



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

1. Purpose and context

The schedule of local area visits was developed in partnership with COSLA and Solace. Letters in support were sent to the council leaders of each local authority by Councillor Tony Buchanan, the COSLA Spokesperson for Children and Young People and to Chief Executives by Jim Savege, Chief Executive of Aberdeenshire Council and the Solace lead for the promise.

Scotland already has an agreed way of understanding progress towards keeping [the promise](#) made on 5 February 2020: the [Promise Story of Progress](#). The local area visits do not replace that. Instead, they provide an opportunity for the Independent Strategic Advisor to hear directly about what is changing for children, families and care experienced adults: what is helping change to happen, what continues to get in the way, and where action could accelerate progress.

The visits began in June 2026, and, by the end of November, I will have visited all 32 local authority areas, heard from a range of partners in local communities and, critically, from those the promise was made to.

This is the first of a series of reports, with this one outlining the purpose and approach of the local area visits and sharing emerging thinking and findings.

These are early reflections, resulting from what has been learned from the first five visits to North Lanarkshire, Shetland, Midlothian, Fife and Aberdeenshire. Five visits cannot provide a definitive picture of change across Scotland, nor are the visits intended to assess or compare individual places.

They are, however, beginning to bring some issues into sharper focus.

At intervals, as my visits continue, I will produce further reports with each building on the content of the reports before it: a final report will draw together learning from the full schedule of visits.

What I hear from each visit is being used to deepen and test what I have heard, to make connections between challenges and solutions, including where they have already been developed elsewhere, and to consider what further local, collective, or national action may be needed.

This will inform how I approach delivery of my current [work programme](#), which started in November 2025 and runs until May 2027, and how I plan for the next one. It will also influence my role as Chair of The Promise Scotland and shaping what the organisation does next.



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

2. Approach

The local area visits are [an opportunity to hear directly](#) from those working to keep the promise, and from those to whom it was made, about what is changing, what is enabling that change, what is getting in the way - including the stubborn issues - and what this tells Scotland about how to accelerate progress and improve the quality of people's experiences.

The visits are not assessments of individual organisations, sectors or places, but are intended to build understanding across localities: to identify effective practice, to understand recurring barriers, to distinguish between what can be changed locally and what requires collective or national action, and to ensure local experience informs decisions and support needed to accelerate progress.

Each visit has been designed by the people leading change in the locality, with all including a range of partners: across sectors and agencies - statutory, voluntary and independent and – crucially - the care experienced community. I do not expect the visits to be the same. Each provides a different perspective. Nor will I treat any individual example as evidence of a wider pattern without testing it further. As the schedule progresses, I will look for issues that recur across places, differences that necessarily reflect local circumstances (and those that do not), and experiences that challenge emerging thinking and assumptions.

From the outset, I have approached the visits with key questions in mind:

- ♥ 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?

These will help identify practice and learning, as well as variation, causation and what needs to happen next. They will help translate what is learned from the schedule of visits into a body of evidence that aids understanding of why national policy, legislation and resources produce different pace, quality or experience of change in different places.

It is this learning that will begin to distinguish operational barriers from structural / systemic ones and, crucially, identify where authority to remove the barrier actually sits.

It is important to note that this schedule of visits is not a stock-take of 32 places but a means of identifying collective patterns, variation, enabling conditions, persistent barriers - and critically where responsibility for further change sits.



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

3. Progress and initial reflections

The first visits have surfaced lines of enquiry, not provided answers. Reflections to date are below, organised around the three functions of my role (as outlined in my [work programme](#)) and will be tested and developed through continued listening and checking.

STRATEGY

Determination to keep the promise is strong, and there is significant good work across local services and partnerships. But separate organisational activity does not, by itself, add up to a shared strategy for delivery. The next step is to build on that progress by bringing activity together into a clear, forward-looking, locally owned multi-agency strategy for the period to 2030. This is not a call for a new national planning requirement or additional reporting burden. It is about using existing local planning and partnership arrangements to turn shared ambition and individual organisational responsibilities into collective delivery: what needs to change, what each partner will contribute, what can be done locally, and what support or action is needed from elsewhere.

