

# work programme

November 2025 to May 2027

Independent  
Strategic Advisor



**Transformation is complex**— for the promise to be kept, coordinated change across multiple interlinked systems is required, whilst continuous improvements are made to delivery of the related public services. This demands change at scale – nationally and locally, across sectors and multiple agencies, to both practice and culture, change at pace – over a ten-year planning horizon; and, above all, change that delivers sustainable improvements to the experiences and outcomes of children, families and care experienced adults.

Scotland is at the midpoint between the promise being made and the date by which it must be kept.

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**In Report THREE, the Oversight Board was clear that progress is:**

**“...behind schedule— but still on course. The destination is clear, and Scotland is heading in the right direction.**

**It requires pace, renewed purpose, and for everyone to play their part to smooth the path ahead.”**

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A huge amount of positive change has happened all over Scotland, but there remains a huge amount to do over the coming five years to fulfil the Independent Care Review’s conclusions in full, to everyone, everywhere, every day.

Collectively, these three functions are intended to:



**Scotland is at the midpoint between the promise being made, and the date by which it must be kept.**

# Independent Strategic Advisor

Fiona Duncan is the Independent Strategic Advisor. She sets the strategic direction and culture of all work to keep the promise, chairs The Promise Scotland, sustains relationships with Ministers, and gives advice to those who require it.

## Strategic priorities

- 6:** Sustained alignment to government priorities
- 8:** Building on progress and positive changes
- 10:** Supporting the development of Plan 24-30 and setting expectations of what's next
- 11:** Creating pathways to solve system problems— via Meeting in the Middle
- 13:** Developing and utilising a range of 'system problem solving tools'

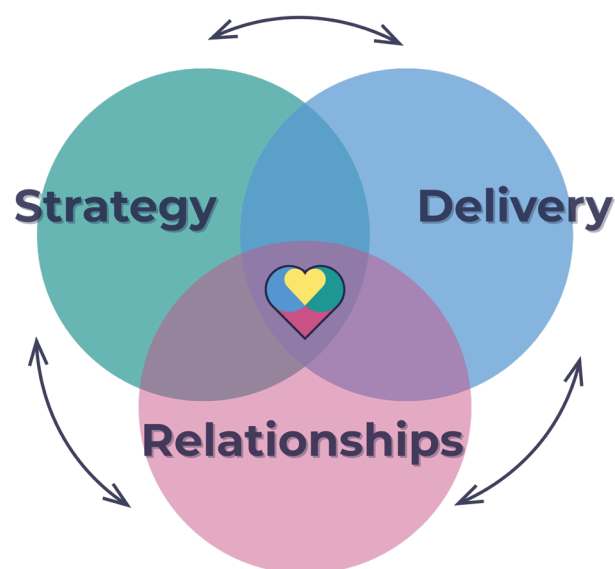
## Delivery mechanisms

- 15:** Via The Promise Scotland
- 16:** Via pace makers

## Relationship priorities

- 17:** With the First Minister, Cabinet Sub-Committee and Ministers
- 18:** Sustaining cross-party support
- 19:** Across local government
- 20:** With sectors, organisations and groups committed to change— and who must change
- 22:** With government officials

## There are three functions associated with the Independent Strategic Advisor role:



**Strategy:** Plan 24-30 is Scotland’s strategy. It contains 25 route maps plotting activity through to 2030 – providing the desired outcomes and clear direction – and will be kept up to date. The Independent Strategic Advisor provides advice, and The Promise Scotland supports project and thematic management.

**Delivery:** Without effective delivery, Plan 24-30 is simply an aspiration. The Independent Strategic Advisor advises on change and new approaches to help increase pace, set momentum and drive up quality. The Promise Scotland supports collaborative planning and delivery to help make sure activities stated in Plan 24-30 inform individual organisational plans, and are converted into resourced actions.

**Relationships:** Relationships are at the very heart of the promise. Strong working relationships build trust and foster collaboration to navigating challenges. They provide unique insights, support new opportunities to thrive, and support new resources to be shared in pursuit of a shared vision— to help keep the promise. They also help “create an environment and culture where finding and maintaining safe, loving, respectful relationships is the norm.”

