

RESPONSE FROM SOCIAL WORK SCOTLAND, TO PROMISE SCOTLAND DEVISING PLAN 2024-30 TOGETHER

January 2024

Introduction:

Social Work Scotland is the professional body for social work leaders. Our membership spans local authority and third sector organisations, across the range of social work provision, and we work closely with our partners to shape policy and practice and improve the quality and experience of social services. Social Work Scotland as an organisation, and across the membership we represent, are committed to the Promise and delivering really significant change in the children's care system. We therefore welcome this opportunity to comment as part of the development of Plan 2024-30, on how we have been supporting work to meet the Promise.

As we noted in our response to the Methodology consultation, the Promise is an ambitious and whole-system-scale change, with many intersecting threads. It is reassuring that, despite a challenging context over the period of the first plan, such significant progress has been made to keep the Promise in Scotland. This provides a strong foundation for ongoing improvement and change. Of particular note is the steady embedding of participation, inclusion, and listening to the voice of young people and their families; changes to language and approach which are transforming the experience of children and young people. There has also been progress with changes needed to enable some of the Promise's fundamental commitments, such as maintaining the connection of brothers and sisters and removing young people from detention in YOI. That this has occurred in a context of a global pandemic (with the continued impact this continues to have on the lives of children and families), and with workforce and financial pressures not seen in many decades is testimony to the commitment of the sector. We note and concur with the comments in the forward to the final report from the Children's Services Reform work undertaken by CELCIS. *'Given what is currently being achieved within the context of limited human and*

financial resources and the ever rising and complexity of demand, we can only imagine what this dedicated workforce could achieve in an optimal environment.'

That wider context is a critical consideration for Plan 24-30. If as a society we are to meet the commitments within the Promise, the foundations for this need to be in place., Those foundations were outlined clearly in the Independent Care Review and underlined again in the Children's Services Reform research. Aspects such as a stable, suitably skilled, and sufficiently staffed children's services workforce are not peripheral, "nice if we can get them" ideas. They are the foundations, or perhaps more accurately the means, by which we will realise and deliver the Promise. We will not be successful if we do not attend to such core components. Unfortunately, it is our judgement that too little progress has yet been made on these fundamentals. The reasons for this are clear and understandable: the covid-19 pandemic and its long tail of workforce complications, global conflict, and the movement of people across borders, and an increasingly tight fiscal environment for the public and voluntary sectors. But as we consider the Promise Plan 24-30, attention to the fundamentals must be paramount. Change built on shaky foundations, if achieved at all, will not be sustained. The path to the outcomes we all seek for children and young people and families runs through the people who provide them with support, protection and advocacy.

With this in mind, we summarise below how Social Work Scotland has supported delivery of the Promise to date, and the views of our members on the conditions necessary to continue that progress over the coming 6 years.

Progress:

Social Work Scotland membership spans all areas of social work, and supports leaders carrying out statutory roles (such as the 32 Chief Social Work Officers), and others providing essential services including those in the voluntary and independent sectors, This provides us with a unique opportunity to make links across disciplines in social work and wider world, something which has been of particular benefit as we respond to the many and varied consultations on policy and legislative change. Children, as we know, do not sit in isolation from adults and the systems and challenges which face them. Our consultation responses and reports reflecting those links may be found on website at [Social Work Scotland - Leading the Profession](#).

Alongside this Social Work Scotland has worked closely with Scottish Government, Cosla and other partners to progress key areas of development, advising and informing to enable key priorities within the Promise to be taken forward in a way which meets the policy objective and improves the lives of children and young people. Examples include:

- Co-leading a series of roundtable events to explore and evidence the crisis in foster care across the country, resulting in ongoing work undertaken in partnership between national and local government and third sector to improve the status of foster carers, and the support provided which we know enables them to care for children and young people with increasingly complex needs.
- SWS jointly chair the Kinship Care Collaborative which has been instrumental in work to prioritise what needs to happen for kinship carers to ensure they are supported to care for the increasing number of children placed with extended family and friends. The work of the Collaborative includes rewriting the guidance for Part 13 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act to provide better clarity to professionals and kinship carers, and development of an assessment framework for kinship carers caring for a looked after child which links to the national practice model and child's plan.
- Active membership of the Staying Together and Connected Implementation Group and subgroups, and a number of related areas where the siblings' agenda is being progressed eg the research advisory group for the SCRA/Families Outside research into children impacted by the imprisonment of a sibling, and the short life working group and subsequent scoping of implementation around children impacted by the imprisonment or placement in secure care of a family member.
- Discussions with regulatory bodies about standards which may enhance or inhibit sibling placements eg in relation to the previous limit on number of unrelated children in foster care, and guidance for residential care.
- Detailed work around how the system in Scotland meets the Promise in relation to those children who join our society such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and children from Ukraine. This includes policy and practice around both how as a society we ensure that they have equitable access and rights as Scottish born children and ensuring that particular cultural needs are acknowledged and championed. Aspects of this work include challenge and noting the importance of managing the wider context of increased demand and workforce.

