Chief Social Work Officer Annual Report Summary

2024/25

Iriss

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List of abbreviations

ADP	Alcohol and Drug Partnership
ARCH	Assessment, Rehabilitation and Care at Home
ASP	Adult Support and Protection
CPC	Child Protection Committee
CPP	Community Planning Partnership
CSWO	Chief Social Work Officer
GIRFEC	Getting It Right for Every Child
HSCP	Health and Social Care Partnership
IJB	Integration Joint Board
MAPPA	Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements
MARAC	Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference
MHO	Mental Health Officer
NCS	National Care Service
NHS	National Health Service
NSWA	National Social Work Agency
SDS	Self-Directed Support
SCIM	Scottish Child Interview Model
SSSC	Scottish Social Services Council
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Background

Iriss received funding from the Scottish Government's Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser (OCSWA) to conduct an analysis and produce a summary of the Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) Annual Reports for the period 2024-2025. As at April 2026, OCSWA transitioned to the National Social Work Agency (NSWA). You can find information on the NSWA at www.socialwork.gov.scot.

The CSWO annual reports are part of a national process intended to support local accountability and a national overview of key themes, issues, and learning. They offer an overview of the delivery of social services in their area, including their key and current activities, developments and challenges. The reports also cover broader themes around governance and accountability, service quality and performance, resources, workforce development, and future priorities.

This synthesis report offers a high-level overview of the delivery of social services across the 32 local authorities based on the main themes and areas covered by all 32 Chief Social Work Officer Annual Reports. It is intended to provide a national overview of the social work landscape in Scotland. It does so by identifying cross-cutting themes across individual reports, including key challenges and emerging issues, to provide a snapshot of the sector.

To analyse the reports, we conducted a thematic analysis of adult services, children and family services, and justice social work across the 32 CSWO reports. In addition to these themes, we distinguished between issues reported widely across Scotland; issues reported by several local authorities; and local examples that illustrate variation or innovation.

It is important to note that this report is a summary of the current activities of CSWOs and should not be read as an in-depth analysis of social services in Scotland. Examples from different CSWO reports have been used for illustrative purposes. For more detailed information, please refer to the individual Chief Social Work Officer reports for the relevant local authority.

Executive Summary

The report provides a summary of the 32 Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO) reports on the landscape of social work and social care across Scotland over the last year.

Overall, the 2024/25 CSWO reports present a picture of a social work system operating within an increasingly challenging environment. Across Scotland, local authorities continue to face rising demand, growing complexity of need, persistent poverty and inequality, workforce pressures and ongoing financial constraints.

Despite these challenges, the reports demonstrate the resilience and commitment of Chief Social Work Officers to delivering service reforms and improving outcomes for individuals, families and communities. Through strong leadership, effective partnership working, and the growing adoption of trauma-informed and rights-based approaches, CSWOs have been delivering high-quality, person-centred social work and social care services in the face of increasing complexity and change.

Context and Drivers of Change

The social work and social care landscape in Scotland continues to be shaped by a range of interconnected pressures and opportunities.

Leadership and governance

CSWOs continue to provide strategic leadership across complex systems, balancing statutory responsibilities with wider roles in governance, partnership working, professional assurance and service improvement. Their leadership has been particularly important in supporting service redesign, workforce development and quality improvement during a period of significant pressure and change.

Service improvements

Despite financial and workforce challenges, local authorities reported significant service improvement activity across Scotland. Common areas of focus included trauma-informed practice, family support, early intervention, quality assurance, digital transformation, workforce development and partnership working. Many authorities demonstrated a continued commitment

to redesigning services around prevention, participation and improved outcomes.

Demographic change

Scotland is undergoing demographic changes that affect the delivery of services, including an ageing population with increasingly complex needs requiring support, and a declining working-age population that affects workforce supply.

Increasing complexity and demand

Rising levels of need and increasing complexity have led to greater demand for social work and social care services across all local authorities. LAs have described an increase in referrals during the 2024/25 period, as well as more complex needs involving poverty, trauma, mental health, substance use, domestic abuse, disability, ageing, family stress, and housing insecurity.

Funding instability

Financial pressures have been reported as a major constraint facing local authorities. This affects the ability to commission services, recruit staff, sustain early intervention, reduce waiting times, provide external placements and avoid crisis-led responses. Many financial pressures are linked to ageing populations and adult social care demand, and children's external placement costs.

Workforce pressures

Workforce sustainability remains one of the most significant challenges facing social work and social care services. Recruitment and retention difficulties, workforce shortages, sickness absence and increasing workload pressures continue to affect service delivery. However, local authorities are responding through workforce development, leadership programmes, wellbeing initiatives and 'grow your own' approaches designed to strengthen future capacity.

Policy change and legislation

CSWOs continue to operate within a rapidly evolving policy and legislative environment. Major reforms relating to The Promise, children's rights, care experience, social care reform, justice services, and digital transformation are creating new duties and expectations for service improvement. While local authorities remain committed to implementing these reforms, many reports highlight the challenge of delivering significant system change alongside increasing demand, workforce pressures and financial constraints.

Cross-service themes

Across Scotland, several common themes emerged regardless of service area or local context. These themes reflect national priorities, shared challenges, and the continued evolution of social work and social care policy.

Early Intervention and Prevention

Early intervention and prevention remain central ambitions across social work and social care services. However, many authorities reported challenges in protecting preventative services while responding to increasing levels of statutory demand and crisis intervention.

Keeping The Promise

Keeping The Promise continues to drive service redesign across children's services, with local authorities investing in family support, participation, trauma-informed practice and care experience. Progress is evident across Scotland, although implementation continues to be shaped by workforce and resource constraints.

National Care Service Reform

National Care Service reform remained an important contextual factor throughout the reporting period. While local authorities broadly supported the ambitions of improving outcomes, there was ongoing uncertainty regarding governance and implementation, which created challenges for planning and service redesign.

Partnership working and integrated delivery

Partnership working has remained one of the strongest features of social work delivery across Scotland. Effective collaboration between local authorities, Health and Social Care Partnerships, NHS services, Police Scotland and the third sector has been critical to delivering integrated support and responding to complex needs.

Self-Directed Support

Self-Directed Support continues to support person-centred and rights-based approaches to care. However, increasing demand and workforce shortages continue to affect the ability of some authorities to fully realise the ambitions of SDS.

Poverty and Financial Insecurity

Poverty and financial hardship remain significant drivers of need across Scotland. Many local authorities reported increasing complexity associated with poverty, including impacts on mental health, family wellbeing, housing stability and demand for social work and social care services.

Community Cohesion and Social Division

CSWOs highlighted the importance of promoting equality, inclusion and community cohesion. Reports identified growing concerns relating to discrimination, hate incidents, social exclusion and the experiences of minority communities, reinforcing the importance of rights-based and anti-discriminatory practice.

Key Service Areas

The CSWO reports highlight the breadth and complexity of social work responsibilities across adult services, children and family services, and justice social work. While each service area faces distinct challenges, common themes include increasing demand, growing complexity of need, workforce pressures and a commitment to person-centred, rights-based and preventative approaches.

Adult Services

Adult services remain the largest area of social work and social care activity. Demand continues to increase across care at home, adult protection, mental health, unpaid carers support and hospital discharge. Demographic change, workforce shortages and provider market sustainability remain significant challenges.

Children Services

Children's services continue to be shaped by a commitment to The Promise, alongside rising complexity of family circumstances and growing demand for support. Local authorities reported significant investment in family support, prevention, participation and trauma-informed practice, alongside ongoing challenges relating to workforce capacity, placement sufficiency and funding constraints.

