

## Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 4 December 2024  
32<sup>nd</sup> Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

# The Promise

## Introduction

1. At its meeting on 6 November 2024, the Committee agreed to hold three sessions on the Promise focusing on workforce issues, whole family wellbeing and voice.
2. This week's meeting will enable the Committee to hear evidence from two panels on workforce issues.
3. Whilst these panels will primarily focus on the recruitment and retention of social workers, it is expected that the session may touch upon other workforce pressures related to the implementation of the Promise.

## Background

4. In November 2023, the Committee held an [evidence session](#) on progress in relation to the Promise. As part of that session, significant concerns were raised around social work recruitment and retention and how this was affecting the Promise implementation across Scotland.
5. In March 2024, the Committee also [spoke informally](#) with 37 young people from across Scotland via Who Cares? Scotland. This highlighted the impact that social work recruitment and retention issues were having on care experienced children and young people. This included frequent changes to Social Workers and/or infrequent access to Social Work support.
6. SPICe has produced a briefing paper for this session which is attached at **Annexe A**.

## Evidence

7. The Committee will hear today from:
  - Claire Burns, Director, CELCIS;
  - Fiona Duncan, Independent Strategic Advisor;
  - Professor Trish McCulloch, Professor of Social Work and Deputy Dean in the School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law, University of Dundee; and
  - Fraser McKinlay, Chief Executive, The Promise Scotland;

and then from—

- Alison Bavidge, National Director, Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW);

**ECYP/S6/24/32/1**

- Laura Caven, Chief Officer, Children and Young People Team and Co-Chair of the Additional Support for Learning Project Board, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA);
- Ben Farrugia, Director, Social Work Scotland; and
- Simon Macfarlane, Regional Manager, UNISON Scotland

## **Submissions**

A submission has been received from the Promise Scotland, which is included at **Annexe B**.

**Committee Clerks  
November 2024**

## Annexe A



# Education, Children and Young People Committee

**Wednesday 4 December 2024**

## **The Promise: Workforce Issues**

### **Introduction**

This SPICe briefing has been prepared ahead of the Committee's first in a series of evidence sessions on children's social work reform and The Promise. The session will focus on workforce recruitment and retention issues and their potential impact on achieving the reforms set out in the 2020 Independent Care Review. The session will focus primarily on the social work workforce, while also looking to increase understanding of issues facing staff working in other areas.

**Please note**, while the Independent Care Review noted children and young people prefer the term 'care experienced' to describe their circumstances, the term 'looked after' has a particular meaning in law. Therefore, this briefing uses the terms 'care experienced' or 'children in or on the edges of care' where possible, but 'looked after' is used in relation to the relevant legislation and policy.

### **Background: Child protection and the care system**

Where a child is believed to be at risk of abuse or neglect, local authorities have a duty to investigate concerns. This is set out in sections 60-64 of the [Children's Hearings \(Scotland\) Act 2011](#). A child protection planning meeting may be held to determine risk. Where a child is found to be at risk of significant harm their name will be placed on the local authority's child protection register and they will have a Child Protection Plan. The latest [Scottish Government Child Protection statistics](#) show that, as at 31 July 2023, there were 2,094 children on the Child Protection Register – up 4% on 2022 and down 21% on 2013.

Where a child has experienced abuse or neglect, has been involved in the youth justice system or has disabilities requiring specialist care they may become involved in the care system. This is where their local authority takes on some legal responsibility for the child's care and the child becomes 'looked after'.

Local authorities have a general duty under section 12 of the [Social Work \(Scotland\) Act 1968](#) to promote social welfare. Section 17 of the [Children \(Scotland\) Act 1995](#) sets out a general duty for local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children looked after by them, and section 22 of the same Act provides a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area.

The process of a child becoming 'looked after' can happen through Scotland's children's hearings system, through the Scottish courts, or via a Section 25 order in cases where parents do not object or are not present.

Children who are formally 'looked after' can live in different arrangements such as at home, where a child continues to live with their parents or carers under a [Compulsory Supervision Order \(CSO\)](#) granted by a children's hearing - this specific arrangement does not exist in the rest of the UK; in foster care; in kinship care with friends or relatives; with potential adopters; in a residential house or school; or in a secure care setting.

The [latest Scottish Government Children's Social Work Statistics for Looked After Children](#) cover the period 2022-23. The statistics show that, as at 31 July 2023, there were 12,206 looked after children in Scotland. 20% of these children were placed at home, 34% with kinship carers, 32% with foster carers, 1% with prospective adopters, 2% in other placements within the community and 11% in residential accommodation.

The overall number of looked after children in 2022-23 is the lowest figure since 2006: numbers decreased by 2% since 2022 and by 24% since 2013. While reform of the children's care system does have an aim of reducing the number of children in care, the reasons for this most recent fall are not fully understood.

The [Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection \(CELCIS\)](#) has said the figures provide "only an outline drawing", missing the details needed for complete understanding, such as information about unmet need, changed thresholds for escalation or barriers to services. CELCIS note there was a 39% drop in the number of children being taken into care in the months after the pandemic started and numbers have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

## Care system reform

Children's social work services are currently going through a period of reform. This began with the [Independent Care Review](#), commissioned in February 2017 to carry out a 'root and branch review' of the care system. A key purpose of the review was to look at how Scotland might address the inequality of outcomes care experienced people face in many areas of their lives such as health and education.

People with experience of the care system represented half of the review group's co-chairs and working group members. During the lifetime of the review, the views of over 5,500 care experienced children and adults, as well as parents, carers and the care workforce, were listened to.

