

Local Government *and* The Promise



Progress

Challenges

What's Needed to Succeed



Contents

Foreword	3
A Word from the Chair	4
Introduction	5
Previous Annual Reports	6
What Does the Data Say?	8
Local Progress and Success	12
The Challenges and What is Needed to Succeed	26
The Year Ahead	36

Foreword



**Councillor
Tony Buchanan
COSLA's Children
and Young People
Spokesperson**

As COSLA's Children and Young People Spokesperson, I'm proud to introduce this report on the work Local Government are leading to keep the Promise made to Scotland's care experienced community.

You will find impressive examples of changes made by councils and their partners, new approaches to supporting children and families, and ways children and young people's voices have influenced decisions councils have made. There is no way to encapsulate all the work underway, these highlights only offer a taste of the progress made. In my spokesperson role I am privileged to hear about a great deal more about how much is going on at a local level, and for that we must sincerely thank our dedicated and talented workforce. They are the ones who are supporting our young people, their families and communities in often challenging circumstances, and we know from hearing the experiences of young people and from research that the relationships with the adults that support them are absolutely key.

The report does not shy away from the challenges we face, notably the financial pressure, workforce recruitment and retention, and the ever-changing policy and legislative landscape. There is not one solution that will solve these, but we highlight what is needed to succeed in keeping the promise. As I see it, one of the biggest, and easiest, wins is stronger partnership working between Local Government, Scottish Government, Public and Third Sector partners. There are already strong relationships and foundations to build on. Joined up policy making, both at a local and national level, to maximise the positive impact we can all have in creating the conditions where children and young people thrive.

We recognise that there is still much progress to be made, and I hope that this report demonstrates our commitment to do this. We are grateful to our children and young people for continuing to challenge us to do better, inspire us to go further, and offer a reality check where it is felt needed.

As spokesperson, on behalf of all 32 councils, I restate our commitment to keep the promise.

A View from the Chair



Jim Savege
Chair of The
Promise Local
Government
Programme Board

Local Government works with communities and businesses day in day out, involving a diverse range of services being delivered and an even longer list of partnerships and priorities to attend to.

But above all, there is simply nothing more important than working hard to ensure the lives of care experienced young people across our communities are the best they can be, that they thrive and realise their ambitions and potential in life. Alongside this commitment has to also be our continued drive to work with communities and families to help young people to stay with their families.

I know that my personal commitment to The Promise is shared by many of my colleagues in local government across Scotland. Working within the context of their own communities, families and young people, every Council across Scotland has made clear their commitment to The Promise, setting out their ambitions, commitments, and plans to fulfil this commitment.

As ever, progress is always better made through working together, which is reflected through the formation of a Promise Programme Board for Local Government across Scotland. The Board's remit is to develop, drive, and keep track on the delivery of the actions and changes we have committed to as local government across Scotland in relation to The Promise. Building on the great work underway across every Council area, the Board is there to support colleagues with their local plans and activity, to help share progress, learning and best practise across the sector, as well as grasping sector-wide issues that need to be progressed nationally.

The Board brings together a broad spectrum of professional associations across local government – a capable and committed cohort of great people who are absolutely committed to Keep The Promise. Our multi-disciplinary approach across services that include social work, housing, finance, employability, HR, health and care is key – we will always achieve more through working together. We further connect with local authorities through The Promise Leads Network, chaired by COSLA, and with the Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland through the VHA Joint Assurance Group for The Promise to provide assurance and challenge across sectors and organisations.

I'm delighted to chair this Board, and to introduce this year's annual report alongside Cllr Buchanan. We hope you able to see our sector's progress and commitment alongside our willingness to be transparent about our challenges, and most importantly what we believe is needed for us all to succeed.

Introduction

COSLA is the voice of Local Government in Scotland. We are a Councillor-led, cross-party organisation who champion councils' vital work to secure the resources and powers they need to deliver effectively. We work on councils' behalf to focus on the challenges and opportunities they face, and to engage positively with Governments and stakeholders on policy, funding and legislation.

COSLA and its 32 member councils are fully committed to Keeping The Promise. In this report you'll read some of the incredible work taking place across the country to support children, young people and their families. You'll read how Local Government are leading from the front; from our national Promise Programme Board to regional and local partnerships to service redesign and transformation around The Promise, Plan 21 – 24 and shortly, Plan 24 – 30.

We have framed our section on 'Success' around high-level themes relating to local partnership plans and service delivery. We've used some of the data available to demonstrate some of that progress, highlight where we've been in recent years and where we are right now. We use this data with full transparency that it does not tell the whole story; it is one part of the picture.

We wish we could highlight every success from every council, they are numerous! However, we have a dedicated [Promise page](#) on our website which showcases more of the work happening across the country.

This report also seeks to be transparent in the challenges the sector faces. We build upon our report from last year 'Delivering The Promise in Local Government' to be explicit about our challenges and how they are hampering progress, whilst also seeking to be direct in what we think is needed to succeed in future. Of course, we know we as a sector, are also responsible for continued progress and success, but we do not have all the levers available to us. We use this report as a call to action for us to work across Governments, across sectors and with stakeholders to openly discuss the challenges we all face and work together to determine solutions so we can Keep The Promise by 2030.

We have an exciting year of opportunities ahead with the publication of Plan 24 – 30 and the opportunity to better align our priorities and actions around what will truly help make the lasting and sustained impact we seek for our children, young people and families.

Previous Annual Reports

Since 2022 COSLA and the Improvement Service have worked collaboratively with local authorities to produce annual reports with the aim of demonstrating some of the scale and pace of change across Scotland whilst also highlighting where there are challenges, at both local and national levels. We have summarised both reports below.



Delivering the Promise in Local Government (2023)

The Improvement Service (IS) were asked to carry out research into the progress being made by Local Government on The Promise. The Promise Local Government Programme Board provided oversight and ownership of the research findings. The '[Delivering The Promise in Local Government](#)' report found that:

- Evidence of senior officer demonstrating leadership on The Promise corresponded with more visible progress.
- External, short-term, competitive funding streams with tight application timescales are unhelpful for the sustainable delivery of The Promise, and too much monitoring and evaluation was being driven by external bodies/funders/statutory requirements, hindering relationship-based practice on the ground.
- Delivering on The Promise required partnership working and wasn't just for local government, though councils were playing a key role in raising awareness of The Promise amongst partner organisations.
- There is uncertainty in the sector about what data is needed to demonstrate progress and a recognition the sector needs to get to grips with measuring its progress.
- There is evidence of the sharing of good practice and innovation between councils.
- There is ample anecdotal evidence of culture change, but linked to the issue of data, evidencing progress remains a challenge, and only four local authorities thought expectations to keep the Promise were realistic given the challenges with finances and the pandemic.

The report outlined next steps, including work to identify high-level indicators to measure local government's progress on The Promise.



What Does

the Data

Say?



