As part of the Agency's duties, there is a specific focus on the social work workforce and social work education and learning, ensuring Scotland has a sustainable and skilled workforce to improve the lives of people across the country. Given the breadth of the NCSWA's remit, this submission and evidence provided at the Education and Gaelic Committee will focus on the social work workforce and the National Social Work Agency's contribution to improving outcomes for looked after and care experienced children and young people through leading excellence and driving positive change for the social work workforce.

This year's Programme for Government recognised the unique role social workers play and the need to work collaboratively to *ensure a sustainable social work workforce and the best support for them to help deliver on our shared priorities*. As demand for social work has grown, so too has the complexity of practice, with children's social work increasingly operating at the interface with adults' services and responding to a wider range of interconnected needs. These challenges are occurring against a backdrop of significant resource pressures across the wider care system, including ongoing challenges in securing appropriate placements and access to the specialist provision required to meet the needs of some children and young people.

Since the publication of The Promise in 2020, Scotland has established a programme of reform supported by national delivery plans, oversight arrangements and legislative change. Progress has been achieved through a range of policy and legislative developments, including investment to expand whole family support, commencement of the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024, implementation of provisions within the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 to strengthen sibling relationships, and delivery of key provisions of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, including ending the use of Young Offender Institutions for

under-18s. In addition, the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 will introduce new statutory responsibilities and expectations across children's services. These reforms demonstrate a continuing commitment to children's rights, trauma-informed practice, family relationships and care-based responses for children and young people.

The ambitions of The Promise rely on a suitably qualified, experienced and sustainable social work workforce. Many of the principles underpinning The Promise, including relationship-based practice, trauma-informed support and promotion of children's rights, reflect established social work practice. The National Social Work Agency welcomes this alignment and will continue to support, strengthen and champion the profession as it plays a leading role in delivery of The Promise and wider reform of the care system.

The children's care system reform agenda increasingly recognises that keeping The Promise is a whole-system responsibility. Social workers play a central role in leading and delivering support for infants, children, young people and families within Scotland's National Practice Model Getting It Right For Every Child, working alongside colleagues across education, health, housing, justice, adult services and the third sector.

This is of particular relevance when considering the expansion of aftercare, where there is also a need for greater focus on the interface between children's and adult services, particularly for care-experienced young people with disabilities, neurodevelopmental differences, complex physical or mental health needs, or other circumstances that may require ongoing or lifelong support. The needs of these young people do not neatly align with organisational boundaries, and successful implementation will therefore depend on effective transition planning, shared accountability and clear pathways between children's and adult services. This will be essential to ensuring continuity of support and avoiding gaps in provision as young people move into adulthood.

If the ambitions of The Promise and wider care system reform are to be fully realised, adequate resources need to be in place not only for social work services but across the wider system of support on which care-experienced young people rely. Whilst strong foundations are in place, the principal and ongoing challenge will continue to be implementation and the capacity of the workforce to support this additional activity. Future progress will increasingly depend on workforce sustainability, placement availability and the capacity of local services to deliver high-quality, relationship-based support.

Successful implementation of care system reforms also require suitable education and professional learning, alongside careful consideration of the support required to enable social workers to meet new duties and deliver positive outcomes for children, young people and families.

The National Social Work Agency has an important role to play in understanding system readiness and workforce implications, working in partnership with COSLA, Social Work Scotland and other partners, whilst recognising the central role of local authorities as employers and corporate parents, and their responsibility for

coordinating support across our children's services. The National Social Work Agency also has a key role in working with those leading care system reform to understand and articulate what the profession will need to support effective implementation. Through the Scottish Social Work Partnership, we will continue our strong working relationship with COSLA and Social Work Scotland and will develop a strategic plan to set out our shared commitment to strengthen the social work profession.