The review findings were published in February 2020. The main findings were set out in [The Promise](#) and accompanying reports examined different aspects of the care system. The Promise gives a vision for a Scotland where, by 2030, all children grow up loved, safe and respected, with effective support reducing the need for children to go into care. This vision is built on five foundations:

- **Voice:** Children must be listened to and involved in decisions about their care.
- **Family:** Children feel loved and safe in their families and families are given the support they need.
- **Care:** Children must not be separated from their brothers and sisters wherever possible. Legislation to help siblings in care stay together has since come into force in July 2021.
- **People:** Care experienced children must be supported to develop relationships.
- **Scaffolding:** Children, families and the workforce must be supported by an accountable system that provides help and support when required.

The Scottish Government [accepted the recommendations of the review in February 2020](#). Following publication of the recommendations, [The Promise Scotland](#) was set up by Ministers as an independent organisation to oversee change. Its goal is to enable Scotland to 'keep the promise' to care experienced children and young people by 2030. In addition, the Oversight Board was set up to hold Scotland to account and reviews progress annually.

The Promise Scotland does not hold statutory powers or responsibilities; its role is to oversee, drive and support change. It works with organisations and individuals all over Scotland to help others deliver change for care experienced children and young people.

In a [written answer published in March 2021](#), the then Minister for Children and Young People, Maree Todd MSP, stated that the role of The Promise Scotland is to: "help drive forward the change needed for Scotland to keep "The Promise" and the role of the Scottish Government is to "underpin the work that needs to be done to make the real transformation to developing policy and focus on what matters, the people, the children and families most in need of support."

Ministerial responsibility for The Promise currently sits with the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, Natalie Don-Innes, reporting to the First Minister. A [Cabinet sub-committee on The Promise](#) was set up to monitor progress and decision making in relation to the Promise across a number of portfolios. Sub-

committee members are the First Minister, Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise; Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport; Minister for Public Finance; and Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy.

## Implementing The Promise

The Promise Scotland set out initial steps toward implementing The Promise in [Plan 21-24](#), and next steps up to 2030 are set out in [Plan 24-30](#). This is described by the Promise Scotland as a 'route map' to keep the Promise by 2030. It is organised around the **five foundations of The Promise**, with Independent Care Review recommendations grouped by theme under each foundation.

The Promise Scotland intends to keep track of progress using the Plan 24-30 website, with a webpage on each theme looking at the situation in 2024, what needs to happen by 2030, and how this will happen. For each of the five foundations, a particular area to focus on has also been identified for this plan. These are:

- **Voice:** Focus on accurate record keeping that shows evidence of views sought and informed decision making. Respect the right to access care records.
- **Family:** Focus on support for families at an earlier stage, enabling more babies and infants to remain at home.
- **Care:** Focus on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.
- **People:** Focus on the recruitment and retention crisis in the children's care system workforce.
- **Scaffolding:** Focus on ensuring funding is clearly aligned to need and impact.

The Promise Progress Framework, developed by COSLA, the Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland, is expected to launch by the end of 2024. The framework is intended to build understanding of progress toward keeping the Promise by bringing together data.

The [Keeping the Promise Implementation Plan](#), published in March 2022, gave an overview of Scottish Government actions and commitments toward keeping the Promise. In September 2024, the [Keeping the Promise to our children, young people and families: progress update](#) was published. This provides a summary of progress so far and outlines next steps.

The Oversight Board has published progress reports monitoring change. [Report One](#) was published in May 2022. [Report Two](#) was published in June 2023, and it concluded that delivering Plan 21-24 commitments would be challenging due to “worsening circumstances for many and the current pace of change”.

## Summary of actions so far

The Scottish Government has brought forward a number of measures to action changes called for by the Independent Care Review. These include:

- Legislation to help siblings in care stay together came into force in July 2021. This is set out in [section 13 of the Children \(Scotland\) Act 2020](#). The Committee heard during an informal evidence session with care experienced children and young people there were still cases where siblings are not being placed together, and a 2022 study using data collected by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) found only one in five children looked after away from home via children's hearings were placed with siblings. Plan 24-30 states local authorities "[struggle](#)" to provide data on this.
- The [Children \(Care and Justice\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) was passed in Parliament in March 2024, and became an Act in June 2024. The overall aim of the legislation is to introduce trauma-informed, age-appropriate support for children involved with care and justice services. The Act's provisions to end the detention of under 18s in Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs) and to treat children detained in secure accommodation as 'looked after children' for the purposes of accessing support came into force in August 2024. Once fully enacted, the legislation will raise the age of referral to children's hearings from 16 to 18.
- The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#) came into force on 16 July 2024. The Act protects children's rights in law, giving them access to legal redress if their rights are breached in relation to laws originally made in the Scottish Parliament. While the Bill originally passed in 2021 intended for all relevant UK and Scottish Parliament legislation to be covered, the Supreme Court ruled this was not within the powers of the Scottish Parliament. An amended Bill was introduced in 2023 became an Act on 16 January 2024 and came into force on 16 July 2024.
- [The introduction of a Scottish Recommended Rate](#) of allowance for foster and kinship carers was announced in August 2023. This followed the 2018 [National review of care allowances](#). The recommended rates have not risen since their introduction, and an [independent review of SRA](#) looking at future policy and financial planning is scheduled to begin this autumn.
- The [2021-22 Programme for Government \(PfG\)](#) committed to a [Whole Family Wellbeing Fund](#) of £500m over Session 6 of Parliament. This is aimed at tackling issues faced by families before they need crisis intervention. The PfG also stated that from 2030, at least 5% of community-based health and social care spend will be focused on preventative measures. The overall intention of this preventative spend is to reduce the number of children being taken into care.
  - In a [September 2024 written answer](#), the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise stated that £110m of Whole Family Wellbeing Funding (WFWF) has been invested since 2022. Of this, £96m was provided to Children's Services Planning Partnerships (CSPPs); £1.6m

for national support for local transformation work; and £13.1m for 12 system change projects across Scottish Government policy areas.