COSLA

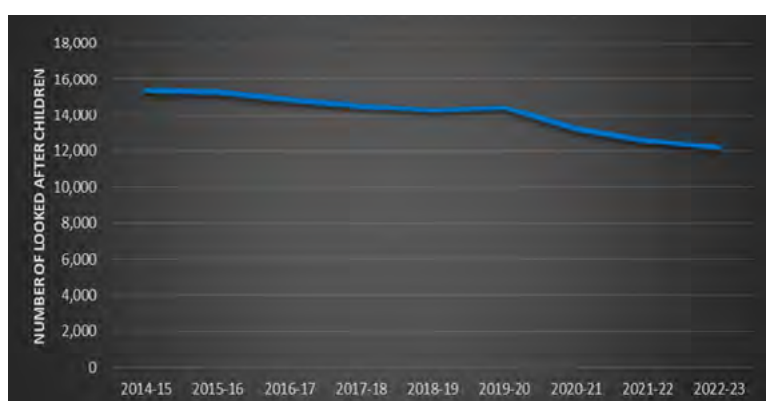
Demonstrating progress to #KeepThePromise is no small or easy task. All organisations across sectors are grappling with the same. We are delighted to be collaborating with the Scottish Government, The Promise Scotland and partners through The Promise Collective to develop a 'Promise Progress Framework' to sit alongside Plan 24 – 30 to support Scotland's understanding of progress, and crucially what is needed to improve and succeed.

While that work is ongoing, using data that is available, the Improvement Service have outlined some key headline data figures relevant to local government's role and responsibilities to keep The Promise.

We caveat these figures with the recognition that data alone does not determine progress, or success and equally, it does not alone determine regression. We simply seek to demonstrate where we were, as a sector, and where we are right now. You'll see we've come a long way, but there's still much work to be done.

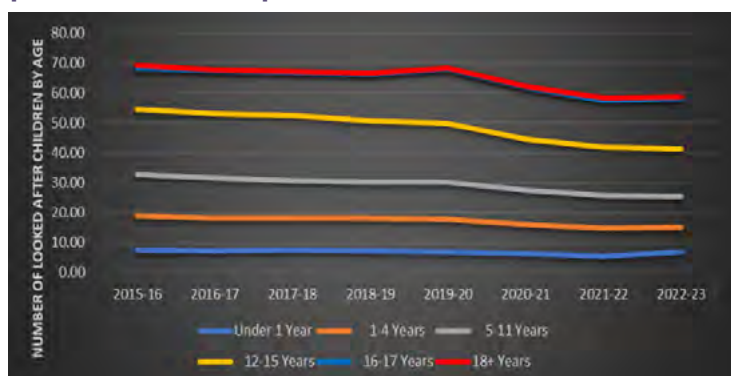
Total Number of Looked After Children^{1 2}

Number of Looked After Children



- The total number of looked after children has fallen by 20% since 2015-16.
- 15,371 children being looked after in 2015-16 to 12,206 children in 2022-23
- Number of looked after children per 1000 population for each age group shows decreasing trend from 2015-16 except 16 to 17 years old (13.73 in 2015-16 to 15.71 in 2021-22).

Number of Looked After Children by Age per 1,000 Population

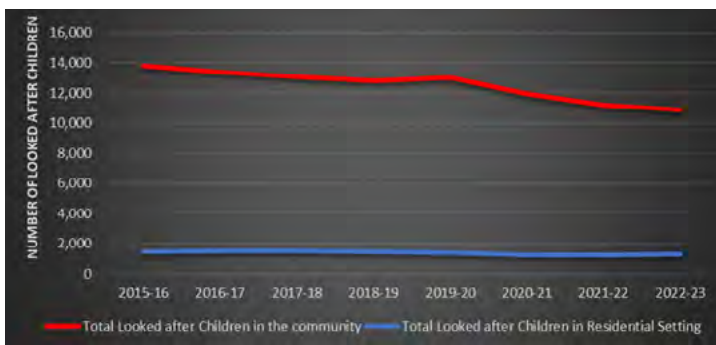


1 **A note on language:** The promise was clear that language used must not stigmatise children and families. There are times where the existing data collection and reporting mechanisms uses certain language. We have only use certain terms for the avoidance of doubt when referring to data.

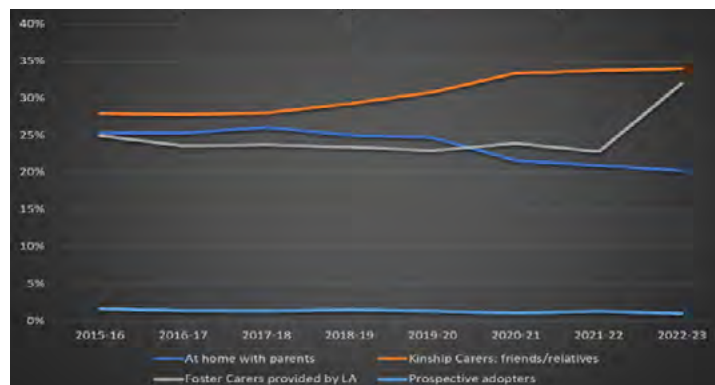
2 **Source:** [Children's Social Work Statistics 2022-23 – Looked After Children - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/documents/2023/02/Childrens_Social_Work_Statistics_2022-23_-_Looked_After_Children.pdf)

The Balance of Care³

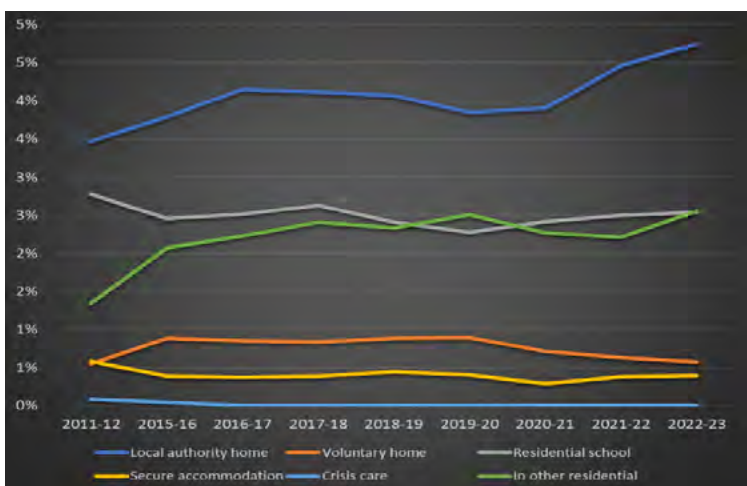
Balance of Care



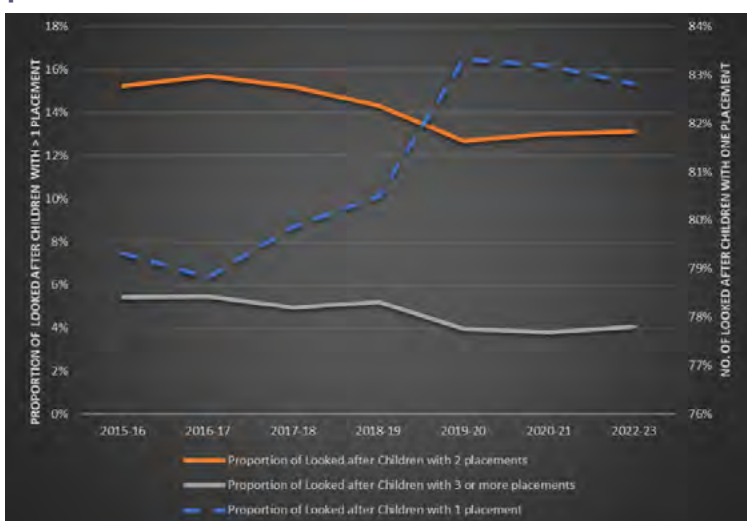
Percentage of looked after children by placement types in community