Justice Social Work

Justice Social Work continues to balance public protection responsibilities with rehabilitation, recovery and community reintegration. This service area is presented across CSWO as one of increasing demand, but also notable innovation The 32 CSWO reports highlighted increasing complexity of need among justice-involved individuals, alongside innovative approaches focused on trauma-informed practice, partnership working and community-based support.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, Chief Social Work Officers anticipate that many of the pressures experienced during 2024/25 will continue into the coming year. Workforce sustainability, increasing demand and complexity, financial constraints and demographic change are likely to remain significant challenges across Scotland.

At the same time, local authorities continue to pursue ambitious programmes of service improvement, prevention, workforce development and partnership working. Notably, the reports suggest that digital and data transformation will

become more important in coming years, alongside an increasing focus on rights-based, trauma-informed and anti-racist practice. The reports suggest that the future resilience of social work services will depend on the ability to balance immediate statutory responsibilities with longer-term transformation, while ensuring that national ambitions for reform are matched by sufficient local capacity, resources and workforce support. Despite the challenges facing the sector, the reports collectively demonstrate a strong commitment to delivering high-quality, human rights-based and relationship-based services that improve outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Context

Chief Social Work Officers (CSWO) in Scotland are system leaders that operate at the intersection of multiple demands – increasingly complex social need, workforce pressures, demographic change, financial pressures and political uncertainty.

Across the 32 CSWO reports, several key pressures on social care and social work have been identified that affect how services are delivered and carried out across Scotland. While the reports cover multiple topics, they all point to similarly challenging circumstances in which services operate, with many pressures intensifying since the previous 2023/2024 reports. The picture in 2024/25 is one of resilient social care and social work services under significant pressure. Local authorities continue to provide statutory services and report areas of improvement. However, many CSWO reports make clear that current models are under strain. The greatest challenge comes from the combined effect of growing demand, funding constraints, and workforce challenges. This creates risks, not only for service performance but also for the ability of CSWOs to maintain preventative, rights-based practice while meeting statutory duties.

Leadership and Governance

The reports analysed demonstrate the important contribution of CSWOs as strategic leaders within local authorities and broader social care systems. Beyond their statutory responsibilities, CSWOs play a key role in influencing organisational priorities, strengthening governance and professional assurance, supporting partnership working across social services, and driving continuous improvement across social work and social care services. This includes services delivered directly by LAs, through Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCP), or through commissioned third and independent sector providers.

Across Scotland, reports describe ongoing work to strengthen practice quality, develop the workforce, improve outcomes for people and communities, and respond to emerging challenges through innovation and collaboration. This leadership role is particularly important in a context where services are required to balance increasing demand and complexity with continuing expectations for improvement.

Governance arrangements for social work and social care services vary across local authorities. In some areas, children's services remain within the local authority while adult and some justice services are delegated to HSCPs.

Other areas have different combinations of delegation and committee reporting. Several reports identify the complexity of governance across local authorities, Integration Joint Boards (IJB), public protection committees, and partnership structures.

Workforce Sustainability

Workforce sustainability remained a major theme across CSWO reports during 2024/25. Many reports highlighted continuing challenges relating to recruitment, retention, sickness absence, workload pressures and the increasing complexity of cases. These challenges were evident across both social work and social care services and were often exacerbated by wider labour market pressures, an ageing workforce in some local authority areas, and difficulties recruiting to specialist roles or rural and remote locations.

CSWOs consistently emphasised the importance of maintaining a skilled and supported workforce in a context of increasing demand. Concerns were raised not only about workforce capacity, but also about the long-term sustainability of services if recruitment and retention challenges persist.

At the same time, reports highlighted a wide range of activities designed to strengthen workforce wellbeing and development. Many local authorities, including Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Dundee and Highland, reported investment in leadership programmes, practitioner learning, supervision, reflective practice, wellbeing initiatives, trainee and graduate pathways, and new approaches to recruitment and retention. Several local authorities, including East Lothian, East Dunbartonshire and Clackmannanshire, highlighted progress in developing trauma-informed and relationship-based practice, strengthening learning cultures in the workplace, and creating more opportunities for career progression and professional development.

Across reports there was a clear recognition of the importance of the staff working in services, with CSWOs frequently acknowledging the commitment and professionalism of staff who continue to deliver high-quality services despite challenging circumstances. This was especially emphasised in Highland Council, Dundee, East Ayrshire, Clackmannanshire, the Scottish Borders. These efforts demonstrate an ongoing commitment to building a sustainable and healthy workforce, capable of supporting future service delivery and improvement.

Service Improvement

Alongside managing increasing demand and complexity, Chief Social Work Officers reported a wide range of activities to improve service development and delivery during 2024/25. Across Scotland, local authorities continued to invest in strengthening social work practice, improving service quality and developing more preventative, person-centred approaches. Common areas of improvement across local authorities during this period included the implementation of trauma-informed practice, the development of family support and early intervention services, strengthening of adult and child protection arrangements, enhanced support for carers and people receiving care, and significant efforts to implement The Promise and children's services reforms.

Beyond these positive outcomes and broad social benefits to families and communities, many local authorities, such as Dundee, East Ayrshire and East Dunbartonshire, also highlighted improvements in service delivery. These included progress in digital transformation, quality assurance and performance improvement, as well as initiatives designed to improve collaboration across health, housing, education, justice and third sector partners. Across many areas, CSWOs described efforts to strengthen multi-agency collaboration, improve data and quality assurance systems, and redesign services to provide more integrated and responsive support. While the nature and scale of activity varied between local areas, the reports demonstrate a continued commitment to innovation, service redesign and improving outcomes for people who access services.

Demographics

Demographic change continues to be a significant factor shaping the delivery of social work and social care services across Scotland. Chief Social Work Officer reports consistently highlight the impact of changing population profiles on both demand for services and workforce sustainability. Most areas of Scotland have been experiencing a decrease in population, with only a few – such as East Renfrewshire – reported population growth. And while patterns vary across local authorities, many areas are experiencing an ageing population and increasing levels of need associated with long-term health conditions, disability, frailty and social isolation. These demographic trends are increasing demand for adult social care, care at home services, support for unpaid carers, hospital discharge services and wider community-based support.

At the same time, demographic change is affecting the workforce that is

delivering services. Several authorities, particularly rural and island councils, reported concerns about shrinking working-age populations, recruitment difficulties and the long-term sustainability of local care and support services.

The impact of demographic change is not experienced evenly across Scotland. Remote and rural areas, and especially island authorities, face distinct challenges relating to population change, workforce availability and access to services. Collectively, the reports suggest that demographic trends are becoming an increasingly important driver of both service demand and service capacity, with implications for future planning and resource allocation.

Increase in Demand and Complexity

All of the CSWO reports described higher levels of need and growing complexity of need over the reporting period, which is increasing pressure on service capacity. Specific challenges include more complex family and adult circumstances, pressures associated with poverty and inequality, and growing demand for care at home, mental health, adult protection, child protection, and justice services. These challenges are exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, with increases in the cost of essentials - such as food and heating – pushing more people into poverty. For instance, the CSWO of Angus council described the 2024/25 year as challenging because of the combination of growth in demand and complexity alongside a difficult financial climate for services. North Ayrshire similarly describes increasing demand and rising complexity, which is compounded by escalating care costs.

Increase in demand also creates operational pressure across local authorities. LAs have reported high referral volumes over the 2024/25 period, alongside care at home demand, placement shortages, and justice demand. North Ayrshire describes a challenging picture in terms of the difficulty in supporting everyone who needs support, which is linked to increasing demand, complexity, care costs and workforce challenges. Stirling also describes pressure across all areas of social work, including resources, demand for mental health services, and foster care recruitment.