- The Hearings System Working Group chaired by Sheriff David Mackie [published recommendations for the redesign of the children's hearings system](#) in June 2023. The [Scottish Government response](#) accepted a number of recommendations but did not accept proposals to introduce salaried professional Chairs and remunerated Panel Members. A [Scottish Government consultation on redesign proposals](#) launched in July 2024.
- Scottish Government consultations on [moving on from care into adulthood](#), the [future of foster care](#) and [developing a universal definition of 'care experience'](#) were launched during 2024.

## Proposed Promise Bill and National Care Service

A Promise Bill containing legislation necessary for the implementation of various elements of The Promise is expected to be introduced before the end of this Parliamentary session. The Bill has the potential to be wide-ranging, covering changes to the Children's Hearings System, governance, inspection and accountability surrounding the care system as well as a range of other areas. The Scottish Parliament will face the challenging task of scrutinising this legislation within a short timeframe if the Bill is introduced ahead of the 2026 election.

The Scottish Government's [September 2024 progress update](#) says of the Bill:

The Scottish Government aims to introduce a Promise Bill by the end of this Parliamentary session, dependent on wider pressures on the Parliamentary legislative calendar. The Bill will be positioned to make any further legislative changes required to keep The Promise. For example, this may include, provisions required to implement recommendations of the Children's Hearings System working group and recommendations of The Promise Scotland in relation to a national lifelong advocacy service for people with care experience. The Scottish Government will continue to work with partners including The Promise Scotland and COSLA to identify areas where a legislative direction may support delivery of The Promise. Subject to Parliamentary timetabling – [Keeping the Promise September 2024 update, Scottish Government](#)

Although the Scottish Government has paused scrutiny of the [National Care Service Bill](#) at Stage 2, amendments put forward by Ministers contained a regulation making power that would have enabled the eventual inclusion of children's services by delegating them to integration authorities across Scotland.

The Scottish Government's [proposed Stage 2 amendments to the NCS Bill](#) also include provisions for the creation of a National Social Work Agency (NSWA), intended to provide "leadership, oversight and support", putting the role of the National Chief Social Work Adviser on a statutory footing, with the NSWA established as an executive agency to support them. During Stage 1 scrutiny of the NCS Bill, questions were raised about the roles and remits of the NSWA and how



they might impact on existing bodies such as the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and the Care Inspectorate.

It is not clear whether the Scottish Government plans to take the NSWA plans forward now that the NCS Bill has been paused.

## Recruitment and Retention

### Previous evidence

During scrutiny of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill (CCJ Bill) in 2023, the Committee also heard evidence of workforce recruitment and retention issues within children's social work services. The Committee held an evidence session on The Promise on [22 November 2023](#) and an informal evidence session with care experienced children and young people on 27 March 2024. Previous evidence and actions taken by the Committee in relation to these issues is summarised below.

The [Committee's Stage 1 Report on the CCJ Bill](#) highlighted existing pressures on resources, recognising the importance of work carried out by staff across the workforce. It called for the Scottish Government to ensure resources were in place to implement changes resulting from the Bill.

The [Scottish Government response](#) to the Committee's Stage 1 Report acknowledged the pressures facing social workers, stating that an improvement plan had been developed with COSLA and other stakeholders. It stated the plan included measures such as a reserve list of social workers, reviewing pay disparities, international recruitment and improving access to social work education.

The Committee then took further evidence on workforce issues prior to Stage 2 consideration of the CCJ Bill. [Giving evidence to the Committee on 25 October 2023](#), Ben Farrugia of Social Work Scotland said that the recruitment of social workers was a considerable issue and retaining experienced staff a "critical challenge".

He said current demands on social workers meant many were leaving the profession, and while there was money to pay for staff, there were no workers to fill vacant posts. He added that while conversations were underway, "there is not a systematic plan in place" to address recruitment and retention issues.

Ben Farrugia told the Committee:

"We want to realise these [CCJ Bill] provisions, we want to realise the changes to the Children's Hearings System, we want to realise the Promise. However, we want those things to be done with an honesty to the discussion about what the costs are, financially, and what we need in terms of people to deliver. We do sometimes feel that is absent. There is a sense that we can 'legislate and guidance' our ways to achieving these cultural, structural revolutions, and our position is that is just not possible." - [Official Report, 25/10/23](#)

On [1 November 2023, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise Natalie Don-Innes MSP was asked](#) what the Scottish Government was doing to tackle recruitment and retention issues. She said that a workforce improvement plan was being developed and was due to be published in 2024, and a short-life working group had been set up to monitor workforce figures and trends.

During the [22 November 2023 evidence session on The Promise](#), Kevin Mitchell of the Care Inspectorate told Members that ensuring “there is the right number of staff and a skilled and competent workforce” should be a key priority in taking forward change toward The Promise. Kevin Mitchell said:

“...In all the years that I have been involved in scrutiny...I do not think that I have seen a situation as bad as it is now, and I include the pandemic in that. Almost every local authority that we interact with, formally and informally, is having significant challenges in recruiting social work staff—particularly social workers, but that does not exclude family support workers. Similarly, there are shortages in critical areas that support children and families. I am thinking about health visitors and speech and language therapists, so the issue is quite broad. There are a number of complexities, but those are the two most significant areas that I would highlight.” – [Official Report, 22/11/23](#)

Mike Burns of Social Work Scotland spoke about his experience in his role of assistant chief officer of the Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership. He highlighted the impact of the Scottish Government’s investment in health visiting, stating his belief that this was having an impact in reducing the number of children coming into care in Glasgow. He said that the increase in health visitors had enabled a shift toward preventative spending. He said:

“When we looked at that £95 million [Glasgow spends on children in care], we saw that we were spending only £2.7 million on prevention. We managed to increase that to nearly £8 million, and then, through massive support from the chief executive, we connected that to around £7 million of community planning money.” - [Official Report, 22/11/23](#)

Mike Burns also spoke of the challenges of recruiting to rural areas such as the Highlands and Islands, stating consideration was needed not only in relation to recruiting but also sustaining workforce.

