



SUMMARY: Halfway Point Report: August 2026

About this report

This report marks the halfway point in my 18-month work programme. It considers what I have done, the contribution that work has made, whether the intended impact is happening and what needs to change during the remaining nine months.

Shared with

Scottish Government, COSLA and Solace

Shared on

7 September 2026

Why this matters

Scotland is beyond the halfway point between making the promise in 2020 and the deadline for keeping it in 2030. There is significant commitment, determination and activity across Scotland. The question is whether that activity is yet adding up consistently to the experiences and outcomes promised to babies, children, families and care experienced adults.

The remaining nine months of my work programme will increasingly focus on what turns evidence and advice into action: where responsibility lies, where authority sits and what would accelerate progress now and beyond the end of my current work programme.

What I have concluded so far

Commitment is not the problem. Despite activity, progress, babies, infants, children, young people, families and care experienced adults are not yet consistent experiencing what they were promised. And all of this activity does not yet add up to coherent collective delivery.

Keeping the promise cannot be delivered by individual organisations acting alone. Plan 24–30 provides a shared framework with many of the barriers to implementation are connected to the wider conditions in which public services operate, including funding, governance, workforce, data, accountability and policy.



What happens next

My focus in the second half of my Work Programme will be on turning what I have learned into action by those with the authority and responsibility to act. To be clear about where progress is being made; the barriers that persist; where responsibility and authority sit; and how keeping the promise connects to wider public service reform and prevention.

Evidence and advice must lead to decisions, responsibility must lead to action, and that action must result in better experiences and outcomes.

Status: action underway / further action required

Scotland is making progress. There is stronger strategic alignment and a growing understanding of what enables change and what gets in its way. But the intended impact is not yet being achieved consistently. The next phase of my work will use those insights to provide focused advice and support coordinated action.

[Read the full report below.](#)

**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027
Halfway Point Report (August 2026)**



1. PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

The post of the Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise (ISA) was established to provide strategic advice, challenge and support to help ensure Scotland keeps the promise.

In November 2025, the ISA published an 18-month [work programme](#) to be transparent about her work and accountable for its delivery. It details her activities, demonstrates how she operates independently, and that everything she does is intended to contribute to a single purpose: Scotland keeps the promise. This Halfway Point Report provides an update at the nine-month point and sits alongside the detailed context already provided to the incoming Cabinet Secretary, Minister, and refreshed Cabinet post election.

2. THE HALFWAY POINT (AUGUST 2026)

There are three functions associated with the role of ISA: strategy, delivery and relationships with the work programme organising priority activities around these:

S T R A T E G Y	a) Sustained alignment to government priorities	D E L I V E R Y	a) Via The Promise Scotland	R E L A T I O N S	a) With the First Minister, Cabinet Sub-Committee and Ministers
	b) Building on progress and positive change				b) Sustaining cross-party support
	c) Supporting the development of Plan 24-30 and setting expectations of what next		b) Via pace setters		c) Across local government
	d) Creating pathways to solve system problems – via Meeting in the Middle				d) With sectors, organisations and groups committed to change - and who must change
	e) Developing and utilising a range of ‘system problem solving toolkit’				e) With government officials

Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)



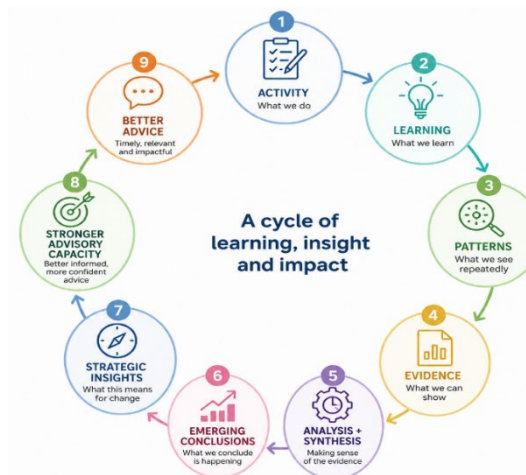
The ISA continues to work across parliament, government – national, local government and wider public services - and the voluntary and business sectors to maintain commitment to keeping the promise and ensure it is connected to both the broader reform agenda and to day-to-day delivery. The first nine months of delivery of this work programme have focused on strengthening the evidence for change, building the relationships through which that evidence can be tested and acted on, and identifying where greater coherence and alignment is required. The remaining nine months will increasingly focus on ways to spread learning, on building strong evidence and producing advice based on this, so work so far influences and informs what next.

The Programme for Government 2026–31 provides a stronger context for this next phase, with explicit commitments to prevention, public service reform and keeping the promise, creating greater opportunity to translate the evidence and advice developed through the ISA role into implementation and system change.

Across Scotland, determination to keep the promise remains strong. The change still required spans national and local systems, structures and services and is closely connected to wider ambitions for prevention and public service reform. Ensuring children and families can access early, ongoing and intensive support offers an opportunity to improve outcomes, make better use of public resources and advance multiple policy ambitions through a more coherent approach. This further highlights that work to keep the promise cannot be treated as a discrete or parallel policy initiative. This reality influences how the ISA approaches her work, focusing on the relationships between strategy, evidence and implementation to:

- ♥ connect Plan 24-30 to wider government priorities and Public Service Reform;
- ♥ identify where progress is being made. understanding what enables it, and how to learn from it and apply the learning;
- ♥ strengthen expectations about how to implement Plan 24-30 and clarity on what this requires;
- ♥ identify the structural and systemic barriers that continue to prevent change; and
- ♥ continue to develop practical approaches to help the system understand and address those barriers.

Rightly, as change happens, the conversation about what needs to change now and next continues to evolve. An intentional shift from listing activities that organisations need to do, and how individual services have to change, brings greater focus on how to create the conditions for change across the entirety of the systems.



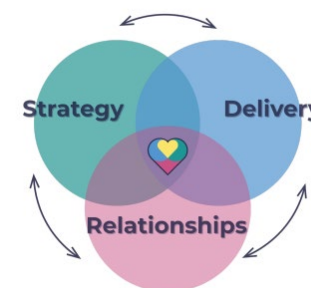


3. PROGRESS AGAINST THE WORK PROGRAMME

The following sections are organised around the three functions of the ISA role: strategy, delivery and relationships, and the 12 priorities set out in the work programme. The three functions are closely connected, and activity will often contribute to more than one priority.

