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To: Members of the Staying Together and
Connected (STAC) National Implementation Group

Via E-mail

16 August 2024

Dear Members of the Staying Together and Connected (STAC) National Implementation Group,

UPDATE ON SIBLINGS WORK

As you know, it has been just over a year since you, the STAC Group, produced its final report and recommendations. I want to mark the anniversary by taking time to reflect upon the last twelve months and the progress that has been made during that time.

I must start by thanking all of you. Delivery of change is not just a national endeavour and I welcome the commitment and dedication that you, and partners across the public sector, local government and third sector have shown to keeping siblings together and connected. It is vital that we continue collaborating and working together.

This spirit of partnership working has been demonstrated clearly in the establishment of a Community of Practice for siblings, which was a priority of the STAC Group. It has come together through your own efforts, and with the support of The Promise Scotland. It is now an important place for everyone who is passionate about siblings to come together, share best practice and learn from each other. I know there is a great deal of energy and enthusiasm within the community, and I hope I can join you at one of your meetings later in the year.

Our approach

Our aspirations for siblings aligns with, and is part of a strong vision for change across the entire landscape of care for children, young, people and their families in Scotland. This is

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centred on a commitment to protecting and upholding children's rights which has been strengthened by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 that was enacted on 16 July, and our framework of Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC).

One of the key recommendations from your work was ensuring that the needs of siblings are held as a key consideration in connected areas of work led by the Scottish Government. Over the past year work continues to connect activity across policy areas and to align the activities underway to bring the change required for children and young people engaged in the care system. An update to the Promise Implementation Plan will be published shortly which sets this out in greater detail. Awareness and information sessions about the legislation and guidance in relation to siblings staying together and connected have taken place across the Scottish Government, in areas such as children's rights, education, health and housing. We will send you a link to the plan once it has been published.

Supporting our workforce

Your report highlighted challenges in terms of availability of carers and practitioners with sufficient time and access to resources to support families to nurture sibling relationships.

I acknowledge the significant pressures that the social work workforce continues to face. We are committed to establishing a National Social Work Agency (NSWA) and working in partnership to lead the social work profession to ensure a skilled, supported and sustainable workforce. The NSWA will have oversight of social work education, improvement, implementation, workforce planning and professional development. Its objectives are to support and invest in the social work profession by providing national leadership, overseeing social work: education (pre/post-qualifying), improvement, workforce planning, implementation support, training and development. The NSWA will work collectively with partners to address workforce pressures and factors impacting on the supply, recruitment and retention of the social work workforce and take action to address them.

Embedding the Learning Development and Leadership Framework that the STAC Group developed across the children and families sector, and wider workforce, including with carers, will help widen understanding of the importance that must be placed on supporting sibling relationships and the duties that are set out in legislation. We provide funding to Who Cares? Scotland to support corporate parenting in Scotland and that includes increasing understanding of local authorities' statutory duties to keep siblings together, where appropriate. However, I am very aware of the capacity constraints that practitioners face and that is why, to date, we have focused on where we can align and embed the framework into planned work that is underway.

The Advanced Practice Framework for Social Work, currently in development, will set out structures to support social workers to progress through different career phases. Importantly, it will describe a cohesive and supportive series of academic, learning and development, and

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work based opportunities to support social workers, both now and in the future. As this work progresses, the framework will reflect the underlying principles of understanding relationships and siblings' rights to stay connected, as will any national training plan that will be developed in time.

The Kinship Care Guidance has recently been refreshed and recognises the importance of assessing relationships and nurturing sibling bonds. Associated kinship care awareness sessions with social work practitioners from local authorities will continue the theme, and highlight the importance of familial relationships, including the siblings legislation and guidance.

Adoption

Adoption plays an important role in providing permanent loving homes for children and young people and sibling relationships must be carefully planned for and supported post-adoption. We are currently developing a national adoption statement for publication later this year, responding directly to feedback from stakeholders that the importance of adoption should be further recognised in Scotland.

This statement will set out our vision for the future of adoption; and our strategic priorities to realise that ambition. It will highlight the importance of sibling rights to stay together and connected.

Finally, the Scottish Government is now providing grant funding to the Association for Fostering, Kinship and Adoption (AFKA) Scotland to develop three national good practice guides on permanence from 2024-26, covering fostering, adoption and kinship. We have ensured that the guides will take account of the importance of sibling relationships.

Children's Rights

Activity to implement children's rights and remedies afforded by the UNCRC Act will see a cultural shift in the way that children and young people's rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled by public authorities. These changes include ensuring that there are appropriate remedies available to those affected, and we are working on them with a number of partners, including the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO), specialist child law centres, children's advocacy services and relevant tribunals. As a result, there will be positive impacts on all children's rights, including the right of siblings to stay connected. The Scottish Government is developing a new resource to support children and young people to understand how to raise a concern, how to make a complaint, and who the adults are in their lives that can support them to do this. A young people's panel will support a working group to develop this pathway resource, which we anticipate will be live by late Autumn 2024.

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Advocacy

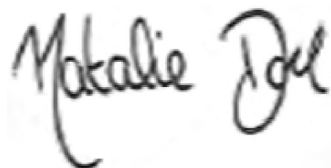
The STAC group and the young people involved in the participation project rightfully highlighted the important role that advocacy workers can play in helping ensure siblings rights are understood and upheld. We are engaged in wider activity across government around advocacy provision, as we consider the development of the NCS, implementation of the UNCRC, Children's Hearing Advocacy National Practice Model and recent recommendations from The Promise Scotland and Who Cares? Scotland around a lifelong advocacy service. I plan to meet stakeholders myself to hear directly from them as we then focus on next steps for implementing an approach.

Data collection

Work to improve the data we gather on siblings continues. We have made good progress – data collection reporting to the Scottish Government on four new data categories related to siblings has just commenced. This will help our understanding of the extent to which children are placed together with their siblings in care. This data collection is very complex so the first year statistics will be treated as a test of change. We need to do more to understand the reasons why siblings aren't placed together, so our next step will be to explore adding an additional item that will help with that. Thank you to the practitioners who are helping us with this work.

Finally, I hope that you all find time to take a well-earned break over the summer and I thank you for your continued support as we work together in the best interests of siblings.

Yours sincerely,



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