

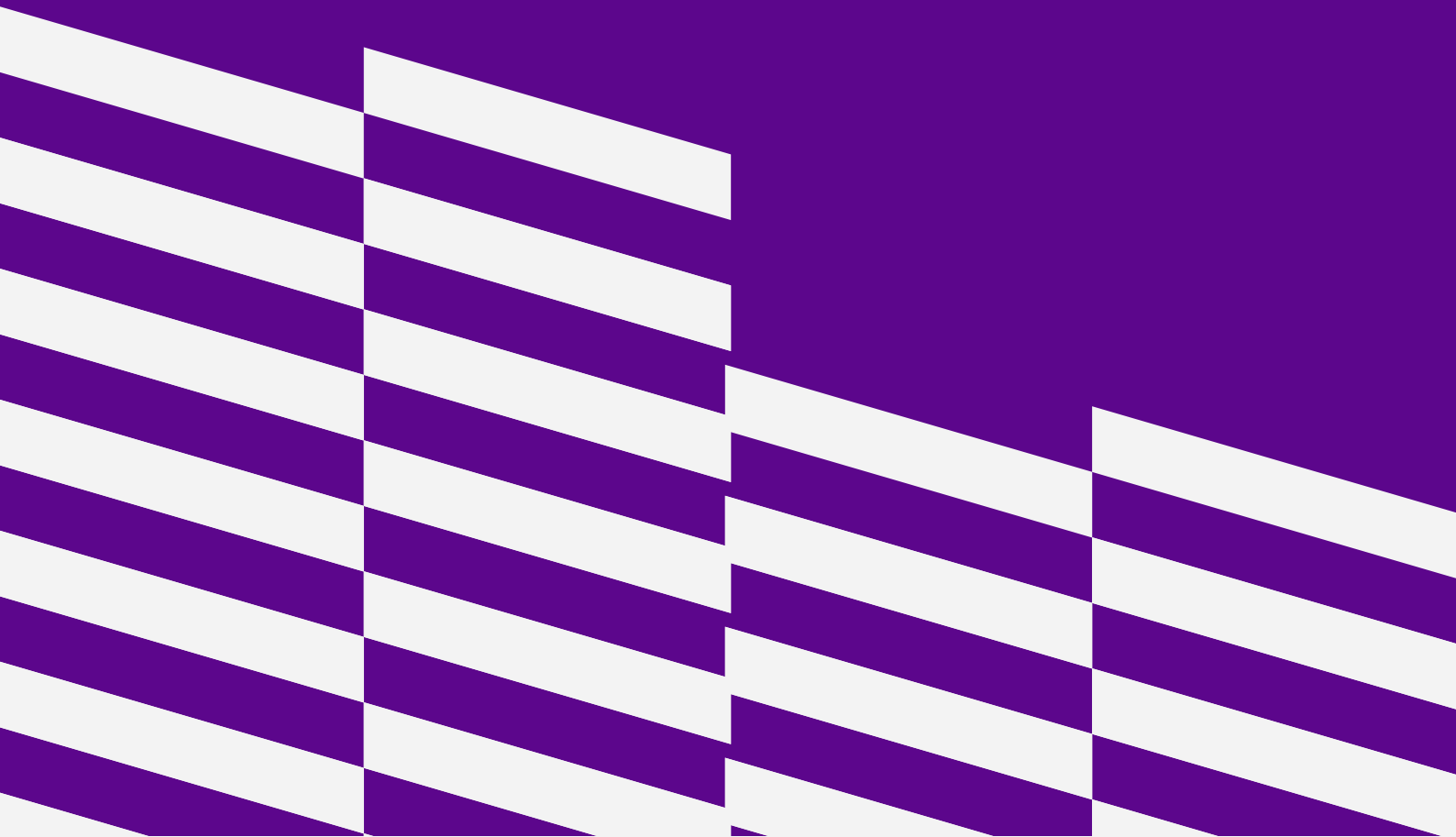
 The need for a Minimum Digital Living Standard
for Young People with Experience of Care

The Digital Promise?

