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Short Article

It takes a network to keep a promise: An overview of the Renfrewshire Promise keeper network

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Abstract

Creating communities where care experienced people feel valued, included and supported is a responsibility shared by us all. The Promise is Scotland's commitment to improving the lives, experiences, and outcomes of the care experienced community, by ensuring children are safe, loved, respected, and able to reach their full potential. Care experience extends beyond statutory definitions, shaping people's lives well into adulthood. Renfrewshire has adopted a broad and inclusive understanding of care experience. In support of this commitment, the Promise Keeper Network was established in 2022 as a community of local champions who promote and embed the values of The Promise within their services. Built on the principle that individuals are the experts within their services, the network includes over 430 Promise Keepers from a range of services. Through a structured application process, ongoing learning opportunities, networking events, and annual conferences, Promise Keepers work to create meaningful change within everyday practice. The network has contributed to a growing culture where responsibility for care experienced people is recognised beyond traditional children's services. As Renfrewshire progresses, the focus is on sustaining impact, strengthening participation, and ensuring the experiences of care experienced people continue to shape service design and improvement.

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Introduction

The Promise

The Promise is a Scotland wide initiative to improve the outcomes, experiences, and lives of the care experienced community. It comprises the concluding findings of the Independent Care Review (Scottish Government, 2020), a three-year national consultation. It involved 5500 members of the paid and unpaid workforce and those with direct lived experience of being cared for by the state in a bid to understand both the strengths of the Scottish care system and areas requiring improvement. The Independent Care Review was commissioned by the Scottish Government due to poor outcomes across the life course for the care experienced community, including poor physical health, poor mental health, poor dental health, poor educational outcomes, addiction, homelessness, and early deaths (Scottish Government, 2020). Uniquely, the findings of the Independent Care Review achieved consensus across the political spectrum, with all political parties accepting its findings in full. The Promise calls on all services in Scotland to ensure that all children are safe, loved, respected, and able to realise their full potential.

Renfrewshire, an area in Scotland, lies immediately west of Glasgow and forms part of the Glasgow City Region. It includes a mix of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Paisley, Scotland's largest town, is the administrative centre and has a significant cultural and industrial heritage (Renfrewshire Council, 2024). The town's name is recognised around the world through the Paisley pattern, a distinctive textile design that was produced in Paisley during the nineteenth century and became closely associated with the area's textile industry. Other towns and villages across Renfrewshire include Renfrew, Johnstone, Erskine, Linwood, Bridge of Weir, Houston, and Lochwinnoch (Renfrewshire Council, 2024).

Communities across Renfrewshire differ in size, character, and local circumstances. The experiences of children, young people, and families are shaped by the places in which they live, learn, and grow. These differences are reflected in the work of the Renfrewshire Promise Keeper Network and in wider efforts to improve outcomes for the care experienced community.

As a local authority, Renfrewshire carries responsibility for realising the values of The Promise across all services. Colleagues across Renfrewshire

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make every effort to adopt a loving, nurturing approach across services and to ensure we are acting on the voices and experiences of the care experienced community and their families. This has been achieved across several workstreams, including the Brothers and Sisters Policy (Renfrewshire Council, 2021), the Renfrewshire Language Policy (Renfrewshire Council, 2023) and the Renfrewshire Promise Keeper Network (Renfrewshire Council, 2026b).

Care experience

'Care experience' and 'care experienced' are used throughout this article. Care experience refers to any situation in which a child or young person has been cared for, supported by, or had their upbringing and wellbeing influenced by the state, or by others outwith their immediate parental care, at any point in their life, regardless of the duration, setting, or legal status of that care. This is distinct from the legal, statutory definition of 'looked after' as outlined in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

This definition recognises that care occurs across a wide range of circumstances and stages of an infant, child, or young person's life and can be short-term, long-term, or intermittent.

