

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	12.
Report No	EDU/35/25

Committee:	Education and Learning
Date:	19 November 2025
Report Title:	Keeping The Promise in Highland
Report By:	Assistant Chief Executive - People

1.	Purpose/Executive Summary
1.1	This report seeks to update Members on activity related to The Promise within Children Services. Whilst the ambitions and aspirations of the Promise are greater than Health & Social Care, and indeed wider than Highland Council, this report is provided in the context of the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities.
2.	Recommendations
2.1	Members are asked to: i. Note the contents of this report, ii. Scrutinise and note areas of challenge and areas of progress across service delivery, iii. Note that all services will be supported to Keep The Promise
3.	Implications
3.1	Resource – There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.
3.2	Legal – As detailed in section 5.3 of this report, there is potential need for adjustments to local policy and practice.
3.3	Risk -The report identifies several risks: • Systemic barriers to progress (as per the Promise Oversight Board). • Data limitations affecting accurate reporting. • Placement instability in kinship care. • Workforce capacity affecting service delivery.
3.4	Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) – There are no direct implications arising from this report.

3.5	Gaelic - There are no direct implications arising from this report.
4.	Impacts
4.1	In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
4.2	Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
4.3	This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.
5.	Context and Background
5.1	This report follows on from the committee update <i>Keeping The Promise in Highland</i> (August 2024). The Promise is one of seven reports based on the findings of the 2020 Independent Care Review. It set out 84 calls to action aimed at transforming how Scotland supports children and families. In response, organisations, political parties, public bodies, communities, and groups across Scotland pledged to #KeepThePromise - a commitment to ensure that by 2030 all children will grow up loved, safe and respected so they will reach their full potential.
5.2	Since the last report to this committee, there have been several national developments: • The Promise Oversight Board annual report - February 2025: acknowledged the extent of the work of individuals and organisations at the halfway point but concluded Scotland was not halfway to keeping The Promise. The report noted systemic barriers, including workforce pressures and leadership challenges. • Local Perspectives Report – June 2025 (commissioned by the Scottish Government and prepared by The Promise Scotland): the report drew on publicly available information noting the limitations in doing so. Due to data collection issues, publication lags and lack of alignment the information published was not up to date nor accurate. As a result, this committee report does not rely on the local perspective report, rather a clearer and more accurate picture of Highland's data will be presented below. • The Promise Progress Framework – December 2024 – Developed jointly by COSLA, The Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland, the framework introduces a national approach to measuring progress. A public dashboard went live on 30 September 2025, offering a shared view of how Scotland is progressing towards keeping The Promise.
5.3	In addition to the national developments outlined above, the Scottish Government introduced the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill on 17 June 2025. This Bill seeks to legislate key reforms recommended by the Independent Care Review, with the aim of improving support for care-experienced individuals. It proposes changes across eight areas, including extending aftercare rights to those who left care before age 16, expanding access to advocacy services, reforming the children's hearings system, regulating fostering and residential care,

	and assigning children's services planning responsibilities to all Integration Joint Boards. A report to the Health, Social Care and wellbeing committee on the 12 th of November provides further detail on this Bill.
5.3.1	Highland Council submitted a consultation response which was broadly supportive of the Bill's aspirations and its alignment with The Promise. However, the Council raised concerns about the limited consultation with professional bodies prior to the Bill's publication and questioned the realism of implementation given current workforce pressures and financial constraints. Specific concerns were noted around the lack of provision for practical aftercare services and the reliance on outdated cost assumptions.
5.3.2	The Council emphasised the importance of adult services in supporting care-experienced individuals throughout their lives and reaffirmed its commitment to working with the Scottish Government to ensure the Bill remains centred on the voices of children, young people, and adults with care experience.
6.	Local Governance and reporting progress
6.1	In Highland, activity related to <i>The Promise</i> is overseen by the Highland Promise Board (Corporate Parenting). Members have previously been briefed on the Highland Promise Plan 2025–2028, which sets out the strategic direction for delivering on our commitments. This high-level plan is supported by three delivery groups, each focusing on a key area: • Family • Care • Doing Data Differently
6.2	To support the development of these delivery plans, a multi-agency session was held in June 2025, bringing together partners from across Highland. The session focused on strengthening shared commitments to <i>Keep The Promise</i> and agreeing the content of the delivery plans. The Highland Promise Plan reports into the Integrated Children's Services Planning Board and contributes to the wider Performance Management Framework, ensuring alignment with strategic priorities and accountability for progress.
7.	Local Data on Care Experienced infants, children and young people
7.1	When describing the data on Highland's care experience children and young people it may be useful to note the definitions of types of care, all of which encompass 'care experience': • <u>Looked after at home</u> is when a child or young person lives at home with their family with a legal order in place which means that the family receives social work support. • <u>Kinship care</u> is when a child or young person lives with a family member such as cousins, aunts and uncles or grandparents, or sometimes a close family friend. Kinship care can be formal or informal. • <u>Formal kinship care</u> is when there is a legal order in place and carers receive an allowance and other supports from their local authority. • <u>Informal kinship care</u> is when there is no legal order in place. Informal kinship carers do not receive an allowance and are not entitled to supports