Percentage of looked after children by placement types in residential



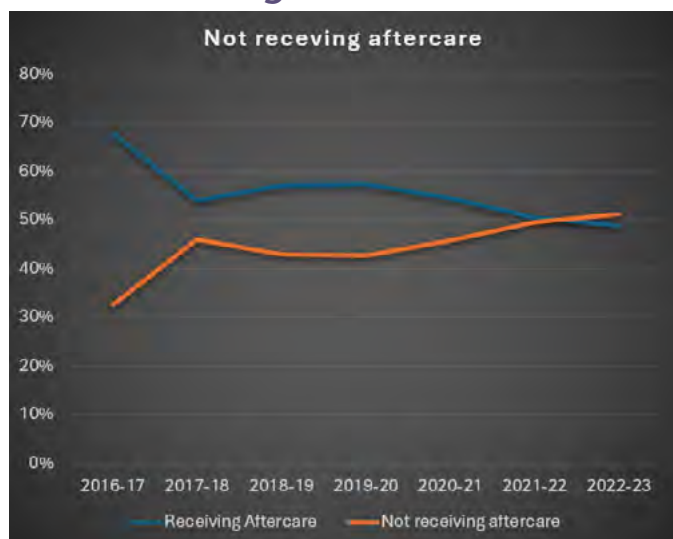
Looked after children by no. of placements



- Since 2015-16, the balance between children cared for in community vs residential settings has remained constant at near 90% and 10% respectively. However, the proportion of children cared for in the community has been decreasing since 2020-21.
- Since 2015-16, the total number of children looked after has fallen by 20%, and the number of children cared for in community settings has fallen by 21% while the number of children cared for in residential settings has fallen by 11%
- This could point to the success of early intervention to avoid children becoming looked after.
- The highest proportion of children cared for in residential care settings are in local authority children's homes.
- Nearly a quarter of the cared for children in residential settings are in other residential care due to complex needs.
- 82% of looked after children experience no change to their placement.
- The proportion of children with multiple placements has been decreasing since 2015/16.

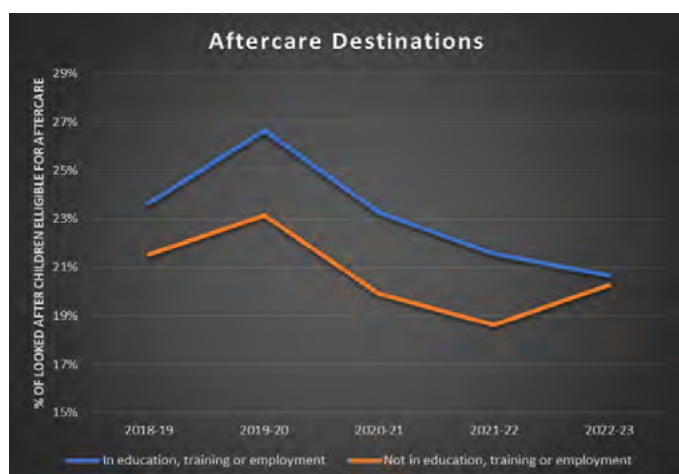
³ Source: [Children's Social Work Statistics 2022-23 – Looked After Children - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

Not Receiving Aftercare



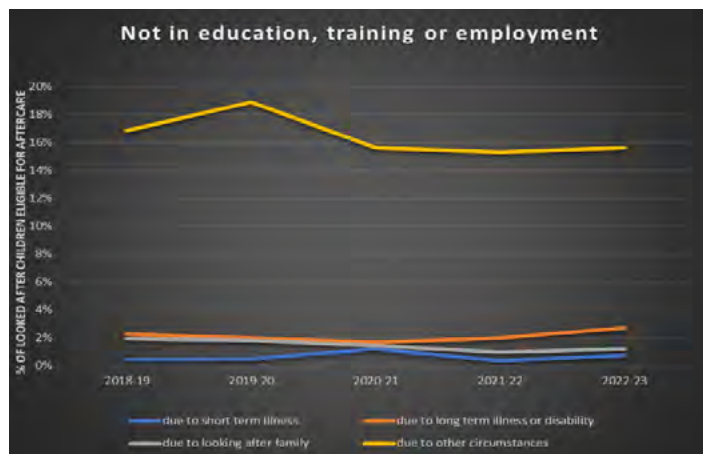
- Proportion of children eligible and not receiving aftercare has been steadily increasing especially, post-covid (2020-21 onwards).

Aftercare Destinations



- Around a quarter of children eligible for aftercare are in education, training or employment. This, however, has been declining post-Covid.
- Children who are eligible for aftercare who are not in education, training or employment had been declining as well in the long term. There has been 2pp increase in the last year.

Not in Education, Training or Employment



- Proportion of children pursuing higher education (HE) has remained relatively constant at 4%.
- Those pursuing education other than HE have seen an increase in 2019-20 reaching back to 2018-19 values.
- Those pursuing education other than HE have seen an increase in 2019-20 reaching back to 2018-19 values.
- Those who cannot go into education, training or employment cite the following reasons:
 - Due to looking after family has been decreasing.
 - Due to long term illness or disability shows a sharp increase since 2020-21
 - Due to short term illness has remained relatively stable.

⁴ Source: [Headline statistics - Children's Social Work Statistics 2022-23 – Looked After Children - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-petitions/html/2023/children-social-work-statistics-2022-23-looked-after-children)



Local Progress

and

Success



COSLA

Given the breadth and depth of work happening across Councils we are only able to showcase one short example from each local authority. We have grouped these into six themes:

- Voice & Participation
- Supporting the Workforce
- Multi-agency working and Partnerships.
- Taking a Preventative Approach
- Transforming Care
- Health and Wellbeing of Care Experienced Young People
- Service Transformation and Doing Things Differently

We have a section on our [COSLA website](#) dedicated to local work on The Promise. For now, we're proud to bring you a flavour of what is going on across Scotland to #KeepThePromise.



Voice & Participation

Councils are encouraging the participation and inclusion of care experienced children and young people in decision-making processes that impact their lives, ensuring their voices and perspectives are heard and considered. This includes establishing forums, such as care-experienced cabinets and youth-led consultations, where young people can express their views, advocate for their needs, as well as digital tools like apps being used to empower young individuals to provide feedback on the support they receive.



Dundee

During the year, our Social Work teams introduced Mind of My Own (MOMO). This digital app empowers care experienced children and young people to provide comments in their own time on the support they receive, including in advance of their own care planning meetings so their voice informs decisions. One Social Worker said: 'It's been a good tool and the main child I use it with enjoyed it – she is 6 and liked the pictures and getting to choose her own answers on screen'.

In 2023-24, the tool will also be used to carry out surveys with care experienced children and young people on key themes, to inform further improvements in the way teams provide support. For instance, questions on whether they believe their relationships with brothers and sisters have been appropriately respected and supported.



East Ayrshire

Over the course of the last two years we have been working to create opportunities for members of our care experienced community to grow their voices and use them to share their views and drive change within the community and within services. We have grown the membership of our Care Experienced Cabinet and young people are increasingly using that forum to push for change with elected members and leaders. The work of [ArtClub?](#) is another wonderful example of how our care experienced community are becoming more visible and using their voices to draw attention to their experiences and views.