Care experience includes, and is not limited to, the following:

- Living away from parents or primary caregivers (for example, in foster care, residential care, or secure care)
- Living with extended family members or others with a pre-existing relationship (for example, kinship care, whether formal or informal)
- Remaining at home under compulsory, statutory supervision and planned support (for example, 'looked after at home')
- Being adopted following involvement of the state
- Living in supported or semi-independent accommodation
- Being an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child receiving care and protection
- Experiencing periods of care that may be planned, emergency, short-term, or long-term

In Renfrewshire, a broad and inclusive definition is encouraged outside of statutory services, recognising that care experience goes beyond a legal

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classification for many members of the care experienced community (Scottish Government, 2025):

> Anyone who is or has been in care, or from a looked-after background, at any stage in their life, including those in foster care, adoption, kinship care, residential care, or looked after at home, as well as those who have spent any length of time in the system or who have been on the 'edges of care' through contact with social work or related services (Renfrewshire Council, 2026b).

This definition supports the normalisation of care experience within society and avoids language that may stigmatise or 'other' individuals. It promotes clarity and consistency in how care experience is understood and applied across services, helping to both reduce variation in practice and improve access to support. Without a shared, universal definition, confusion can act as a barrier for individuals to access support.

The Promise Keeper Network

Renfrewshire's Promise Keeper Network (the network) is a community of local champions for The Promise who promote, advocate, and improve outcomes and experiences for the care experienced community utilising their services. The network is designed with the ethos that individuals are the experts in their service areas and therefore in how to embed the values of The Promise within them. There are currently over 430 Promise Keepers (as of 26/06/26) in Renfrewshire, and this number continues to increase organically.

Uniquely, the network has representation at all levels of seniority within Renfrewshire, from volunteers to the Chief Executive of Renfrewshire Council. A central element of the network is being part of a committed community brought together by the drive to enact positive change for the care experienced community by creating cultural and systemic change. This drive is disseminated across services, with Promise Keepers sharing their learning with their colleagues. The core aim of the network is for advocacy for the care experienced community to become part of normative, daily practice across all services, with an embedded understanding of impact and participation. From this, Promise Keepers play a valuable role in providing intel and experiences as we seek to implement further changes to fulfil the aims of The Promise.

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Background to Renfrewshire's Promise Keeper Network

The network was developed in 2022 to ensure that individual services were empowered to take ownership and responsibility for embedding the values and changes of The Promise into their service, within a supportive learning environment. It is based on the ethos that care experienced people will access a range of services across their life course, including services directly related to their experience of state care, such as social work and education. However, the network aims to recognise the full extent and range of services accessed, such as leisure, cultural, and council tax among others. As such, colleagues across all services have a responsibility to consider the needs and sensitivities of the care experienced community within their service delivery. The network is open to anyone who works or volunteers in Renfrewshire, and the table below represents the breadth of services involved. To achieve The Promise in full, we must engage services beyond traditional children's services, while also recognising the valuable and significant role they play. Therefore, the ethos is clear, that it is everyone's responsibility to implement The Promise.

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Service	Number of Promise Keepers
Social Work	59
Education – Primary	56
Third Sector/ Social Economy	47
Education – Secondary	46
Education – Early Years/ Preschool	42
Children's Houses/ Residential Care	33
NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde/ Health and Social Care Services	28
Whole Family Wellbeing	18
OneRen (leisure services)	18
Education Miscellaneous	17
Educational Psychology	14
Employability Services	9
Youth Services	9
Local Elected Councillors	3
Foster Carers	3
Human Resources	3
Local Community Groups	3
Police	2
Finance and Resources	2
Housing Services	2
Scottish Fire and Rescue Service	1
Higher Education/ University	1

Note: Data is accurate as of 26/06/2026

Figure 1 – Number of Promise Keepers across Renfrewshire services

A key aspect of the network, which distinguishes it from other champions networks within workplaces, is that there is a formal application process in place. Through feedback from our care experienced community, they

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want enthusiastic, authentic champions for The Promise in Renfrewshire, devoid of tokenism. To deliver this in practice, a three-stage application process was created, and has been sustained. There are no exceptions to this process, irrespective of role or seniority.

