



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Education Children and Young People Committee

Natalie Don MSP

Minister for Children, Young People and
Keeping the Promise
Scottish Government

T3.60

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By email only—

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18 December 2023

Dear Minister

I am writing on behalf of the Education, Children, and Young People Committee. As part of its ongoing scrutiny of The Promise, the Committee held an evidence session on [22 November 2023](#) to consider [The Promise Oversight Board's Report Two](#) (published in June 2023) and the progress made towards achieving The Promise. The Official Report of that meeting can be found [here](#).

The Committee would welcome your reflections on the matters arising below.

Workforce: capacity, skills, and expertise

The Committee acknowledges the multifaceted capacity issues that witnesses have highlighted in their evidence to date on the Promise. This includes the need for structural investments to be made to allow for more flexible, improved resource management. This is compounded by issues regarding a lack of staff with suitable skills and expertise and exacerbated by difficulties around recruitment and retention pressures, and shortages in critical areas that provide support to children and their families (col 8).

Kevin Mitchell (Care Inspectorate) emphasised that it is a challenge that would require the development of:

“...some innovative approaches to the workforce and strategic planning... in the coming years, because there are significant shortages, tensions and challenges” (col 8).

Louise Hunter (Who Cares? Scotland) also said that:

“It is also about not just the number of people that we have out there delivering services but their skills and expertise. A lot of people who work in the system still do not know what care experience is, so that is an immediate hurdle that we need to get over” (col 67).

The Committee was particularly concerned to hear that those most affected by the Promise feel that their views are not being listened to (cols 29, 67). That includes children and young people themselves, as well as the wider workforce. The Committee, therefore, seeks details of the next steps you will undertake to ensure that these issues are remedied urgently.

While the Committee acknowledges that work is already underway to create a strategic workforce improvement plan due in 2024, the Committee recognises the pressing need not only to listen to the concerns and needs of young people and organisations working with them – including the third sector – but also the need to consult them when developing the next social workforce improvement plan.

It is clear from the evidence the Committee heard that legislation alone will be insufficient to bring about the culture change required to keep the Promise. Witnesses have made it clear time and again that what is needed is strong and effective leadership (col 33).

Therefore, the Committee asks that you set out the steps you will be taking to address the above concerns and the associated timeframe to ensure the successful delivery of the overall aims of the Promise consistently with the goals stated in the [Programme for Government 2022 to 2023](#) (col 36).

In particular, the Committee asks that you provide further detail about the steps the Scottish Government will take to ensure the impending workforce improvement plan dovetails with cross-sector workforce planning in other areas such as education; including what support teachers will be afforded to understand the impact of care experience and ensure that Scotland is “the best place in the world for children to grow up” per the strategy set out in the Scottish Government’s [Keeping the Promise implementation plan](#).

In addition, the Committee asks for reassurances as to how you will ensure that the voices of stakeholders are heard and reflected on in the social workforce improvement plan.

Early intervention

The importance of investment in early intervention (i.e., before children and young people come into care) was highlighted as a means of utilising resources more effectively and meeting the aims of the Promise. Kevin Mitchell said:

“Support for the most vulnerable—poverty plays a huge part in this—needs to be provided not just early but at the right time and early enough to prevent things from escalating” (col 8).

In turn, Mike Burns (Social Work Scotland) stated that “we need to focus on the early years and earlier intervention”, explaining that in his role as assistant chief officer of the Glasgow health and social care partnership, he had seen early intervention led to a £24 million reduction in spend over six years (cols 13-14).

Fraser McKinlay (The Promise Scotland) highlighted the importance of the Whole Family Wellbeing Funding (WFWF):

“As you know, the Government committed £500 million to [the WFWF] over the parliamentary session. Two lots of £50 million were identified in the first two years. It is looking unlikely that all of that money will be found and spent in the next two years, before the end of the parliamentary session. As we say in our submission to the committee, how that money is identified and used to make the shift towards the longer-term ambition for prevention is critical” (col10).

The Committee recognises the role early intervention is likely to play in achieving the Promise and seeks further information from the Scottish Government about future allocations of the WFWF. Can you confirm whether the Scottish Government still intends to allocate £500 million over this Parliamentary session?

Exclusions

In its March 2022 report on [Keeping the promise to our children, young people and families](#), the Scottish Government committed to limiting the informal and formal exclusions of care-experienced young people in schools to the most extreme circumstances (p 40). The Committee heard that school exclusions are often not the result of the behaviour of children and young people but often due to resource and availability issues.

Louise Hunter (Who Cares? Scotland) said:

“...a lot of the exclusions that we hear about directly are not because of the behaviour but...because of the system tripping over itself. Young people who attend hearings or meetings with social work are being removed from school for a day or half a day to suit the working patterns of professionals. That informal exclusion might not be classed as such by the educational establishment, but it is

a real concern for us that children and young people are missing out on large elements of school” (cols 55-56).