Plan 24–30 provides the shared national framework through which to do this. Greater ownership and use across Scotland – by local and national partners together – can connect activity, clarify contributions and identify where action is required beyond individual organisations or localities, creating the conditions for delivery through to 2030.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships continue to be central to the change the promise requires: with babies, infants, children, young people, their families, care experienced people and their communities; within organisations; and across agency and sector boundaries. For babies, infants, children, young people and care experienced adults, trusted relationships must be enabled, with delivery barriers removed. Relationships across systems, organisations and the workforce must create the trust needed both to support and to challenge, enabling the change demanded.

DELIVERY

The conditions surrounding resources may matter as much as the amount available: I have not heard just a call for more money. But workforce pressures and short-term, ring-fenced funding can constrain longer-term planning and the shift towards a preventative approach to support. There are many examples of good individual services: these do not necessarily add up to the experience Scotland promised children, families and care experienced adults.

Authority, responsibility, and accountability also matter, but local and national action cannot be treated as separate. National policy, funding, legislation, scrutiny, and reform shape the conditions in which local delivery takes place. Local partners must use the levers available to them; where the levers required for change sit elsewhere, those with national or collective authority must use them, working with local partners to remove barriers and enable change.



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

4. Emerging findings

These are early findings rather than conclusions. They reflect what I have heard so far and will be tested and refined as the schedule continues.

STRATEGY - Is activity adding up to coherent change?

What I am hearing

There is no shortage of cross-sector, multi-agency determination, commitment or indeed change activity. One of the clearest reflections from the visits so far is that, more than six years after the promise was made, it remains vibrant and continues to provide a strong focus for change in every place I have visited. The strength and longevity of that shared commitment is unusual and has been remarked on many times. The next challenge is to build on it by connecting good work into a clear, forward-looking, shared strategy for delivery through to 2030.

Across very different urban, rural, remote and island communities, I am hearing of efforts to strengthen whole-family support, provide help earlier, work more relationally, protect important relationships through more flexible services, and give babies, infants, children, young people, families and care experienced adults a greater role in decisions that affect them. I have heard about different forms of partnership, both within council services and across the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration and Children's Hearings Scotland, with health, policing, the third sector and communities.

What I will test next

The promise was not a commitment to a collection of projects or isolated service improvements. It was a commitment to transform how Scotland supports children, families and care experienced adults. I will therefore use the next stage of visits to better understand what enables good work to become coherent collective delivery: how local partners align and sequence activity, organise resources around shared outcomes and use existing planning and partnership arrangements to drive change.

I will also test what enables or inhibits that shift, including where action is within local control and where national partners need to support, enable or act.

RELATIONSHIPS - Is change being felt in people's lives?

What I am hearing

The importance of relationships has been one of the clearest themes from the first five visits. I am hearing about the shifts required so trusted relationships and whole-family practice become the norm and help children to safely stay with their families - and, where that is not possible, support greater stability, belonging and connection. Relationships also shape whether children, families and



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

care-experienced adults seek help at all: where people feel known, listened to and respected, support is more likely to feel like help rather than surveillance or judgement.

What I have heard reinforces that the quality of those relationships is not incidental to change; it is part of how children, families and care experienced adults experience whether change is happening.

Strong relationships between organisations matter too, particularly when they create the trust needed to challenge established practice and make different choices. Structures, services and models of support matter, but none is the whole answer. The more important question is what children, families and care experienced adults experience as a result.

The visits have brought that into sharp focus.

The candid way members of the care experienced community have engaged during these visits cannot be overstated. I appreciate their willingness to talk to me and to help me test not just what is happening, but how it is being experienced. Their stories are their own, but I continue to be struck by how clear-sighted they are about how far change has come, and how far there is to go. I have also been able to see and feel the warmth of relationships in places, connecting what I hear from the care community with what I see and hear across local services and partnerships.

Individual services – no matter how good - do not necessarily add up to good experiences. A child may receive good care but live far from their family and community. Support for care experienced adults may exist but it may feel too risky to ask for. Organisations may work well together without that translating into earlier or better help.