Fraser McKinlay of The Promise Scotland described issues facing the workforce as “one of the risks to achieving The Promise in full”, however he added:

“...while we are right to be concerned about the pressures on the workforce generally that arise from the new things that are coming through, we should bear it in mind that many of those new things will help: they are the long-term solutions to the problems that we are currently facing” - [Official Report, 22/11/23](#)

Claire Burns of CELCIS stated that a recent survey of the workforce carried out by her organisation had found staff were committed to the aims of The Promise but frustrated “that the current context does not allow them to practise in the way that they want to practise”. She said as a result they felt they were letting children and their families down. Asked what was causing this, Claire Burns said:

“It is the lack of investment. Staff feel that, when they have such limited resources, they can reach only the top of their priorities and statutory responsibilities... Often, we have to wait until families are saying that they are at crisis point before we can intervene, and the workforce recognises that. There is much more that they would like to do for families at an earlier stage.”  
- [Official Report, 22/11/23](#)

Claire Burns later added that achieving The Promise will require: “massive change from what has happened before...it will take capacity, and that means people and money”.

Louise Hunter of Who Cares? Scotland (WCS) described workforce issues as having “a significant impact”, adding:

“Without the ability for the workforce to feel fully equipped and well resourced, I am not sure that we will get to where we need to be.” - [Official Report, 22/11/23](#)

Nicola Killean, Children and Young People’s Commissioner for Scotland, said that while investment was needed in capacity:

“...it is also about how people work—about understanding what relationship-based practice looks like and how that is meaningfully delivered in services. I look forward to seeing more of that and to seeing whether it is strategic and looks across the whole piece at what true investment and support for the workforce looks like.” - [Official Report, 22/11/23](#)

Claire Burns later stated there was potential for the proposed National Social Work Agency to help address recruitment and retention challenges and also to consider education and practice issues.

On 27 March this year, an [informal session with 37 care experienced children and young people](#) was held in Parliament, facilitated by WCS. During this session, many of the participants stated they had not yet seen any changes as a result of The Promise. Points raised by care experienced participants in relation to recruitment and retention of workforce included:

- Social workers being assigned big caseloads impacts the support they can offer to individuals. Participants suggested a maximum caseload of five, rather than the 15 to 20 they currently have.

- Young people experienced frequent changes in their social worker, and this impacted on the ability to build relationships.
- Once an individual is seen to be making good progress, their social work support is dropped. This can then lead to difficulties later.
- In some cases, a failure to provide early support for a young person results in them being placed in secure care further down the line.
- There is a lack of ongoing support for those leaving care, and in some cases this can lead to individuals becoming homeless or being at risk of homelessness.

Following the informal meeting, the [Committee wrote to the Minister](#) to highlight the issues raised. The [Minister responded in June](#) stating that the National Social Work Agency – at that time being considered as part of the National Care Service Bill – would create a single national body overseeing social work education, training and professional development. It would also seek to address recruitment and retention challenges.

The Minister added that the Scottish Government was working with “COSLA and key stakeholders” to develop a joint Workforce Improvement Plan”. She added that the Joint Social Care and Social Work/Services Workforce Taskforce, chaired by the Scottish Government and COSLA, was also looking at delivering improvements for the adult and children’s social care and social work workforce.

## The care system workforce

### Defining the workforce

The [Independent Care Review’s Evidence Framework report](#), published alongside the main report in February 2020, found:

“...a stable and motivated workforce is central to the delivery of effective high-quality services for children, young people and families. Pivotal to this is valuing and supporting the workforce and promoting their well-being.” - [Evidence Framework Report, Independent Care Review, 2020](#)

The Review’s workforce working group proposed a model consisting of three main layers to broadly define the workforce for looked after children:

1. First (inner) layer: Parental role group/’family’ carers (e.g. parents and carers)
2. Middle layer: Decision-maker group (e.g. social workers, children’s hearing panel)
3. Outer layer: Awareness-raising groups (e.g. wider community such as police, teachers etc)

However, getting a full picture of the workforce delivering services within the care system is challenging. The Evidence Framework Report therefore mainly focused on

social workers, foster carers and – “to some extent” – residential workers, as these were the areas of the workforce for which evidence was more readily available. The report also highlighted a lack of annual statistics available on some sections of the workforce, particularly in relation to unpaid/community roles, concluding:

“Research is not easily available on the full range of the workforce; less is known about those in less formal roles who support looked after children and young people.” – [Evidence Framework Report, Independent Care Review, 2020](#)

The Evidence Framework Report – published before the COVID-19 pandemic - found “serious concerns” at that time about the state of workforce well-being. It called for the creation of supportive organisational cultures to help combat work-related stress, and also noted that a trauma-informed workforce with shared values, practices and language would be a positive development.

CELCIS published [Children’s Services Reform Research reports in 2023](#) looking at what is needed to ensure that children, young people and families get the help they need when they need it. The work was commissioned by the Scottish Government to inform decision making on the proposed introduction of the National Care Service and the inclusion of children’s services within that.