Geography and Local Variation

A recurring theme across the CSWO reports is the influence of geography and local context on the delivery of social work and social care services. While many of the challenges identified across Scotland are shared by LAs, the way these pressures are experienced by councils varies considerably depending on whether they are urban, rural, island or mixed authorities. A number of place-based factors – including local population size, levels of deprivation,

transport infrastructure, housing availability, workforce supply and the availability of specialist services – all influence service delivery and shape the priorities identified by Chief Social Work Officers.

Geography was particularly significant in relation to workforce sustainability and access to services. Rural and island authorities – including Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland, Orkney and Shetland – reported challenges associated with recruitment, retention, travel times, ferry dependency, housing availability and limited local labour markets. These factors can increase service delivery costs and make it more difficult to access specialist support. At the same time, urban authorities often reported different challenges associated with larger populations, higher levels of demand and greater social complexity. Collectively, the reports demonstrate that while national policy provides a common framework, effective service delivery requires sufficient local flexibility to respond to the distinct place-based circumstances of different communities across Scotland.

Funding and Financial Pressures

Financial pressure is reported as a major constraint across the Chief Social Work Officer reports. It affects the ability to commission services, recruit staff, sustain early intervention, reduce waiting times, provide external placements and avoid crisis-led responses. Many of these financial pressures are linked with demographic change, adult social care demand, and children having to be placed outside of their local authorities due to lack of care spaces or foster families in particular, as can be seen with the reports on East Lothian, Dumfries and Galloway and Dundee.

Others, including Fife, Midlothian and Falkirk, mentioned how challenging and precarious the financial situation is with the Health and Social Care Partnership and other partnerships, as well as trying to meet the needs of individuals with increased demand, increased levels of complexity and costs of care. The instability of funding and budgetary constraints make it particularly difficult for these demands to be met.

Financial challenges require local social care and social work services to manage risk while delivering savings and reductions in public sector spending. Local CSWO reports, such as Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway, East Lothian, Fife and Midlothian, repeatedly describe a need to prioritise statutory duties, manage overspends, reduce high-cost placements, and redesign services to support prevention and community-based alternatives. The reports indicate that local authorities are responding through redesign, prioritisation, commissioning reviews, increased use of eligibility criteria, prevention, local

placement development, telecare, and digital systems. For instance, North Lanarkshire claims that despite increasing in demand and need, their integrated approach succeeded in avoiding an increase in out-of-authority placement.

Still, several reports caution that short-term measures, vacancies, reserves, or one-off savings are not sustainable long-term solutions. For example, Argyll and Bute highlighted the diminishing availability of reserves to offset ongoing overspends, while Midlothian described the challenges of balancing budgets through service reviews and savings measures in the face of rising statutory demand. Fife and Falkirk similarly reported significant partnership overspends and continuing financial pressures linked to increasing demand and complexity.

Policy and Legislation Changes

All the Chief Social Work Officer reports refer to policy development and legislative changes that they are currently preparing for or responding to. Local authorities list several legislative developments that will create new duties or demands, while also noting uncertainty about capacity for resource improvement. Some of these major legislative reforms and developments include:[1]

- **Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill 2025:** the aim is to fulfil the national commitment to #KeepThePromise by 2030 that will introduce a legal right to aftercare for those who left care before age 16, among others.

- **Care Reform (Scotland) Act 2025:** transforms social care by enshrining Anne's Law, introducing statutory right to breaks for unpaid carers and creating a National Social Work Agency.

- **Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024:** Reforms Scotland's youth justice and care systems to align with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and local authorities continue to implement the convention locally based on the UNCRC (Incorporation) Scotland Act 2024.

- **Prison (Early Release) Scotland Act:** Automatic early release of short-term prisoners from prison as well as children from detention that CSWO need to approve the assessment of needs, risks and

[1] Examples from Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Angus, Dumfries and Galloway, Falkirk, Inverclyde, Moray, North Lanarkshire, and Perth and Kinross

alternatives.

- **Equality and anti-racism expectations: Local authorities are working with police to support New Scots;** have targeted equality engagement; tackle racism through stigma-informed approaches; training for staff on equality, inclusion and children's rights.

- **Digital transformation:** CSWO reported training staff, implementing the Analogue to Digital Transition Programme, streamlining administrative processes and investing in digital solutions for efficiency.

Quality Assurance and Evaluation

Robust quality assurance and governance arrangements remain essential to supporting safe, effective and accountable social work services. Across the Chief Social Work Officer reports, there was a strong emphasis on professional oversight, performance monitoring, and learning and continuous improvement – particularly in areas of significant statutory responsibility such as Adult Support and Protection, Child Protection, justice services and statutory mental health functions. As demand and complexity continue to increase, many local authorities highlighted the importance of ensuring that assurance systems are capable of identifying risk, supporting good practice and driving service improvement.

Several local authorities reported strengthening quality assurance arrangements during the period 2024/25 through strengthening data collection, recording and monitoring in order to support continuous improvement in services. For example, Dundee reported the development of a new governance framework and oversight dataset designed to improve assurance and performance monitoring. East Dunbartonshire and East Lothian similarly described work to strengthen quality assurance, governance and performance reporting arrangements. Midlothian highlighted the implementation of a new case management system to improve recording and management information. Collectively, these examples suggest that while authorities continue to strengthen local assurance arrangements, there remain opportunities to improve data quality, recording systems and performance information to support both local governance and national analysis.

In addition, Dundee and East Ayrshire describe strengthening professional governance arrangements through the creation of a Deputy Chief Social Work Officer arrangement, reflecting wider national discussion about the need for stronger social work leadership across multiple structures.

Reports also demonstrated a growing focus on learning reviews, self-evaluation, reflective practice, regular audits, the creation of Quality Assurance sub-groups that are responsible for different aspects of QA, and the stronger use of evidence to inform service development.[2] While approaches varied across local areas, the reports suggest an increasing recognition that strong governance, high-quality data and effective quality assurance are critical to supporting improvement and responding to an increasingly complex operating environment.

[2] Examples from Aberdeenshire, Clackmannanshire, Dundee, East Dunbartonshire, Scottish Borders, Shetland, and West Lothian.

Cross-Service Themes

While individual local authorities face different demographic, geographic and organisational challenges, a number of common themes emerged consistently across the CSWO reports. These themes reflect both national policy priorities and wider social, economic and demographic pressures, highlighting the interconnected challenges and opportunities facing local authorities. Collectively, they demonstrate how Chief Social Work Officers are balancing immediate operational demands with longer-term ambitions for prevention, reform and service improvement.

Early Intervention and Prevention

Early intervention and prevention remain central ambitions across social work and social care services in Scotland, although the nature of activity varies across authorities and service areas. For example, Clackmannanshire and East Lothian reported how their family support and early help approaches are designed to prevent escalation into child protection processes. Dumfries and Galloway highlighted intensive family support and kinship care initiatives that aim to prevent family breakdown and reduce the need for alternative care arrangements.

In adult services, East Dunbartonshire and Highland Council highlighted preventative approaches that focus on early intervention, strengths-based practice and community support, aiming to prevent needs from escalating and enable people to remain as independent as possible for longer. Meanwhile, authorities such as South Lanarkshire emphasised rehabilitative justice approaches, while West Lothian highlighted the role of technology-enabled care in helping people remain safely at home and avoid more intensive interventions.

However, prevention is under pressure because increasing statutory demand can divert attention and resources away from preventative approaches. A recurring strategic issue across the CSWO reports is how local authorities can protect early help and community-based support while meeting immediate statutory duties. In response, CSWOs, including East Renfrewshire, Falkirk, Perth and Kinross, and South Ayrshire, reported investing in workforce capacity, training, and skills development among social workers to support early intervention and prevention efforts more effectively.