What I am hearing demonstrates that change is happening, but not consistently or equitably. That requires holding two things in view at the same time: good progress and continuing injustice. Improvement should not make poor experiences acceptable; continuing problems should not prevent Scotland from recognising and learning from what is working.

What I will test next

Lived experience remains the test: whether relationships are stronger, help comes earlier, people are treated with dignity and have their voices heard and acted upon, babies, infants, children and young people experience greater stability and belonging - and lives are better.

The people I am listening to do not share their experiences simply to be heard. They do so in the expectation that listening will lead to change. I have heard things that give me great confidence.

And I have heard things that reinforce how much remains to be done.

At this stage, I will keep listening to both.



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

DELIVERY - Are the conditions for change in place?

What I am hearing

The Independent Care Review's approach was unorthodox - it placed the people services are intended to serve at the heart. So much about keeping the promise is also about power: who holds it, who uses it, and how it is ceded or shared. Vertically, those with authority must use it to enable change, while ceding power where decisions are better made closer to people and communities. Horizontally, organisations must move beyond individual authority and responsibility towards shared power and collective action. And relationally, power must be shared with children, families and care experienced adults through listening, participation and genuine influence over the decisions that affect their lives.

My meetings with members of the care community, particularly Champs Boards, have reinforced this. Their involvement in the Independent Care Review has carried forward into an active role in keeping the system right: identifying priorities for delivery and the changes still required. This is more than simply changing what systems do - it requires changing how power operates: from hierarchical to distributed, from organisational to shared, and from doing to or for people towards acting with them.

Workforce pressures have also been repeatedly raised, with recruitment and retention difficulties affecting capacity and continuity. This is particularly evident in foster care and other family-based care, where availability directly affects where children live and whether they remain close to family and community. Social work vacancies and their impact are also being mentioned frequently.

I have also heard concerns about resources. Short-term and ring-fenced funding, reporting requirements and multiple reporting arrangements can constrain local choices and long-term planning. Local places have identified ways these arrangements could improve, particularly in relation to prevention. I hear widespread recognition of the value of earlier support, but also how difficult it is to create the capacity to invest in it while responding to high and increasingly complex need.

What I will test next

I will test more deliberately where and to what extent workforce and funding are constraining progress, where their effects are greatest, and what would materially change those conditions. This will include distinguishing what can be addressed locally from what requires collective or national action, moving beyond describing pressures to identify what action is needed, and by whom.

DELIVERY - Are resources being used to follow the child?

What I am hearing

A specific question emerging from the visits is whether funding, commissioning and provision are organised around what children, families and care experienced adults need - or whether, far too often, people are still expected to fit into the provision the system already has.



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

Some of this relates to care for children who cannot safely live at home with their families. Some localities report significant reliance on independent and third sector provision. Some also report that, despite their work on prevention, the number of children and young people they are supporting has not changed because they are also supporting children from outside their area who are growing up away from their friends, communities, families and schools. This can be a considerable challenge for children and for local partners, including health and education, as they plan and provide support for all children living in their area.

What I will test next

I will use the remaining visits to deepen understanding of how the overall shape and location of provision are being determined by children's needs. I will look beyond the quality of individual provision to understand how children's needs are driving planning, commissioning, and investment.

DELIVERY - Is there clarity about where responsibility sits?

What I am hearing

Plan 24–30 provides a shared framework for the change required. The visits highlight an opportunity to use that framework to strengthen locally owned, multi-agency delivery through to 2030: what experience is being sought, what needs to change to create it, which partners need to act, and what conditions need to change.

Part of my challenge through the visits is to test whether local partners are making full use of the powers, resources and levers already available to them. There is much that cannot be resolved locally, but that must not obscure what can. Equally, delivery depends on national policy, funding, legislation, scrutiny and wider reform. Those national decisions are not separate from local delivery; they shape what is possible in every place.