West Lothian

Having Your Say is a well-established forum in West Lothian for care experienced children and young people that promotes participation, provides peers support, opportunities to discuss important themes and informs on children's rights. Having Your Say have been involved in our recent Customer Service Excellence assessment showcasing their achievements, highlighting the various forums they are involved in and explaining how they are supported to share their views. We regularly discuss the strategic direction and priorities for West Lothian with this group of young people and recent engagement focused on the corporate parenting plan. In November 2022, Community Education arranged and hosted a consultation event which was led by young people at Howden Park Centre in Livingston. This was a peer led experience involving numerous youth groups from around West Lothian.



Moray

The Champions' Board was officially re-launched on National Care Day, 17th February 2023, and we had 20 young people sign up as members. The Champions Board have been involved in the co-production and decision making of services and have taken a lead role in the commission of our local authority residential children's house in Moray, with their views contributing to 25% of the marking. They also played a lead role in the commissioning of the new single service advocacy provider contract in Moray.



Falkirk

Our local Champions Board which includes care experienced young people have been instrumental in bringing about change and have shared their 'Language in Care,' 'The Promise film' and 'What it means to be a Council Family and Friends Member' presentations to over 700 new staff from across the Council during mandatory induction training. They have also delivered training to the school Nurses, and Elected members. These resources have been developed by the Champs into an online module that all employees can access, ensuring the voice of care experienced children and young people is heard across the council and its partners.



Supporting the Workforce

Councils are improving services for care-experienced individuals by supporting the workforce empowered and knowledgeable about The Promise, and what children, young people and families need. The following good practice examples includes activities to establish “Promise Keepers,” who ensure that care promises remain central to service delivery, implementing trauma-informed practices and introducing programs to provide work experience and mentoring opportunities for care experienced people.



Renfrewshire

There are currently 230 Promise Keepers across Renfrewshire, with plans to grow this network in 2024. Promise Keepers act as local champions, helping to educate and improve services for care experienced people. They are central to ensuring The Promise remains at the forefront of service design and delivery.

All Promise Keepers undergo training to ensure that they have a good understanding of The Promise and are being supported to fulfil the role. A key strength of the Promise Keeper network is the facilitation of networking for staff from across the local authority, to ensure good practice is being recognised and shared appropriately. The Promise Keepers across the council and community planning partners help to ensure the needs of our care experienced children and young people are considered across the wide range of services that affect them.

The next step is to get Promise Keepers from businesses within Renfrewshire.



Highland

We have had a lot of success in Highland Council of raising awareness and engagement of the workforce in efforts to #KeepThePromise:

- Awareness & Engagement: Significant improvement in staff awareness and engagement with The Promise, as evidenced by surveys and feedback from engagement sessions.
- Partnership Collaboration: Development of initiatives like the Promise Conversation Café and Promise Newsletter to keep staff informed and engaged.
- Trauma-Informed Workforce: Progress in supporting the workforce to deliver trauma-informed practice, with a focus on trauma-informed leadership.
- Family Support: Introduction of Family Group Decision-Making and the Whole Family Well-being Programme to support families and prevent crisis intervention.

These successes demonstrate Highland Council’s commitment to improving the care system and supporting children, families, and the workforce in line with The Promise.



Midlothian

On the 28th of June 2023, we launched our Promise Guarantee which has been established to promote our commitment to our care experienced young people, ensuring they have an opportunity to gain valuable work experience throughout the council and beyond.

"Our future priorities include the implementation of our Promise Guarantee which strengthens our existing commitment to care experienced young people in that those who wish to work with the Council, to gain valuable work experience including a guaranteed interview, can do so. Our Elected Members and Senior Officers have also offered a number of mentoring and 'shadowing' opportunities should young people and any care leavers wish to know more about the respective roles"



Dumfries and Galloway

We received funding to procure a Virtual Reality training package to build staff resilience in response to the increasing impact of the pandemic on trauma, abuse and neglect. The immersive nature of the Virtual Reality Programme allows the user to experience the impact of trauma, abuse and neglect through the eyes of the child. The programme is a clinically-led, technology enabled behaviour changing tool. It is designed to enhance adults understanding of a child's emotions, trauma and potential triggers to improve the care, support and guidance they provide. By understanding the journey of children and young people that experience trauma, we can enhance our empathy, and when we change our behaviour, the outcomes for children and young people can improve significantly. The Virtual Reality Programme facilitates this behaviour change.



Orkney

We have been working with Who Cares? Scotland to identify suitable learning and awareness raising opportunities that can be provided across the Orkney Community Planning Partnership. A recent benchmarking exercise undertaken in schools, by the Care Experienced Children & Young People's Co-ordinator, found that this is an identified need. This need was identified from a roadshow that was created to raise awareness throughout the county's educational establishments about the Scottish Attainment Challenge and The Promise. The aim is to reach all schools in Orkney and includes online sessions to ensure the outer islands can participate.



Multi-agency Working & Partnerships

No one organisation will be able to keep The Promise on its own. Multi-agency and partnership working is crucial if we are all to achieve our ambitions. This section contains examples of successful local partnership work which includes working across council services, with external organisations such as health, and the third sector.



West Dunbartonshire

A Keeping the Promise sub-group was created in July 2022, which reports to our Children's Services Partnership. This group has representation from 23 different services and

supports and drives forward the recommendations of The Promise. Short working life groups were established from the Keeping the Promise group to look at specific issues in more detail and enlist membership from relevant parties. The three initial working groups were for Continuing Care (Moving on), Brothers and Sisters and Language. They report progress to the Keeping the Promise Group and take action to progress these priority areas.

The "Moving On" group focussed on how we can have a more consistent and clear approach around the implementation of Continuing care. Within the Language group we have found that the words used to describe people's lives are really personal, and that our goal should really be around following certain principles around language (strengths based, easy to understand) to influence practice and personalise language for our care experienced children and young people wherever possible.

The Brothers and Sisters group began in March 2023 by gathering our local data to establish a baseline for how we are doing in keeping brothers and sisters together, alongside efforts to establish how decisions and being made, and how we are supporting on-going relationships when siblings are separated. We are in the progress of establishing the next areas of priority that we will look at within Promise activity, and areas that have repeatedly come up are around Voice, Right to Education and Workforce Support.



Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Our third sector colleagues in Action for Children are doing work with parents/carers of children involved in offending behaviours and alcohol/substance misuse within various families' projects. These projects seek to provide safe and secure spaces for discussions about offending, substance use, domestic abuse seeking to create safe families.

The Comhairle has kept and enhanced its commitments to Keep the Promise and has indeed secured funding to Keep the Promise by developing and progressing work in our schools to:

- prevent/eliminate exclusion.
- respond to the needs of young people rather than react to problematic behaviour.

- create safe and supported places for our Care Experienced Children and Young People to get support and mentoring, in and out of the school environment. We have secured additional space within our largest secondary school for this purpose.

We have given a commitment to continual development of these projects in order that we maintain enthusiasm and momentum in keeping the Promise. This commitment to never stand still sustains progress toward improved support and proactive engagement with young people and their families.



North Ayrshire

In North Ayrshire, our approach to integration in early years support and locality modelling around community-based teams has been recognised as good practice. We have an integrated, multi-disciplinary team of nursing, support, and early years social work staff who can provide support to families in their home with a focus on early and preventative help.