The application process

1. Applicants complete a short application form, comprising two questions: 'Why do you want to be a Promise Keeper?' and 'What opportunities for The Promise do you see in your role?' Applicants reflect on their reasoning for applying, before having the application signed by their line manager and submitting.
2. Once the application form has been received, the applicant is invited to attend an informal Promise Keeper interview. This is hosted online, and lasts around 15 minutes, entailing a light chat about The Promise with the Promise and family wellbeing coordinator and the training and development manager. This ensures that the applicant is authentic and is driven by the cause of The Promise.
3. All Promise keepers receive training to ensure they have a consistent understanding and consideration of care experience, The Promise and the role itself. The training is carried out in person and is multi-agency to ensure cross-sector and cross-departmental networking, relationship building, and learning. Throughout the training, staff are reminded that they bring their own unique knowledge and lived experience of the issues surrounding The Promise, which will be built upon throughout their role as a Promise keeper.

The approach of staff applying, interviewing, and training for a voluntary role within their own organisation is not a normative or conventional one. This brought about initial challenges with implementation, with some staff not fully comprehending why. This has improved over time, with staff now understanding the importance and significance of the Promise keeper role.

Ongoing training support, guidance and opportunities

After initial training, Promise keepers benefit from a range of ongoing training and support. The Promise and family wellbeing coordinator is accessible and available to all Promise keepers to provide support and guidance as required. This involves advising on developing ideas and work, sense checking, or co-presenting at team meetings with Promise keepers.

Promise keepers are invited to attend regular networking and information sessions, with both online and in-person sessions hosted to recognise the

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flexibility requirements of our diverse workforce and network. During these sessions, local and national updates are provided. There are opportunities for Promise keepers to share and celebrate examples of good practice and recent achievements. These sessions facilitate a supportive environment whereby Promise keepers can make wider connections across the network, and work through challenges. One of the core principles of the network is that we are constantly learning from each other.

Promise keepers are encouraged to make connections across the network independently. This is promoted through the Renfrewshire Promise Keeper Directory, which is a compilation of all Promise keepers along with their job titles and contact details. This resource is updated every six months and shared across the network.

Renfrewshire's Promise keeper conferences have been hosted on an annual basis since 2023 with attendance exceeding 100 participants (representing 30-45% of the network) for each event. This has involved an array of keynote speeches, professional speed dating exercises, and the showcasing of short films to highlight ongoing work around the Promise in Renfrewshire within the network.

The Promise keeper role

Promise keepers work to apply small, incremental changes to their service, such as sharing their learning with colleagues, ensuring The Promise remains at the forefront of service delivery, and promoting positive, non-stigmatising language as outlined in the Renfrewshire language policy (Renfrewshire Council, 2023). The role is designed to become part of an individual's everyday practice.

Promise keepers are provided with badges following the completion of their training. This helps to establish services as supportive, safe spaces for care experienced people, which recognise their needs. The badge itself is small and subtle: a metal pin badge of the Promise logo, overlaid with the Paisley pattern, reflecting the town's textile heritage and providing a tangible connection to Renfrewshire (Paisley.is, n.d.). The badge is worn voluntarily by the Promise keeper and was created in response to requests from Promise keepers who wished to be identifiable.

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Progress to date

The most significant area of progress has been the gradual normalisation of conversations about care experience across services and organisations that may previously have viewed The Promise as something relevant only to children's services. The network was intentionally created to challenge this assumption.

From the outset, the view was that care experienced people move through the same communities, public services, workplaces, and leisure spaces as everyone else. If Scotland is serious about keeping The Promise, then responsibility cannot rest solely with those services or organisations that hold statutory duties but requires a wider cultural shift across places and institutions.

The growth of the network demonstrates this shift, starting from a group of early adopters, and developing into a network of more than 430 individuals from a diverse range of services and organisations across Renfrewshire. The breadth of representation is particularly important (see Figure 1), and this diversity provides an important indication that The Promise has moved from a specialist agenda to part of mainstream practice and thinking.

The network has also contributed to wider organisational developments. The Renfrewshire language policy emerged through consultation with both care experienced young people and members of the network, with discussions within the Network highlighting the impact of stigmatising and negative language. Promise keepers subsequently played an important role in promoting person-centred language across their teams and services. This has helped support broader conversations about the difference between complying with organisational processes and genuinely creating environments where people feel respected and understood.