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**“...drive the changes demanded by the Independent Care Review to help ensure the complex labyrinth of interlinked ‘systems’ are fit-for-purpose and able to #KeepThePromise.”**

The term of office for the Independent Strategic Advisor ends in 2030— by which time the promise must be kept. Throughout this period, time, energy and resource will be centred to where it will have the greatest impact to accelerate pace and quality of change and clear the path for what is required next.

This Work Programme takes account of the conclusions of the report ‘[Improving care experience: Delivering The Promise](#)’ published by the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission, both where specific reference is made to the Independent Strategic Advisor and where it is considered that her intervention could increase pace or quality of change in initiatives that require greater progress.


For the promise to be kept, the day-to-day experiences of Scotland’s children, families and care experienced adults must continue to improve. For this to happen, they must be listened to, with what they say influencing decisions about their lives. This is something which requires sustained national and local change— within systems and everyday settings, across sectors and by multiple agencies, and to the culture of care.

## Driving the change

The Independent Strategic Advisor is driving this change, with this Work Programme providing an outline of the activities to be undertaken over the next 18 months. These are designed to inform and create the conditions for this change.

The Work Programme is designed to be flexible to allow the Independent Strategic Advisor to respond to opportunities as they arise and adapt to unexpected changes. This unique role has no statutory powers, and operates independently – without fear or favour – relying on strong, collaborative relationships.

Regular updates on progress against this Work Programme will be published, with insights used to offer advice.



**Day-to-day experiences of Scotland’s children, families and care experienced adults must continue to improve.**

## None of us live within a policy or system silo. The human cost of fragmented, disconnected services, all working to separate – or, worse still, competing – targets is huge.

Although there is no single organisation or sector that alone can keep the promise, the Scottish Government occupies a critical position—often at the source of the entire pipeline of change, holding the principal ‘system change’ levers (see [‘Meeting in the Middle’](#)).<sup>1</sup> A deeper understanding of the inter-relationships between government missions, portfolios, policies, and activities will enable intentional and explicit alignment to Scotland’s commitment to keep the promise. In turn, this will help in identifying cross-government priorities, strengthening cohesion, enabling more effective targeting of resources and reducing bureaucracy.

As a result, there will be improvements to public services and the quality of care and support Scotland’s children, families and care experience adults receive – and, therefore, their outcomes – with the workforce spending more time on what matters, operating more effectively and efficiently.

Keeping the promise is central to pursuit of three government missions: as a **DRIVER** for eradicating child poverty, an **ENABLER** for high quality, sustainable public services (public sector reform), and a contributor to realising the **OUTCOME** of growing the economy.

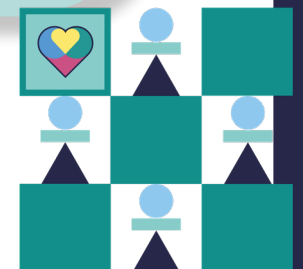
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1. The changes demanded by the promise requires reform across the broader landscape. Five areas have repeatedly been identified as the major bridges and the major barriers to the promise being kept. These are: **data, scrutiny, risk, money, and policy**. These are all interconnected and Plan 24-30 calls these meeting in the middle.



## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Keep abreast of government's missions, portfolios, policies and provide clarity on how they inter-relate (driver / enabler / outcome model) and align work to keep the promise.
- Ensure the First Minister, Deputy First Minister, Cabinet Sub Committee, all relevant Ministers, SpAds and officials are provided with support to identify cross-government priorities and viable propositions for greater cohesion.
- Maximise the potential of key milestones – e.g. the Strategic Spending Review, the annual budgeting cycle, PfG, May 2026 elections etc.
- Connect with relevant government reviews / inquiries / commissions on their activity and conclusions and how these could impact work to keep the promise.
- Keep Plan 24-30 up-to-date, reflecting progress by Scottish Government on delivery of its role and responsibility.
- Purposeful **decluttering of the legislative landscape**.



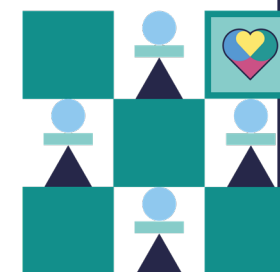
When the promise is kept, all Scotland's children will grow up safe, loved and respected everywhere, every day.