There were five reports published as part of this research. Of these, the [fourth report, published in November 2023](#), looked at the views and experiences of the children’s services workforce. The responses provide valuable information about service types and sectors they are working in. Of the 1,399 people that completed the survey:

- 40.6% were social workers;
- 15.6% worked in education;
- 14.8% worked in health;
- 8.5% worked in community and family-based care and support services (for example, social care, foster and kinship care, youth work, family support, community learning and development, participation and housing);
- 8.1% worked in early learning and childcare;
- 5.8% worked in residential care;
- 3.4% worked in the police;
- 3.2% worked in other areas including youth justice, the children’s hearings system, and multi-agency roles.

CELCIS acknowledged that while over 1,400 members of the overall children’s services workforce took part in the survey, those engaging in the research were motivated to do so and therefore they may have differing views from those who did not take part. As a majority of respondents were social workers, the findings may

therefore be more representative of their views than those of other areas. Survey findings are covered in the ‘Recent report findings on workforce’ section of this briefing.

## Children’s social work staffing data

Data on the children’s social work workforce is published bi-annually by SSSC. The Social worker filled posts and vacancies six-monthly survey keeps track of social work recruitment and is a designated set of official statistics.

There are four types of social work team in Scotland: children, adults, justice or generic. There are two grades of practising social workers: main or senior. In the main, it is children’s social work teams that are most involved in delivering commitments related to The Promise.

The latest survey was published in November this year, looking at data for the six months up to 14 June 2024. For numbers of whole-time equivalent (WTE) of children’s social work teams, the survey found an improving picture:

“In children’s fieldwork teams the WTE of social workers has risen from the low point seen in the June 2023 survey. While it continues to remain lower than pre-pandemic levels it is higher than it was in December 2022. The number of senior social workers, in children’s fieldwork teams, continues to rise and is now 48% higher than in 2019. The figures for June 2024 show that the combined total for children’s teams is now at its highest with a combined WTE total of 2,695.” - [Social worker filled posts and vacancies six-monthly survey, SSSC, November 2024](#)

Table 1 below shows staffing numbers over the past five years.

**Table 1: Main and Senior children’s social work roles, December 2019 to June 2024**

Childrens social work post grade	2019	2020	2021	2022	June 2023	Dec 2023	June 2024	% change since 2019	% change since Dec 2023
Senior	422	426	497	524	547	538	623	47.7%	15.8%
Main	2,116	2,110	2,153	2,056	1,934	2,007	2,072	-2.1%	3.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,538</b>	<b>2,536</b>	<b>2,650</b>	<b>2,580</b>	<b>2,481</b>	<b>2,545</b>	<b>2,695</b>		

Source: [Social worker filled posts and vacancies six-monthly survey, Nov 2024, SSSC](#)

The 2024 findings are in contrast to SSSC’s October 2023 report for the six months to June time period, which found all local authorities bar one reported difficulty filling social work vacancies. The publication stated:

“Some authorities discussed the effects that difficulties filling posts have had, including creating capacity issues due to exhaustion and burnout.” – [Social worker filled posts and vacancies six-monthly survey, October 2023](#)

The 2024 SSSC report also includes data on vacancy rates. The WTE vacancies shown are a percentage of the WTE total staffing figure. The total staffing figure is all WTE filled posts, plus vacant posts.

**Table 2** below shows the vacancy rates for senior and main children’s social workers at Scottish local authorities submitting data on vacancies from December 2019 to June 2024.

The table shows the June 2023 vacancy rate for children’s social workers was 10.5% for senior and 16.5% for main grade. The report states:

“The vacancy rates for both senior and main grade social workers are down significantly from June 2023 which are understood to be the highest for practising social workers since the early 2000s.” - [Social worker filled posts and vacancies six-monthly survey, Nov 2024, SSSC](#)

**Table 2: Main and Senior children’s social work WTE vacancy rates (%), December 2019 to June 2024**

Childrens social work post grade	2019	2020	2021	2022	June 2023	Dec 2023	June 2024
Senior	4.4	5.1	7.3	4.7	10.5	6.8	4.5
Main	7.8	6.0	8.2	11.7	16.5	12.9	10.1

Source: [Social worker filled posts and vacancies six-monthly survey, Nov 2024, SSSC](#)

SSSC asked local authorities in 2023 and 2024 if they found social work vacancies hard to fill and, if so, why. 31 local authorities responded to the 2024 survey, 28 responded to the question on whether vacancies were hard to fill; 23 answered yes and five answered no (in the 2023 survey, 28 responded to the question and 27 answered yes).

Reasons given by local authorities for hard to fill vacancies included:

- Having too few applicants (2023: 18; 2024: 13)
- Too few applicants with the required experience (2023: 15; 2024: 9)
- Pay less competitive than other employers (2023: 10; 2024: 10)
- Too few applicants with the required qualifications (2023: 10; 2024: 9)

- Rurality/remoteness of post (2023: 8; 2024: 6)
- Competition from other sectors (2023: 3; 2024: 2)

In the 2024 survey, four local authorities stated they had run successful recruitment campaigns. However, a shortage of applicants and problems retaining existing social workers was identified as a national issue:

“The theme running through many responses is that there is a national shortage of applicants and as such the labour market is becoming more competitive. This challenge is added to by problems retaining social workers.”  
 - [Social worker filled posts and vacancies six-monthly survey, Nov 2024, SSSC](#)

## Overall workforce data

As The Independent Care Review’s Evidence Framework Report found, there is a lack of clear data on staff in non-social work roles delivering services in the children’s care system.

[SSSC publishes overall workforce data on the Scottish Social Services Sector](#), and this includes information about staff providing services to children and their families. These staff are grouped into the sub-sector ‘Fieldwork services (children)’.