To avoid duplication, this report distinguishes between:

- 💖 **Strategy:** what has been learned and how this has been developed into strategic evidence;
- 💖 **Delivery:** how learning is being translated into actions to support delivery and implementation; and
- 💖 **Relationships:** who the ISA has worked with, and how the relationships through which evidence has been gathered need to develop.



For each priority, the report therefore sets out:

- 💖 **Key activities:** a summary of work ISA has done;
- 💖 **Contribution:** what ISA's work has added, enabled or influenced;
- 💖 **Impact:** the extent to which there is evidence of the intended change having occurred and/or further change needed; and
- 💖 **Next phase:** what follows from the work to date.

Contribution and impact are deliberately distinguished. The ISA can make a substantive contribution by providing evidence, advice, challenge, connections or practical support, with the intended system impact not having yet occurred. This is particularly important at the halfway point of an 18-month work programme in the context of a 10-year change horizon. The ongoing work to keep the promise means Scotland's approach to care was different in 2025 (when this work programme was published) to how it was in 2020, with further change at the point of this report – and it must be different again next May when this period of work will come to an end, and every May after that.

Work won't stop in 2030, however by that time

"...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."

[extract from the paper to the Cabinet Sub Committee on the Promise on 11 November 2025].

**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027
Halfway Point Report (August 2026)**



3.1 Strategy

a) Sustained alignment to government priorities - what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would:

- ♥ align government priorities and missions with keeping the promise
- ♥ support coherence across portfolios and national policy
- ♥ influence key government processes, including budgets, spending reviews and Programme for Government

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months the ISA has:

- ♥ Supported the development and implementation of key pieces of policy and legislation that will ensure Scotland keeps its promise:
 - ♥ development of the new Kinship Care Vision;
 - ♥ Children (Care, Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2025 - in particular with respect to the changes linked to Secure Care; and
 - ♥ Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 – specifically, the ISA worked with all political parties to secure unanimous support for the 2026 Act from the Scottish Parliament and pushed for a number of changes at Stage 2 and 3 to strengthen the Act in line with what was heard during the Independent Care Review.
- ♥ Worked to sustain cross-party support, including:
 - The development of The Promise Scotland's pre- election positioning paper, maintaining relationships with all party leaders and spokespeople and ensuring party manifestos included commitment to the promise.
 - Writing to new MSPs and providing briefing papers on their role and responsibility for keeping the promise by 2030
 - Met the new Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic and new Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, providing them with written and verbal updates on progress and advice on what still needs to happen.
- ♥ Developed a comprehensive evidence base to underpin the below:
 - Setting out of the pre-existing work detailed in Plan 24-30 that the Scottish Government must undertake in 2026 to keep the promise, and further actions set out in the route maps for coming years that must take place in the early term of the new Parliament.
 - A proposition on Intensive Family Support sent to the First Minister at his request for a priority to consider for Programme for Government 2026/27

S T R A T E G Y	a) Sustained alignment to government priorities
	b) Building on progress and positive change
	c) Supporting the development of Plan 24-30 and setting expectations of what next
	d) Creating pathways to solve system problems – via Meeting in the Middle
	e) Developing and utilising a range of 'system problem solving tools'



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

- An Advice Note for Cabinet Secretary on Public Service Reform detailing how work to keep the promise maps across ‘Scotland’s Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland’ and the how it links to the ongoing work to bring together the whole family wellbeing fund, whole family support and the Fairer Futures Partnerships.

Please see pages 17 and 18 for full list of correspondence

Contribution

The ISA continues to produce substantial evidence and information to inform the Advice Notes.

To underpin the Advice Note on Intensive Family Support, a combination of desk-based national mapping of provision across Scotland’s 32 local authorities, identification of services demonstrating strong outcomes that could be scaled, analysis of unmet need, and strategic advice to Scottish Government on how Intensive Family Support could become a practical cross-government reform priority were undertaken. This brought together evidence on children and families experiences, wellbeing and public spending to demonstrate that Intensive Family Support is not simply a children’s services approach, but a practical example of prevention and public service reform in action. The research, led by The Promise Scotland, found a diverse yet often fragmented landscape.

There are strong examples of Intensive Family Support operating across Scotland, including support that has helped children remain safely with their families, supported families to come back together, reduced the use of residential and out-of-authority care and, in several cases, demonstrated significant cost avoidance. At the same time, the mapping showed that access to this kind of support is inconsistent and that there is work to be done to understand a clear national picture of unmet need. The work also brought together wider indicators - including child poverty, child protection, domestic abuse, temporary accommodation, family wellbeing, mental health and addiction - to begin to demonstrate the scale of need that sits behind current service provision.

The Advice Note provided to the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform and Scottish Government officials to explore the relationship between Public Service Reform, the National Performance Framework and Plan 24-30 builds on the proposition that keeping the promise must not be seen as a discrete government agenda or priority. Rather, the outcomes throughout Plan 24-30 are closely connected to ambitions around child poverty, health and wellbeing, communities, whole-family support and public service reform.

Impact

In terms of Intensive Family Support, by providing one of the clearest examples to date of how keeping the promise can meet the needs of those who need support and connect directly to wider government priorities, the proposition has generated sector support around shared intent.



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

The evidence shows that working intensively alongside families contributes simultaneously multiple policy areas - reducing poverty, improving family wellbeing, keeping children safely – and with their families where possible, reducing pressure on the ‘care system’ and making better use of public resources. It therefore creates a practical bridge between the existing commitments of the promise, Whole Family Support and Public Service Reform.

The Advice Note developed from this evidence seeks to position Intensive Family Support as a practical cross-government reform priority with the potential to demonstrate how prevention-focused public services can work differently. This is important because it moves the discussion beyond whether Intensive Family Support is effective and what good looks like – both of which already have substantial evidence bases underpinning them - and the evidence assembled through the work further reinforces that effective approaches already exist.

The reform question is now how Scotland creates the funding, governance, accountability and delivery conditions needed to make that support consistently available to families who need it. This is a unique set of responsibilities that only the Scottish Government has. The Programme for Government subsequently committed to ensuring that learning about the value of intensive family support is embedded within ongoing work to keep the promise. This provides an important opportunity to move the advice from proposition towards implementation, including testing the wider funding, governance and delivery conditions required for intensive family support to be consistently available.

Next phase

A meeting is being arranged between the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform and the ISA to discuss the proposition set out in the Advice Note and any next steps. It sets out a strong shared strategic narrative - Plan 24-30 can contribute directly to wider government priorities and can provide a practical route through which wider reform ambitions can be tested and demonstrated.

The letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic and Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise of 26th August sets out a number of issues and requests that will be addressed in the next phase of work. In the interests of not delaying this report, they are acknowledged here but not responded to in full.

b) Building on progress and positive change - What the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would:

-  identify where progress is being made, and understand why;
 - capture, promote and spread effective practice
-  identify pace setters;



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

- ♥ promote learning across systems to reduce postcode variation of experience and outcome;
- ♥ challenge where progress could increase or improve with different local actions;
- ♥ surface systemic or structural barriers to improvement;
- ♥ support the development of the Promise Story of Progress; and
- ♥ support the usage and development of Plan 24-30.

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months the ISA has worked with COSLA and all 32 local authority areas to develop a schedule of engagement with cross-sector, multi-agency, partners. The approach is deliberately focused not simply on asking whether areas are making progress, but on understanding:

- ♥ What is working well here, and why?
- ♥ What is proving harder to achieve, and why do the barriers persist?
- ♥ Where has change been significant or accelerated, and what enabled it?
- ♥ What explains variation between localities, including what can be resolved locally and what requires action nationally or elsewhere in the system?
- ♥ What can be learned and applied more widely, by whom - and what needs to happen next to accelerate progress?

The first eight visits have now been completed, and analysis of the emerging evidence has begun. The detailed findings from individual local area visits are being reported separately. This report does not replicate those findings. Instead, it draws out the cross-cutting learning emerging from the visits that is relevant to the ISA's strategic role and the next phase of the work. As the visits progress, the findings from them will build a cumulative picture of what is changing, what enables or constrains progress, and what action is required locally, nationally, and collectively, including by The Promise Scotland.

Alongside this, the evidence the ISA has drawn together on existing evidence and examples of effective Intensive Family Support already operating across Scotland and information on where the infrastructure for scale already exists is important. This has helped shift the emphasis away from designing entirely new models towards understanding and spreading approaches that are already demonstrating value.

Contribution

The schedule of engagement is surfacing new insights into how change happens to services, practice and cultures over time and therefore the specific challenges that must be overcome for scale. This provides an opportunity to see beyond simply identifying variation between places towards understanding the reasons for that variation, including the organisational, financial, leadership, workforce and system conditions that enable or



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

constrain progress. This is an important shift towards learning from the services in and around the ‘care system’ rather than simply assessing them – a key step in sustaining and increasing the pace required to keep the promise.

Impact

The work is contributing to a strong, collective understanding of the conditions that appear to be necessary to make sustainable transformation possible. There is not yet sufficient evidence to conclude that this learning is being applied systematically across Scotland. The impact at this stage is therefore principally in the quality of the evidence available: with ISA distinguishing between effective practice in places, the conditions that enable it, the barriers that inhibit it and the respective action required locally, collectively and nationally. This strengthens the basis on which ISA can provide strategic advice about where change must accelerate or improve, and where national action is required to create the conditions for keeping the promise at a national and local level.

Next phase

The next phase will complete the series of focused outputs and learning from the local area engagement. These will connect, where appropriate, to Plan 24–30 route maps, the Promise Story of Progress and wider implementation of work to keep the promise. Learning will also be shared through The Promise Scotland’s regional networks, learning collaboratives and other appropriate forums. The aim is to ensure that local engagement results in cumulative learning and practical action rather than becoming a series of individual reports.

The ISA will increasingly use the evidence across areas to distinguish between:

- ♥ what local areas can change themselves;
- ♥ where organisations need to act collectively; and
- ♥ where national or structural change is required.

c) Supporting the development of Plan 24-30 and setting expectations of what comes next - What the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would:

- ♥ shape the strategic direction of Plan 24–30
- ♥ clarify responsibilities for delivery across the system
- ♥ encourage ownership by leaders rather than reliance on the ISA role
- ♥ highlight and amplify examples of success and
- ♥ identify where acceleration is required and advocate for urgent action



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months ISA has continued to support the development and implementation of Plan 24-30, including updates to the route maps, the Promise Story of Progress and the website on which both are hosted in December 2025. This work has helped clarify Plan 24-30 as the practical planning and monitoring framework for keeping the promise. It has strengthened the clarity and focus of the outcomes that need to be achieved for the promise to be kept, the responsibilities of different parts of the system and the areas where greater pace and clarity are required.

The ISA has also provided strategic advice relating to the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 as it was progressing through Parliament, seeking to ensure that legislative development supports rather than sits separately from implementation of Plan 24-30. The Intensive Family Support and Public Service Reform Advice Notes are intended to make the expectations of implementation more tangible by showing what wider reform could look like when applied to a specific national priority.

Contribution

There is now greater clarity about the role of Plan 24-30 as the framework through which the promise should be delivered. The work has also reinforced an important principle: the ISA can provide challenge, advice and support, but responsibility for delivery sits with the leaders and organisations responsible for making change happen. The role is therefore not to create dependency on the ISA or to put in place a linear plan, but to continue to help create the conditions, clarity and accountability needed for others to lead.

Impact

Plan 24-30 now provides a clearer framework through which the activity required to keep the promise can be understood and monitored. The content of the route maps is influencing what organisations are doing and what they plan to do, increasing positive activity. However, those organisations that are using the route maps to shape their delivery, are conscious that - even when they plan and do everything outlined - as their role and responsibility, they simply do not have all the levers to keep the promise on their own.

This reinforces that even if every single organisation was meeting their statutory duties and delivering against the detailed outcomes described in Plan 24-30, a gap remains between what they can do and what is needed that can only be met partly through greater collaboration. So, despite growing usage, their existence has not improved the quality of change or increased the momentum everywhere for everyone every day. The collaborative process through which the route maps were developed has also not yet translated into full ownership of delivery by the custodians of the system.

To date, Plan 24-30 has not acted as the catalyst for the collective forward-focussed strategy needed to get Scotland over the line by 2030. The central question that must be asked and answered to overcome this challenge is “what is needed for multiple actors to shift the conditions of the entirety of



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

the interlinked delivery systems in ways that enable the promised transformation to happen?” Not all of the answers will be within individual organisations’ control.

Again, The Programme for Government provides a stronger expression of this alignment, explicitly connecting prevention, public service reform and keeping the promise and recognising the need to change how public services work around people. The impact sought through this priority is therefore not yet fully realised. The next phase needs to move increasingly from clarifying the framework towards using it to organise collective action: making clearer what needs to change, who needs to act, how different contributions connect and where progress requires acceleration. This makes the task for the next phase more concrete: to help translate that strategic alignment into clearer expectations, responsibilities and action between now and 2030.