**Meanwhile, everyone everywhere deserves the very best Scotland can offer, every day.** By generating and supporting mechanisms to share good and best practice and working alongside those who need to make greater improvements, this aspiration can become the reality.

Five years of sustained change has tested the tolerance of Scotland's 'care system' – nationally and locally, without legislative or structural change – with organisations listening to what matters most to children, families and care experienced adults, and acting on this to improve how they care and demonstrate what good looks like. Continuous learning from what is working (and what is not), for who, where and how is generating insights.

Engendering an open learning culture and supporting 'catching up' will accelerate the pace and quality of change, drive consistency, and challenge the 'postcode lottery'.

Ultimately, listening to children, families and care experienced adults to understand their needs and aspirations must become 'the norm', embedded in planning, delivery and budget allocation— requiring system and culture change. Until that happens, Scotland must have mechanisms to offer the best it has to everyone, everywhere, every day.



## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Work with the care community to understand what is making the biggest difference to children and families and care experienced adults, where and why and use this to drive change.
- Support the development of the Promise Story of Progress which will highlight organisational learning and identify pace setters.
- Continual assessment of whether 'listening to understand and act' is embedded to determine what else is required for this to become 'the norm'.
- Use Plan 24-30 to:
  - assess good/poor practice and gaps
  - analyse bridges and barriers to change
  - use insights to support improvement and inform scrutiny
- Ensure areas struggling to make change are supported to catch up.



Thousands of people and organisations are dedicated to keeping the promise, all across Scotland. This is reflected in their plans, how they allocate resources, their day-to-day practice, and their culture. Plan 24-30 pulls content from these plans to reflect current commitments, and will provide future content for these plans on what is needed next, by when and who.

As per [Report THREE](#), the Oversight Board in the absence of a single plan for Scotland, the Independent Strategic Advisor took on responsibility for producing Plan 24-30 supported by The Promise Scotland. The plan is not a substitute for organisational plans, but will set expectations to determine pace of change and momentum, while making roles and responsibilities clear— to engender greater cross-sector, multi-agency planning and delivery to raise the bar on quality.

**This is a new approach to co-ordinated planning and collaborative delivery for Scotland, designed to drive and reflect change that is felt in the daily lives of children, families and care experienced adults, regardless of what service or sector or system they are engaged with.**

The evidence shows that the traditional ways of planning have not worked— Plan 24-30 is deliberately different, built on, and for, collaboration.

## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Work with leaders – national and local – on Plan 24-30:
  - to set a clear direction to drive the necessary change until 2030
  - to make clear responsibilities for change
  - in order for responsibility to shift from the Independent Strategic Advisor to those leaders.
- Continue to advise on and advocate for the urgent changes (systemic and service) needed.
- Amplify where Scotland is on track and highlight where the pace and scale of change must accelerate.



Report after report into why long-term change has not been realised has listed the same, persistent ‘sticky issues’ as ongoing barriers that get in the way:

- **policy** silos and the impact of their fragmentation;
- incomplete, out-of-date or simply wrong **data** that measures the wrong things;
- short-term, discordant distribution of public **money**;
- unclear accountability so ineffective **scrutiny**;
- lack of shared **risk** or worse still aversion to the risk of change.

Analysis of 160+ documents received from 100+ corporate parents cited these five issues as recurring barriers to keeping the promise. Despite decades of evidence of their deep, intertwined roots across multiple ‘systems’ and the old ways of tackling them not working, Scotland has not developed new ways that do.

A tool called **‘Meeting in the Middle’** has been developed to generate insights and innovative approaches to convert each barrier to a bridge. Testing has identified multiple opportunities to address complex, interconnected challenges; surfaced where responsibilities are shared across the pipeline of change (national ↔ local ↔ system ↔ setting *etc.*) and ascertained optimum pathways from diagnosis to solution.