We have recently partnered with national charity Dads Rock to employ a Dads Support Worker to consider how, within this early years' approach, we can better consider the role of dads and other male caregivers to develop positive attachments and relationships with their children. We have school based social workers and social work locality teams based within some schools where education, health and social work staff work together leading to enhanced communication and quicker responses to needs.



City of Edinburgh

We have opened a Corporate Parenting Hub, based on Leith Street in Edinburgh. This space acts as a community space for the Care Experienced Community. Opening in phases the building is a warm and welcoming space for the community, where they can access support and care in a safe and predictable environment. As well as groups running from the space such as Edinburgh Champs, there are dedicated spaces for brothers and sisters to meet and spend time together.

These spaces have been co-designed with the community and include an arts, crafts and imaginative play space and a gaming and chill room. There is also a sensory room, lounges and meeting spaces for group or one to one sessions. The opening of these spaces has been made possible by working alongside other departments within City of Edinburgh Council as well as our Community Benefit Partners and Private Sector Organisations. Other spaces in the building will be developed and opened for use as funding permits.



Taking a Preventative Approach

Early and effective intervention is at the heart of work to keep The Promise. These are some examples of how councils are innovating to support children, young people and families at the earliest possible opportunities.



Inverclyde

Support to our children and families begins at our front door with our Request for Assistance team providing that first point of contact. In addition, a key partnership developed in February 2023 with Children's 1st Family Wellbeing Services, now co-located together, has improved the support access to early help to 34 families. There has been a reduction in unnecessary social work involvement and opportunities for 5 Family Group Decision Making meetings, trauma informed systemic whole family wellbeing support and trauma informed support to individual family members. This service has further provided an opportunity for 4 families to attend a residential weekend. Evaluation continues with our children and families regarding the views and impact of the service.



Perth and Kinross

The Whole Family Wellbeing Fund has allowed for the continuation of the early intervention services which provide support to families out of office hours in their own homes. We have also developed a project which is called Families Empowering Communities which works now within 5 areas of Perth and Kinross to engage with families who are struggling. The team use a community empowerment approach to design support which meets their needs. The project is working with families who find it hard to engage with universal services.



Aberdeen City

The Fit Like Hub, a multi-disciplinary rights based and family first service established in 2022, continues to help ensure that families can access early and preventative support. Our Fit Like Hubs have supported 1043 families with an increasing percentage of self-referrals (currently 10%). In April 2023 401 young people/families were engaging with the service and 146 of the 401 are families who were being supported for the first time.

There is clear evidence that engagement with the service realises:

- Parents feeling supported to manage their anxieties and worries
- Parents/carers and children and young people feeling listened to and heard
- Strengthened family relationships
- Improved child mental health and wellbeing.

Those accessing the service tell us that it feels like a bespoke service and that it is the first time support has 'felt right'. As a result we have the confidence in our ability to deliver high quality, rights based integrated services that adapt based on what children and families tell us. Families tell us that they appreciate this and other more integrated services and this feedback is helping to shape our work to establish a Bairns Hoose.



East Dunbartonshire

The House Project has been established following collaboration with the National House Project and Life Changes Trust. The Project aims to build upon the scaffolding required to provide young people leaving care with the opportunity to plan and prepare in a structured way to enter their tenancy, make them feel valued and reduce feelings of uncertainty and lack of control over their future. House Project also aims to provide young people with a community of support and the ability to build connections in their local area.



Fife

There has been significant progress within Fife across the partnership including accessing funding opportunities to focus on early intervention and prevention, the redesign of services across the partnership by focussing on the key priority areas of the promise. Key highlights include:

- Senior Social Work Practitioners based in schools.
- 13 Homemakers posts embedded within area teams.
- A Senior Mental Health Nurse within the Young People's Team
- Learning with Care team within Education
- Redesign of Close Support Team for a targeted focus on interventions with young people in residential childcare
- The Willow Project. A CAMHS service specifically for Kinship care
- 2 additional posts within the Young People's Team secured to support Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children



Transforming Care

The number of young people coming into care is changing. Councils have worked tirelessly over years to transform services and ensuring children, young people and families get the right support at the right time. This work has also included efforts to ensure where children do require additional support and protection, they are cared for in places which are right for them. The examples in this section include reducing the number of children accommodated away from their families and reducing reliance on external residential placements. There has also been work to ensure young people feel supported to continue in their care setting past 18, and to move on with help with priority access to housing and support for moving into their own home.



Glasgow

The reform of the care system for children and young people in Glasgow City has led to a substantial reduction in the number of looked after children, more than halving the number of children accommodated away from their families since 2016.

As of February 2024, the number of looked after and accommodated children in the City has reduced from 1413 in January 2016 to 617, representing a reduction of 56%. In addition, there has been an 82% reduction in the number of admissions of children under 5 into care since 2016 (from 105 in 2016 to 19 in 2022). This has been coupled with a reduction in the number of placement moves, though it is recognised that some placement moves are positive, particularly where related to the reunification of brothers and sisters, and in response to a request from a child or young person.



Stirling

Our strongest source of evidence regarding progress in Stirling is the continuing transformation of care, with a sustained significant reduction in the number of children and young people residing in external residential placements, the majority staying at home or with family. This has been achieved through whole systems change in professional assessment and decision making, and allocation of resources to better support young people at home in their communities.

This has been a labour intensive process over a period of around seven years involving a range of staff, but the effort has borne fruit. As of January 2024 we have only 4 external Care and Education placements, compared to seven years ago when we had around 35 external placements.



Shetland

Young people are supported and encouraged to remain in their kinship, foster or residential placement for as long as they like, in line with the continuing care duty in the Children & Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. The majority of our young people remain in their care setting until they are 21, and the council has a protocol in place to support young people leaving care to receive priority access to housing. Children's social work support and guide young people to prepare for moving into their own home, and our throughcare and aftercare team provide support until 26, and beyond where required.



Health and Wellbeing of Care Experienced Young People

Ensuring that our care experienced young people's health and wellbeing is supported and protected is of upmost importance. Councils are ensuring young people have access to mental health support alongside supporting access to culture and leisure activities.



East Lothian

We have successfully established a Single Point of Access which provides access to three strands of support and services:

- Mental Health and Wellbeing Support (Tier 2/Additional Level)
- Neurodevelopmental Assessment
- Early Years Education Resource Group

Integrated approaches to tier 2 mental health supports and services are demonstrating a reduction in demand for the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and reduced delays for children experiencing distress. This should help children remain included and engaged in education and reduce the risk of requiring targeted services.



Clackmannanshire

We continue to implement and embed our Mental Health and Wellbeing in Clacks transformation project. The project seeks to effect sustainable change in mental health for children, young people and their families through the implementation of a whole-systems approach and 'continuum of support' that is allowing for personalisation and choice in building a package of support that meets the needs of the child/young person at the right time and in the right place.

The project has four principles – holistic ('Closer to Clacks'), one door ('Tell Us Once'), contextual ('Closer to Clacks') and responsive ('Children Cannot Wait') which act as drivers for ten work streams covering a range of activities including the development of a continuum of new mental health supports, available both digitally and face-to-face. This enables children, young people and their families to create packages of support that most suit their needs. Our digital services include Kooth, Togetherall and Shout.