- Systems and implementation work. Social Work Scotland has worked closely with Scottish Government, Cosla and our members around key changes not directly related to Promise, but which impact on ability and capacity to meet that commitment. Of note is our championing and active work to develop a National Social Work Agency. We believe this will promote the value of the social work role and give a voice to the profession nationally which will assist in ensuring that appropriate workforce support and resource - essential if the work of Promise is to be progressed - is highlighted and acknowledged.
- Core commitments in the Promise include the ceasing of placement of 16- and 17-year-olds in YOI, reform of secure provision and reform of the children's hearing system. Whilst social work as a profession was not part of the core children's hearing working group, Social Work Scotland has worked hard, and will continue to work hard, with colleagues and other agencies to change the culture of the hearing system so that it is respectful, collegiate and meets the needs of children. We sit on the Redesign Board, Children's Hearing Improvement Partnership and the Planning Group and will retain our active involvement and part in bringing the unique social work voice and perspective to ensuring that the Hearing System is redesigned to better listen and meets the needs children and families. Key members are also involved in the advisory group for Reimagining Secure Care, and the Care and Justice Advisory Group, and have assisted in many aspects of this work including providing financial and practice evidence, and insight into the practical aspects of implementation and sequencing of change.

Our organisation does not provide direct delivery of services but does operate in a wide range of influential spaces where we are able to provide practice wisdom and implementation advice. As a profession our foundation principles are those of human rights and equity and SWS has supported and sought to ensure that UNCRC incorporation is implementable and meets its goals. This rights-based approach extends into all the spaces here we operate and aligns to the Promise.

Contextual Considerations:

An update on progress to meet the Promise would not be complete without comment in relation to some of the specific additional contextual factors which have, and continue to,

impact on the capacity of the workforce and wider society to meet the Promise. These are factors which will not be resolved in the short term, and which will therefore also impact on and require consideration in terms of development and monitoring of Plan 24-30.

Covid-19 Pandemic: The Promise was launched in early 2020, as the world moved into the unknown and unanticipated Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of this on society, workforces, and the children and families we serve, is profound and continues to evolve. Evidence of developmental delay, communication challenges, reduction in school attainment and attendance, as well as the more hidden experiences of children continue to emerge¹. The ways in which professionals are required to work has been changed profoundly, and the consequences of this are not yet fully understood.

There is an increasing demand for the range of support and services, from early intervention and family help to the more targeted provision required to meet more profound need. And woven through all aspects of service and need is the overarching increase in the level and depth of mental health needs amongst both children and their families. Identified in the Independent Care Review and reflected in the Promise, mental health needs following the pandemic continue to arise at a new level².

Not unrelated is the current cost of living crisis. Poverty is a significant and well researched factor in the pressures which children and their families are facing.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children: This increased demand resulting from the covid 19 pandemic is further enhanced by the National Transfer Scheme, which when put in place in 2021 to share responsibility for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in the south coast anticipated around 20 children year being allocated to local authorities in Scotland. To date over 7,000 unaccompanied children have arrived in UK with Scotland taking 64 of every 650 arrivals. Those arriving spontaneously either through ports or adult

¹ [The Sustained Impact of COVID-19 on Speech and Language Therapy Services in the UK \(rcslt.org\)](https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/118105/pdf/)

² [Statistics on the impact of COVID on children | NSPCC Learning](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/our-research-and-evidence/statistics-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-children/)
[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): impact on children, young people and families - evidence summary October 2020 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/documents/2020/10/20201001_evidence-summary-covid-19-children-young-people-families.pdf)

asylum hotels, adding to those numbers. A current data exercise across the country estimates that at least a third of looked after children away from home in most local authority areas are now unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, with this rising to over 40% in some areas. Local authorities and partners are supportive of the needs of those young people, and creative and responsive, but also acknowledge the pressures on the care and wider system which arise from this increased demand and the impact it has on already stretched local and national resources, and therefore on ability to meet the Promise. This changes the fundamental nature of our care system.