Data for 2023 shows that the total headcount number of staff in the ‘Fieldwork services (children)’ sub-sector was 5,690. Of these, 2,720 were social workers. We can therefore assume that the remaining 2,970 were not social workers. **However, it is not possible to determine from the data how many of these staff – social work or otherwise – are directly involved in working with children in or on the edges of care children.**

Other sub-sectors it can reasonably be assumed are likely to be involved in delivering services to children in or on the edges of care are covered in the table below. With the exception of ‘Fieldwork service (children)’ covered in the previous paragraph, it is not clear from the definitions provided for each of the sub-sectors whether the headcount figures for services below include social workers. It is also not an exhaustive list, and there will likely be staff delivering services to children in or on the edges of care working in roles that are not covered below.

**Table 3: Headcount total staff numbers by sub-sector 2014, 2022, 2023**

Sub-sector	2014	2022	2023	% Change since 2014
Adoption services	440	430	400	-9.1
Fieldwork service (children)	5,910	5,810	5,690	-3.7
Fostering services	970	820	770	-20.6



Residential childcare	7,360	8,230	8,220	11.7
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Source: [SSSC workforce data, 2023](#)

## Recent report findings on workforce

[Social Work Scotland's Setting the Bar report](#) was published in 2022, with findings based on a survey of 1,588 social workers, of which 1,552 were practicing social workers and 42% were from children and families teams. The report recommended children and families social workers should have a maximum caseload of 15 (the survey found the average caseload figure for children and families was 21.4)

Later in 2022, Social Work Scotland carried out four focus groups involving up to ten social workers from across local authority areas in Scotland to further develop thinking. The findings were published in the [Taking the Wheel report](#). Issues identified by the focus groups included:

- The pressure of administrative tasks (such as sending out reports, booking meeting rooms and recording case conferences) and keeping on top of paperwork.
- The need for better understanding from MSPs, MPs, the children's hearings system and others about the role of social workers and the pressures faced by teams.
- Experiences of being "conditioned for stress" as part of the profession/embedded within organisations, and a stigma associated with asking for support.
- Newly qualified social workers reported leaving university with a negative perception of children and families social work and finding the reality not as bad as expected.
- The need to create a positive working environment.
- Mental health and wellbeing of social work staff, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic identified as a particular challenge.
- Individuals moving on from front-line children and families roles with the aim of having time for more relationship-based work.
- The role of the team manager in creating a positive culture and being able to challenge unreasonable expectations on the team. However, the limits to what managers can do was also recognised.
- Striking the right balance between working from home and in the office.

CELCIS published five [Children's Services Reform Research reports](#) in 2023. Of these:

- The [second report looked at case studies of transformation](#), highlighting that strong national leadership is needed to bring about successful transformational change, with national workforce planning as part of this.
- The [fourth report, published in November 2023](#), looked at the views and experiences of the children's services workforce. Surveying 1,399 people across the workforce. A breakdown of the services and sectors respondents worked in is covered in the 'Defining the workforce' section of this briefing.
- The [fifth and concluding report](#) was published in December 2023 and brought together key themes from across the four preceding publications.

Survey [findings from the fourth report](#) highlighted:

- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a perception that services were improving prior to the pandemic but have since declined. Many who worked through the pandemic were exhausted.
- Children's services are responding to greater diversity and complex needs, with mental health difficulties, additional support needs and the cost of living contributing to rising demand for services at a time of cuts to budgets and service provision.
- The children's services workforce "has been in crisis for some time with unmanageable workloads and high levels of sickness, absence, turnover and vacancies" and without investment, high quality support and practice cannot be provided. Measures being taken are small scale; national co-ordination and attention is needed.
- The legislative, policy and funding landscape is cluttered and can hinder implementation where foundations such as The Promise, UNCRC and GIRFEC are not fully aligned with legislative, policy and funding developments. New developments often have unrealistic timescales for implementation and divert leadership and workforce development and resources.
- There are persistent gaps and weaknesses in services and transitions, including provision of early intervention support services, access to mental health services and access to support for children with additional support needs. Transitions from children to adult services and holistic support between children and adult services were also identified.
- The workforce needs long-term clarity, commitment and investment over a 10-to-20-year timeframe locally and nationally. Support for children's services leaders is needed as the demands on them are significant. Support should follow families for as long as they need it.
- Service structures must enable practitioners to work together. There was unease around the idea of restructuring children's services at a time when the sector is under "substantial pressure". Respondents were also concerned about opportunity costs, believing that the resources needed to restructure would be better spent on improving existing services.

- Developing national statements of service expectations, consistent means of referral and points of access into different services, and integrated data and IT infrastructure were identified as potentially beneficial areas to explore.
- Every service type should be valued as a key partner, with respect for all service types and practitioner roles.
- Integrated data and IT would support working together.

[CELCIS' fifth and concluding report](#) found no clear solution for the future structure of children's services. However, it did identify a range of elements contributing to creating the environment needed to improve the lives of children and their families requiring support. These elements are:

- Supportive, trusting and consistent relationships between children and young people, families and practitioners.
- Certain functions such as national policy and guidance development and implementation, workforce planning and data infrastructure being led at national level to support local service delivery.
- Structures enabling the workforce to provide help and support that children, young people and families need, and to work together in partnership seamlessly across service and system boundaries.
- Effective measures to combat poverty.
- A simplified and aligned legislative and policy landscape.
- An approach to planning and implementing change that acknowledges the complexity of human relations and systems, makes the best use of existing evidence but also pays attention to emerging learning.

One of the areas of possible future study identified by CELCIS is an exploration of good practice in supporting children and their families and what supports and hinders this.

Pressure on local authority social work was also highlighted in the [Care Inspectorate's Secure Care Pathway Review](#), published in September 2023, which highlighted "national recruitment and retention issues in the workforce" with those working in secure care telling the Care Inspectorate about workload pressures and challenges.