Prepared by

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The need for a Minimum Digital Living Standard for Young People with
Experience of Care

Mhor Collective, June 2026

Executive Summary

Scotland has committed, through *The Promise*, that children and young people with care experience will grow up loved, safe and respected, and that the systems around them will remove the barriers that limit their lives. This research shows that digital inequality continues to act as a barrier. It is not peripheral or technical: it is structural, pervasive and deeply intertwined with the wider inequalities that young people with experience of care already face. In a society where education, employment, housing, health care, relationships and civic participation are increasingly digital-first, the Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) makes clear that digital access is a prerequisite for an ordinary life. The evidence gathered in this research demonstrates that there is a real need for the MDLS to particularly reflect the needs of those with experience of care.

Across four sessions with the National Leadership Network, STAF and Moniack Mhor, young people, carers and practitioners described a consistent picture of digital inequality across all types of care: foster care, kinship care, residential care, secure care, throughcare and aftercare. While the specific challenges vary by placement type, the underlying pattern is the same: inconsistent provision, fragmented responsibility, and a lack of clear entitlements leave young people without the devices, connectivity, skills or support they need to participate fully in modern life.

Kinship care emerged as the most structurally disadvantaged setting, with many young people living in homes without broadband, digital infrastructure or support for carers. Residential care was described as a high-control, low-connectivity environment where outdated devices, poor WiFi, over-restrictive safeguarding and punitive practices compound inequality. Foster care showed wide variation depending on carers' confidence, attitudes to risk and understanding of digital rights. Throughcare and aftercare were identified as the most dangerous points of digital exclusion impacting on adult wellbeing and security, where lack of connectivity, credit history or digital skills directly affects housing, income, health safety and survival.

Across all settings, participants described lacking appropriate, up-to-date devices; relying on temporary or project-based access; facing poor or unaffordable connectivity; and encountering digital systems, such as Universal Credit, housing portals, HMRC, SAAS, banking and healthcare, that are difficult to navigate even for digitally confident adults. Public alternatives such as libraries are not realistic for time-sensitive tasks. The result is a digital landscape that young people repeatedly described as “a barrier”, “not fit for purpose”, and “a postcode lottery”.

The emotional impact of digital inequality was equally clear. Shame, fear, stigma and reluctance to disclose were recurring themes. Young people spoke of feeling “silly”, “stupid” or afraid of making mistakes with real-life consequences. Without trusted

adults who are “just there”, many do not reveal their struggles until crisis point. Trauma-uninformed responses, such as removing devices as punishment or failing to replace broken equipment, further entrench exclusion.

Despite these challenges, the data also highlighted what works. Relational, low-pressure digital learning; trusted spaces such as those led by young people with experience of care, youth work and creative programmes; proactive staff who seek funding or advocate for devices; and clear, rights-based communication all make a meaningful difference. Young people and practitioners were clear that digital access must be framed as a right, not a privilege or a reward.

The findings of this research align with national evidence: without decisive action, digital exclusion will continue to compound existing inequalities and produce poorer outcomes for young people with care experience than for their peers. Embedding the MDLS within the implementation of *The Promise* is therefore not an optional enhancement. It is a necessary condition for ensuring that young people with experience of care can participate fully in education, employment, relationships, community and civic life, and for ensuring that Scotland keeps the Promise it has already made.

Introduction

Scotland has pledged, through *The Promise*, that children and young people with care experience will grow up loved, safe and respected, and that the systems around them will uphold their rights and remove the barriers that limit their lives. This research adds to an existing body of evidence showing that digital inequality is now one of those barriers, deeply intertwined with the wider inequalities that young people with experience of care already face. In a society where education, employment, housing, health care, relationships and civic participation are increasingly digital-first, the Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) makes clear that digital access is no longer optional. It is a prerequisite for an ordinary life.

Yet the experiences shared by young people, carers and practitioners across Scotland show that this standard is not being met. Digital inequality is not a marginal issue: it is a structural one. It mirrors the same patterns of inconsistency, fragmentation and unequal support that *The Promise* seeks to dismantle. Young people in kinship care without broadband, those in residential care with unusable WiFi or shared devices, those leaving care and unable to secure contracts because they lack a credit history, and young people navigating high-stakes systems like Universal Credit or housing portals without the tools or skills they need: all of these experiences reflect a system that has not yet adapted to the realities of digital life.

This research reinforces what national studies, third sector organisations and young people themselves have been saying for years: without decisive action, digital exclusion will continue to compound existing inequalities, limiting young people's opportunities, undermining their rights, and producing poorer outcomes than their non-care-experienced peers. Embedding the MDLS within the implementation of *The Promise* is therefore not an enhancement or an optional improvement. It is a necessary condition for keeping the Promise Scotland has already made.