Next phase

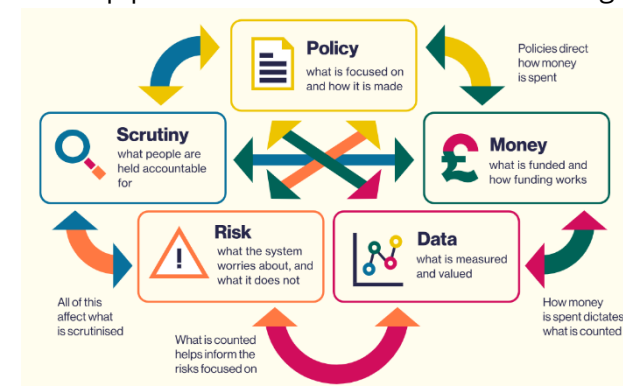
The ISA will continue to support the development and iteration of Plan 24-30 and its route maps, while supporting implementation of legislation and ensuring that legislative, policy and reform activity remains aligned. This will be particularly important as Scottish Government develops an updated Implementation Strategy setting out progress and the key actions it will lead to keep the promise by 2030, as committed to in Programme for Government. The emphasis will increasingly be on what needs to happen next, who needs to act, what Government needs to lead, and where acceleration is required.

d) Creating pathways to solve system problems through Meeting in the Middle - what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would apply [Meeting in the Middle](#) to persistent system barriers, bringing partners together to develop practical solutions to issues including:

- ♥ policy silos
- ♥ money, funding and commissioning
- ♥ data and information sharing
- ♥ risk aversion
- ♥ scrutiny and governance

The intention remains to connect this work to wider Public Service Reform in order to develop approaches that could convert deep-rooted systemic barriers into practical opportunities for change





Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months ISA has undertaken analysis of recurring structural barriers affecting delivery across Scottish public services and worked with Public Service Reform colleagues to identify opportunities to use Plan 24–30 as a practical demonstrator of wider reform. This has included consideration of the barriers that prevent Intensive Family Support from becoming consistently available, including issues relating to funding, governance, workforce, data, accountability and policy alignment. The work has helped to reframe these issues. The question is now not simply how individual services can improve, but what needs to change around them for improvement to be possible and sustainable.

Contribution

The work has shifted the focus from operational problems towards structural reform. It has demonstrated that many of the barriers to keeping the promise cannot be solved by individual organisations acting alone. They require coordinated action across policy, funding, governance, data, accountability and leadership, including decisions that can only be taken nationally. This provides a practical connection between Plan 24–30 and Public Service Reform.

Impact

The analysis has established a stronger basis for treating recurring barriers as system problems rather than isolated operational difficulties. It has also helped identify where the conditions affecting delivery sit across organisational, portfolio and national/local boundaries.

The intended impact of Meeting in the Middle, however, is not diagnosis alone. It is to enable partners to work differently together to resolve barriers that cannot be addressed by any one organisation acting independently. That impact has not yet been demonstrated consistently. The work is therefore at an important transition point: from identifying and reframing system problems towards testing whether the approach can create practical routes through them.

Next phase

The next phase will focus on refining the approach with Scottish Government and other relevant partners such as the Strategic Public Service Scrutiny Network to identify a small number of issues where Meeting in the Middle can be applied in practice. This will include being explicit about the different levels at which action is required: what can be changed locally; what requires collaboration between organisations or sectors; and what requires national policy, funding, governance or structural change. The wider public service reform agenda now creates a particularly relevant environment in which to test this approach. The Programme for Government identifies the need to remove barriers to delivery, simplify how Government works and speed up decision-making, while pursuing significant structural reform across public services. The next phase will therefore seek to test whether Meeting in the Middle can provide a practical way of working through the cross-cutting barriers that sit between policy ambition and delivery.



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

e) Developing and using practical system problem-solving tools - what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would develop practical tools to help the system understand and solve complex problems, including approaches to:

- 💖 system mapping
- 💖 strategic investment and disinvestment
- 💖 evidence mapping
- 💖 data and analytical capability
- 💖 composite story development
- 💖 long-term planning

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months ISA has synthesised evidence from Learning Reviews, Joint Inspections and Audit Scotland performance audits to identify recurring structural barriers across the Scottish public service system. The analysis shows that issues such as fragmented information, weak coordination, inconsistent planning, missed opportunities for early intervention and limited use of lived experience are not isolated problems. They recur across different parts of the public service system and over time.

Work began to develop a more coherent analytical framework for understanding system performance through the Independent Care Review's Human and Economic Modelling that placed the human experience and outcomes at the centre, rather than relying solely on organisational or service-level measures. ISA further developed this into a strategic approach to investment and disinvestment, extending the analysis of the costs associated with the 'care system' and its impacts to include the root causes, allowing identification of a core suite of policies that are experienced simultaneously. The basis of this formed a Cabinet Sub Committee paper in November 2024. The approach moves understanding beyond what the current system costs (effects) to ask where public expenditure is responding to unmet need, failure demand and escalation; what could have prevented that demand; what alternative investment would be required to meet need (causes); and where the resulting benefit or saving would occur (planned disinvestment).

Bringing together evidence and expenditure mapping to identify opportunities for investment and disinvestment across systems, the work considers cost avoidance, failure demand, duplication, low-value activity and displacement, and is intended to develop investment cases that consider human impact and outcomes, avoided demand, financial, as well as wider economic benefits. This development stage was done in partnership and opportunities were identified to test the theory and support development of a composite story toolkit and strengthen the connection between evidence and policy action.



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

Contribution

The evidence base demonstrating that many of the barriers to keeping the promise are systemic, longstanding and cross-cutting continues to grow. This matters because it changes the nature of the response required. Persistent problems cannot be addressed solely through additional guidance, new initiatives or improvements within individual services. They require changes to the conditions in which public services operate. The emerging investment and disinvestment methodology adds a practical dimension to this analysis by connecting system problems to the way resources are currently allocated. It provides a potential mechanism for identifying where expenditure is sustaining responses to consequences rather than preventing need, and for developing and testing alternative approaches that could improve outcomes while reducing or avoiding future demand.