The networking sessions, conferences, and wider communication opportunities have created spaces where colleagues from very different professions can learn from one another. An educational psychologist may find themselves discussing participation with a youth worker, while a housing officer may learn about improvements within children's services, and a residential childcare worker may discover opportunities available through the local employability partnership for young people. These

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conversations help reduce organisational silos and create stronger partnership working.

The Promise keeper conferences are an important part of this culture. Feedback highlights the value participants place on hearing from experts outside their own professions, with participants sharing that they often leave with ideas they can adapt and apply within their own settings. In this respect, the conferences have helped shift thinking away from seeing The Promise as a set of national policy expectations towards seeing it as something that can be translated into everyday actions.

The network has also supported the development of new initiatives aimed at addressing inequalities encountered by the care experienced community. The Promise human library emerged through workforce discussions and now provides opportunities for young people to access informal career insights and guidance from colleagues across a wide range of professions. Similarly, the Care Experienced Staff Network and the guaranteed interview scheme reflect a growing recognition that care experience continues to shape opportunities and experiences into adulthood (Renfrewshire Council, 2026b). Both developments have benefited from the collective insight, challenge, and advocacy that exists within the wider Promise keeper community.

Perhaps the most encouraging development has been the increasing confidence of the Promise keepers themselves. Early conversations often focused on uncertainty, with individuals questioning whether they had sufficient expertise or influence to contribute meaningfully towards keeping The Promise. Over time, there has been a noticeable shift, with colleagues increasingly recognising that their everyday decisions, interactions, and relationships matter. A Promise keeper does not need to redesign a service to make a difference. Sometimes the most significant contributions come from small actions: changing language, advocating for a young person, questioning an assumption, improving access to an opportunity, or helping colleagues think differently about care experience. These changes may appear modest in isolation, but collectively they contribute towards the wider cultural change that The Promise ultimately aims to achieve.

The greatest success of the network is not the number of members, conferences, or training sessions delivered, but that increasing numbers of colleagues across Renfrewshire now recognise that they have a role in

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keeping The Promise. Creating that sense of shared ownership has taken time, persistence, and many conversations, and is an ongoing journey. Even so, there is clear evidence that the network has helped establish a stronger foundation for long-term change across Renfrewshire's services and communities.

Next steps

As Renfrewshire enters the latter half of Scotland's commitment to The Promise, the next phase of development for the network will focus less on growth for its own sake and more on sustaining influence, deepening impact, and strengthening local ownership (Renfrewshire Council, 2026a). The network has reached a stage where it is recognised locally and nationally, so the challenge now is ensuring that this growing community continues to contribute meaningfully to lasting change, rather than becoming simply another professional network.

A key priority will be continuing to strengthen representation across parts of the local system where care experience may be less visible. There remains an opportunity to deepen engagement across additional corporate services and community settings, which is particularly important because many of the barriers experienced by the care experienced community relate to broader social and economic factors rather than direct service involvement alone. Employment opportunities, access to community activities, participation in local decision making, and financial inclusion all influence life chances. The network plays an important role in encouraging organisations to view these issues through the lens of care experience.

The continued development of the network will also require careful attention to authenticity. One of the reasons the application and interview process was established was to create space for reflection and commitment. Maintaining that principle remains important. As membership develops, there will be a need to preserve the sense of purpose underpinning the network, and to ensure that individuals understand both the opportunities and responsibilities associated with the role. This will continue to require investment in learning, support, and relationship building, with quality of engagement mattering more than membership numbers alone.

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Workforce development will remain a central theme over the coming years via opportunities for deeper learning through networking sessions, workshops, and shared practice discussions. There is growing recognition that relational practice is not limited to children's services, with staff across all sectors benefitting from opportunities to reflect on power, language, relationships, and inclusion within their work. The network provides a practical mechanism for supporting these conversations.

This also strengthens and promotes the contribution of Promise keepers to wider local and national strategic developments, demonstrating the value of bringing Promise perspectives into broader discussions about service design and improvement. Promise keepers often identify issues, opportunities, and unintended consequences, with their local knowledge and understanding providing valuable insight when organisations are contemplating change. Future development should create additional opportunities for this learning to inform strategic decision-making.