**Meeting in the Middle may read like a technical ‘system change’ problem, but the impact of the failure to address it is most directly experienced at the point of service delivery— so solving it has the potential to transform lives.**



## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Work with leaders to apply 'Meeting in the Middle' to co-design implementable (scalable if appropriate) solutions to persistent, deep-rooted, complex system problems to help realise long-term systemic change and effective delivery.
- Continue work with the Strategic Public Sector Scrutiny Network to follow the 'scrutiny' route to 'become a nation that does not restrain its children'.
- Identify other usages of 'Meeting in the Middle' 'Meeting in the Middle' to accelerate pace and improve quality of change and prove *wider* concept (beyond what is understood to be the promise) to embed it as a tool to support public sector reform.
- The provenance of 'Meeting in the Middle' is work to keep the promise, but its further development, testing and application will be supported by the University of Glasgow's Centre for Public Policy.



## Strategic Priority: Developing and utilising a range of 'system problem solving tools'

The Promise Scotland continues to develop new approaches to help overcome barriers to change— like [the Promise Design School](#), to co-design new approaches in ways that meaningfully include 'experts' in their own experience, and [the What Matters Questions](#) to support practitioner to focus on what children and families told the Independent Care Review about what was important to them, as opposed to focusing on system data to assess change.

These – and other tools – have helped make sure that most of the 'systems' that needed to change first, change most or had the furthest to go are actively engaged in work to keep the promise - including many of the leaders of systems that previously considered themselves 'adjacent' to care – like health and justice, *etc.*

**However, there continue to be some on the periphery requiring more information to understand their role and responsibility— for promise to be kept, their active involvement is needed.**

To complement '[Meeting in the Middle](#)', a range of problem-solving tools are being developed. Currently, these include:

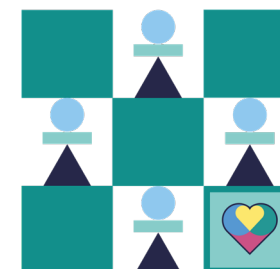
- new composite stories
- a policy ↔ system mapping tool
- a strategic approach to investment : disinvestment.

The new composite stories focus on Scotland when the promise is kept (as opposed to the original composites from the Independent Care Review that told the stories the review heard) will help bring new leaders/organisations into the work of change.

They will help organisations consider alternative ways to tell stories, to move away from practices that can be traumatising such as 'case studies'/'single story on a stage'.

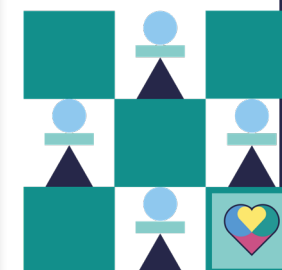
The '(policy) cause + effect = core policies + permeable systems' will continue to provide an evidence base that both qualifies and quantifies which policies and systems are experienced simultaneously providing national and local organisations with greater understanding of intersectionality and transgenerational patterns.

It supports the generation of propositions for new approaches to break these cycles. Alongside the 'strategic investment : disinvestment approach', this will demonstrate where pooled budgets would better support delivery. It will also address the continued inconsistencies between national and local engagement.



## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Co-design a toolkit for composite storytelling, and develop new composite stories.
- Develop 'the (policy) cause + effect = core policies + permeable systems' to provide evidence that new approaches are needed.
- Develop 'strategic investment : disinvestment approach' to demonstrate where better flow of money will support change.
- Progress the development of an app that would track, capture and analyse statutory data sets to:
  - provide evidence on intersectionality (national data) across siloed policies / discrete systems
  - demonstrated transgenerational patterns (national compared to local data)
  - facilitate focused proposition development - thematic/multi-sector/place based
  - inform budget decisions
  - continue dialogue with grant-makers and philanthropists about the establishment of a prevention pot.
- Identify networks and groups exploring relevant issues to learn and share learning.
- Although the provenance of these tools was in pursuit of keeping the promise, their potential application is much wider, so further development, testing and usage will be supported by the University of Glasgow's Centre for Public Policy. If required, new system problem solving tools will be developed as more is known about the systemic public policy bridges and barriers to change supported by analysis about how to support positive change.