	from the local authority. <i>Note on Informal Kinship Care: there are no official statistics for this group,</i> • <u>Foster care</u> is when a child or young person lives with another family. Foster carers are paid an allowance to provide this care and are assessed to be foster carers. • <u>Residential care</u> is when a child or young person lives in a house with 1 to 6 (sometimes more) other children and young people. They are looked after by paid residential carers working on rotas. • There are some other care settings such as living with prospective adopters or supported accommodation.																																																																								
7.2	The table below captures local data on our care experienced infants, children and young people. Table 1: Breakdown on C&YP with ‘care experience over 2023 – 2025 <table><tr><th colspan="2">Accommodation Type/Age</th><th>2023</th><th>2024</th><th>2025 (Preliminary)</th></tr><tr><td rowspan="6">Community</td><td>At home with parents</td><td>94</td><td>110</td><td>111</td></tr><tr><td>With friends/relatives</td><td>75</td><td>81</td><td>88</td></tr><tr><td>With foster carers provided by Local Authority</td><td>104</td><td>97</td><td>99</td></tr><tr><td>With foster carers purchased by Local Authority</td><td>48</td><td>44</td><td>48</td></tr><tr><td>With prospective adopters</td><td>15</td><td>14</td><td>9</td></tr><tr><td>In other community</td><td>28</td><td>29</td><td>28</td></tr><tr><td rowspan="4">Residential</td><td>In Local Authority home</td><td>26</td><td>25</td><td>24</td></tr><tr><td>In residential school</td><td>4</td><td>5</td><td>5</td></tr><tr><td>In secure accommodation</td><td>3</td><td>3</td><td>3</td></tr><tr><td>Other residential</td><td>19</td><td>24</td><td>24</td></tr><tr><td colspan="2">Total</td><td>416</td><td>432</td><td>439</td></tr></table> Table 1 demonstrates a positive direction of travel for children living in kinship care and the Service, having formed a dedicated Kinship Care Team and a Family Group Decision Making Team, would be expecting this number to increase further. The Table also highlights the ongoing challenges in terms of number of children in purchased foster and residential placements. Children in these placements are often living far from their family, friends and community. Table 2: Education figures on C&YP currently ‘looked after’ over 2023-2025 <table><tr><th>Pupils who were Looked after at home or away</th><th>2024/25</th><th>2023/24</th><th>2022/23</th></tr><tr><td>Rate of attendance for pupils experiencing care</td><td>83.63%</td><td>81.48%</td><td>83.70%</td></tr><tr><td>No of pupils experiencing care within school year that were excluded</td><td>15</td><td>15</td><td>31</td></tr><tr><td>% of children leaving school with care experience achieving SCQF level 5 qualification or more</td><td></td><td>42.86%</td><td>44.00%</td></tr><tr><td>% of children leaving school with care experience going on to a positive destination</td><td></td><td>78.57%</td><td>72.00%</td></tr></table> Table 2 demonstrates that the progress made in terms of school exclusions was maintained over 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 although the Service recognises that to	Accommodation Type/Age		2023	2024	2025 (Preliminary)	Community	At home with parents	94	110	111	With friends/relatives	75	81	88	With foster carers provided by Local Authority	104	97	99	With foster carers purchased by Local Authority	48	44	48	With prospective adopters	15	14	9	In other community	28	29	28	Residential	In Local Authority home	26	25	24	In residential school	4	5	5	In secure accommodation	3	3	3	Other residential	19	24	24	Total		416	432	439	Pupils who were Looked after at home or away	2024/25	2023/24	2022/23	Rate of attendance for pupils experiencing care	83.63%	81.48%	83.70%	No of pupils experiencing care within school year that were excluded	15	15	31	% of children leaving school with care experience achieving SCQF level 5 qualification or more		42.86%	44.00%	% of children leaving school with care experience going on to a positive destination		78.57%	72.00%
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	meet The Promise formal and informal exclusion of care experienced children from school must end.																					
7.3	<u>Family Based Care</u> The Family First approach aims to support children and young people to remain safely within their families, kinship networks, or Highland communities. Where it is safe to do so, this approach seeks to reduce the number of children placed in residential care or other external placements. To help achieve this, Children’s Services has invested in strengthening family-based care. This includes the development of: • A dedicated Kinship Team, and • A Family Group Decision Making Team These teams work to increase the number of children supported to stay at home or within their wider family network, particularly through kinship care arrangements																					
7.4	<u>Fostering</u> There is an overall reduction in the number of foster carers across Scotland, and Highland is experiencing similar recruitment and retention challenges. Initial Placement Comparison: Highland Children (2022/23 vs 2023/24) <table border="1"><thead><tr><th>Placement Type</th><th>2022/23</th><th>2023/24</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Hospital</td><td>5</td><td>0</td></tr><tr><td>Provided Residential Home</td><td>11</td><td>14</td></tr><tr><td>Provided Foster Care</td><td>31</td><td>19</td></tr><tr><td>Friends/Relatives</td><td>28</td><td>39</td></tr><tr><td>Purchased Foster Care</td><td>3</td><td>4</td></tr><tr><td>Purchased Residential</td><td>2</td><td>7</td></tr></tbody></table> This table presents a comparison of the initial placement types for children accommodated in Highland between the periods of 1st August 2022 – 31st July 2023 and 1st August 2023 – 31st July 2024. A number of key trends are evidenced: - Friends/Relatives placements increased significantly from 28% to 39%. - Provided Foster Care placements decreased from 26% to 18%. - Purchased Residential placements increased from 1.6% to 7%. - Provided Residential Home placements increased slightly with 5 additional placements. Whilst foster care currently accounts for 45% of our current cohort of cared for children, the reduction in available fostering households has resulted in an overall decline in fostering availability for children at the point of accommodation. To successfully deliver on The Promise, Highland needs to see these trends reversed, where there are fewer and not more children living in any form of residential placement. That is not to say residential care does not have its place. It does, and for	Placement Type	2022/23	2023/24	Hospital	5	0	Provided Residential Home	11	14	Provided Foster Care	31	19	Friends/Relatives	28	39	Purchased Foster Care	3	4	Purchased Residential	2	7
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	those children requiring a residential placement, the Service aspires to these residential placements being closer to a child's family and community.
7.5	<u>Kinship</u> Recruitment remains ongoing for the specialist Kinship Team. Management and social work staff have been appointed, and it is the intention the support worker roles are advertised in the next month. Work is underway in developing the service including consultation with kinship carers and families.
7.6	Historically, kinship placements have shown a higher likelihood of placement changes compared to other types of care. This may be due to the temporary nature of some arrangements — for example, a relative stepping in until another family member becomes available. However, it highlights the importance of robust assessment and continuous and appropriate levels of support for kinship carers to minimise disruption for children. The Kinship Team's core purpose is to: • Support kinship carers • Identify and coordinate the supports needed to sustain placements • Monitor and review arrangements to ensure children and carers are well supported now and into the future
7.7	Permanence planning — securing long-term, stable placements for children remains a challenge. Current performance is below the level the Service aspires to. To strengthen this area, a bid is being submitted to the Whole Family Wellbeing Programme to provide support for enhanced trauma-informed approach to permanence planning. In addition, the Service has recruited an experienced social work practitioner who will focus specifically on progressing permanence plans. Achieving permanence in family-type placements is central to delivering The Promise, ensuring children have the stability and relationships they need to thrive
8.	Local Change
8.1	Highland continues to make significant progress on its journey to Keep The Promise. While it is not possible to capture all activity within this report, the following section provides a snapshot of key developments across the Council that reflect its ongoing commitment.
8.2	<u>Child Health</u> The Promise highlights the importance of children receiving the right support at the right time. Early help is essential to prevent crisis and reduce both the financial and human cost of care — as outlined in Follow-the-money. In response, several developments within Child Health aim to improve outcomes for care-experienced infants, children, and young people (CEICYP):
8.3	A proposal is underway to refocus existing roles into a specialist health team for CEICYP. This team will: • improving the quality of initial assessment and health planning • to facilitate access to mainstream health services • to coordinate health care where children move out of the family home.