Another priority is ensuring that the network remains informed by the experiences of care experienced people themselves, as the strongest ideas within the network have consistently emerged through listening to those with direct experience of care. The language policy, improvements to participation structures, and emerging employability initiatives all reflect this. Maintaining these connections will remain essential, so that the network can continue to create opportunities for care experienced people to influence priorities, challenge assumptions, and help shape future developments. The Promise is ultimately concerned with people, relationships, and lived experience rather than organisational activity. Maintaining that focus is critical.

In the future there is also an opportunity to better understand and evidence the impact of the network. Membership numbers and event attendance provide useful information, but they tell only part of the story, with the more important questions relating to influence. How are services/organisations changing? What barriers have been removed? How have experiences improved? What can be learned from successful local examples?

Crucially the network depends upon preserving its original purpose. It was never intended to create a separate group of specialists responsible for keeping The Promise on behalf of everyone else. The ambition has always been wider than that. The network exists to create advocates, encourage

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reflection, develop relationships, and support small changes that accumulate over time. As Renfrewshire, and indeed Scotland, moves towards 2030, the measure of success will not be whether the network continues to grow, but whether increasing numbers of services, organisations, and communities instinctively consider the care experienced community when designing and delivering support. If this becomes normal practice, the network will have achieved exactly what it set out to do.

Call to action

Wherever you are in the world, care experience reaches further than many people realise. Care experienced people engage with education, healthcare, housing, employment, community groups, businesses, and public services every day. The experiences they have in these places can shape their sense of belonging, their confidence, and the opportunities available to them. Our experience in Renfrewshire has encouraged us to look beyond traditional definitions of care and to consider how communities as a whole respond to those who are care experienced.

This creates important questions for every country, organisation, and community. How is care experience understood where you live and work? How visible are the care experienced community within policy, practice, and public life? What do people experience when they engage with your services, systems, or communities? Every place has its own culture, history, and approach. Progress begins by listening carefully to people with lived experience, reflecting on what they tell us, and considering how that learning can influence future action. We invite you to examine your own assumptions, explore your sphere of influence, and identify opportunities for change.

Consider what a care experienced person would encounter in your organisation, community, or service today. Would they feel welcomed, respected and supported? Would they experience a genuine sense of belonging? The answers to these questions have the potential to shape stronger communities, better experiences, and brighter futures for the care experienced community across the world.

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Maurice Gilligan is Promise manager for Renfrewshire council and a member of the Children's Services Senior Leadership Team. He leads the strategic implementation of The Promise across Renfrewshire, working with colleagues across local government, health, the third sector, and community planning partners to improve outcomes, experiences, and opportunities for the care experienced community. Maurice plays a key role in aligning local activity with national priorities, through collaboration with organisations including the Scottish Government, COSLA and Promise Scotland to support lasting systems and cultural change. Throughout his career, Maurice has championed approaches that place children, young people, and families at the heart of services, decision-making, and system change. He has led the development of a range of initiatives that support organisations to better understand their role in improving outcomes for care experienced people. His work focuses on embedding the principles of The Promise into everyday practice, helping to create lasting cultural change across services, systems, and communities. Maurice's values are rooted in inclusion, participation, equity, and respect. He is motivated by a belief that care experienced people should enjoy the same opportunities, aspirations, and life chances as everyone else. Outside his Promise manager role, Maurice serves as a non-executive director of Scotwest Credit Union, supporting ethical financial inclusion, community empowerment, and opportunities for people and communities to thrive.

Sam Macrae is the Promise and family wellbeing coordinator at Renfrewshire council, with key responsibilities for co-chairing and embedding the supporting the workforce workstream of The Promise. This includes the successful creation of a guaranteed interview scheme for care experienced applicants, establishing the Promise human library, and oversight and project management of the Promise Keeper Network. Sam is currently undertaking a part-time MSc in Public Policy and Management at the University of Glasgow. In a professional context Sam is interested

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in experiences of employment within the care experienced community, workforce support and development, and embedding lived experience in a meaningful way. In an academic context, Sam is interested in considerations of care experienced people across areas where they have not previously been considered, such as voting behaviour and patterns. Sam is currently a trustee of the Unite Foundation, which provides free accommodation to care experienced and estranged students at partner universities across the UK.

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