Keeping the Promise

Keeping The Promise remained a major priority across Scotland during 2024/25 and featured prominently within many CSWO reports. Local authorities such as Clackmannanshire, East Dunbartonshire and East Lothian reported continued efforts to embed the principles of The Promise across children's services, with activity focused on family support, early intervention, trauma-informed practice and corporate parenting responsibilities. Many areas highlighted progress in redesigning services to better reflect the needs and experiences of children, young people and families through participation, co-production and partnership with people who have lived experience. This included involving children, young people, families and carers in shaping priorities, designing services, evaluating existing provision, informing workforce learning and, in some areas, participating directly in governance and decision-making.

Some local authorities – such as Argyll and Bute, East Lothian and Midlothian – also highlighted the challenges of delivering transformational change in children's services within a context of increasing demand, workforce pressures and constrained resources. A recurring theme was the need to balance immediate statutory and protection responsibilities with longer-term ambitions for system reform. Despite these challenges, CSWOs consistently reaffirmed their commitment to The Promise and its vision of ensuring that all children, young people and families receive the support and opportunities they need to thrive. The CSWO reports suggest that implementation has increasingly moved beyond policy commitment towards practical service redesign, although concerns remain about the pace at which transformational change can be achieved.

National Care Service Reform

National Care Service reform continued to influence the social work and social care policy landscape in Scotland. While the direction and scope of reform evolved during the 2024/25 period, reports highlighted the ongoing impact of policy uncertainty on local planning, workforce engagement and service development.

Originally proposed as a major reform of social care governance and delivery in Scotland, the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill sought to create a more consistent, rights-based approach to care and support across the country. The reform programme evolved significantly during the year. However, following stakeholder concerns around governance arrangements, accountability, implementation costs and the transfer of functions, proposals to transfer social

work and social care services into a National Care Service did not progress as originally envisaged. Against this backdrop, CSWOs continued to provide leadership within a period of policy uncertainty. Chief Social Work Officers described balancing the need to engage with national reform agendas while continuing to deliver statutory services and respond to immediate local pressures. A number of LAs – including Angus, Argyll and Bute, Fife, and South Ayrshire – emphasised a commitment to the principles underpinning reform, including improved outcomes, greater consistency, stronger rights-based approaches and enhanced collaboration across health and social care.

At the same time, there was some recognition that sustained uncertainty regarding future governance arrangements and responsibilities had created challenges for long-term service redesign and strategic decision-making. A common theme across reports was the need to sustain improvement and transformation activity despite uncertainty about the future shape of national reform.

Partnership working and integrated delivery

All Chief Social Work Officers engage heavily in building strong partnerships to deliver social work and social care services. Partnership working is a consistent strength reported across local authorities. Reports describe how CSWOs work closely across local authorities teams, Health and Social Care Partnerships, Integrated Joint Boards, NHS, Police Scotland, third sector organisations, independent providers, public protection committees, alcohol and drug partnerships, housing, education, and community planning partnerships to deliver cohesive services. Notably, public protection depends heavily on multi-agency arrangements – including Adult Protection Committees, Child Protection Committees, Scotland's 10 Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) regions, Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), and Chief Officers Groups. All CSWOs mentioned how impactful these partnerships are for the delivery of services, especially given the growing complexity of cases. These partnerships were seen to improve support for individuals, data sharing and protection, shared learning across teams, and the development of new ideas.

At the same time, some local authorities – such as Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, East Ayrshire, Fife and Midlothian – also reported some challenges in this area, as working with partners sometimes creates more complexity. Several reports identified the need for clearer professional governance where social work responsibilities sit across multiple organisational structures. Other CSWOs were concerned that, owing to

funding pressures, some partner organisations may struggle to have enough staff and resources to provide services in the future. CSWOs reiterated their commitment to continue to work closely with partners to achieve closer cooperation and emphasised the importance of strong partnership working to maintain service delivery and respond to need.

Self-Directed Support

Self-Directed Support (SDS) is Scotland's approach to social care that aims to give people greater choice, control and flexibility over how their care and support is planned and delivered. SDS continued to be an important area of focus for Chief Social Work Officers in 2024/25. With the aim of promoting choice, control and independence, SDS remains a key mechanism through which local authorities seek to deliver person-centred and rights-based support.

Several authorities reported ongoing work to strengthen the implementation of SDS through governance arrangements, workforce development, review activities, and quality assurance processes. For example, East Ayrshire highlighted governance and oversight arrangements designed to support consistent, person-centred practice, while East Dunbartonshire emphasised participation, advocacy and rights-based approaches that enable people to influence decisions about their care and support.

At the same time, local authorities such as Fife and Midlothian described increasing demand for SDS alongside wider workforce and financial pressures, highlighting the challenge of maintaining genuine choice and flexibility within constrained service environments. Reports also suggested that while increasing numbers of people are accessing SDS, patterns of option selection have remained relatively stable. This indicates that expanding uptake does not necessarily lead to significant changes in how people choose to receive support. More broadly, CSWOs recognised that achieving the ambitions of SDS depends not only on policy implementation but also on the availability of a sustainable workforce and sufficient capacity to support informed choice.

Poverty and Financial Insecurity

The ongoing impact of poverty and cost-of-living pressures remained an important contextual theme across many CSWO reports during 2024/25. Although inflation had eased from its peak, many households continued to experience financial hardship as a result of sustained increases in the cost of essential goods and services – including food, housing and energy. These

pressures have been shaped by wider economic and geopolitical factors, including the long-term effects of global inflationary trends, energy market disruption and international conflict. Across Scotland, CSWOs reported the continuing impact of financial insecurity on individuals, families and communities, particularly those already experiencing disadvantage, disability or social exclusion.

Many reports, including those from Highland, Midlothian and South Ayrshire, highlighted the relationship between poverty and increased demand for social work and social care services. Financial hardship was frequently linked to worsening mental health, family stress, housing insecurity, unmet care needs and greater complexity of support requirements. In children's services, concerns were raised about the effects of poverty on child development, family wellbeing and demand for early intervention and family support. Within adult services, the combined impact of poverty, poor health and social isolation contributed to increasing levels of need and complexity. These challenges often required social work services to respond to issues whose root causes lay beyond the direct influence of local services.

Some CSWO reports, such as those from Fife and East Lothian, also reflected the impact of wider economic pressures on service delivery itself. Rising costs, workforce pressures and constrained public finances continued to affect the ability of local authorities and partner organisations to respond to increasing levels of need. CSWOs described the challenge of balancing growing demand with finite resources, while seeking to maintain preventative, relationship-based and rights-based approaches to practice. Across reports, there was a recognition that addressing poverty and inequality remained fundamental to improving long-term outcomes and reducing future demand for statutory services.

Equality, Inclusion and Social Cohesion

Several CSWO reports highlighted the importance of promoting equality, inclusion and community cohesion within an increasingly complex social environment. Reports identified concerns relating to discrimination, racism, social exclusion and the experiences of minority communities, particularly refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant populations. These issues have implications for social work services, which often support individuals experiencing disadvantage, trauma and marginalisation.

In response, many local authorities reported an increase in activities focused on participation, advocacy, inclusion, trauma-informed practice and engagement with people with lived experience. While approaches varied

across local authority areas, the CSWO reports demonstrated a continued commitment to promoting dignity, inclusion and equal access to support, while recognising the important role social work services play in supporting community wellbeing and social cohesion.

Adult Services

Adult social work and social care services represent the largest area of activity discussed within the Chief Social Work Officer reports. Within the past year, services have been experiencing sustained demand, particularly in care at home services, older people's services, adults with learning disabilities and autism, mental health, self-directed support, unpaid carers support, adult protection, hospital discharge, equipment and adaptations, and technology-enabled care. The increasing complexity of demand, alongside workforce and financial challenges, has caused strain on service delivery. Yet CSWOs remain committed to delivering high quality services, despite these challenges.