The Committee would welcome some reassurances from you about how you intend to address this issue and move toward limiting formal and informal exclusions as set out in The Promise’s Plan 21-24.

Change and sequencing

The Committee is aware of the whole-system, transformational, and leadership changes that are needed to deliver the Promise by 2030. In their evidence to the Committee, witnesses emphasised the need for greater clarity about the direction of travel in light of issues such as the cost-of-living crisis which have emerged as work on the Promise has progressed (cols 11-19). Witnesses have also stressed how the delivery landscape is impacted by a complex legislative and policy landscape and planning and sequencing issues (cols 27-29).

In your evidence to the Committee on 1 November 2023, you suggested that the Bill and the HSWG recommendations would be kept separate as they “were not started in tandem”. However, in the evidence the Committee heard from stakeholders, coordination and sequencing of work across different workstreams was seen as being vital to the successful implementation of the Promise.

Fraser McKinlay highlighted the links between work on the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill and the recommendations of the Hearings System Working Group (HSWG). He said that while the Scottish Government assured The Promise Scotland it understands the connections between the two, “we could still see the evidence of that more strongly”.

Fraser McKinlay said:

“We need to be really careful that the planning and sequencing of all the different moving parts—the cogs that are turning—all make sense together, not only for the people who deliver those services and deal with the changes on the ground, but, as importantly, for the children, young people, families and people with care experience who receive the services. We would like to see more evidence on that. There is still an opportunity to be clearer about the sequencing of the legislation that is being passed and how its implementation will pan out” (col 27).

Mike Burns also highlighted concerns around alignment:

“It goes back to the initial question about whether there is sufficient appreciation of the enabling context, and I think that the answer to that is no. We keep coming back to the word “alignment” and how there is a lack of sequencing in the layering on of legislation.” (col 28)

The Committee remains gravely concerned by the current delivery approach whereby various pieces of work requiring changes are not being addressed in tandem. Please

can you provide further details of the work the Scottish Government will undertake and/or has begun to map out the full range of changes required to implement the Promise fully by 2030, including consideration of the sequencing of change, consultation with affected stakeholders, and any adjustments that have been made as a result of this consultation work?

Premature deaths

The Committee is aware of the [Care Inspectorate's Report on the deaths of looked after children in Scotland 2012 – 2018](#) and the establishment of the Child Death Review Hub led by Healthcare Improvement Scotland.

During the evidence session, Fraser McKinlay said that different organisations in the system looking at different parts of the issue of child deaths has meant “we are unable to get a fully rounded picture” (col 24). He added:

“...we do not know enough about the nature of those young people's lives. That is the thing that is absent from the whole debate and discussion, and that is the bit that the board feels strongly about, as do I. The critical thing is to understand what is happening in those young people's lives that leads them to that place” (col 24).

The Committee seeks further information about how learning and understanding around the early deaths of care experienced people is developed and shared across organisations involved in keeping the Promise, including the Scottish Government's role in this work.

Sibling contact

The Committee recognises the policy and legislative landscape has changed recently better to support sibling contact for young people in care when it is safe to do so. This recognises the importance young people themselves have placed on maintaining these long-term relationships. However, the Committee acknowledges that there are still delivery issues and problems with siblings being unaware of their rights (cols 19, 59).

The Committee also heard that, in many cases, siblings are not being placed together despite the introduction in 2021 of legislation placing a duty on local authorities to ensure siblings are supported to stay together where appropriate.

The Committee would welcome further information on what steps the Scottish Government will take to address these ongoing issues, including what you are doing to monitor the implementation of the 2021 legislation and any associated timeframe for this.

Paving the Way Report

The Committee notes that Who Cares? Scotland produced a report setting out the views of children and young people on the Scottish Government's plan to keep the

Promise. It also addressed several recommendations to the Scottish Government in June 2022. The evidence the Committee heard indicates that to date, the Scottish Government has not provided any response to any of the key asks listed in that report (col 49-50). The Committee asks for your views on the report's recommendations and what actions you intend to take in response to these.

Priorities

Finally, the Committee seeks further information on the progress of the Cabinet Sub-Group on The Promise as announced by the First Minister during his statement on the 2023-24 Programme for Government. In particular, the Committee would like information about the membership of and priorities identified by this Sub-Group.

The Committee also seeks further information on whether a progress update on the Scottish Government's 2022 Promise Implementation Plan will be forthcoming in the months ahead.

We would be grateful if you could please respond to the points raised in this letter in Word format by **Monday 22 January 2024**.

Kind regards

Sue Webber MSP

Convener