

Agenda Item	6
Report No	HCW/16/26

The Highland Council

Committee: Health Social Care & Wellbeing Committee

Date: 19 August 2026

Report Title: The Promise Update Report

Report By: Assistant Chief Executive - People

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides Members with an update on progress made by Highland Council and its partners in delivering The Promise, Scotland's commitment to ensuring that care-experienced children and young people grow up loved, safe and respected.

The report outlines progress across the five pillars of The Promise: Voice, Family, Care, People and Scaffolding; highlights key achievements and identifies priority areas for further development.

- 1.2 The report also highlights ongoing challenges relating to workforce capacity, placement sufficiency and financial sustainability.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. Note progress made in delivering The Promise across the five pillars;
- ii. Note the continued commitment of Highland Council and its partners to delivering the ambitions of The Promise and preparing for implementation of forthcoming legislative requirements.
- iii. Note the ongoing workforce, placement sufficiency and financial challenges; and
- iv. Agree the priority improvement actions identified for 2026/2027 set out in section 11.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, was passed by Parliament in March 2026 and received Royal Assent in May 2026. Challenges exist in terms of implementation, planning and progression of the Act until core deliverability issues have been addressed and the necessary enabling

conditions are in place i.e. finance, placement and workforce conditions. The areas that need addressed and the enabling conditions that need to be in place prior to implementation, planning and commencement of the legislation are detailed in the body of the report.

Current cost estimates are incomplete, with elements of the Act, particularly those amended at Stage 3, not yet fully costed. Without robust and agreed costings, there is a significant risk of underfunding, which will undermine delivery and place additional pressure on existing services.

3.2 **Legal** - The Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, was passed by Parliament in March 2026 and received Royal Assent in May 2026. Following the Bill's passage, Highland Council and partners whilst keen to move into implementation planning, remain concerned about deliverability. There is a risk that proceeding before core delivery issues are addressed will exacerbate the concerns raised, create expectations that cannot be met, increase the likelihood of not being able to meet statutory duties, and add further pressure to services already operating beyond sustainable capacity.

3.3 **Risk** - Just as in Highland, across Scotland there are significant pressures across the workforce, particularly a recruitment and retention crisis within social work, which is disproportionately impacting children's services, at all levels.

The shortage of placements for children is becoming increasingly acute, driven in part by the long-standing crisis in the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people) – n/a**

3.5 **Gaelic** – Highland recognises the importance of ensuring The Promise impacts positively on all children including the rights of Gaelic-speaking children and young people and their families. Articles 28, 29, 30 and 31 of the UNCRC, which The Promise is aligned to, as a package have the capacity to significantly impact positively on the rights of Gaelic speaking children and young people.

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 a monitoring and update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 The Promise

- 5.1 The Promise represents Scotland's commitment to ensuring that care-experienced children and young people grow up loved, safe and respected, with opportunities to reach their full potential. Highland Council and its partners remain fully committed to delivering the ambitions of The Promise through service redesign, investment in early intervention, workforce development and strengthening the voice of children, young people and families.

6 Voice

- 6.1 A fundamental principle of The Promise is that children, young people and families should be listened to, respected and actively involved in decisions that affect their lives. Highland Council has continued to strengthen participation and engagement arrangements to ensure that lived experience informs both individual care planning and strategic service development. Feedback from more than 8,000 children and young people contributed directly to local priorities. Future work will focus on increasing participation opportunities for seldom-heard groups and embedding quality assurance arrangements demonstrating how children's views influence planning and decision-making.
- 6.2 The Q1 progress report from Who Cares? Scotland explains that the service engaged with 76 of Highland's care experienced children and young people through their advocacy service. This is an increase of 7 from the last reporting period. 16 young people supported were placed out with the Highland area and received in-person, remote and/or hybrid supports.
- 6.3 A welcome development has been the recent introduction of an additional advocacy service in Highland. Partners in Advocacy (PIA) has received funding to provide an independent advocacy service for children / young people up to 16 yrs of age in Highland who have lived/living experience of substance use (drugs and/or alcohol) – their own or those close to them. The service is for 3 years, commencing in November 2025 and is provided via match-funding from the CORRA Foundation and the Highland Alcohol and Drug Partnership (HADP).

7 Family

- 7.1 The Promise emphasises that, wherever it is safe to do so, children should remain within their families and communities and receive support at the earliest opportunity. Highland Council continues to prioritise a preventative approach through investment in early intervention and whole family support. Whole Family Wellbeing Funding and additional investment in kinship support are helping strengthen family resilience. The Whole Family Wellbeing Programme supports that delivery by focussing criteria on families who are at risk of poverty; families with a child or adult with disability; families where the mother is under 25; as well as lone parents, larger families, minority ethnic families and families with a child under 1. There is also a focus on care experienced families, particularly Kinship families, to drive change to meet the aspirations of the Promise.

Future priorities include further shifting resources toward prevention and reducing reliance on commissioned care placements through earlier and more effective intervention.

