

Ensuring Scotland's children grow up loved, safe and respected

How the next Scottish Government and
Parliament can make sure that Scotland
keeps the promise



The Independent Care Review listened to over 5,500 children and adults with experience of care and members of the paid and unpaid workforce.

When it published its findings in February 2020, Scotland made a promise to transform its approach to care so by 2030 **all children grow up loved, safe and respected to realise their full potential**.

It will be the continued responsibility of the next Scottish Government, Members of the Scottish Parliament and other duty bearers to make sure that the promise made to Scotland's children, families and care experienced adults is kept.

Therefore, this paper is to inform all political parties standing ahead of the Scottish Parliament election in May 2026, about what must to happen to keep the promise by 2030, to support their discussions and guide their decisions.

To understand the breadth and importance of Scotland's commitment, take Isla's story— one of 12 composite stories developed by the Independent Care Review to represent all children and none. Isla experienced the 'care system' throughout her childhood. She felt unseen and unheard in decisions about her life and did not always have the support and love she needed— reflecting what far too many children experience when the promise is not kept and will continue to if Scotland does not take the necessary action.



Summary

For the promise to be kept, all political parties must:

- Clearly state their commitment to the promise made to Scotland's children in their manifestos.
- Work collaboratively to address the systemic barriers getting in the way of change by:
 - Creating a clear legislative environment.
 - Ending short-term and siloed funding, engendering good practice within commissioning.
 - Improving data collection.
 - Strengthening scrutiny, accountability and governance.
 - Using unique levers to enable shared responsibility and long-term outcomes, not to drive compliance or blame, signalling trust in the workforce and creating conditions for confident, collective decisions rather than risk-averse ones.
- Clearly state their support for the development of Plan 24-30 and the implementation of the route maps for change.



Cross-party support

“The promise makes me feel safe. I know that people are out there doing work for us and making things better.”

Board Member, Our Hearings, Our Voice

Sustained cross-party support has meant there is no political impediment to the promise being kept. Progress has been made in many areas as a result – from supporting children and families to stay together, to embedding rights and voice into overarching frameworks and structures, to improving the experiences children, families and care experienced adults have with the ‘system’.

There is still a lot to do. This will require strong political leadership to maintain a laser focus on 2030, to drive forward wholesale change at rapid pace and hold to account those responsible for making these changes.

The Promise Scotland has asked all political parties to clearly state their commitment to the promise by including the following in their manifestos:

“We remain committed to keep the promise so by 2030 all children grow up loved, safe and respected and realise their full potential.”

Addressing the systemic barriers

Keeping the promise demands transforming the entirety of how Scotland cares, placing children, young people, families, and care experienced adults at the centre of changes to the 'care system' and all the other systems that are experienced simultaneously. This requires keeping families together wherever safe to do so, ensuring children who cannot remain at home have a happy childhood alongside their siblings and are loved, safe and protected, and that care experienced adults continue to thrive.

Work to keep the promise is set against a challenging fiscal environment, a workforce experiencing significant recruitment and retention challenges, burnout and a lack of capacity and resource, and a cost-of-living crisis which has increased pressure on families and the services which support them.

Therefore, the Scottish Government must work with all parties in the next Parliament and partners, including Local Government, to address the systemic barriers by:

- **Creating an enabling and clear legislative environment.** This means committing to 'decluttering' the landscape in the next Parliament by consolidating a number of existing pieces of legislation and make rights and duties easier for children, families, care experienced adults and the workforce to access and understand.
- **Fixing short-term, siloed and ringfenced funding and commissioning practices** that block sustainable services, lasting relationships and long-term investment.
- **Improving data collection** so that what is reported on and measured is what matters most to children, young people, families, and care experienced adults, and can enable those working alongside them to support them in ways that will make the most difference.



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- **Assessing, managing and mitigating risk**, modelling the long-term, big-picture approach that is needed by setting national expectations, aligning resources and scrutiny. This involves supporting leaders to take measured, collective decisions that prioritise whole-life outcomes as well as short-term safety. This includes a relentless focus on addressing the challenges with workforce recruitment and retention and ensuring that the workforce feel better supported and that children, families and care experienced adults are able to have safe, loving relationships.
 - **Strengthening scrutiny, accountability and governance** around the promise across all systems and sectors that work alongside children, families and care experienced adults. Scotland must know how it is doing in its journey to keep the promise— and children, families and care experienced adults must feel assured that these changes are being measured and will be felt in their lives.

To create the optimum conditions for change, all national agendas must be clearly linked and aligned, for example broader public service reform to improve outcomes for children. When changes are made in one part of the 'care system', the impact will be felt elsewhere. Strong partnership working with the wider government family – including local authorities, plus the third sector – is vital, and changes must be thoughtful, sequenced and well resourced.



What will 2030 look like?

With clear focus, brave decision-making and sustained cross-party support, over the next Parliament from 2026-2030, the promise can be kept. Leadership to address systemic barriers will accelerate the pace of change to achieve the vision.