These are not new issues. They reflect persistent barriers identified through [Plan 24-30](#) and '[Meeting in the Middle](#)'. The visits are helping to show how they are experienced in everyday practice, where responsibility for addressing them sits, and whether those with the authority to act are using it. Some changes can be made locally; others require national action; and many require local and national partners to act as one system. National bodies therefore need to be connected to the places in which their policy, funding, scrutiny and reform are experienced – not positioned outside the local problem or its solution.

What I will test next

I will use the remaining visits to test these distinctions more deliberately: 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 no single organisation or level of government can act alone and progress depends on collective action. This will help identify practical ways of bridging national and local action, while being clearer about who can act, who must act and where they must act together. Shared responsibility must mean shared leadership with clear accountability, not responsibility passed between different parts of the system.



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

5. What happens next?

As I continue visiting local areas, the questions that have guided the visits will remain consistent. The lines of enquiry emerging from the first five visits will become more deliberate tests: whether the patterns I am seeing recur elsewhere, where they do not, and why; what is making the greatest difference; where progress becomes difficult; and what would materially change the conditions for delivery.

In particular, I want to build a clearer picture of where responsibility for change actually sits: what is already within reach of local partners, what depends on organisations acting together across boundaries, and what depends on decisions taken nationally. The implications set out below follow that order, and one question runs through all three- are the levers that already exist being used to their fullest, and where they are not, is it clear enough who holds them and what needs to change?

Local implications

There is significant work already under way locally. The next question is whether local partners are making full use of the authority, flexibility, resources and relationships already available to them.

I will test how existing activity is being brought together around a shared strategy for delivery through to 2030; whether existing planning and partnership arrangements are enabling collective action; whether resources are being organised around the experiences sought for children, families and care experienced adults; and whether arrangements that no longer support those outcomes are being challenged.

There is much that cannot be resolved locally, but that must not obscure what can. Where local partners hold the levers for change, the question is whether they are using them fully. Where they do not, they need to be increasingly precise about what is preventing progress, where the relevant authority sits and what action is required.

Collective implications

Some change cannot be achieved by any organisation acting alone. Integrated planning and investment, the future shape of provision, workforce, the spread of effective practice and the practical shift towards prevention all require action across organisational boundaries and, in some cases, across local and national levels.

I will therefore test not only whether partners are working together, but whether they are able to combine their authority, resources and responsibilities around shared outcomes. Where progress depends on several organisations, shared responsibility must mean shared leadership with clear accountability: who can act, who must act, where they must act together and how action will be followed through.



Local Area Visits

Initial Reflections Report: September 2026

Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor - the promise

National implications

National policy, legislation, funding, scrutiny and wider reform do not happen in the abstract. They are experienced in local places and directly shape the conditions in which local delivery takes place. National bodies are therefore part of the system for keeping the promise in every place, not separate from the local problem or its solution.

The same test must apply nationally as locally. Where national partners hold powers or levers required for change, I will seek to understand whether they are being used; where national arrangements are creating barriers, what needs to change; and where the answer cannot be determined nationally or locally alone, how national and local partners can act together.

This requires national partners to understand how their decisions operate in practice and to be connected to local planning, delivery and problem-solving. Funding is one example, but the same principle applies to policy, legislation, scrutiny and wider reform: national action needs to enable, rather than inadvertently constrain, the collective delivery required locally.

Building the evidence

I will continue to test what appears to be working, what is proving harder, what enables progress and what prevents it. I will test what I hear in individual places against wider evidence, distinguishing issues specific to particular localities from those that recur across Scotland.

That learning will continue to inform Plan 24–30 and sit alongside the Promise Story of Progress. I have also asked the team at The Promise Scotland to work with local areas to develop learning stories. A number have been identified from the first five visits. Each will explore what changed, what made that change possible, the difficulties encountered and what others might learn from it.

As the evidence accumulates, I will continue to review these lines of enquiry and be explicit about what has become clearer, what has become more complicated, what I have changed my mind about and what new questions the evidence raises.

Future reports will consider what the accumulated experience of local places tells Scotland about the changes Scotland needs to make between now and 2030.

That is what I will be listening for next.