Impact

The problem-solving work has strengthened the analytical foundation for understanding system performance and has identified potential approaches, including composite story development, for bringing together evidence that is often held separately. Increasingly this tool is being used by other agencies and prevents the re-telling of traumatic stories. The full scope of the practical impact is not yet established. Without input from Scottish Government, the investment and disinvestment methodology cannot be further developed or tested to evidence changes in investment decisions or system performance.

Next phase

The next phase of work is connected to a small collective who are working closely with officials on prevention and investment. It is anticipated that this will include continuing to map expenditure and failure demand across relevant systems associated with keeping the promise, identifying potential investment and disinvestment propositions, and developing tests of whether resources can be shifted towards approaches that prevent need and improve outcomes. Learning will be used to refine the methodology and consider its potential for wider application. Leaders remain positive about using the emerging tools to enable them to view problem-solving differently to make better decisions about action, including where resources should be invested, redirected or disinvested. The evidence synthesis will be evolved with potential role in developing practical system tools explored further. Work with The Promise Scotland, the Centre for Public Impact and NHS Lanarkshire will continue to develop the composite story and related toolkit, with a focus on ensuring that tools are practical and capable of supporting action.

The Programme for Government's commitment to develop a Scottish Prevention Investment Framework creates a particularly relevant opportunity to test this work. ISA has met with the small team behind this framework to help share what she has learned to ensure a consistent approach to identifying, assessing and prioritising investment in prevention and early intervention, including directing resources towards actions that improve outcomes and reduce future demand. The ISA will continue to collaborate and explore how she could contribute to the government's emerging



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

thinking by connecting evidence about need, outcomes and failure demand with decisions about where resources are invested and where expenditure could ultimately be reduced or redirected.

3.2 Delivery

a) via The Promise Scotland - what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA's role includes chairing The Promise Scotland, the principal vehicle to lead and support work to keep the promise. She will discharge this by ensuring the organisation remains focused on identifying and shoring up gaps, clearing the ground for the next phase of change, attributing responsibility and not creating dependency. This helps set priorities whilst considering future role, responsibilities and eventual obsolescence.

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months ISA has continued to discharge her governance responsibilities in relation to The Promise Scotland, including maintaining oversight of the organisation's strategic direction and ensuring that its work remains aligned with Plan 24–30 and the wider purpose of keeping the promise.

This has included chairing the following meetings:

- ♥ AGM and Directors' meeting – 25th November 2025
- ♥ Directors' meeting – 3rd March 2026
- ♥ Directors' strategy day including business meeting, strategy session and session with the Permanent Secretary – 4th June 2026

The Promise Scotland is wholly owned by Ministers with all Board papers shared with the Scottish Government, which the Cabinet Secretary and Minister may be interested in. Minutes are posted on The Promise Scotland's website.

The Directors are governed by the Companies Act 2006. They continue to consider the organisation's role and responsibility as implementation progresses, clear that their leadership and responsibilities, and the implications of the contributions of The Promise Scotland must not become a permanent part of the change landscape. The organisation has provided much of the infrastructure through which the ISA's wider programme has been supported including the scheduling of the local engagement, running the regional networks and learning activity, development of Plan 24–30 and its route maps, development of the Promise Story of Progress and analytical capacity. The Promise Scotland submits quarterly grant reports to the Scottish Government officials that detail activity and progress which the Cabinet Secretary and Minister may be interested in.

D E L I V E R Y	a) Via The Promise Scotland
	b) Via pace setters

Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)



Contribution

The ISA's relationship with The Promise Scotland has enabled strategic advice, evidence, engagement and implementation support to be connected rather than developed as separate strands of work. It has also maintained focus on an important principle: The Promise Scotland exists to support Scotland to keep the promise. Responsibility for implementation sits within the organisations and systems with the authority, resources and accountability to deliver change.

Impact

The Promise Scotland continues to provide significant capacity and infrastructure supporting implementation of Plan 24–30. However, the intended longer-term impact is not the continued existence or activity of The Promise Scotland. It is a system increasingly able to own and deliver the change required without dependence on a dedicated organisation. At the halfway point, that transition remains incomplete.

Next phase

The ISA will continue to use her governance role to ensure that The Promise Scotland's activity is focused on the areas where it can add greatest value. This will include continuing to clarify what functions need to be sustained to 2030, where responsibility for those functions should ultimately sit and what this means for the future role and shape of The Promise Scotland.

b) via pace setters - what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would identify and work with people, organisations and places demonstrating significant progress, using their experience to understand what enables change and how effective approaches can be accelerated or spread. Pace setters were intended to provide practical evidence of what is possible.

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months, ISA has sought to identify organisations that are doing innovative work in pursuit of keeping the promise. One example that came directly from the work to develop an approach to strategic investment : disinvestment is an initiative by Community Justice Scotland to divert women from prison and keep their children wherever safe to do so. This is an example of wrap around support for women with complex lives and is intensive family support in action. Through sector relationships ISA identifies organisations, services, leaders and places that are demonstrating approaches from which the wider systems can learn. These examples are producing strong outcomes for children, families and care experienced adults – in some cases preventing them experiencing Scotland's 'care system' and are showing what strong leadership, collaborative planning, integrated delivery through trusted partnership working could look like. With the emphasis increasingly shifting from the identification of individual

Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise

Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027

Halfway Point Report (August 2026)



examples of what good looks like towards understanding what the conditions for success are and how these could be replicated for similar progress elsewhere.

Contribution

The work is helping move the discussion from isolated examples of good practice towards a more useful understanding of the conditions that enable pace. This matters because effective practice cannot necessarily be replicated simply by copying a service model. Leadership, funding, commissioning, workforce, governance, local relationships and national policy conditions all influence whether an approach can succeed and be sustained. Pace setters therefore provide a practical source of evidence for the ISA's wider strategic work: demonstrating what is possible and helping identify what needs to change around organisations to enable progress elsewhere.

Impact

There is a stronger body of practical evidence about where progress is happening and why. There is not yet evidence that this learning is being systematically translated into faster progress elsewhere. The intended impact – accelerated and more consistent change across Scotland – therefore remains a priority for the second half of the programme.

Next phase

The ISA will continue to identify and learn from pace setters through local visits, sector engagement and the wider evidence programme. The focus will increasingly be on turning examples into transferable learning: identifying what is specific to a particular place or organisation, what can be adapted elsewhere and what national or structural conditions need to change before effective approaches can spread.