A principal aim of CSWO services across local authorities has been to support and promote independence and person-centred support. This allows those receiving care and accessing services to be given more choice and control while receiving individualised support and improving outcomes in an increasingly complex environment.[3] While many reports emphasise the importance of person-centred support to address this aim, there is less consistency in how local authorities describe its implementation and impact in practice.

Supported Individuals

CSWOs reported on those in need of support and how this is changing. Within this reporting period, those most in need of social care and social work services include:

- **Older people**, who continue to represent a significant proportion of adult service activity – particularly in relation to care at home services, residential and nursing care, hospital discharge and long-term support. For example, South Lanarkshire reported supporting up to 1,840 older people in long-term care placements, while many other authorities highlighted growing demand associated with an ageing population.

- Adults with **learning disabilities and mental health needs** were also prominent across reports. South Lanarkshire reported supporting 1,481 people with learning disabilities living within their communities, while Comhairle nan Eilean Siar highlighted dedicated services for adults with learning disabilities and mental health needs, including support from Mental Health Officers.

[3] Examples from: Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Angus, City of Edinburgh, Clackmannanshire, Falkirk, Fife, and Glasgow.

- Many authorities also reported supporting **adults affected by alcohol and drug use**, including specialist substance use services and work to reduce drug-related harm. Fife highlighted its Compass Alcohol and Drugs Team, while Inverclyde reported implementation of Medication Assisted Treatment standards and support for individuals with co-occurring mental health and substance use needs.

The CSWO reports demonstrate the breadth of adult social work and social care responsibilities and highlight the increasing complexity of need facing services. Across Scotland, CSWOs emphasised the importance of person-centred, rights-based and preventative approaches that support adults to live independently, remain connected to their communities and achieve positive outcomes.

Care at Home

Care at home services remain a cornerstone of adult social care across Scotland, supporting people to live independently, avoid unnecessary hospital admission and remain within their communities for as long as possible. Care at home has multiple social benefits, including reducing social isolation, and enabling greater prevention and early intervention strategies. Across Scotland, local authorities continue to promote preventative and person-centred approaches, often under ‘Home First’ or similar models, recognising that most people wish to remain in their own homes for as long as possible.

At the same time, care at home services are experiencing substantial pressure. Many reports describe increasing demand driven by an ageing population, greater complexity of need, rising levels of frailty, more people living with multiple long-term conditions, and growing expectations that individuals can be supported safely at home rather than in institutional settings. Several authorities noted that the intensity of care packages is increasing, with people often requiring more hours of support and more specialised interventions than in previous years.

Argyll and Bute reported continued growth in the number of adults receiving care at home services, alongside increasing demand for reviews and reassessments. Similarly, Orkney reported an increase in both the number of people receiving care at home support and the complexity of support packages required.

A recurring theme across reports is the close relationship between care at home capacity and wider health and social care system performance. CSWOs frequently described care at home as essential to reducing delayed discharge,

preventing avoidable hospital admissions and supporting flow through acute services.

Dundee noted that investment in care at home services has contributed to reductions in delayed discharge, reductions in unmet need and improved support for people returning home from hospital. Likewise, West Lothian reported improvements in care at home capacity which helped reduce waiting times for support packages, reduce unmet need, and improve delayed discharge performance. These reports highlighted the important role that partnership working with commissioned providers plays in increasing care at home capacity and improving outcomes for people requiring support.

Workforce sustainability remains one of the most significant risks facing care at home services. Recruitment and retention difficulties were reported widely across Scotland, affecting both local authority services and independent sector providers. For example, Highland stated that almost 3,000 hours of assessed care at home need remained unmet each week, while dozens of people experienced delayed discharge because care packages could not be sourced. It also reported the loss of several care at home providers during the year, illustrating concerns about market sustainability and workforce fragility. Similar concerns were reported by South Ayrshire which identified recruitment difficulties within care at home services as a significant operational challenge and highlighted targeted recruitment and workforce development activity designed to improve capacity.

The sustainability of the independent care sector emerged as a related concern. Several CSWOs noted that local authorities rely heavily on commissioned providers to deliver care at home services, meaning that provider viability, workforce availability and rising operational costs directly affect the ability of local authorities to meet assessed need. In some areas, concerns were raised about the ability of providers to recruit staff, sustain services and respond to increasing demand over the longer term. In response to these pressures, many areas – such as Argyll and Bute and Aberdeen City – reported significant service improvement and transformation activity. This included redesigning care at home models, investing in digital technologies, expanding technology-enabled care, strengthening reablement and enablement approaches, reviewing commissioning arrangements, and developing new workforce initiatives. Authorities increasingly described efforts to move away from purely task-based models of support towards approaches that promote independence, maximise capability and improve quality of life.

Residential Care

Residential and nursing care services continue to play an important role within adult social care, particularly for older people, adults with complex needs and those requiring specialist or intensive support. While local authorities continue to promote independence and support people to remain at home wherever possible, CSWO reports recognised that residential care remains an essential part of the care system.

Many reports highlighted increasing demand and complexity within care homes, with residents often presenting with higher levels of frailty, dementia, multiple health conditions and complex care needs. Residential care also supports hospital discharge and helps prevent unnecessary admissions, making it an important component of wider health and social care systems. For example, South Lanarkshire reported supporting approximately 1,840 older people in long-term care placements, demonstrating the scale of residential care provision.

CSWOs, including Argyll and Bute, Highland and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, also raised concerns about the sustainability of the care home sector. They highlighted workforce shortages, recruitment difficulties, provider sustainability and the challenges of maintaining services in rural and island communities.

Residential care was also affected by financial pressures, particularly in relation to high-cost placements and increasing care costs. Several local authorities described efforts to strengthen local provision, improve commissioning arrangements and reduce reliance on expensive external placements where appropriate. Fife, for example, highlighted significant financial pressures associated with increasing levels of need and care costs.

Adult Support and Protection

Adult Support and Protection (ASP) remains one of the most significant statutory responsibilities highlighted across Chief Social Work Officer reports. Authorities consistently reported increasing levels of ASP activity, reflecting growing demand, greater complexity of cases and increased awareness of harm, exploitation and vulnerability. Reports frequently described adults experiencing multiple and interconnected needs, including mental health, substance use, disability, self-neglect and social isolation. Several local authorities noted rising numbers of inquiries, investigations and protection plans, indicating continued pressure on ASP services.

Partnership working was a defining feature of Adult Support and Protection

across all reports. CSWOs consistently emphasised the importance of multi-agency arrangements involving local authorities, NHS services, Police Scotland, care providers and third-sector organisations. Adult Protection Committees have played a central role in providing governance, quality assurance, learning and improvement activity. Many authorities reported ongoing work to strengthen inter-agency collaboration, information sharing, staff training and public awareness. Reports from authorities including South Ayrshire, Dundee and Angus highlighted the contribution of Adult Protection Committees and wider public protection partnerships in supporting effective responses to risk and ensuring that vulnerable adults receive appropriate protection and support.

Several local authorities reported activity to improve the quality and effectiveness of ASP practice. For example, East Dunbartonshire highlighted audit activity, workforce development and trauma-informed approaches to strengthen professional practice and improve outcomes, while South Ayrshire reported ongoing multi-agency training, governance and quality assurance activity through its Adult Protection Committee structures. These initiatives demonstrate a continued focus on learning, improvement and ensuring that protection activity remains person-centred, rights-based and responsive to increasingly complex needs.

Mental Health Support

Mental health services featured prominently across many Chief Social Work Officer reports, with local authorities reporting increasing levels of demand, greater complexity of need and growing pressures on specialist services. CSWOs highlighted rising numbers of people experiencing mental health issues, often alongside other challenges such as substance use, poverty, trauma, and physical health conditions. Several reports noted increasing demand for Mental Health Officer (MHO) services, difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified MHOs, and concerns about the sustainability of statutory mental health functions. Many CSWOs – including Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Highland and South Lanarkshire – highlighted pressures on mental health services arising from workforce shortages, increasing referrals and growing complexity of presentations.

