



Connected by Care

**Who Cares? Scotland's Manifesto
for the Scottish Parliament
Election 2026**



For the past 47 years, Who Cares? Scotland has been at the heart of the Care Experienced community in Scotland. As Scotland's only national independent membership organisation for Care Experienced people, our mission is to secure a lifetime of equality, respect, and love for Care Experienced people in Scotland.

We provide individual relationship-based independent advocacy and collective advocacy for Care Experienced people across Scotland.

In the next parliament, we want to see the Promise kept in full. Our priorities for the next parliament include the Promise, voice, mental wellbeing, education and rights. We're asking Scotland's political parties and candidates to commit to the necessary love, investment and leadership for our Care Experienced community to thrive.

These calls have been selected from recent advocacy and participation evidence from the Care Experienced community, our Lifelong Rights and Action on Advocacy campaigns, and a recent activity with our members at our Summer Festival to inform their prioritisation.



What do we mean by Care Experienced people?



When it comes to care, there are many different phrases and terms used with different definitions. These often do not recognise the lifelong impact that care can have and creates further inequality.

Who Cares? Scotland uses the term 'Care Experienced people'. This applies to anyone who has ever been in the care system, regardless of how long or at what age. This can be in a range of settings including:



Foster Care

Whether short-term or long-term.



Kinship Care

Cared for by extended family or close family friends.



Secure Care

For their own welfare or safety.



Adopted

Having been removed from their birth family.



Residential Care

In group care settings.



Looked After at Home

Under social work supervision while living with birth families.



Our priority calls to action

1

Ensure the Promise is kept in full and fully resourced, with processes to track its delivery up to and beyond 2030.

2

Keep Care Experienced people's voice at the heart of the Promise, implementing the statutory right to independent, relationship-based, lifelong and accessible advocacy for all Care Experienced people who need it.

3

Every child in care should be offered mental health support, and Care Experienced people of all ages should be able to access trauma-informed support. Services providing spaces for connection including befriending should be accessible to Care Experienced people of all ages.

4

Adopt a whole-school approach to supporting Care Experienced children and young people, such as our 'Communities that Care' model.

5

Introduce the Scottish Human Rights Bill which includes Care Experienced people within the Equality duty.

1 Ensure the Promise is kept in full and fully resourced, with processes to track its delivery up to and beyond 2030.



Scotland is now almost halfway through the ten-year plan to implement The Promise. And yet, the third Oversight Board report in 2025 found that “Scotland is not halfway towards keeping its promise”, and “some people, some organisations and some systems are not yet doing enough, and this risks the country as a whole failing to deliver the promise.”

It is clear that whilst commitment remains high and some progress is evident, currently, the Promise risks being broken.

The recent Audit Scotland report has warned that the Promise lacks planning, tracking and accountability - which are all fundamental elements for transformational change. Our Is Scotland Keeping the Promise report identified similar critical issues that must be addressed: data availability and accountability, and dilution of original aims, particularly relating to the use of restraint.

We know there are barriers related to resources and external challenges faced globally over the past five years. However, in many cases, key commitments have either not been tracked or have not yet started. Worryingly in some cases, commitments are not even being considered for practice currently.

Plan 21 - 24 has not been delivered in full and failure with Plan 24 - 30 cannot be accepted. We're asking for awareness, investment and leadership in our incoming Parliament, and we stand ready to help you along the way.



“More action should happen. There's been a lot of chat and not enough action.”

Care Experienced person, 2022.

2 Keep Care Experienced people's voice at the heart of the Promise, implementing the statutory right to independent, relationship-based, lifelong and accessible advocacy for all Care Experienced people who need it.

The Care Review's Follow the Money Report found that 'delivering the current 'care system' in Scotland costs around £942 million per annum. The universal services which can be associated with Care Experienced people cost a further £198 million per year. These bleak figures are why we believe in investing in independent advocacy - as a form of prevention and early intervention to mitigate the strain on public services and more importantly, the human cost of rights abuses from escalating and happening in the first place.

A 2025 report by Social Finance UK reported that for every £1 spent on advocacy, £12 was saved by universal services for people with autism and learning disabilities. The financial benefit of this commitment will be felt across other public policy budgets such as health, housing, and justice. Indeed, The Independent Care Review also made a strong case for investing upstream to get it right for every Care Experienced child and adult, at the economic benefit to other services.

We regularly advocate for Care Experienced children and young people who are being denied their rights under existing legislation due to local authorities facing resourcing issues. We encourage decision-makers to ensure local authorities are fully supported to implement these changes so that the Promise is kept on an individual level for every Care Experienced person seeking support.



"Having someone to ... generally help fight my corner was a lifeline for me and I am so grateful for the help from my advocate."