Angus

Free leisure access is provided for care experienced children and young people with a focus on those looked after at home and young care experienced adults living independently. Support is available to purchase clothes and equipment where needed, targeted at breaking down the barriers for care experienced young people, supporting engagement in education, and accessing local community activities. The programme is a joint venture between Angus Council and Angus Alive that came from a local needs analysis and joint work in Leading the Promise.



Aberdeenshire

The development of Care Groups in schools has progressed from 3 groups to 16 over the past year. Additionally, we have secured £84,000 from the CORRA Foundation to work in partnership with Wildbird, a community organisation specialising in the arts. Young people within our care groups are being supported to embark on arts-based projects such as the Sounding Out Project, where pupils used highly technical equipment to produce a music video with recordings of local sound and footage, as well as photographs. The pupils visited Huntly Castle, the River Deveron, Portknockie Bay and Cullen Beach to gain the footage and then hosted a 'Sounding Out' evening at Huntly Castle. The group is being nominated for an Inspiring Aberdeenshire award, testament to their teamwork and talent.



Service Transformation and Doing Things Differently

Work to Keep The Promise inevitably means that services will transform and adapt around the needs of children, young people and their families. This final section demonstrates some of that work which includes success with educational outcomes, 'care' as a protected characteristic and support for unaccompanied asylum seeking children.



East Renfrewshire

Key Education data is showing an improving picture for our care experienced pupils. Systems are in place to track the participation, attendance, attainment and achievement of care experienced children and young people. Education Services work with the wider corporate parents to support them to understand how they can provide opportunities for care experienced young people. Key achievements include:

- 100% of care experienced children and young people met their P1 developmental milestones in 2022/23.
- Attendance for children and young people attending East Renfrewshire Schools who are looked after is 90%.
- Zero Looked After children and young people were excluded in 2022/23.
- 86.5% of care experienced children and young people were in a positive destination in 2022



South Ayrshire

In 2023 our Integrated Equalities Impact assessment (IIA) was developed to include The Promise, Child Rights and Wellbeing, Trauma Informed Practice, Our Ageing Population, Health and Wellbeing and Rurality. Within the IIA we have recognised 'Care' as a protected characteristic specific to South Ayrshire Council, therefore anyone introducing new policies, procedures, strategies, projects, and financial decisions, whether working directly or indirectly with young people and their families will have to consider the Promise and acknowledge care as a protected characteristic as core to all new initiatives.



Scottish Borders

The New Roots group is a Champions Board project for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in Scottish Borders. Providing a support infrastructure for this group of young people is a new development for Scottish Borders over the last few years. The New Roots Group:

1. offers a safe space for peer support and a welcome to new arrivals to the Scottish Borders.
2. provides a platform for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people living in the Scottish Borders to have a voice and influence change.
3. supports the creation of new links within the community, ensuring young people know who their corporate parents are and the range of support services and opportunities available to them in Scottish Borders.

- learns and shares information about other cultures (including both the young people's cultures and Scottish cultures)



South Lanarkshire

In South Lanarkshire we are making progress in the decriminalisation of young people. A Whole System Approach Team has been established and is working towards decriminalising all young people, with the team helping to maximise the use of diversion and bail supervision for young people where possible. South Lanarkshire's flagship Structured Deferred Sentencing Court has also helped to contribute to supporting young people to address their issues in a timely way with community-based supports. An evaluation by the University of the West of Scotland highlighted that 83% of young people were admonished at the end of their structured deferred sentence.



North Lanarkshire

Ongoing work with schools towards fulfilling the ambition of The Promise to end school exclusions has resulted in significant reductions over the past three sessions.

- 88% reduction in exclusions for care experienced learners
- 88% reduction in days lost due to exclusion for care experienced learners
- 84% reduction in number of care experienced learners excluded

The Virtual School in partnership with The Promise team has created and implemented a Promise Champions model in schools across the authority, with schools being recognised for their promotion and work to deliver on the ambitions of The Promise. Currently two clusters have been involved in the 'Keeping the Promise' pilot (over 200 school staff), however this will continue to be rolled out locally. The model has attracted national interest, and Education Scotland have developed this to be used as a national resource across Scotland.



Argyll and Bute

During 2022-23 our Care Experienced Education Team (CEET) was supported by four Health and Wellbeing Liaison Officers and three Lead Additional Support Needs Assistants. During this academic year over 40 CECYP have benefitted from the Care Experienced Education Team input. Following a timetable review in April, part of the team were redeployed and in May 2023 we piloted early intervention support in one of our Early Learning and Childcare settings. Qualitative feedback from the setting practitioners has evidenced the positive impact on educational attainment, particularly literacy and numeracy. One child in particular has grown in confidence, leading to higher engagement and increased skills development. Learner feedback remains essential to informing our approach. Throughout May and June, we have surveyed our CECYP as part of our self-evaluation process. A range of questions in relation to the support received from the Care Experienced Education Team were asked. This feedback supports identification of the type of support important to our children and young people and allows us to plan to meet these needs. It also informs individual support, Care Experienced Education Team staff training needs, evidences the impact of the interventions and continues to feed into our improvement journey. 38 learners completed our 'Learner Voice' survey.



Challenges

and

What is Needed

to Succeed



COSLA

Local government and its individual local authorities are incredibly proud of the progress and impact over the last four years. In the previous section we've only been able to highlight a small snapshot of innovative, and often life-changing work taking place every day. Progress, however, is not without its challenges, and recognition of the context in which the sector is operating should be acknowledged when scrutinising the pace of change.

Colleagues across the local government workforce, who work tirelessly to achieve better outcomes and experiences for children and young people, often describe the progress that has been made in such challenging conditions, as remarkable. We may not see remarkable progress every day, but it's there.

A particular challenge levied at our sector is that the pace of change is not being felt equally across the country and that we must work harder, and faster to transform and deliver for our children, young people and families. Of course, to an extent, this is correct, however, we will not go further, do more, be better unless we are explicit about the challenges facing local government.

In this section we seek to highlight the challenges facing every single local authority in Scotland. Some to a greater or lesser extent, but ALL face them. Many of the challenges we face are not unique to local government, but they are having an impact on our progress, and it's clear that there are interdependencies between many.

We also seek to be clear about what is needed to address these challenges so that Scotland CAN Keep The Promise; because THAT is exactly what we're all striving to do. These challenges are not excuses, they are the reality facing local government and without acknowledging these and working collaboratively with others, we will not be able to provide the right support, at the right time for children and families in Scotland; we will fail.

Our sector will continue to strive to be better through our local strategic and partnership plans and build on our current progress and success. We see opportunity in Plan 24 – 30 and we've welcomed the opportunity to inform and influence the development of that through our local experiences.

The Challenges



“The Workforce is in Crisis”

We are proud to have a dedicated, loyal and committed local government workforce. Without them, and the partners we work with, we would have made no progress in the last four years. But the last four years, since The Promise was made, have been immeasurably difficult. A worldwide pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis, and global conflict have been outwith our control but have contributed significantly to the pressure our workforce is under.

CELCIS, in their Children’s Services Reform Research, [‘Scotland’s children’s services landscape: The Views and experiences of the children’s services workforce’](#) were clear in their analysis of the challenges facing the children’s services workforce. Some stark headlines from their report:

- The children’s services workforce is in crisis and needs urgent investment.
- Scotland’s children’s services are responding to greater diversity and complexity of need.
- The workforce needs long-term clarity, commitment, and investment from national and local leaders.