	• providing expert support to staff in universal health care, who are partners to the plan for CEICYP. In addition, a Whole Family Support Project is underway, led by the Lead Nurse in Highland Council. It aims to offer early intervention support to pregnant woman and their families who have been identified by community midwives as needing additional support. The project is grounded in national policy drivers, such as The Promise and change theories including the National Language and Communication Programme and the Early Child Development Transformation Programme. Recognising that a whole-system approach is required to improve outcomes for children and families, the project team has formed a collaborative with stakeholders from across the system to create the right conditions for systemic change.
8.4	The team has chosen Quality Improvement (QI) methodology as a framework to support this work, as it is a reliable and robust method that helps participants understand the system and identify and prioritise efforts effectively. Current learning from this project highlights: • We need to reduce duplication and adapt the current system to ensure co-production with families, allowing for early identification and a timely, firm offer of support. • There is a need to Prioritise efforts in remote and rural areas. Three change ideas are currently being explored: • Community Early Years Practitioners delivering whole-family support during pregnancy and early childhood in Skye. • Improved communication between midwifery teams in Alness. • Implementation of an Infant-Caregiver Positive Interaction Tool.
8.5	<u>Child's Rights & Participation</u> <i>'Children must be listened to and meaningfully and appropriately involved in decision-making about their care, with all those involved properly listening and responding to what children want and need.'</i> <i>The Promise, pg. 30</i> As reported previously, Highland Council as part of the Family First delivery, invested in a Child's Rights & Participation (CRP) Service. 3 officers were recruited in June 2024 and offer a Highland wide service to ensure the council: • Delivers on its commitments to 'Keep The Promise' which includes evidencing it actively listens to children about decisions that affect their lives • Delivers on its Integrated Children's Service Plan • Upholds the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) • Responds to the 2022 Care Inspectorate findings and evidence improvement • Supports a consistent approach to capturing the views of children and young people The service has led quality improvement projects, including a test of change using the <i>Better Meetings Guide</i>, a co-designed tool created by children and young people to support practitioners in upholding voice, choice, and participation during meetings. Feedback from the <i>Better Meetings Improvement Group</i> showed the guide was not being widely used. A small test of change with a Family Social Work team identified