**The sole purpose of The Promise Scotland (and the Independent Strategic Advisor) is to fulfil its role and meet its responsibilities – to help make sure that by 2030 the promise crafted by and made to the care community is kept – and put itself out of business.**

The Promise Scotland (a non-statutory company wholly owned and funded by Scottish Ministers) occupies a unique position within a traditional statutory landscape. Committed to being a change agent whilst not building itself into the 'system', fulfilling its' task and making itself obsolete is unusual and requires a very specific type of governance with a focus on:

- sustaining the profile of Scotland's work to keep the promise at a national and local level whilst supporting delivery
- making sure activities in The Promise Scotland's rolling Strategic Work Programmes support positive impacts on the care community, whilst not taking credit for change
- generating insights and foresight to drive continuous improvement within a rapidly evolving environment whilst being able to operate flexibly and adapt to remain relevant and useful.

## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Fulfil governance responsibilities as Director and Chair of The Promise Scotland providing leadership and assurance:
  - Meet duties as defined by governing documents and the Companies Act.
  - Chair quarterly board meetings (supported two sub-committees - Finance and Audit and Risk).
  - Chair the Annual General Meeting and the annual strategy session (inviting the Permanent Secretary)
  - Optimise the effectiveness of the board to secure buy-in from sectors beyond those traditionally considered 'care'
  - Develop a glide path planning to obsolescence.
  - Provide advice, support and challenge to the Chief Executive and the Promise Scotland team.



For three years, the Independent Care Review understood directly from the care community what changes Scotland had to make for children, families and care experienced adults to thrive. For the last five, since the promise was made, Independent Strategic Advisor's focus has been to inform and drive those changes across and within the sectors responsible for making that change. Sustaining an understanding of what they are doing and what impact it is having will remain the focus for the coming five.

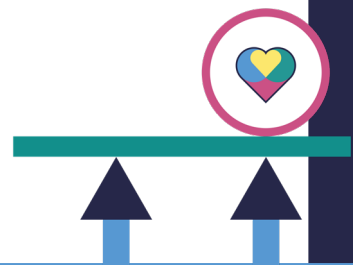
This includes identifying the 'pace setters'— those intent on making a positive difference in the day to day lives of children and families and care, who:

- immediately accepted the old ways weren't working, changed their approaches and tried new things
- are determined to go faster, to increase the pace of change and up the momentum so the promise is kept on time, or better still— sooner
- committed to overcoming barriers and solving problems to forge new paths
- brave enough to challenge cultural inertia and call out poor practice.

**Pace setters don't only disrupt the status quo, increase momentum and set new minimum standards, they listen, and they care— and their perseverance is contagious.**

## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Identify and support pace setters.
- Work with Scottish Government to support pace setters to secure the support they need, remove obstacles and help demonstrate their impact.
- Work with the pace setters on how to build new bridges and overcome persistent barriers.
- Champion the work of the pace setters.

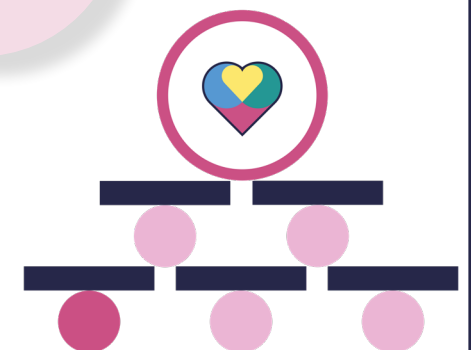


As the head of the Scottish Government, the First Minister has ultimate responsibility for policy decisions, the appointment of his team of Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers and oversight of government operations and public bodies. He has the authority to bring together those responsible for change.

**In his letter reappointing the Independent Strategic Advisor, the First Minister was clear about what he wants from the postholder, including an effective, collaborative relationship and open communication so advice, proactive and reactive, can be given. The content and milestones in this Work Programme will inform this.**

## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Regularly meet the First Minister, attend the Cabinet Sub-Committee and regularly communication with the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise on key issues Including wherever necessary, other Ministers.
- Publish updates on progress against the Work Programme, and use insights to offer advice including to Ministers and officials, cross-party, leaders and pace setters.
- Assess five years of promise-related activities against 'Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy— Delivering for Scotland' to identify opportunities and challenges to make progress and to continue engagement with the Minister for Public Finance.