Almost all local authorities report vacancies within their social work teams, with added complexities around recruitment, alongside the balance of those leaving the profession and the numbers coming into it. The aforementioned CELCIS report and Social Work Scotland’s [‘Setting the Bar’](#) report both bring into sharp focus the challenges facing the sector, including caseloads, the demographics of the sector and the added pressures and complexities of a cluttered legislative and policy landscape.

Of course, we know that it is not social work’s responsibility alone to keep the promise. From local government it does, and will, require service delivery and transformation across the spectrum of services coupled with working closely with public and third sector partners; through statutory mechanisms such as Community Planning Partnerships and Children’s Services Planning Partnerships to individual relationships with organisations.

The workforce crisis does not begin and end with social work. Information reported to the Society of Personal and Development Scotland (SPDS) workforce planning portfolio group suggests that Scottish local authorities are facing significant challenges in maintaining and developing the capacity of the workforce; factors such as financial pressures, increased service demand, and population changes across the country, amongst others, all contribute.

Information highlighted to SPDS also suggests there are critical workforce gaps across services which are fundamental to keeping the promise; gaps in social care, social work, mental health officers, housing officers, teachers and head teachers all contribute to the workforce challenges affecting local service delivery, and the sustained transformation required of The Promise.

Highlighting the workforce challenges is not one dimensional, it is directly attributable to the challenges facing local government in its efforts to transform and deliver services and support at a pace required to keep the promise by 2030. Without a well-resourced and supported workforce, we have no Promise.

“A national shortage of social work staff has impacted our recruitment drive and has resulted in a number of teams running at reduced capacity. Recruitment challenges impacted our ability to fully implement the service redesign and we had to accept that some of the new priorities and processes would be slower to show impact due to insufficient staffing numbers in key areas.

LA Promise Lead ”

“Challenges remain in a number of areas, most obviously there are resource constraints and wider capacity issues across services amid ongoing financial difficulty. One aspect of this is a continued reliance on temporary and fixed term contracts (linked to funding mechanisms) which, whilst useful for enhancing services, can increase the rate of change in personnel among corporate parent organisations. This is a real barrier to forming lasting and valuable relationships.

LA Promise Lead ”

We MUST acknowledge and address these challenges as a matter of urgency.
To quote The Promise:

‘Scotland must hold the hands of those who hold the hand of the child’



The Policy and Legislative Landscape is Cluttered

The Promise and Plan 21–24 both made clear that *'The landscape is cluttered, complex and does not provide a clear frame to support children, families, decision makers and service providers.'* In the years since the Independent Care Review and subsequent publication of The Promise, multiple new initiatives, policies and legislative changes have been, and continue to be added to an already complex system. These have included, but are not limited to:

- The Scottish Child Interview Model
- Implementation of Bairns' Hoose
- Delivering Equally Safe
- UNCRC Incorporation
- Children's (Care and Justice) Scotland Bill
- Introduction of the National Care Service Bill
- Education Reform
- Children's Hearings Redesign
- Whole Family Wellbeing Funding

We, as a sector, cannot argue with the intentions of most of the added legislation and policy. They are all in place to protect children's rights, advance service delivery and improve outcomes for children and young people. However, as 'more' is added into the system the pressure is increased on local government's financial and workforce capacities.

Additional reporting and additional workforce responsibilities, as mentioned in the previous section, reduce the capacity of the workforce to meet the needs and demands of children and their families. More levels and layers of complexity cannot continue to be added, alongside overburdensome reporting requirements from Scottish Government, with the same level of expectation of service delivery and transformation.

“We are supportive of these initiatives, and all have the potential to improve outcomes, but they are not well coordinated, and there is insufficient capacity to respond to all of these demands simultaneously while delivering frontline services in the context of reducing public funding and recruitment challenges.

LA Promise Lead ”

“The lack of policy coherence and the scale of policy demands continues to be a barrier to delivering change and has possibly become more not less complex and cluttered. Some examples, would be, responding to the requirements associated with the GIRFEC refresh, new national child protection guidance, the Bairns Hoose model and UNCRC implementation and so on, diminishes services' capacity to deliver on the broad reaching recommendations of The Promise. The policy landscape feels disconnected and the focus on risk that is reflected in current policy priorities feels at odds with the vision of prevention and early intervention that was outlined in The Promise.

LA Promise Lead ”



There isn't Enough Money in the System

Local authorities have faced severe funding pressures in recent years, with cuts to core budgets and increasingly directed funding from the Scottish Government. This has been compounded by increased demand, rising costs and inflationary pressures. The 2024/25 Local Government Settlement saw another real terms cut to revenue and capital budgets, with no additional funding to address inflation. As a result, local authorities have had to make tough decisions in order to balance budgets, including cuts to services and staffing. These ongoing pressures on the Local Government Settlement are having an impact on all council services, including Children's Services. A recent [Accounts Commission report](#) on Local Government budgets 2024/25 highlights the significant budget gaps faced by councils – with a gap of £585m in 2024/25, estimated to increase to £780m by 2026/27.

If councils' core funding continues to be squeezed, this will impact on local authorities' ability to deliver the services that are vital to keeping The Promise by 2030. Ringfenced and directed funding limits local authorities' flexibility to deliver services in a way that meets local need. Funding for Children's Services in particular includes multiple separate pots of funding, each with their own conditions and reporting requirements. Single year settlements also do not enable councils to deliver long-term, sustainable financial plans and has an impact on ability to commission third and independent sector services. Local authorities require adequate and sustainable funding and the flexibility to make decisions based on local need and circumstances. Investment in Local Government is key to long term positive outcomes for children, young people and their families.

We are encouraged by the work on an 'investment : disinvestment' model, led by Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor for The Promise. Thus far, discussions across the public and private sectors have garnered interest and support to seek investment to apply a new approach to resourcing preventative approaches, both from Scottish Government and the philanthropic community. Whilst discussions remain at an early stage, we are excited by the possibilities and opportunity to truly transform and invest in early intervention and prevention. We will continue to support this approach in the coming months and years.

We welcome the Verity House Agreement, which can open up opportunities to address these funding challenges and help fund essential services, through the commitment of 'local by default, national by agreement', the default position of no ring-fenced or directed funding and a new fiscal framework.

“ Promise related funding provided via CORRA for 12/18 months is not long enough for services to establish themselves and have a meaningful impact on people's lives. Short term funding leads to short lived services. This can mean a lot of time and effort being used in evaluation and reporting work to justify and secure funding, whilst also trying to deliver a service that delivers for people.

LA Promise Lead ”

“ The Scottish Government approach to the use of temporary funding is inconsistent with the demands in The Promise to transform the system over 10 years. Different funding streams and disconnected reporting arrangements creates uncertainty about how much will be provided and for how long. This limits how bold we can be. It also creates challenges in recruitment and retention of skilled staff to deliver change.

LA Promise Lead ”



There's a National Shortage of Foster Carers

It is everyone's priority to keep families together. Where this is not possible local authorities work tirelessly to ensure that children remain within their local communities. However, a shortage of high quality, local placements is providing immense challenges owing to difficulties, nationally and locally, to recruit foster carers. This, in turn, can mean that children are placed in residential settings or in expensive out of authority placements. A lack of foster carers coupled with the lack of suitable housing, is also directly impacting our ability to progress local and national actions to ensure brothers and sisters are placed together, where safe to do so.