3.3 Relationships

Open and trusted relationships are essential to the ISA role. They provide access to those responsible for and affected by change, enable emerging analysis to be tested and create routes through which independent evidence, advice and challenge can reach those with authority to act.

The sections below therefore focus principally on the reach, purpose and effectiveness of those relationships. Substantive learning generated through them is reflected under the relevant strategic and delivery priorities above. All relevant activities are submitted to the Lobbying Register.

R E L A T I O N S	a) With the First Minister, Cabinet Sub-Committee and Ministers
	b) Sustaining cross-party support
	c) Across local government
	d) With sectors, organisations and groups committed to change - and who must change
	e) With government officials



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

a) With the First Minister, Cabinet Sub-Committee and Ministers - what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would maintain direct relationships with the First Minister and relevant Ministers to provide independent strategic advice and challenge. The aim is to support government to achieve its commitments by ensuring the work is positioned appropriately, is visible within government decision-making, and ministerial leadership or cross-government action is identified where required.

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months, the ISA has maintained ministerial engagement, including through the changes to Cabinet and Ministerial portfolios and has had meetings, provided written briefings and formal advice.

Following changes within the Scottish Government, she met the new Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic and the new Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise and provided her with a briefing pack on the outstanding and future issues for government. As above, ISA has also provided substantive written Advice Notes to ministers, including on Intensive Family Support and the relationship between keeping the promise and wider Public Service Reform and has regularly met with officials, as detailed in section e) below.

Across all work programme areas, ISA has communicated and engaged extensively with Ministers ensuring they were up to date with work underway and all opportunities to provide advice were taken.

This included:

- 💖 11th November 2025 – Letter to the First Minister and a paper to The Promise Sub-Committee
- 💖 21st November 2025 – Letter on Secure Care to Natalie Don-Innes, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise
- 💖 24th November 2025 - Letter enclosing advice on decluttering the legislative landscape to Natalie Don-Innes, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise
- 💖 2nd December 2025 – Letter on Stage 2 of the Bill to Natalie Don-Innes, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise
- 💖 21st January 2026 - Letter on Stage 2 of the Bill to Natalie Don-Innes, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise
- 💖 28th January 2026 – Letter on Stage 2 of the Bill to Natalie Don-Innes, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise
- 💖 3rd February 2026 - Letter enclosing The Promise Scotland's Stage 2 briefing on the Bill to Natalie Don-Innes, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise
- 💖 18th May 2026 – Letter to the First Minister congratulating him on his re-election
- 💖 27th May 2026 – Letter to the Presiding Officer congratulating him on his appointment
- 💖 3rd June 2026 - Letter to Siobhian Brown, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise congratulating her on appointment as Minister and providing post-election advice note on what must be done by the end of 2026



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

- 💖 26th June 2026 – Advice Note on Intensive Family Support to the First Minister, Mairi McAllan, Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic and Ivan McKee, Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform
- 💖 2nd July 2026 - Letter to Siobhian Brown, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Learning from 32 local authorities)
- 💖 2nd July 2026 – Draft Advice Note on alignment between the promise and Public Service Reform to Ivan McKee, Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform and Mairi McAllan, Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic
 - With the final Advice Note due to be sent early in September in advance of the meeting

The ISA also attended the Cabinet sub-Committee on the promise on 11th November 2025 and 17th March 2026. She met with the Minister three times and the First Minister once, discussing a range of issues, including the progression of the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 and the areas she believed would strengthen it as it progressed through Parliament.

Contribution

These relationships have provided a direct route through which independent evidence and challenge can reach senior political decision-makers. They have also enabled the ISA to connect the promise to wider ministerial priorities rather than allowing it to be considered solely within the children and families portfolio.

Impact

There is evidence that the ISA's advice is contributing to ministerial understanding of the relationship between keeping the promise, prevention and wider reform, and Intensive Family Support has generated significant interest as a practical reform proposition.

However, ministerial access and consideration of advice do not themselves constitute system impact. The test is whether that advice results in decisions, action and the conditions required for implementation. That impact is still developing.

Next phase

The ISA will continue to provide direct advice and challenge to the First Minister, Cabinet Secretaries and ministers, with increasing emphasis on the decisions and interventions required between now and 2030.

b) Sustaining cross-party support - what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA works to sustain the cross-party commitment that was established in 2017 whilst she was Chair of the Independent Care Review and which led to its conclusions being accepted in full across the parliament, a position that has underpinned all work to keep the promise and ensured there is no



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

political impediment to the path to 2030. It has helped keeping the promise remain a shared national commitment, rather than becoming associated with any one government, single party or short parliamentary term.

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months, the ISA has:

- ♥ Held pre-election meetings with Gillian Mackay MSP (Co-Leader, Scottish Greens) and Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP (Leader, Scottish Liberal Democrats) to encourage them to restate their commitment to the promise in party manifestos. All parties who previously committed to the promise restated their commitment in their manifestos.
- ♥ Met with Nicola Sturgeon MSP to discuss her amendments lodged at Stage 2 of the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill about a right to return to care.
- ♥ Sent letters to all party leaders following the Scottish Elections to congratulate them on their re-election/election to the Scottish Parliament. The letters emphasised that Scotland is just past the halfway point between the promise being made and the 2030 deadline to keep it, and it will be this parliament's responsibility for keeping it. The letters reinforced the importance of cross-party support and the need to enable full implementation of the CCCESP Act 2026.
- ♥ Sent all MSPs a post-election briefing which provided them with background on the promise, what keeping the promise will look like, what the role of MSPs is and what they can do now, and the difference cross-party support has made so far. The 'What will Scotland look like when the promise is kept?' was enclosed to be clear on the destination.
- ♥ Continued to engage across the political landscape, including in relation to legislative developments affecting care experienced children, families and implementation of Plan 24–30 and providing evidence to Committee. This has included maintaining focus on the relationship between legislation and the existing commitment to keep the promise, rather than allowing legislative activity to develop as a separate programme of reform.

Contribution

The work has continued to reinforce the importance of treating the promise as a commitment made by Scotland and sustained across political boundaries. It has also provided independent challenge on whether legislative proposals and other work underway support the outcomes and implementation framework already established through Plan 24–30.



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

Impact

Cross-party commitment to the promise remains important, but the impact of this work cannot be measured simply through political statements of support. The stronger test is whether that shared commitment is reflected consistently in scrutiny, legislation, resource decisions and the sustained action required through to 2030. That remains an ongoing task.

