

Keeping the Promise: A focus on Early Help

Scottish Government Debate, November 2024

Children First is Scotland's national children's charity. We stand up for children, keep them safe and support them to recover from trauma and abuse through our national and local services.

When the Promise was published, it sparked hope for Scotland's children, families and those who work with them. It recognised the need for fundamental change in the way we approach care, protection and justice, and that at the moment, Scotland's care system isn't working.

But a combination of national crises, alongside slow system reform, mean that we are still a long way from Keeping the Promise. Children First has now declared a "childhood emergency" in Scotland, with new research revealing most adults believe growing up in the country is worse than ever before.¹

Early help and support for children and families will be pivotal to improving Scotland's chances at Keeping the Promise. At the moment, too many who reach for help struggle to find it. Challenges grow into crises, and more pressure is placed on the struggling care system.

In 2011 the [Christie Commission](#) stated that, "a cycle of deprivation and low aspiration has been allowed to persist because preventative measures have not been prioritised." Preventative ways of working are often dropped because we struggle to see beyond the most immediate challenges that families face. In many ways, these findings still remain true today.

Keeping the Promise will need commitment from everyone. We remain determined to make sure the Promise is kept and call on all parties in the Scottish Parliament to do the same. To address this now:

1. The Whole Family Wellbeing Fund needs simplified and made transparent with a clear and ambitious strategy and delivery plan, with funding streamlined to focus on frontline service delivery and consistently connected to financial wellbeing advice.
2. As part of the Promise Bill, the Scottish Government should consider the legislative landscape for early help and prevention services like whole family support and FGDM.
3. The role of the third sector needs to be recognised as part of this reform, so that children can continue to receive support in line with their needs and their rights, recognising that choice and control over how help is delivered is key to improving outcomes in families.

¹ [Children First declare childhood emergency | Children First](#)

1. Whole Family Support must become consistently available.

“We feel our voices are being heard by you, the schools, there hasn’t been issues with schools recently things have got a lot better. I know you have my back. You guys have helped by being there if I need to vent. You were there at the tricky meetings with the school, you made me feel supported, you had my back. You guys have put a lot of hard work to getting us where we are today. I would have lost it by now if you weren’t here.”

Parent, Children First Service.

Whole family support, if delivered with quality and consistency, could transform the care system and be the catalyst to Keep the Promise.

The Promise said, “Where children are safe in their families and feel loved they must stay – and families must be given support together, to nurture that love and overcome the difficulties which get in the way.” However, there are real concerns about whether enough progress is being made. Children and families have a right to access support², but too many are still struggling to find help when they need it.

The Whole Family Wellbeing Fund was an important commitment from the Scottish Government. But it is not yet working as it was intended. The reality is public authorities are making difficult cuts, and preventative services suffer in this type of financial climate. The Fund needs simplified and made transparent, with funding streamlined to focus on getting people working alongside families.

The good news is that we continue to see families’ circumstances transform when they have people alongside them to give them a helping hand. In the last few years, Children First have delivered family support services alongside financial wellbeing advice, which has proven transformational. Our advisors recorded £1,908,519 in financial gain for families by supporting them with income maximisation through existing entitlements and managing debts and other finances. This holistic approach means that families can get the practical, emotional and financial support they need to stabilise their lives.

2. Community-based care opportunities need fully explored.

The Independent Care Review said it “heard from care experienced young adults where kinship opportunities were missed because of lack of exploration of available family willing to care.”³ Recent

² [Article 8](#) of the European Convention on Human Rights (on a right to private and family life), the UNCRC Preamble, as well as [Article 3](#) (on the duty for everyone to consider children’s best interests and for states to help people to do this), [Article 6](#) (on the right to survival and development) and [Article 18](#) (on the right to be brought up by both parents if possible).

³ Independent Care Review, (2020) [The Promise](#), P74.

research into the children's hearing system asked, "whether opportunities were missed to enable them (families) to stay together after the child had been born".⁴

We believe that Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)⁵ should be a fundamental part of ensuring families' right to stay together is upheld. Through FGDM, accredited co-ordinators spend time working with the whole family network and services, gathering views and working to strengthen support and resilience around children. Families are empowered to create a 'Family Plan', supported by social work, which sets out unique solutions to their own challenges, with their voices effectively represented.

I feel a lot more better, than what it was, than what I was originally. And like, I felt like you [the coordinator] were, you like helped me co-, like sorta communicate better and like you helped bring like the family closer, that now we are all communicating.

Young Person, FGDM Evaluation Report: Children First and Scottish Borders Council Pilot Project, (2024).

At the moment, FGDM is available in around two-thirds of local authorities. Children First believe that FGDM has untapped potential that could be addressed, in part, by considering its existing place in legislation as part of the Promise Bill, so that FGDM can synchronise with children's hearings.

Its existing place in law and policy⁶ means that steps can be taken quickly to grow the benefits, but FGDM needs a clear place alongside hearings through the redesign, so children facing life changing decisions have the best opportunity to ensure their families and communities are involved. There should always be a way to find support before statutory interventions are brought in, and ways to ensure that referrals back to community-based support are available to decision makers in social work and the children's hearing system.

3. Third sector services need recognised as part of reform.

The third sector is an invaluable support to statutory services across Scotland's care and protection system and delivers much needed help on the ground to children and families every day. But many of these services are at risk. We know from experience that preventative services, particularly when they are funded through the third sector, are the first to go when there is pressure on budgets.

We also know that losing early help and support means that small problems are left to grow, and that more intrusive and costly interventions are needed further down the line – which places even more financial pressure on services in the long term. As spending decisions are made over the coming years, it is vital that the support offered by the third sector is fully understood and utilised to Keep the Promise.

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⁴ Cusworth et al. (2022) [Born into care in Scotland: Circumstances, recurrence and pathways \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot).

⁵ The National FGDM Steering Group National Standards and Practice Guidance: [Family Group Decision Making \(FGDM\) Scotland](#) (2023).

⁶ See the relevant legislation [here](#).