Alongside these challenges, CSWO reports described significant efforts to improve mental health support through partnership working, early intervention and community-based approaches. Many local authorities highlighted collaboration between social work, NHS services, third-sector organisations and community partners to provide integrated support and reduce reliance on crisis responses. Several authorities reported investment in trauma-informed

practice, recovery-focused approaches and support for people experiencing both mental health difficulties and substance use issues. For example, Inverclyde highlighted work to support people with co-occurring mental health and substance use needs, while East Dunbartonshire reported wider trauma-informed and wellbeing initiatives designed to strengthen preventative and early intervention support.

A further recurring theme is the importance of protecting individuals' rights while managing risk and meeting statutory duties under mental health legislation. Reports frequently referenced the role of Mental Health Officers in carrying out assessments, supporting compulsory measures where necessary, safeguarding individual rights and ensuring that decisions are informed by professional social work perspectives. Several authorities reported workforce development, supervision and recruitment initiatives aimed at sustaining MHO capacity and strengthening professional practice.

Alcohol and Drug Services

Alcohol and drug services remain an important area of adult social work, with many CSWO reports highlighting increasing complexity of need linked to substance use, mental health difficulties, trauma, homelessness and social exclusion. Authorities emphasised person-centred, trauma-informed and recovery-focused approaches, delivered through strong partnership working between social work, health services, housing, justice and third-sector organisations.

Reports also highlighted ongoing improvement activity aimed at reducing harm and improving outcomes. These activities included the implementation of Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) Standards, strengthening recovery services, and improving family support and early intervention initiatives. For instance, Inverclyde reported progress in implementing MAT Standards, while Scottish Borders highlighted support for individuals affected by Alcohol Related Brain Damage (ARBD). Several authorities also described the importance of partnership working through local Alcohol and Drug Partnerships (ADPs), bringing together social work, NHS services, housing, justice and third-sector organisations to coordinate prevention, treatment and recovery support. While progress was reported, CSWOs continued to identify substance use as a significant public health and social care challenge requiring sustained partnerships and long-term investment.

Children and Family Services

Children and Family Services remain a major area of responsibility for Chief Social Work Officers and feature prominently across all reports. During 2024/25, local authorities continued to support children, young people and families through a wide range of statutory and preventative services, including child protection, looked after children, fostering, adoption, kinship care, family support, youth justice and corporate parenting. Reports consistently highlighted the increasing complexity of need, with many families experiencing the combined effects of poverty, poor mental health, trauma, domestic abuse, substance use, housing difficulties and wider social inequalities. These factors increased demand for support and intervention, particularly for children and families with multiple and interconnected needs.

A dominant theme throughout the reports was the ongoing implementation of The Promise. Local authorities described significant efforts to redesign services around the needs, rights and experiences of children, young people and families. LA activities in this area commonly included strengthening family support, promoting early intervention, expanding participation and engagement, increasing the use of trauma-informed and relationship-based practice, and improving support for care-experienced children and young people. Authorities such as Clackmannanshire, Dumfries and Galloway, East Dunbartonshire and East Lothian highlighted work to embed The Promise through service redesign, whole-family approaches and increased involvement of people with lived experience.

Child protection remained a significant area of activity, with reports highlighting the importance of multi-agency working through Child Protection Committees, Chief Officers Groups and wider public protection arrangements. Many authorities reported continued investment in trauma-informed practice, workforce development, quality assurance and learning from reviews to strengthen protection systems and improve outcomes for vulnerable children. Alongside child protection responsibilities, local authorities continued to develop preventative approaches aimed at intervening earlier with families and reducing the need for more intensive statutory intervention. Several authorities highlighted initiatives such as Family Group Decision Making, Whole Family Wellbeing Funding, Bairns' Hoose and intensive family support as examples of this shift towards prevention and early help.

Partnership working was a defining feature of Children and Family Services across the reports. CSWOs consistently described close collaboration with health services, education, Police Scotland, housing, third-sector organisations and community partners to support children and families. Many

reports also highlighted challenges, including workforce pressures, increasing demand, placement sufficiency concerns and financial constraints, particularly in relation to external residential placements. Despite these pressures, the reports demonstrated a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people through prevention, participation, partnership working and the continued implementation of The Promise.

Whole Family Support

Whole family support was a prominent theme across many CSWO reports, reflecting the continued emphasis on prevention, early intervention and The Promise. Local authorities reported investing in services designed to support families before difficulties escalate into child protection concerns or care placements, often through partnership working with health, education and third-sector organisations. Some of these examples include Clackmannanshire's Whole Family Wellbeing approach and family support developments, East Lothian's Family Group Decision Making approach, and Dumfries and Galloway's work to strengthen family support and Bairns' Hoose developments. These initiatives aimed to improve family resilience, keep children safely within their families and communities where possible, and reduce the need for more intensive statutory intervention.

Adoption and Fostering Services

Adoption and fostering services continued to play a vital role in providing stable, nurturing homes for children who cannot live with their birth families. CSWO reports, including those from Dumfries and Galloway and East Ayrshire, frequently highlighted recruitment and retention challenges affecting foster care provision, alongside efforts to improve placement stability and expand local fostering capacity. Several authorities described ongoing work to support foster carers through training, supervision and enhanced support arrangements. Consistent with The Promise, many local authorities also emphasised the importance of maintaining family relationships and prioritising kinship care where appropriate, while ensuring adoption and fostering services remained focused on achieving positive long-term outcomes for children and young people.

Residential Care for Children

Children’s residential care featured in several CSWO reports, often in the context of increasing complexity of need, placement sufficiency challenges and rising costs associated with external residential placements. Some

CSWOs, such as Argyll and Bute and Fife, reported efforts to reduce reliance on out-of-area and high-cost placements by strengthening local provision, improving commissioning arrangements and investing in preventative and family support services.

At the same time, reports recognised that residential care remains an essential service for some children and young people with highly complex needs who require intensive support. Several authorities linked this work directly to The Promise and wider ambitions to ensure children remain connected to their families, communities and support networks wherever possible.

Supported Children and Young People

Across Scotland, local authorities reported a wide range of services supporting children and young people, including looked after children, care-experienced young people, young carers, disabled children, children requiring protection and young people involved in youth justice services. A strong focus was placed on participation, rights-based practice, trauma-informed approaches and improving outcomes through early intervention and partnership working. For example, East Dunbartonshire highlighted participation and wellbeing initiatives to support children and young people, while Clackmannanshire and Dumfries and Galloway reported significant work linked to The Promise, children's rights and care experience. Many authorities also highlighted support for young people transitioning into adulthood, recognising the need for continued support beyond childhood to promote positive long-term outcomes.

Justice Social Work

Justice Social Work remains a core statutory function across all Chief Social Work Officer reports, supporting individuals involved in the criminal justice system while contributing to public protection, rehabilitation and safer communities. Across Scotland, CSWOs described Justice Social Work services operating within an increasingly complex policy and operational environment, balancing statutory responsibilities for risk assessment and public protection with wider ambitions to promote recovery, reintegration and desistance from offending. Services are delivered through extensive partnership working with the courts, the Scottish Prison Service, Police Scotland, Health and Social Care Partnerships, housing providers and third-sector organisations, reflecting the interconnected needs people involved in the justice system.