Keeping the promise means that by 2030:

- Children and families will get early help and support, including those living 'on the edges of care, so they can stay together where safe to do so.
- Children and young people who cannot live with their families will have consistent caregivers and belong to a safe and loving home, with their brothers and sisters when safe to do so.
- Children and young people will have safe, stable, comfortable homes where they are happy and loved. Their transition from these homes will be supportive, and will prepare them for the move from childhood to adulthood.
- Care experienced adults will know and understand the rights they have and how to access help and support whenever they need it.
- There are clear lines of responsibility and accountability for all aspects of 'care'.

By 2030, the changes called for by the Independent Care Review will have been achieved to the extent that Scotland's interconnected systems work together as a coherent, fit-for-purpose whole. This will enable the paid and unpaid workforce to be supported and empowered to keep the promise for everyone, every day everywhere—ensuring that children, families, and care-experienced adults receive the consistent, compassionate care and support they deserve.

For more detail on the specific actions the next Scottish Government needs to take to make this happen, see below.

Scottish Government actions required to keep the promise

The Promise Scotland has developed an approach to drive and support change— [Plan 24-30](#). It is a dynamic website that is designed to be flexible as progress is made. All conclusions from the Independent Care Review are clustered under 25 route maps, identified on the website across the promise's foundations— **voice**, **family**, **care**, **people** and **scaffolding**. Specific actions for the next Scottish Government are summarised below.

For more information and actions for other duty bearers please see the Plan 24-30 website.

Voice

- Embed the voices of children, families and care experienced adults in decision-making processes that affect them.
- Work in partnership with the care community to inform necessary changes in policy, legislation and guidance to the 'language of care'.
- Complete the redesign of the Children's Hearings System so it upholds the rights of children and their families and operates inquisitorially. This includes removing Grounds Hearings and ensuring that all children and families who need it have access to legal representation and independent advocacy.
- Ensure listening to children and families is embedded throughout corporate parenting plans.

Family

- Making early help the primary focus for services and investment, rather than crisis support, including clear targets around preventative spend.
- Provide support to local areas to shift towards providing universally accessible emotional, practical and financial family support to help keep families together wherever safe to do so.

- Clearly address the link between poverty and care via local child poverty delivery plans.
- Prioritise sustainable funding for whole family support.
- Make family group decision making consistently available for children, families and care experienced adults where appropriate.
- Ensure community-based intensive support is available in each local area for all families who need it, and align it with the work being done to ensure that there are alternative options for Secure Care.

Care

- Prioritise and implement the recommendations from the Staying Together and Connected Working Group at pace to ensure children who cannot live with their families belong to safe and loving homes, staying with their brothers and sisters wherever safe, and building lasting relationships.
- Ensure care experienced children are not excluded from school and educational establishments are provided with the support that they need to uphold their corporate parenting responsibilities.
- Provide, and ensure access to, the physical and mental health support children, young people, families and care experienced adults need, including thoughtful, trauma informed therapies.
- Put in place a statutory framework around restraint that applies to all settings of care. Ensure all restraint and use of seclusion is recorded and reported on so that Scotland can understand its use and monitor progress towards its cessation.
- Increase the age of criminal responsibility, and ensure children's rights are upheld when they are in conflict with the law. This includes amending current legislation so that children can be held in 'places of safety' as an alternative to police custody.

- Address children experiencing lots of moves via the work to reform foster care in Scotland and by better supporting kinship and foster carers. This includes improving the financial support that carers need to keep children safe, nurtured and loved.
- Ensure children and young people are supported to maintain strong and sustainable relationships with important people in their lives, including, where safe, their brothers and sisters.
- Remove the cliff edges in statute, where necessary and put a statutory 'right to return' in place to support care experienced young people to move into adulthood with security, support and opportunity. Expand existing 'aftercare' and 'continuing care' provisions and better outline a national 'offer' to care experienced young people and adults.
- Ensure that care experienced young people and adults have a safe and comfortable home. They will not experience homelessness, and good practice will be shared across local authorities, including by expanding availability of projects that work such as the National House Project.
- Ensure all care experienced young people and adults can access advocacy, health, housing, education, and employment and financial support so they can thrive throughout their lives.

People

- Dedicate investment, time and resources to the plans which are being developed to robustly address the current challenges in workforce recruitment and retention.
- Undertake collaborative work with Local Government and the third sector to ensure that there are innovative new ways for the workforce to feel valued and supported to work relationally alongside families and to provide early and intensive help and support.

Scaffolding

- Focus public service reform on prevention, joined-up working, and measuring and understanding what truly matters to children, families and communities.
- Continue and further develop the work that has begun to remove profit from care.
- Make changes to the current model for delivering Secure Care in Scotland.
- Fully sequence, implement and resource existing policy and legislative commitments and duties that help support children and families and care experienced adults.
- Systematically prioritise and uphold the rights of children and care experienced adults, including by ensuring that new legislation is fully within the scope of the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 and that all care experienced children, families and adults are aware of their rights and how to access them.
- Retain both the Ministerial post for Children, Young People and The Promise, and the Cabinet sub-committee for The Promise.

About us

The Promise Scotland exists to support Scotland as it works to keep the promise to Scotland's children, families and care experienced people following the conclusions of the Independent Care Review. This includes supporting all the parties elected to the Scottish Parliament.

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The Promise Scotland thanks everyone working alongside them for helping to inform this paper.