	barriers such as limited capacity and access to the tool and provided recommendations for improvement
8.6	<u>Participation in Practice</u> As Members are aware, Highland developed a Children and Young People's Participation Strategy, led by the Highland Children's Rights & Participation Group, a subgroup of the Integrated Children Services Planning Board. Building on the strategy, the group has moved into implementation with a suite of innovative, rights-based resources designed for children, by children. These include an ethics framework, consent tools, a practitioner participation guide, and the "Library of Voices" a digital platform amplifying children's views and reducing consultation fatigue. The work is grounded in the UNCRC and the Lundy Model, with six key themes identified by children across Highland forming the foundation. A new "Voice & Influence Process" is being piloted to embed children's input directly into the governance of the Integrated Children's Services Board, ensuring their voices inform strategic planning. Two key examples of innovation include: the co-produced Participation ROCCS resource, which challenges adult myths about children's capacity to participate; and ongoing work with children to build a case for how current complaints processes are not child-friendly, so they can help re-design them. This is not a one-off project, but a sustainable shift in how Highland listens to, learns from, and acts with its young people. Encouragingly, this work has recently been shortlisted for a COSLA award, under the 'strengthening communities and local democracy' category.
8.7	<u>Language</u> Previous reports to committee have noted the work undertaken on language in response to The Promise calls for action to demonstrate destigmatising language and practices across the service. This improvement activity was informed by lived experience through the Language Bin and resulted in the production of a Language Guide. To further support the Council's journey of improvement on language, a test of change with two residential homes was undertaken. Members can learn more about this via the Each & Every Child Podcast, where Highland was invited to showcase the work.
9.	Learning without Boundaries
9.1	Learning without boundaries is a strategic initiative to improve educational outcomes. This initiative is designed to address the urgent and complex needs of children and young people who are either currently disengaged from education or at significant risk of their school placements breaking down. These learners often face multiple barriers to engagement, including trauma, instability in care placements, and disrupted educational experiences. As such, they represent some of our most vulnerable cohorts and it is imperative that we respond with a coordinated, compassionate, and evidence-informed approach.
9.2	At the core of this work is a commitment to ensuring that every child and young person in this group receives consistent, strategic support that enables them not only to re-engage with learning but to thrive within it. We are developing a coherent vision and strategy that expands the concept of a Virtual School, traditionally focused on care-experienced young people, to encompass a broader group of learners who require targeted intervention and oversight.