Increasing demand and intersecting disadvantage

The CSWO reports suggest that Justice Social Work is experiencing increasing demand and complexity among individuals accessing justice services. Many authorities reported working with people experiencing multiple disadvantages, including mental health difficulties, substance use, trauma, homelessness, poverty and social exclusion. As a result, CSWOs emphasised the importance of person-centred, trauma-informed and relationship-based approaches that support both public protection and long-term desistance from offending. Midlothian, for example, identified mental health, neurodiversity, housing insecurity and employability as key challenges requiring coordinated responses across partner organisations, while East Dunbartonshire reported continued development of trauma-informed approaches and partnership working across justice services to improve outcomes for individuals and communities.

Several authorities described rising workloads associated with prison population pressures, legislative reform, court activity and changes to release arrangements. Dumfries and Galloway, for example, reported additional pressures arising from prison overcrowding, changes to early release arrangements and increasing demand for community-based justice services, while West Lothian highlighted implementation of the Care and Justice (Scotland) Act alongside wider changes affecting justice social work practice. The City of Edinburgh also reported increasing demand for Justice Social Work Reports as court activity returned following pandemic-related disruption, placing additional pressure on assessment and supervision

services. These developments demonstrate that Justice Social Work is responding not only to increasing numbers of people requiring support but also to a more complex legislative and operational environment.

Statutory responsibilities

Public protection remains one of the most significant statutory responsibilities undertaken by Justice Social Work and features prominently across almost all reports. CSWOs described increasing activity under MAPPA, reflecting both growing numbers of individuals managed in the community and increasing complexity of risk assessment and management. Several authorities reported strengthening governance, quality assurance and multi-agency oversight to ensure effective management of high-risk individuals. South Lanarkshire, for example, established a dedicated MAPPA service following substantial growth in caseloads and strengthened its audit arrangements, while North Lanarkshire reported increasing demands associated with online offending, terrorist offender management and more complex risk profiles. Argyll and Bute similarly highlighted significant growth in MAPPA activity linked to more complex cases and changes within the prison population. Collectively, these reports suggest that public protection is becoming an increasingly resource-intensive area of Justice Social Work, requiring close collaboration between social work, Police Scotland, prisons and other partner agencies.

Investment in Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Alongside statutory risk management, many authorities reported continued investment in rehabilitation, diversion and early intervention. Rather than focusing solely on offending behaviour, justice services increasingly seek to support people to address wider factors affecting their lives, including housing, health, employment, education and family relationships. The City of Edinburgh reported the development of new justice pathways, specialist court services and enhanced support for care-experienced young people involved in the justice system, while Falkirk described its Throughcare Team, Court and Early Intervention Team and Whole System Approach as helping to divert individuals from further involvement in the justice system. Scottish Borders also highlighted initiatives including peer mentoring, wellbeing support and employability services to strengthen rehabilitation and successful reintegration following release from prison.

Partnership Working

Partnership working is consistently identified as fundamental to effective Justice Social Work. Reports described close collaboration through Community Justice Partnerships, Community Planning Partnerships, Alcohol and Drug Partnerships, MAPPA arrangements and integrated throughcare services. These partnerships enable agencies to coordinate assessment, information sharing, risk management and rehabilitation while supporting people with complex needs across services. For example, Dumfries and Galloway described coordinated release planning involving the Scottish Prison Service, Police Scotland, housing, health and social work, while Midlothian reported strong partnership with employability providers, Families Outside and voluntary sector organisations to improve opportunities for rehabilitation and community reintegration. Across the reports, effective partnership working was viewed not simply as good practice but as essential to delivering safe, coordinated and person-centred justice services.

Whole systems approach

Overall, the reports demonstrate that Justice Social Work continues to play a vital role in protecting the public while supporting rehabilitation and reducing reoffending. They also show that the service is evolving beyond traditional models of offender supervision towards a broader, whole-system approach that integrates public protection, trauma-informed practice, recovery, prevention and community reintegration. However, this transformation is taking place within a context of increasing statutory demand, more complex risk management responsibilities, workforce pressures and continuing financial constraints. The reports suggest that sustaining these developments will depend upon continued investment in partnership working, workforce capability, professional leadership and community-based support that enables individuals to rebuild their lives while contributing to safer communities across Scotland.

Workforce

Workforce sustainability remains one of the most significant themes across the CSWO reports. Authorities consistently highlighted the dedication, resilience and professionalism of staff working within increasingly complex and challenging circumstances. However, reports also identified ongoing workforce difficulties relating to recruitment, retention, workforce capacity, sickness absence, and workload pressures. Many CSWOs expressed concern about the long-term sustainability of services if workforce challenges persist, while also describing significant efforts to strengthen workforce capability, wellbeing and resilience.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention challenges were reported across almost all authorities, affecting both social work and social care services. Recruitment difficulties were particularly evident in relation to qualified social workers, Mental Health Officers, care at home staff, residential care staff and specialist roles.

Notably, rural and island authorities frequently highlighted additional challenges associated with geography, travel, housing availability and limited labour markets. For instance, authorities including Highland, Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Shetland reported ongoing recruitment difficulties affecting service capacity and sustainability.

Many local authorities have responded to recruitment and retention challenges through targeted recruitment campaigns, improved career pathways, flexible working arrangements and efforts to reduce vacancy levels. Despite some local successes, recruitment and retention remain a significant strategic risk across Scotland.

Grow Your Own

Many CSWOs adopted ‘grow your own’ workforce strategies as a key response to recruitment challenges. These approaches aim to develop local talent pipelines by supporting existing staff and local residents to enter professional social work and social care careers. The ‘grow your own’ strategy does this through a number of mechanisms including trainee social worker schemes, apprenticeships, student placements, supported learning opportunities and career progression pathways.

For instance, Highland Council reported continued its investment in trainee and development opportunities to build local workforce capacity and reduce reliance on external recruitment, while Shetland highlighted the importance of developing local talent through training and professional qualification routes given the challenges of recruiting to island communities. These initiatives were particularly important in rural and remote areas where external recruitment can be difficult and workforce shortages are more pronounced.

Training and Development

Investment in workforce learning and development was a consistent strength across local authorities. CSWO reports described extensive programmes of professional learning, leadership development, supervision, reflective practice and continuous professional development. Some common areas of focus included trauma-informed practice, adult and child protection, implementing The Promise, self-directed support, mental health, leadership and public protection. For instance, East Dunbartonshire emphasised workforce development and trauma-informed practice initiatives, while South Ayrshire emphasised significant investment in multi-agency training and professional learning activity across public protection services. Many local authorities also reported leadership development programmes designed to strengthen future management and professional leadership capacity.

Staff Wellbeing

Staff wellbeing remained a major priority across the CSWO reports, recognising the pressures associated with increasing demand, workforce shortages and the complexity of contemporary social work practice. CSWOs frequently acknowledged the commitment and resilience of staff and described a range of initiatives to support staff wellbeing, including wellbeing programmes, employee assistance services, reflective supervision, flexible working arrangements, trauma-informed support and staff recognition initiatives. For example, East Dunbartonshire highlighted workforce wellbeing, reflective practice and trauma-informed approaches designed to support staff resilience and professional development, while South Ayrshire reported investment in workforce support, learning and development, and initiatives aimed at maintaining staff wellbeing and capability across services. Across the reports there was a clear recognition that the workforce is social work's greatest asset, and that supporting staff wellbeing is essential to maintaining safe, effective and sustainable services.

Emerging Issues

While many of the themes identified in the Chief Social Work Officer reports reflect longstanding challenges facing social work and social care services, several emerging issues are beginning to shape future service delivery and strategic planning. These developments highlight changing expectations, new opportunities and evolving risks across the sector, which require councils and partners to adapt their approaches while continuing to respond to current pressures.

Rights-based, trauma-informed, and anti-racist practice

The CSWO reports demonstrate a growing commitment to rights-based, relationship-based and trauma-informed practice across Scottish social work and social care services, particularly within children's services, public protection and justice social work. Many local authorities reported activities directly linked to The Promise, the incorporation of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) principles and rights advocacy, and lived-experience engagement, thereby reflecting a stronger focus on ensuring that people who use services are actively involved in decisions affecting their lives.