Making a promise can be the easy part: keeping it is often more challenging.

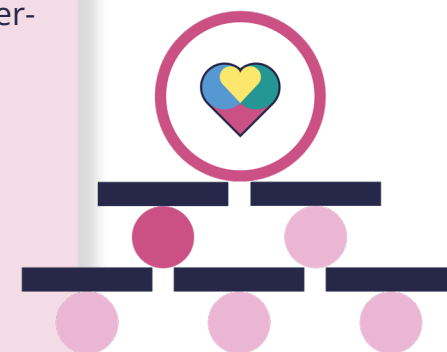
Scotland has embarked on a decade-long programme, covering two political terms. Legislative reform is essential to increase the spend and quality of change, to clear the path for what is needed next, and to cement positive changes so they sustain long-term. This task sits with the devolved (legal competency) of the Scottish Parliament, and Members perform an essential role including through the work of the committees scrutinising Bills, asking questions and taking part in debates, and through voting.

**Therefore, sustaining relationships across parties with agreement on *what* Scotland has to do – keep the promise – is essential, especially when there is disagreement on *how* to do this.**

As is engaging with the UK parliament on reserved issues with a cross-border impact on children, families and care experienced adults— with both requiring independence and impartiality.

## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Continue to meet MSPs and engage with parliamentary committees to retain cross-party support and progress issues such as the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill and implementation).
- Support manifesto planning for the 2026 elections, ensuring that all political parties are clear on the important role they play in driving forward the necessary change.
  - Welcome and brief new (2026) MSPs, party spokespeople and members of relevant parliamentary committees.
- Continue engagement with UK Government on cross-border issues, specifically the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families.
- Prepare for the Scottish Local Government Elections— 6 May 2027



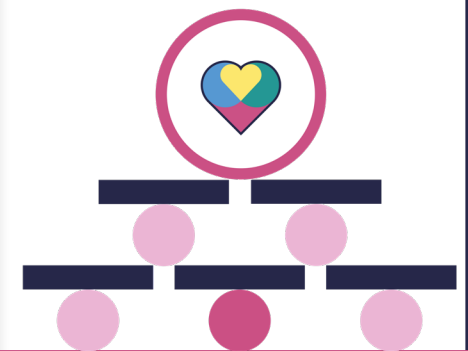
Just as the Scottish Government is typically the source of the pipeline of 'care system' system change, the main statutory duties for 'service delivery' sit with local authorities, so, although they are not entirely responsible for experiences and outcomes, it is their teams who are most often at the frontline, working to keep the promise.

Local government has a unique perspective into the effectiveness of the 'pipeline of change', where traditional (national) 'top-down' versus (local) 'bottom up' has been most impactful and why. They understand how policy silos affect funding flows, at worse unduly skewing resource allocation, how targets and reporting can contribute to perverse outcomes and demand significant amounts of time for reporting.

**Sustaining positive, trusting and collaborative working relationships will help navigating to 2030, generate insights and support new opportunities and shared resources to keep the promise. And, critically, for the care community, progress the creation of “an environment and culture where finding and maintaining safe, loving, respectful relationships is the norm”.**

## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Secure invitations to give regular updates at the COSLA Children and Young People Committee and Solace meetings on what else is needed, pace setters, insights *etc.*
- Make best use of Plan 24-30 to engender collaboration within and across local government and beyond.
- Follow up on insights generated from the [Keeping the promise: A local perspective report](#) and the care community.
- Identify and recruit pace setters and places to seed ideas.
- Prepare for Scottish Local Government Elections— 6 May 2027.



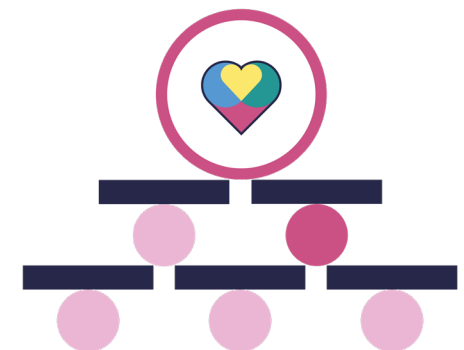
No one lives in a silo or relies on any single institution for their wellbeing.