[WCS's February 2024 report Is Scotland Keeping The Promise?](#) highlights an increase in social worker sickness absence in each of the past three years, up from 65.2% of social workers having a sickness absence in 2021 to 83.3% in 2023. *[Please note, it is not clear from the report what definition of 'sickness absence' has been used and it is therefore unclear if this includes short-term absence and/or longer-term absences.]*

WCS concludes that the essential role of social workers in keeping the Promise means LAs must receive adequate levels of funding and support to ensure sufficient levels of staff.

## Addressing workforce issues

While the most recent SSSC staffing data for children's social work staff shows an improved picture compared to last year, conclusions reached in research by CELCIS and others highlights workforce ongoing workforce issues.

The Promise Scotland's submission to the Committee ahead of this meeting states that there must be a "laser sharp focus on effective implementation, resourcing, recruitment and retention of the workforce". It goes on to say that ensuring the workforce have the time and capacity to work effectively with care experienced children and their families requires structural change as well as investment. It highlights the need to ensure changes are sequenced effectively, stating:

"It is crucial for ensuring the workforce does not feel overwhelmed by the changes which are being considered in parallel to one another but are well resourced and the current recruitment and retention challenges are overcome. There must be an overhaul of scrutiny and the way that data is collected so that Scotland is able to understand better how it cares for its children and is better able to measure what matters to children. Changes must be made to ensure that profit is removed from Scotland's 'care system'." – The Promise Scotland submission to Committee

As noted in the 'Previous evidence' section of this briefing, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, Natalie Don-Innes MSP, has indicated that the Scottish Government is working with COSLA and others to develop a joint Workforce Improvement Plan. The Scottish Government's [September 2024 progress update](#) on The Promise states that the improvement plan will be published in "autumn 2024". COSLA, Social Work Scotland, Scottish Association of Social Workers (SASW), Unison, and Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) are listed as key stakeholders in this work.

A Joint Social Care and Social Work/Services Workforce Taskforce, chaired by the Scottish Government and COSLA, was also set up looking at delivering improvements for the adult and children's social care and social work workforce.

Following the Scottish Government's announcement that the National Care Service (NCS) Bill is currently paused at Stage 2, it is not clear whether the government intends to proceed with the proposed National Social Work Agency. Amendments making provision for this were introduced to the NCS Bill at Stage 2. The proposed NSWA would create a single national body overseeing social work education, training and professional development. It would also seek to address recruitment and retention challenges.

In relation to social work services practice, the 2024 progress update states that work to support organisations to develop and train their workforces to implement a

trauma informed approach to practice is being taken forward through the National Trauma Transformation Programme with COSLA, the Improvement Service, Resilience Learning Partnership, and NHS National Education Scotland. Delivery of the [Trauma Responsive Social Work Services Programme](#) began in October 2023.

**Lynne Currie, Senior Researcher - Further Education, Higher Education and Children's social work, child protection and adoption, SPICe**

**28 November 2024**

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.  
The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP [www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot)

## Annexe B

### The Promise Scotland's briefing for the Education, Children and Young People Committee evidence session

Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> December 2024

Ahead of the evidence session on the impact of workforce challenges on the implementation of the promise, The Promise Scotland has prepared a short briefing for the Committee's consideration.

#### About The Promise Scotland

[The Promise Scotland](#) exists to support Scotland as it works to keep the [promise](#) to Scotland's children, families and care experienced people following the conclusions of the [Independent Care Review](#). The Promise Scotland is the custodian of [Plan 24-30'](#), which sets out a series of routemaps to keep Scotland on track to keep the promise by 2030.

**Keeping the promise involves transforming the entirety of Scotland's 'care system', so that children, young people, families and care experienced adults are at its centre.** The Promise Scotland directly supports the work of multiple organisations and agencies, across many sectors, working to make that happen by 2030 at the very latest.

#### Key messages

**Over the last 4½ years, substantial progress** has been made **towards keeping the promise—and change has happened.** There is **a lot of fantastic work** happening all across the country, by dedicated and caring people. However, for Scotland to achieve its collective promise by 2030, **there needs to be a step change in the pace and scale of work. As the midway point to 2030 is approached,** much more must be done so that change is felt consistently in the lives of children, families and care experienced adults. This includes:

- The Independent Care Review listened to over 5,500 experiences, with thousands of those voices being from the paid and unpaid workforce. The promise reflects what the Care Review heard and is clear that **the workforce needs support, time and care** to develop and maintain relationships, and must be supported at all stages of their caring journey. **Scotland must hold the hands of those who hold the hand of the child.**
- Ensuring a **laser sharp focus on effective implementation, resourcing, recruitment and retention of the workforce.** This includes adequate and sustainable funding and support to develop lasting and loving relationships.
- **Listening to children, families and care experienced adults, placing them at the centre of decisions about their lives.** This includes **redesigning the Children's Hearings System.**
- **Transforming the way that children and families are supported** so that where children are safe in their families and feel loved, they stay. Progress is being made but there is still a lot to do—particularly to ensure Scotland is spending its money in the right place.

- **Focusing on relationships** so that when living with family is not possible, children stay with their brothers and sisters and belong to loving homes, staying there for as long as possible—and returning there if they need.
- **Properly supporting young people moving on from care** into adulthood and supporting **care experienced adults**.
- Changing the **way that data is collected** and the way Scotland speaks about children, families and care experienced adults—the ‘language of care’.
- **Addressing systemic barriers**, in particular, the five major bridges and barriers that have been identified through [Plan 24-30](#): policy, money, data, risk and scrutiny. This must include removing profit from the ‘care system’.