Next phase

The ISA will continue to engage across parties as relevant legislation and policy develops, maintaining focus on the outcomes to be achieved by 2030 and the need for continuity of commitment and implementation.

c) Across local government - what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would build relationships across local government to understand progress in different places, hear directly from those responsible for delivery, identify barriers and effective practice and strengthen the connection between local experience and national decision-making.

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months, working with COSLA, ISA has developed a programme of engagement intended to reach all 32 local authority areas. The programme combines direct engagement with local leaders and partners with focused visits intended to understand how the promise is being implemented in different contexts. To date, five visits have been completed, with further visits scheduled before the end of the year. The engagement is designed to hear from the range of partners whose decisions shape the experience of children and families locally, rather than treating keeping the promise as the responsibility of children's services alone.

Contribution

The programme has significantly strengthened the ISA's direct relationships with local government and created a route through which local experience can inform national strategic advice. It is also providing a stronger basis for distinguishing between barriers that local areas have the agency to address themselves and those created or sustained by national policy, funding, legislation, governance or other structural conditions.

Impact

Local areas have greater direct access to the ISA and there is a growing evidence base through which their experience can inform national discussion. The wider intended impact – stronger learning between places and national action in response to barriers that cannot be resolved locally – is not yet fully realised. The second half of the programme will provide a clearer test of whether the relationships established can be converted into collective and national action.

Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)



Next phase

The remaining local engagement will be completed, with the emphasis increasingly shifting from gathering evidence to synthesising it across areas and connecting it to action. The ISA will continue to use local relationships both to test emerging strategic conclusions and to take evidence about recurring national barriers back to those with responsibility for addressing them.

d) With sectors, organisations and groups committed to change – and who must change – what the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA would maintain relationships across the sectors, organisations and groups whose decisions and practice determine whether Scotland keeps the promise. The intention was both to work with those already committed to change and to provide challenge where greater ownership, alignment or pace was required.

Summary of key activities

Over the last nine months, ISA has maintained a broad programme of engagement across public services, national organisations, local partners, the third sector and others with a role in delivering change. These relationships have been used to test emerging analysis, identify examples of progress, understand barriers to delivery and explore where organisations can contribute to the wider outcomes in Plan 24–30. The engagement has also helped identify areas where there is substantial commitment and activity but insufficient connection between individual organisational priorities and a coherent strategy for system change.

Contribution

The breadth of engagement gives the ISA a perspective across organisational and sector boundaries that is central to the independence of the role. It enables recurring issues to be identified across different settings and helps distinguish between problems specific to an organisation and those that arise from the way the wider system operates. The relationships have also created opportunities to connect organisations and evidence that might otherwise remain separate.

Impact

There is stronger shared recognition in parts of the system that keeping the promise cannot be delivered by children's services or individual organisations acting alone. However, the evidence gathered also suggests that commitment has not yet translated consistently into collective ownership, changed ways of working or sufficient pace. The intended impact of these relationships is therefore only partially realised.



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

Next phase

Engagement will become increasingly focused and purposeful, concentrating on the organisations and leaders whose action is required to address the critical interventions emerging from the evidence. The ISA will continue to work with those demonstrating progress while providing clearer challenge where action, alignment or pace remains insufficient.

e) With government officials – with the work programme set out to achieve

The ISA has a regular schedule of meetings that sustain productive working relationships and information sharing with senior Scottish Government officials so that independent advice, evidence and challenge inform policy, implementation and cross-government decision-making. These relationships intend to connect Plan 24–30 to wider government priorities, resolve barriers spanning portfolios and create routes through which strategic advice could be translated into action.

Summary of key activities

Over the nine months, ISA dedicated time to officials across relevant policy and reform areas. This has included supporting improved alignment between Plan 24–30 and Public Service Reform, Intensive Family Support, governance, legislation and the structural barriers affecting implementation. This spring, these discussions focused on establishing the most effective delivery arrangements within government. ISA provided evidence, analysis and proposals to support a shift from treating the promise as a discrete policy programme towards using its sustained implementation as a mechanism for government to operate strategically in pursuit of wider public service reform. This included ongoing dialogue with the Permanent Secretary, a presentation to the Executive Team and discussions with the Director-General Exchequer, Strategy and Performance.

Despite sustained engagement and agreement, an effective route through which the ISA's evidence and advice consistently results in coordinated government action has not yet been established.

Contribution

ISA provides government officials with a substantial and increasingly integrated body of evidence about the relationship between keeping the promise, implementation and wider reform. The work has identified practical opportunities for alignment and has made clearer the national conditions – including funding, governance, policy alignment and accountability – that can enable or constrain local delivery. It has also exposed an important implementation issue in its own right: where government structures and ways of working make it difficult to respond collectively to evidence about problems that span portfolios.



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

Impact

The intended impact of this priority has not yet been achieved. Examples of constructive engagement and areas of shared interest, particularly around Public Service Reform, have not yet developed into a consistently effective relationship through which the ISA's strategic advice results in coordinated government action. Being explicit about that distinction is important. The ISA has made sustained efforts and a substantive contribution; the absence of the intended impact identifies an issue requiring attention rather than an absence of activity.

Next phase

Establishing a more effective relationship with Scottish Government officials will be a priority for the remainder of the work programme.

The focus will be on creating clearer routes between evidence, advice, decision-making and action; identifying the officials and governance arrangements required to progress cross-cutting issues; and being more explicit about where national action is necessary to remove barriers experienced locally. Where progress remains limited, the ISA will continue to use her independent role and relationships with ministers to make visible the consequences for implementation and the pace required to keep the promise.

4. WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED SO FAR

Five themes are emerging across the work of the ISA to date:

- i. **The system does not lack ambition; it struggles to translate commitment into consistent implementation.** Across all the evidence reviewed, there is substantial policy ambition and a clear commitment to keeping the promise. The local visits have reinforced this: there is significant activity across children's services, education, housing, health, police and the third sector, much of which is positive and necessary. The Programme for Government reinforces this diagnosis: its emphasis on prevention and public service reform reflects a recognition that achieving better outcomes requires changes in how services, systems and resources are organised, rather than simply additional activity within existing structures.

The recurring challenge is translating commitment into consistent implementation and, ultimately, a consistent experience for children, families and care experienced adults. Local leaders are also describing structural and national barriers which they cannot resolve themselves, creating a gap between their ambition and their agency to act. This points to the need both to test whether existing local levers are being fully used and for national action where the conditions for change sit elsewhere.