Additionally, following the invasion of Ukraine, Scotland has seen a sharp increase in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking (UAS) Children, both through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) and spontaneous arrivals. A recent data collection exercise from local authorities indicated that Scotland is supporting 1147 UAS children in our care system. Unaccompanied children arriving in Scotland are being supported by local authorities in a range of placements between foster care, residential, supported accommodation, and varying types of tenancies.

Whilst we strive to ensure all children in Scotland grow up loved, safe and respected we must acknowledge and address that the challenges presented by a workforce crisis, a critical gap in the number of foster carers required and the changing complexities of children and families requiring support and protection on our ability to Keep The Promise with the current resource available.

“ Establishing a range of good quality, local placements for children and young people has proved challenging due to difficulties in recruitment of foster carers locally as is the case nationally. This can impact on our ability to keep children within their locally communities and providing a home where brothers and sisters can remain living together and close to significant others. Due to the local and national shortage of fostering placements, more children and young people are being placed in residential care, or external placement despite significant recruitment efforts made locally.

LA Promise Lead ”

“ Challenges in availability of foster carers is exacerbated by the pressures of the National Transfer Scheme. Our council has taken a proactive approach, making an early decision to create a team dedicated to supporting this area of practice, and from an initially social work-focussed approach, this has diversified into a multi-agency team. However there have been significant challenges in finding foster families for young people who are under 16, when this was already an area under pressure prior to the inception of the National Transfer Scheme.

LA Promise Lead ”



The Future of Children's Services

The uncertainty around the future of children's services is cause for great concern. Each local authority has, under the powers of The Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014 made decisions regarding the local structure of children's services, with the intention of delivering the best outcomes for children and families. Whilst we recognise that improvements are necessary, we have outlined throughout this report what some of the successes, challenges and enablers are; none of which will be resolved by changing the structures in which services operate. Without an evidence base to suggest that outcomes will be improved by such structural upheaval, at a time when significant transformation is already underway, it is difficult to see what benefits will arise from mandating new structures upon local authorities.

“ Large scale structural change within an already fragile and diminishing workforce, while need becomes more complex, risks destabilising organisations and threatens quality of service delivery. Potential implications for terms and conditions could lead to industrial action. The Bill contains no reference to implications for backroom support staff, or to salary costs of providing equivalent support in a new organisation.

LA Promise Lead ”

“ Just as there are existing arrangements with Children & Justice integration through IJBs, there are also different, successful structural arrangements where Children & Education Services are integrated, noting in some areas this integration has evidenced positive outcomes particularly for Looked After Children and Children with ASN. Mandated delegation threatens to undo the progress made in joint working, fracturing current inclusive practice between Children's and Justice Social Work and wider council services. Risk and impact assessments have not been considered for crucial interface between services.

LA Promise Lead ”

What is Needed to Succeed?

Throughout this report we have sought to demonstrate our commitment, innovation and progress whilst being realistic about the challenge the sector faces now, and in the years to come. Whilst the previous section puts a sharp focus on the challenges local authorities face, we also want to be clear about what we think, as a sector, is required for us to continue to play our part in keeping The Promise.

The risks are too great for us not to address and tackle these challenges. COSLA, as the voice of local government and on behalf of members, believe the following **MUST** be prioritised to enable continued and sustained progress. We, as a sector, will also play our part and continue to lead from the front. We look forward to the publication of Plan 24 – 30 and the opportunities it brings to Keep The Promise.



Local authorities require adequate and sustainable funding and the flexibility to make decisions based on local need and circumstances

Many of the challenges outlined in the previous section stem from a reduction in councils' core budgets and a significant increase in ringfenced, directed and grant funding.



Better national support for the workforce

Plan 21-24 was explicit in stating the workforce that supports children and families must itself be supported and have the right scaffolding of help, resource and accountability. There are major workforce issues within the sector, including recruitment and retention of social workers and foster carers. This is not helped by criticisms that the workforce not doing enough on The Promise.

The recruitment and retention of social workers and foster carers cannot be solved by individual local authorities, and new national strategies and incentives are needed to tackle these long-term and systemic issues.



Local authorities need better national policy coherence and alignment from the Scottish Government

Better alignment between the Scottish Government, The Promise Scotland and The Promise Oversight Board on priorities, reporting mechanisms, and coordination between different policy areas related to The Promise is required.

There is also a need for consistency and alignment between national policy initiatives that align to The Promise, and a recognition that local authorities cannot deliver on all the priorities while facing core budget cuts. There is also a tension between taking forward preventative policy initiatives while trying to support improved outcomes for children and families here and now when funding and resources are under strain.

Scotland requires a clear strategy and policy framework, aligned to The Promise.



The National Care Service – Children’s and Justice Social Work Services

Since the introduction of the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill COSLA has been clear that decisions around the delegation of children’s and justice social work services to Integration Authorities MUST remain locally.

The CELCIS research outlined many areas requiring prioritisation for improvement. It did not reach the conclusion that structural integration between children’s services and health improves outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Given the scale of transformation underway across local authorities, and the lack of evidence to suggest that changing structures will improve outcomes, all the focus for investing and transforming children’s services should be focused on what will help Scotland keep The Promise, for all Scotland’s children.



Improvements in reporting, data and monitoring

We are delighted to be involved in the development of the ‘Promise Progress Framework’, but it is long overdue. The new ‘monitoring framework’ must become the basis for Scotland’s understanding of our progress, or lack thereof. This must be used by The Promise Oversight Board, along with all stakeholders, as our shared understanding. It should also be used as the mechanism by which we seek to reduce the burden of reporting and improve the data and information we collectively hold, both for understanding and improvement. Future decisions must be evidence-based and have clear accountability how they will help Scotland keep The Promise.



The

Year

Ahead



COSLA

We're incredibly proud to have the opportunity to showcase a small snapshot of some of the incredible, life changing work happening across Scotland's councils. As an organisation which represents Scotland's 32 councils, we also felt it was crucial to underline and highlight the challenges which are, without doubt, hindering progress and pace.

We know that no one organisation will keep the promise on their own, and we promise to continue to collaborate with partners across the public sector, with the Scottish Government, The Promise Scotland, with the third and independent sectors and crucially with our children, young people and families to get it right.

In the coming year there are more opportunities and challenges ahead. The passing of the Children's (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill is an important milestone in our journey; the Scottish Government's plans to consult on the Children's Hearings System, Moving On, the Definition of Care Experience and Fostering are welcome to inform a future Promise Bill, due to be introduced by the end of this parliament. There are opportunities for closer and more connected working with Scottish Government through the Verity House Agreement to tackle our shared priorities around child poverty, a just transition to net zero ambitions and sustainable public services.

The publication of Plan 24 – 30 is June much anticipated and, as a sector, we've been grateful to have informed the development of this and hope to have more opportunities to collaborate in this way with both The Promise Scotland and The Promise Oversight Board.

Whilst we welcome the opportunities ahead, we have to, once again, make very clear that we **MUST** first address the challenges outlined in this report.

We step into the remainder of this year, and next with optimism and hope.



Local Government
and
The Promise