Legislative and Policy Developments: The children's arena has seen multitudes of policy and legislative – and practice - change and developments since 2020 when the Promise was made to Scotland's children. Many of these link to the improvements and changes required to make Scotland the 'best place in the world to grow up' and commitments within the Promise. Examples include the 'siblings' legislation which was implemented in July 2021 and related practice, guidance and scrutiny changes, the refresh of the GIRFEC guidance, legislation linked to cross border Deprivation of Liberty Orders, development and ongoing implementation of Bairnshoose Standards and development of the model, Self-Directed Support standards and application to children, transitions bill, Social Security amendments to enable the care leavers payment, development and roll out of the national trauma framework, whole family wellbeing and the extensive and varied Care and Justice Bill. On the horizon are the changes related to the reform of the children's hearing system, a core theme within the Promise and something which children, young people and those who work with them and implement the system agree is critical.

These are almost universally positive developments with improvement intentions which SWS as an organisation and our individual members representing specific areas and organisations involved in the delivery of social work services, support. However, while reflecting the necessary journey to improve our care system in Scotland, these changes impact on workforce capacity to delivery day to day care alongside improvements. Social Work Scotland host the Joint Investigative Interviewing Team who train and support social work and police staff from across the country in the Scottish Child Interview Model, a trauma informed approach to forensic interviewing of children who have suffered or witnessed abuse which allows the record of interview to be used as evidence in chief, thus reducing trauma and distress to children. Learning from development, training and implementation of the model has been extensive and includes the equal importance of

attention and time to implementation support as to training to ensure maximum impact and embedded learning and practice.

When a service must continue to be delivered, changing that service is complex, time consuming and often costly work. Social Work Scotland are supportive of, and indeed have championed, many of the policy legislative and practice changes, each of which will bring improvement to the lives of children and families. However, without the time and attention to implementation, the impact of those changes is less, and therefore the intent of the change diminished. The pace of changes is now such that not only is implementation space not built into the improvement journey, but new changes and duties are overlapping and being applied before previous ones are in place or embedded, with a resultant impact on the practice and cultural change so critical to meeting the Promise. Sequencing of change, particularly where cultural change is sought, is essential for positive impact.

Workforce. The children's services workforce has experienced particular pressures and demands since 2020. These are well described in the Children's Services Reform report on this topic, and their final report which we quote in our introduction. This describes the commitment of the workforce amid phenomenally challenging circumstances and highlights the capacity for change aspect mentioned in the section above. Across our membership and committees this combined commitment and fatigue is reflected – a genuine desire to be solution focused and to be part of and see evolving the changes needed, alongside exhaustion as the demands and need continue to increase in a situation of under-staffing.

These aspects are also highlighted in the SWS *Setting the Bar Report*, and work since then which specifically focuses on the social work workforce³. Pressures on many social workers within children and families are such that a significant number are leaving this area to work in adults or justice services, or indeed leaving the profession altogether. Related to this is the impact of the pandemic on social worker training. Both recruitment and retention and initial training are the focus of national work around development of a National Social Work Agency, and specifically an improved career pathway. SWS is a supporter of this work, recognising the core remit of social workers in the change agenda related the Promise. This

³ [Setting the Bar: towards an indicative maximum caseload for Scotland's public sector social workers - Social Work Scotland](#)

[Setting the Bar 2: 'Taking the wheel' - Social Work Scotland](#)

is also acknowledged in the Hearings for Children report, which notes that attention to workforce and poverty are fundamental foundations for the recommendations in that report.

Conclusion:

Social Work Scotland members take heart from the progress made over the past three to four years, appreciating as they do how deeply challenging and uncondusive the environment has been.

But for the Promise to be met our members are clear that, as the Independent Care Review noted in 2020, the foundational building blocks must be in place if real change is to be secured. Attention to those factors in Plan 2024-30, and particularly a resilient children's workforce and effective data systems, must be the priority. Without this, achieving all that is needed by 2030 is not possible. Given the scale of the challenge in respect of these fundamentals, even if given due attention in Plan 2024-30, Social Work Scotland has reached a point where we consider that open discussion is needed about a longer period of time to reach our shared goals.

SWS remain committed to playing our part in making the Promise happen.

For further information, please contact:

Vivien Thomson

Childrne and Families Policy and Practice Lead

Social Work Scotland

vivien.thomson@socialworkscotland.org