Care Experienced person, 2023

3

Our 2022 mental health report ‘Tend Our Light’ found that 100% of participants felt that their care experience had negatively impacted their mental health, and 70% had been unable to access mental health support. We called for training on Care Experience and trauma for professionals, proactive mental health support offers for children in care, mental health support to be available to Care Experienced people of all ages, and support for Care Experienced people to keep the loving relationships they already hold and form new support networks throughout life.

This theme of support networks and the impact care experience and loneliness can have on Care Experienced people's lives was also highlighted by participants who informed our 2024 Belonging and Connection issue paper two years later. 75% of respondents reported struggling with loneliness, and around half felt that their time in care had negatively impacted on their sense of belonging and connection.

We recommended various ideas to tackle loneliness, create conditions for unconditional love and equality, and provide lifelong support in order to improve Care Experienced people's social networks and mental wellbeing.



Mental health support was never put in place for me, and in part this is because you only got support if you had already reached breaking point and if I had received better support back then, maybe life would have turned out differently.

Care Experienced person, 2022

4 Adopt a whole-school approach to supporting Care Experienced children and young people, such as our 'Communities that Care' model.

A good education opens doors to opportunities, levels out inequalities and develops a young person's confidence, interests and talents. For Care Experienced people, receiving a good education can be a route to overcome socioeconomic barriers and enable them to pursue their goals and aspirations.

However, the most recent National Education Statistics for Looked After Children show that educational outcomes for children in care continue to be much lower than average across a number of metrics - including on attendance, school leaving age, and SCQF level 5 attainment, which have all worsened in comparison to the previous year.

Our 2025 report 'Exclusion labelled as Support' highlighted how the use of part time timetables and informal exclusions are regularly threatening Care Experienced pupils' right to an education. Challenges in accessing personalised support were identified alongside how a poor school culture that doesn't understand care experience can make them feel.

Care experience is not currently included in the curriculum, and the understanding of care experience and outcomes for Care Experienced pupils varies widely across schools. Our 'Communities that Care' Whole School Approach involves educating entire school communities on care experience with the aim of upholding children's rights and creating more empathic and inclusive communities. This creates the conditions for Care Experienced children and young people to be nurtured and supported in their schools and wider community, enabling them to thrive.



"I enjoyed the lessons because we learned that everyone is different in their own way."

Pupil, 2024.

5

Introduce the Scottish Human Rights Bill which includes Care Experienced people within the Equality section.

The 2020 Independent Care Review found that Care Experienced people are almost twice as likely to have poor health, over 1.5x more likely to have financial difficulties and over 1.5x more likely to experience severe multiple disadvantage (homelessness, substance use, mental health issues). Five years later, these inequalities persist.

Our National Advocacy Helpline is primarily used by those who've aged out of statutory aftercare support, struggling with housing, social security, and mental health issues. Older Care Experienced adults who contact this helpline are often seeking support to access their records or navigate claiming redress for abuse they experienced in care which continues to impact them decades later.

Our Lifelong Rights report 2023 calls for these inequalities to be recognised and addressed as a human rights issue. In our Summer of Participation 2023, over 80% of Care Experienced adults who took part wanted extra protection for their rights in law.

We believe that human rights law must recognise Care Experienced people as a group of rights holders that face barriers to enjoying their rights across their lifetime. As a group who face far higher rates of poverty, homelessness, and hunger than the rest of the population, Care Experienced people have much to gain from a Human Rights Bill.

While recognition in guidance, international law, and outcome monitoring would go some way towards this goal, the 2023 report by Dr Scott of the University of Glasgow shows that the most secure way to ensure Care Experienced people's rights are protected is to recognise them in the text of a Scottish Human Rights Bill.

The current Government is openly considering this proposal. Who Cares? Scotland calls on the next Government to introduce the Scottish Human Rights Bill and work with us to ensure that this legislation includes care experience as a named group within the Equality Duty. This would help Care Experienced people access justice by having a legal route to challenge discrimination based on their care experience.



"...being care experienced is a predictor of life outcomes and they aren't always good - we need to ensure that we wrap a rights based legislative framework of rights around care experienced people so that we can ensure children and young people grow up loved, but as they grow into adults, they aren't forgotten. Scotland has a duty to do the right thing."

Care Experienced person, Summer of Participation, 2023

When we ensure that everyone in our community has access to the support they need, when they need it, everyone benefits



In Scotland, we are all connected to care in some way, whether through our own experiences, our families, or our communities. Together, we can ensure that Scotland is truly 'Care Aware' and becomes a place where every Care Experienced person can thrive.

The 2026 Holyrood election is an opportunity for Scotland to build a more equal future for all. The next Scottish Government must be bolder and braver in keeping the Promise to Care Experienced people. We want to see MSPs from every party work together across the chamber to ensure that policy and public investment deliver real change for those who need it most.

We can create a lifetime of equality, respect and love for all Care Experienced people in Scotland.



We ask for your support to make the 2026 election a hopeful moment of change for all Care Experienced people.