9.3	This enhanced provision will serve as a central hub for leadership, coordination, and accountability. It will ensure that support is not fragmented or reactive, but instead proactive, personalised, and aligned with each young person's educational journey. The model will act as a strategic driver for improvement, bringing together professionals across education, social work, health, and third-sector partners to deliver joined-up support.
9.4	We have already taken several key steps to lay the foundation for this work: Evaluation of Current Provision: A comprehensive review has been undertaken to assess the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms. This evaluation has identified areas of good practice as well as gaps in provision, particularly in relation to consistency, coordination, and outcomes. It has also highlighted the need for a more strategic and system-wide response to the challenges faced by this cohort. Appointment of a Virtual Headteacher: Recruitment is progressing for a dedicated Virtual Headteacher who will lead the implementation and delivery of this strategy. This role will be pivotal in driving improvement, ensuring accountability and embedding a culture of high expectations and inclusive practice.
9.5	Focus on Educational Attainment and Engagement: We are committed to improving educational outcomes for these young people, many of whom have disengaged from full-time education. This includes developing flexible learning pathways, alternative provision, and targeted interventions that support both academic achievement and personal development.
9.6	Reintegration and Transitions: Where appropriate, we are working to support reintegration into mainstream education, ensuring that transitions are well-planned, supported, and sustainable. Our goal is for every child to leave school with meaningful qualifications, a tangible sense of achievement, and a positive destination.
9.7	This initiative is not simply about addressing immediate needs, it is about creating a sustainable, system-wide approach that embeds equity, inclusion, and excellence at the heart of our educational response. It reflects our commitment to the principles of The Promise and aligns with national priorities around closing the attainment gap and improving outcomes for care-experienced children and young people.
10	Conclusion
10.1	Highland Council continues to demonstrate a strong and evolving commitment to <i>Keeping The Promise</i> . Through strategic investment, collaborative working, and a focus on early intervention, the Council is actively reshaping services to better support care-experienced children, young people, and their families. While challenges remain — particularly in workforce capacity and permanence planning — the progress outlined in this report reflects a clear direction of travel. The Council's efforts to embed children's rights, improve participation, and strengthen family-based care are laying the foundations for long-term, sustainable change. Continued leadership, partnership, and innovation will be essential as we move forward in delivering on our shared promise: that all children grow up loved, safe, and respected.

	Designation:	Assistant Chief Executive - People
	Date:	30 October 2025
	Author:	Carrie McLaughlan, Jack Libby, Ian Kyle
	Background Papers:	N/A
	Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Promise Information Sheet

Want to know more about The Promise in Highland?



Appendix 1.

Information:

PROMISE CONVERSATION CAFE



Informal, café-style virtual, bi-monthly sessions, open to professionals in Children's Services and anyone supporting children, young people, and families. Provides updates & shares progress on activities related to The Promise across Highland.
www.hcpc.scot/training

THE CHILD RIGHTS & PARTICIPATION SERVICE:

Small team in Highland who are passionate about hearing what children and young people have to say. We offer:

- Tools to support children and young people to feel empowered to share their views.
- Support teams working with children and young people to share their views, feel listened to.
- Support children and young people to understand their rights and be listened to.

Contact us: keepingthepromise@highland.org.uk

PROMISE NEWSLETTER

A Quarterly Promise Newsletter, created to help keep readers up to date with activity relevant to #KeepingThePromise in Highland.

Sign up: keepingthepromise@highland.gov.uk



RIGHTS & PARTICIPATION WEBSITE

- Check out the [Children's Rights and Participation website](#) and [Promise page](#).
- Use the [Library of Voices](#) to share participation work or hear about others work.
- Find resources on [rights and participation](#).
- Read the [Participation Strategy](#), co-created with C&YP across Highland using the Lundy Model and the Highland Key Themes.



COMPOSITE STORIES

The Care Review created 12 composite stories. The stories are not real people but have been written to reflect the experiences the Care Review heard. The animations show what the Care Review learned from talking with children, young people, their families and carers. The Care Review spent time with the children and young people to ask how they felt about the stories. They liked the stories, made some excellent changes and said that children and young people would see themselves in them.

<https://www.carereview.scot/conclusions/composite-stories/>

Training:

RAISING AWARENESS OF THE PROMISE IN HIGHLAND

Sign up via: www.hcpc.scot/training
Sessions delivered by Promise Ambassadors. In person sessions for team meets or development sessions can be requested.
Contact: keepingthepromise@highland.org.uk



HIGHLAND LANGUAGE GUIDE

This [guide](#) shares what children, young people, families and the workforce told us about the words and phrases they found challenging or hurtful and highlights some key messages about the importance of language. It aims to make you aware of our words and their impact.

CARE EXPERIENCED & CORPORATE PARENTING

This module was developed by Who Cares? Scotland and offers an introduction to Corporate Parenting and our responsibilities. This is currently available via [Traineasy](#), the Highland Council's training platform.

EDUCATION SCOTLAND - KEEPING THE PROMISE AWARD



Aims to raise awareness & improve support in Education settings. This programme promotes consistent messaging and reduces stigma for care experienced young people. Info can be found [here](#).