**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027
Halfway Point Report (August 2026)**



- ii. **There is significant progress to learn from, but activity does not yet add up to one shared strategy.** The local area work is providing an opportunity to develop a sharper picture of what keeping the promise looks like in practice: where there are clear examples of effective practice, where significant weaknesses or barriers remain, how resources are being used to follow the child and family, and what needs to change locally and nationally between now and 2030.

The visits completed so far and wider evidence show that change is happening and that there is much to learn from what is working in different places. The opportunity now is to understand why change is happening in some places and not others, identify the conditions that enable it, and make that learning easier to spread.

At the same time, a recurring theme from the local visits is that there are many tactics but not yet a coherent, shared strategy for getting to the destination. Plan 24–30 provides the framework for bridging this gap, but the connection between individual activity, the collective outcome being sought and the contribution of different parts of the system is still evolving. This suggests that the next stage of implementation needs to help answer three practical questions: what experience are we trying to create, who needs to move to make it possible, and what needs to change around them? This requires a closer look at the role, responsibility and effectiveness of Scotland's public sector planning architecture.

- iii. **System problems require system solutions, and local and national action are interdependent.** Many of the barriers identified cannot be solved by one organisation or one sector. They sit between organisations, portfolios and levels of government. Local areas are often experiencing the same structural barriers, while feeling unable to influence the national conditions that create them.

This reinforces the importance of approaches such as Meeting in the Middle, which focus on the space between organisations and on solving the conditions that prevent progress. It also highlights the need to distinguish between what local areas can change themselves, what requires collective action and what requires national or structural reform.

There is also significant learning to share between places, but this is not yet happening systematically enough. The opportunity is to create stronger mechanisms for learning from local practice without creating another reporting requirement for local authorities.

- iv. **Keeping the promise is part of wider public service reform and provides a practical test.** The changes required to keep the promise are closely connected to wider government ambitions around prevention, integration, public service reform and better use of resources. The promise should therefore be understood as both an outcome to be achieved and an opportunity to demonstrate what successful public service reform can look like.

**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027
Halfway Point Report (August 2026)**



The Intensive Family Support work demonstrates the value of bringing together evidence from practice, outcomes and public spending around a single reform priority. It shows that Scotland already has services achieving strong outcomes for children and families, but that provision is uneven and shaped by local funding, governance and commissioning arrangements. The challenge is therefore not simply to create new services, but to understand what works and create the conditions for it to become consistently available. This makes Intensive Family Support a practical test case for wider Public Service Reform: it brings together prevention, whole-family working, better outcomes and more effective use of resources in a way that can be understood by both practitioners and policymakers.

- v. **The next phase needs to focus increasingly on implementation, acceleration and collective strategy.** Scotland has a strong strategic and analytical foundation and a richer understanding of what is happening in practice. Now, it needs to make increasing use of that foundation to support implementation, remove barriers, spread effective practice and identify where greater pace is required. It should also explore how Plan 24–30 can be used more practically to organise collective action around the change required, rather than simply as a framework against which activity is mapped.

The local visits are also making clearer the distinction between local and national responsibility. Local areas are being asked to deliver significant change, while many of the conditions that determine whether they can do so – including funding, legislation, national policy direction and the wider operating environment – sit beyond their direct control. The focus therefore needs to identify not only what local systems need to do differently, but what Scottish Government and the wider system need to do to create the conditions for that change.

5. THE NEXT PHASE OF THE ISA WORK PROGRAMME (SEPTEMBER 2026 - MAY 2027)

Building on the work programme priorities and applying the learning to date, the priorities for the duration of the work programme are to:

-  **Strengthen alignment and influence:** Continue to connect Plan 24–30 with Public Service Reform and wider government priorities, including through ongoing engagement with Scottish Government.
-  **Use local learning to turn evidence into action and collective change.** The local visits and other ongoing engagements will continue to provide a practical test of what Plan 24-30 means in different contexts. The ISA will synthesise the emerging cross-area evidence to identify:
 - how resources and funding support or constrain children and families



Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027 Halfway Point Report (August 2026)

- what needs to be different to create the experience we want children and families to have
- the contribution different organisations and sectors need to make
- the key strengths, weaknesses and barriers affecting delivery in each area and what local areas can change themselves
- where local authorities and partners are working effectively together and what still requires collective action and
- what requires national or structural change

The outputs will distinguish between practice that demonstrates the promise being kept, practice that is not yet consistent with the promise, and the conditions required to move from one to the other.

-  **Continue to identify the critical interventions required between now and 2030.** Use the evidence from local areas, alongside wider ISA engagement and analysis, to identify where the powers, resources and levers for change already exist and whether they are being fully used; where action is constrained because the necessary levers sit elsewhere; and where progress depends on organisations or levels of government acting together. This will help identify the small number of critical interventions required locally, collectively and nationally, and provide a sharper basis for discussions with Scottish Government about the actions required to accelerate progress.
-  **Support implementation of Plan 24–30.** Continue to strengthen route maps, expectations and responsibilities, while supporting alignment with legislative and wider reform activity.
-  **Develop and make use of practical system tools:** Progress the composite story and other tools that can help leaders and organisations understand system performance, identify barriers and make better decisions.

6. CONCLUSION

At the nine-month point, the ISA work programme has moved from strengthening strategic relationships and developing advice towards building an ever- stronger evidence base for implementation and reform.

The work has helped connect keeping the promise with wider government priorities, strengthened the practical delivery narrative of Plan 24–30, identified recurring structural barriers across public services, and begun to create a clearer picture of what enables the change required in practice.



**Independent Strategic Advisor – the promise
Work Programme November 2025 – May 2027
Halfway Point Report (August 2026)**

It is increasingly clear that keeping the promise and reforming public services are not separate tasks. The same structural conditions that affect the experience of children and families also affect the effectiveness of public services more broadly. This creates an opportunity for the second phase of the ISA work programme: to use the promise as a practical lens through which Scotland can understand, test and accelerate wider public service reform.

The role of the ISA in the next phase will therefore be increasingly focused on connecting evidence to action, identifying where the system needs to change, testing whether those with the authority to act are using it, supporting collective action where no single actor can act alone, and providing challenge where progress needs to accelerate.

The Programme for Government creates a stronger opportunity to test this conclusion in practice: the task for the remainder of the ISA work programme is increasingly to help translate alignment into the decisions, structures, resource allocation and collective action required to make the change visible in the lives of children, families and care experienced people by 2030.