**Over the last four and a half years, substantial progress has been made towards keeping the promise in Scotland—and change has happened.** On a national scale, this has included the passage of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, which ensured children are no longer placed in Young Offenders Institutions; commitment to the £500m Whole Family Wellbeing Fund and the care leaver payment; the incorporation of UNCRC into Scots law; and the new Scottish Recommended Allowance for foster and kinship carers and Care Experienced Students Bursary. More information is outlined in the [Scottish Government’s Keeping the Promise Implementation Plan Progress Update](#).

At local levels, a lot of great work is taking place because of hardworking and committed members of the workforce, particularly around keeping brothers and sisters together, the work of Virtual Headteachers, enabling important relationships, supporting young people moving on from care into adulthood and changing the culture and language. The Promise Scotland has shared some of these through the [‘Stories of Change’ project](#) and [COSLA has set out some examples in their recent report](#).

However, as Scotland approaches the midway point to 2030, much more must be done so that change can be felt more consistently in the lives of care experienced children, young people and families. The shifting economic context, the persistence of poverty and the experiences of children, young people, families and care experienced adults to date means that for Scotland to achieve its collective ambition, **there needs to be a step change in pace and in scale**.

It is crucial not to lose the overall vision for transformational change set out by the Independent Care Review—which outlines a smaller, more specialised ‘care system’. Specific attention must be paid to addressing the following areas and ensuring that the voices of the 5,500 children, young people, families, care experienced adults and members of the paid and unpaid workforce who shared their story with the Independent Care Review are not lost.

**1. For the promise to be kept, there must be a laser sharp focus on effective implementation, resourcing, recruitment and retention of the workforce.**

The promise is clear that by 2030 there must be strong leadership across all of Scotland’s workforce and a new way of thinking about the workforce must have been established. Measures must be put in place to support and enhance recruitment and retention and there must be a national values framework in place. By 2030, children and young people will thrive and feel loved because the

workforce is nurtured and supported throughout their care-giving journey to help them create a sense of home, family, friends, community, and belonging for those they care for.

Work to realise these ambitions currently exists against a backdrop of recruitment and retention challenges, an extremely challenging fiscal environment, and a lack of capacity and resource, meaning the workforce is already struggling to fulfil its existing statutory duties in full. The workforce feel time poor, under resourced, unsupported, and restricted by the confines of the system.

These existing challenges must be addressed so that the workforce have the space, time, and capacity to work relationally alongside children, young people, families and care experienced adults and is well equipped to uphold their rights and meet their needs. This requires far more than just financial resources but structural changes to support the workforce and ensure they have access to work in the way that the promise envisages.

- 2. Children and families must be recognised as experts in their own lives and be involved and engaged in the important decisions that affect them.** The recommendations included in our [advocacy scoping report](#) and the recommendations set out in the Hearings System Working Group's report, [Hearings for Children](#), must be implemented. This will result in a statutory right to advocacy for care experienced children, adults and families and a significantly smaller and more specialised Children's Hearings System, which takes an inquisitorial, rights-based approach. Our [response](#) to the current Scottish Government's consultation on Redesigning the Children's Hearings System sets out our positioning in more detail. Crucially, the calls from children and young people for consistent decision-makers in the Children's Hearings System must be realised.
- 3. The ongoing work to embed early help and support for families must continue, including through the £500m Whole Family Wellbeing Fund.** There must be a renewed effort, building on the strong emphasis on whole family support in the recent Programme for Government, to ensure that all families are able to access emotional, practical and financial support to stay together, wherever it is safe to do so. More work is needed to address policy and funding siloes, reduce duplication and ensure longer-term funding is available. Legislative change must also be considered, including to secure a right to Family Group Decision Making in Scots law. Children and families must also be able to access more intensive support—at the moment this is not consistently available across Scotland.
- 4. There must be a focus on relationships** so that when living with family is not possible children stay with their brothers and sisters and belong to loving homes, staying there for as long as possible—and returning there if they need. There are considerable challenges to implementing the existing legislation relating to brothers and sisters—not least in terms of housing—and these must be overcome.

The Scottish Government recently published [a consultation on the future of foster care](#) and the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) recently [published its report on reimagining Secure Care](#). In order for these ambitious reforms to be realised, there must be adequate, sustainable funding and support for the workforce to develop lasting and loving relationships and remove unnecessary bureaucratic barriers.



5. **Young people moving on from care into adulthood must be properly supported.** We have set out more detail of what changes are required in our response to the Scottish Government's 'Moving On' consultation. In particular, the current disparity and inconsistency in implementing existing 'continuing care' and 'aftercare' duties must be addressed. There must be extensions to existing duties so that more young people, including children and young people on Kinship Care Orders and young people in further and higher education, can access more support. **Scotland must plan for more young people to 'stay put'** in their setting of care for as long as they need or want to and **a statutory 'right to return' to settings of care must be introduced** for young adults for whom Scotland has taken on parenting responsibility.
6. **Systemic barriers must be addressed, in particular, the five key issues that have been identified through [Plan 24-30](#): policy, money, data, risk and scrutiny.** These are all issues that relate more broadly to the wider public sector reform agenda and have a significant impact on local delivery of work to keep the promise.

There is a clear need for **strategic leadership to sequence the many changes and proposals properly and coherently**. It is crucial for ensuring the workforce does not feel overwhelmed by the changes which are being considered in parallel to one another but are well resourced and the current recruitment and retention challenges are overcome. There must be an **overhaul of scrutiny** and the **way that data is collected** so that Scotland is able to understand better how it cares for its children and is better able to measure what matters to children. Changes must be made to ensure **that profit is removed from Scotland's 'care system'**.

Not all changes require legislative change, but where it is required, legislation must not further complicate and clutter the existing landscape. The **upcoming Promise Bill must be broad enough in scope** to ensure that the required legislative changes are made for Scotland to keep the promise, everywhere, every day and to everyone.