Trauma-informed practice was particularly evident within children's services and justice social work. Several local authorities reported investment in workforce development and service redesign to ensure that services better recognise and respond to the impact of trauma. West Lothian, for example, reported a Trauma Responsive Social Work Service pilot involving approximately 100 frontline staff, while Comhairle nan Eilean Siar highlighted a Philosophy of Care based on relationships, compassion and trauma-informed practice. Developments such as Bairns' Hoose were also frequently referenced and were often described as transformational approaches that bring together child protection, justice, health and recovery services within a child-centred and trauma-informed framework.

However, while trauma-informed and rights-based approaches are clearly visible across many reports, the extent of reporting varies considerably between authorities, making it difficult to determine how consistently these approaches are embedded across all local areas.

In contrast, anti-racist practice is less consistently reported, although there is evidence that it is becoming more visible within wider equality, diversity and inclusion agendas. Some authorities, including South Ayrshire and East Dunbartonshire reported activity relating to cultural inclusion, protected

characteristics, equalities training and commitments to anti-racist practice. Nevertheless, explicit reporting on anti-racism was much less common than reporting on trauma-informed practice.

Digital transformation, data, and recording

Digital transformation is an increasingly visible theme across the Chief Social Work Officer reports, with many authorities reporting investment in new technologies, digital systems and data improvement programmes to support service delivery, planning and performance management. Local authorities reported using digital tools to improve access to services, strengthen care management processes, support hybrid and mobile working, and enhance communication between practitioners and partner organisations.

Alongside these developments, many CSWOs recognised the growing importance of high-quality data for service planning, quality assurance, performance monitoring and demonstrating outcomes. LAs including Aberdeen City, Dundee and West Lothian engaged with digital transformation and technology-enabled approaches as part of wider service improvement and modernisation programmes. These developments reflect a growing recognition that effective use of data and technology will be essential to managing increasing demand, improving efficiency and supporting better outcomes.

At the same time, CSWO reports suggest that limitations in data systems, recording quality and performance reporting remain a significant challenge across the sector. They identified difficulties in obtaining consistent, reliable and meaningful data across complex service areas and partnership structures, particularly where information is held across multiple systems. Reports highlighted ongoing work to improve recording practices, strengthen quality assurance arrangements and develop more robust performance frameworks. There was also recognition that better data is needed not only to support local governance and professional assurance, but also to strengthen national understanding of social work activity, outcomes and workforce pressures.

Service Redesign, Improvement and Innovation

A recurring theme across the CSWO reports is the significant level of service redesign, improvement and innovation taking place across Scottish social work services. While many initiatives are linked to prevention, person-centred practice and improved outcomes, they are often being implemented within a context of increasing demand, workforce pressures and financial constraint. Reports frequently described efforts to develop more sustainable models of

support, strengthen local provision and improve outcomes through earlier intervention and community-based alternatives. In many cases, service redesign reflected both a desire to improve services and a need to respond to growing pressures on existing models of delivery.

Examples of innovation can be seen across a range of service areas. Several authorities reported investment in local fostering, kinship care and intensive family support services to reduce reliance on high-cost external placements while improving outcomes for children and families. East Ayrshire reported strengthening local fostering capacity, while Fife described efforts to manage pressures associated with costly external placements through service development and local alternatives. Rural and island authorities also reported innovative responses to workforce and service delivery challenges. For example, Highland Council described local workforce development initiatives and transformational work to address recruitment challenges, while Shetland highlighted ‘grow your own’ approaches to building workforce capacity in an island context. Several local authorities, such as Aberdeen City, also reported developments in digital transformation and technology-enabled care.

Innovation was frequently linked to prevention, sustainability and risk management. Authorities described efforts to reduce demand for more intensive interventions, improve service coordination, support workforce resilience and create local alternatives to costly or less effective forms of support. For example, Aberdeenshire’s Assessment, Rehabilitation and Care at Home (ARCH) service was designed to support people leaving hospital and reduce delays through short-term care at home support, while West Lothian reported improvements in care at home capacity that contributed to reductions in unmet need and delayed discharge. Many CSWOs also recognised that sustaining improvement and transformation activity in the future will depend on workforce capacity, financial stability and continued partnership working.

Looking Ahead

The 2024/2025 Chief Social Work Officer reports presented a picture of a social work system that continues to demonstrate strong professional leadership, commitment and adaptability in the face of sustained and increasing pressure. Across Scotland, local authorities are working to improve outcomes through service redesign, prevention, workforce development, partnership working and innovation. These developments, however, are taking place within a context of increasing demand and complexity of need, while resources remain constrained. The reports suggest that social work and social care services are not simply responding to individual challenges in isolation, but rather they are managing the cumulative effects of systemic issues such as demographic change, poverty, workforce shortages, financial pressures and growing expectations for transformation.

The reports also highlighted the interdependence of these pressures. As a result, many of the strategic priorities identified by CSWOs – including early intervention, community-based support, workforce development, digital transformation and partnership working – are not separate improvement agendas but interconnected responses to a changing operating environment. While the reports demonstrate a clear commitment to maintaining rights-based, person-centred and relationship-based practice, they also highlight the increasing difficulty of balancing long-term transformation with immediate statutory responsibilities.

The reports suggest that the future resilience of social work services will depend more on the ability of the system to sustain capacity while continuing to improve. There is encouraging progress in relation to areas such as The Promise, trauma-informed practice, community justice, prevention and early intervention, workforce development and service redesign. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for the system to absorb additional pressure. The challenge for the years ahead will be translating ambitious policy and reform objectives into meaningful improvements in outcomes, while ensuring that councils have the workforce, funding, infrastructure and local flexibility required to deliver change. To summarise, the strongest areas of progress are:

- **Implementation of The Promise** through family support, participation and service redesign.

- **Trauma-informed and rights-based practice**, particularly in children's and justice services.

- **Partnership working** across health, social care, justice, education and the third sector.

- **Early intervention and prevention initiatives** supporting families and communities.

- **Workforce development**, including training, leadership and reflective practice.

- **Public protection** and governance, with strengthened assurance and multi-agency working.

- **Service redesign and innovation**, including local alternatives to high-cost care and greater use of digital solutions.

- **Strong CSWO leadership** providing professional oversight and strategic direction.

The most significant areas of risk are:

- **Workforce sustainability**, including recruitment, retention and specialist workforce shortages.

- **Financial pressures**, rising costs and budget constraints.

- **Increasing demand and complexity** across adult, children's and justice services.

- **Placement sufficiency**, particularly foster care, residential care and external placements.

- **Care at home capacity** and wider provider market sustainability.

- **Pressure on preventative services**, with crisis demand displacing early intervention.

- **Mental health service pressures** and shortages of Mental Health Officers.

- **Data and digital limitations**, affecting performance reporting and planning.

- **National reform uncertainty**, particularly around long-term planning and governance.

- **Poverty and inequality**, contributing to increasing levels of need and complexity.

In conclusion, the 2025/26 period is likely to require continued attention to four interconnected national priorities. First, workforce sustainability remains critical, with ongoing challenges relating to recruitment, retention, workforce capacity and leadership development across social work and social care services. Second, protecting prevention and early intervention will be essential if local authorities are to reduce future demand while continuing to meet immediate statutory responsibilities. Third, there is a need to strengthen data quality, digital infrastructure and performance information to support assurance, planning and service improvement. Finally, local authorities will need to continue managing the implications of ongoing legislative and policy change, ensuring that national reform ambitions are matched by sufficient local capacity, workforce development and implementation support. These priorities reflect the key opportunities and challenges identified consistently across the CSWO reports.

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