8 Care

- 8.1 Where children are unable to remain safely at home, care should be safe, stable, nurturing and relationship based. Highland Council continues to prioritise placement sufficiency, stability and permanence. Work continues to increase fostering and kinship care capacity and strengthen quality assurance. Continuing Care and Aftercare pathways are under review to improve outcomes for care-experienced young people. Future activity will focus on increasing local fostering capacity, supporting Kinship Carers and increasing Children's Houses capacity through capital investment funding in order to reduce purchased and out-of-authority placements and supporting enduring relationships.
- 8.2 Highland Council has invested a further £3.5m in 2026/27 in Children's Services to support the Shifting the Balance of Care Strategy. Shifting the Balance of Care is a key priority for Highland Council as not only are there economic advantages in doing so but, more importantly, the strategy will keep more children within their own community and closer to family and friends. The investment is being used to develop two new Children's Houses, reinstate two existing Children's Houses and increasing Short-break capacity at The Orchard.

9 People

- 9.1 The Promise recognises that positive outcomes depend upon a skilled, stable and supported workforce. Highland Council continues to invest in recruitment, retention, relational practice and workforce development. Participation in the Local Learning Partnership programme, expansion of traineeships and workforce progression initiatives are helping to strengthen capacity. Ongoing activity will focus on workforce sustainability, leadership development and staff wellbeing.

10 Scaffolding

- 10.1 The Promise requires systems, governance arrangements and organisational structures that enable children and families to access the right support at the right time.
- **Practice improvement and service redesign** will continue to be driven through the Child Protection Committee Quality Assurance Sub-group, supporting continuous learning, audit and improvement in line with the Promise focus on lived experience, relationships and outcomes.
 - **Strategic leadership and advocacy** for The Promise will be maintained through the Promise Board, with active engagement from senior leaders across Highland Council and partners. Overall lead responsibility will be shared between the Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) and Head of Service, reflecting the collective leadership model promoted nationally.
 - **Monitoring progress and resolving issues** will be embedded within individual services, with designated Promise leads within Children's Social Work, Education and Child Health. This reflects Plan 24-30's emphasis on progress being demonstrated through everyday practice and service-level ownership.

- **Governance and reporting** will be streamlined, with service leads reporting directly to the Promise Board and internally through SMT to the CSWO, ensuring clarity of accountability while avoiding unnecessary layers of oversight.
- **Quality assurance and programme integrity** will focus on alignment with Service Plans and internal coherence, supporting sustained change rather than time-limited initiatives.
- **Future resourcing or appointments**, if required, will be led by the Head of Service, ensuring flexibility and proportionality as delivery needs evolve.
- **Delivery of new products, services and improvements**, alongside resource and skills allocation, will be managed through existing working groups aligned to specific priorities.
- **Risk management** will be escalated to the Promise Board, with ownership and mitigation resting with the relevant service(s), supporting shared accountability and timely action.
- **Embedding practice** relating to The Promise, moving away from a delivery model where a small team had responsibility for promoting and ensuring compliance with The Promise, and moving towards a system where all managers within the service are responsible for ensuring promotion of and compliance with The Promise.

These arrangements support the transition from programme-based delivery to business-as-usual system change, which is consistent with how The Promise is intended to be kept nationally. Progress has been made in strengthening governance, developing performance measures and increasing accountability through partnership arrangements. Future work will focus on improving outcome reporting, strengthening data quality, reducing bureaucracy and ensuring investment continues to support prevention and early intervention.

11 Conclusions and Next Steps

11.1 Highland Council and its partners remain committed to delivering the ambitions of The Promise and have made positive progress across all five pillars. Significant investment has been made in participation, family support, workforce development, kinship care and governance arrangements. However, workforce capacity, fostering availability, placement sufficiency and financial sustainability remain significant challenges.

11.2 Priority over the next reporting period will be given to:

- **strengthening participation** – The Quality Assurance and Reviewing Officers have recently introduced a monitoring tool, designed to monitor child participation into decisions affecting their own lives. It has been designed in such a way that themes and trends can be identified, which will help direct improvement actions.

- **increasing local care capacity** – The £3.5m investment will be utilised to both increase care capacity and change practice, ensuring children can remain living at home where possible; and where not possible, more children live with a kinship carer or foster carer; and if a child has to live in a Children's House, then this will be closer to their own family and community.

- **supporting workforce sustainability** - structural changes currently taking place within the service are designed to better support and mentor trainee social workers, newly qualified social workers and other less experienced social workers.

- **expanding preventative services** - The Whole Family Wellbeing Programme supports that delivery and the criteria by focussing in on families who are at risk of poverty, which encompasses families with a child or adult with disability, families where the mother is under 25, lone parents, larger families, minority ethnic families and families with a child under 1. The criteria also has a focus on care experienced families, particularly Kinship families, to drive change to meet the aspirations of the Promise.

- **improving performance reporting** – the Promise Board have almost concluded a piece of work on developing an agreed data-set for monitoring and improving outcomes for care experienced children and young people.

- **embedding the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill** – senior officers from within the Service will continue to engage at a national level in order to influence how the Act will be resourced and the pace at which changes are expected to be made. The Service is currently working on a Delivery Plan, which, once the resources available and expected timescales become known, can be concluded and taken to a future Committee for approval.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - People

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Background Papers: N/A