Although most of the principal 'system change' levers sit with the Scottish Government and the main statutory duties for 'service delivery' sit with local authorities, there is no single organisation or sector that alone can keep the promise— and it is not the sole responsibility of those working in the 'care system'. The promise must be known and understood wherever children, families and care experienced adults are.

**Whilst this Work Programme aims to capture how the Independent Strategic Advisor will discharge her responsibility, ultimately responsibility to make change happen sits with those in charge of systems and services. This matters for wholesale change.**

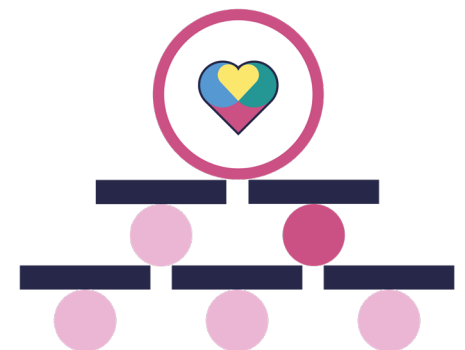
Change that builds on what is working, to make sure everyone experiences the best Scotland has to offer— and that stops what is not working, to redirect resources to be more effective. Change that increases the pace of change, sets a new speed and momentum. Change that embraces new opportunities, for example explores what can be realised from tech, areas that continue to be under understood in the context of keeping the promise. With clarity needed about which organisations are responsible, and which are accountable for change.

Proposed changes to legislation could result in Integrated Joint Boards (IJBs) having the same statutory duties as local authorities and health boards in the development and implementation of children's services plans, extending accountability to these Boards, creating a tripartite system.



## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Work to a timebound schedule of targeted, engagement with the nine priority sectors identified to immediately improve progress opportunities to drive further change, engender greater leadership and ownership.
- Secure invitations to meet organisations and attend key groupings.
- Support the development of collaborations and effective working relationships.
- Identify and recruit pace setters and places to see new ideas.
- Keep track of the changes proposed to legislation and the possible role of Integrated Joint Boards (IJBs) in terms of statutory duties.



Officials have a critical role to play in work to keep the promise. Civil servants provide advice to Ministers, have responsibilities for implementing policies to deliver public services and manage resources— not just in Scottish government but across the plethora of agencies that make up the wider government family.

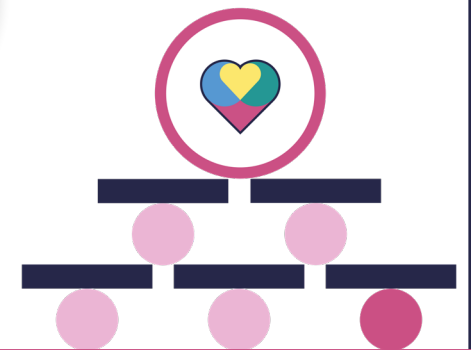
As detailed across this Work Programme, the active collaboration of officials will either enable and accelerate change or hinder it.

Many recognise the challenges from their siloed operations, within departments and across the external agencies— and are committed to working to improve this.

Independent Strategic Advisor must sustain good working relationships in pursuit of the former. This involves engaging officials in change, sharing knowledge, offering practical solutions and challenging where appropriate.

## What will the Independent Strategic Advisor do?

- Regular meetings with the Permanent Secretary including an annual meeting to discuss performance in relation to the three functions associated with the role “with particular recognition given to the independent nature of the appointment”.
- Meet quarterly with the Director-General For Education and Justice and whenever necessary with the Director for Children and Families.
- Work with civil servants to support resetting public services.





## And finally...

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At the time of publishing this Work Programme, there are 61 months left until the promise must be kept in full to everyone, everywhere, every day. It provides a snapshot of planned activity over the first 18 of these months, intended to keep Scotland heading in the right direction at a greater pace. The reason for the short planning timeframes is to help make sure these activities remains relevant and practical in what has to continue to be a rapidly changing environment. So, all said, it is subject to change. If you have any comments, please get in touch with me via [hello@thepromise.scot](mailto:hello@thepromise.scot) and make your email for the attention of Fiona, the Independent Strategic Advisor.

Thank you.

*Rina*