The following data was gathered over three sessions, working with frontline staff and consultants from the National Leadership Network, STAF and Moniack Mhor. The National Leadership Network is a Scottish project led by people with care experience for people with care experience, their supporters and allies. Moniack Mhor is Scotland's National Writing Centre and ran the Creativity and Care programme which provided funding, support, professional mentoring, and project development for young people with experience of care in a wide range of creative outlets, including art, writing, film, music and drama. STAF is the Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum and is Scotland's national membership organisation for all of those involved in the lives of young people leaving care. Their vision is that the well-being and success of young

people leaving care across Scotland is indistinguishable from that of their peers in the general population.

Data was gathered both in Mentimeter and in scripted notes, through workshops and semi-structured interviews.

‘Care experience’ and different types of care.

It was clear throughout the data that digital inequality impacts on all young people with experience of care, but that there are particular issues related to particular types of care. The framing of different types of care is an essential starting point and introduction to the data that follows later in this report.

Foster Care and Kinship Care

Foster care is when a child or young person lives with an approved foster carer who is not a family member. Foster carers are trained and supported by the local authority or an independent fostering agency. Digital access depends heavily on the foster carer’s resources, digital confidence, attitudes to risk and understanding of opportunities.

While foster care is less explicitly discussed than kinship or residential care, the dataset highlights variation and inconsistency:

Some foster carers understand digital needs, but “it’s not always the case.”

- Data revealed restrictions imposed by carers that limit access: “Often carers will place restrictions on the access – trying to protect the YP but often creating barriers to access.”
- Foster carers may not know what young people are entitled to: “Foster carers and kinship carers also need to know their rights and entitlements too.”
- Digital access can be removed as a behavioural response : “Devices are used as a weapon and can be removed as a punishment.”

These examples show that digital inequality in foster care is often shaped by carer attitudes, risk-averse practice, and lack of clear guidance.

Kinship care is when a child or young person lives with relatives or close family friends, often grandparents. Kinship carers receive far less structured support than foster carers, and digital infrastructure in the home is often limited.

Kinship care emerged as one of the most consistently disadvantaged groups in the data:

- **Lack of broadband or home infrastructure:** “Kinship care, young people staying with older adults, grandparents – often didn’t have broadband or good connections. Young people couldn’t access college course learning material and education due to this.”
- **No digital support for carers:** “My grandparents took all four of us in. But there was no support for them around digital things.”
- **Local authority checks stop at physical safety:** “When I moved into my grandparents’ house, they came and checked that the house was suitable/safe, and then that was it... They don’t do the continuous support or access to digital devices.”
- **Kinship carers often lack digital skills or equipment:** “Often grandparents don’t have the home infrastructure – the wifi, the devices.”
- **Young people miss out on education because of this:** “Young people in Kinship Care couldn’t access uni or college.”
- **A clear call for MDLS to be applied in kinship settings:** “If social work applied the MDLS it could help... equipping a grandparent’s house to be digital would be absolutely amazing.”

Kinship care emerges as the most structurally digitally excluded placement type

Residential Care (Children’s Homes)

Residential care involves living in a staffed group home. Young people often experience high levels of monitoring, rules, and digital restrictions. Infrastructure varies widely between homes and local authorities.

Residential care is described as a high-control, low-connectivity environment, with particular challenges “Residential care is often at the whim of policy around access and devices.”

Poor or unusable WiFi: “Children’s houses – WiFi standard is terrible – not accessible at all.”

- “Homes saying ‘we do provide’ but the reality was that the wifi is so poor they couldn’t connect.”
- Shared or staff-controlled devices: “I went out to a residential care home to find that the only computer they could use was one in a staff office - they didn’t have their own.”

Outdated or broken devices not replaced:

- “Devices are sometimes given but rarely kept up to date and often 10 years old.”
- “If devices were broken, the young person was put to the bottom of the pile again.”

Punitive removal of devices:

- “Devices are used as a weapon and can be removed as a punishment.”

- “Young person breaks the device in a state of crisis, and then has to wait months... this can feel like a punishment.”

Over-restriction due to safeguarding policies: “Blanket age restrictions cause issues – if you were researching religion... you couldn’t get in because of the access limitations.”

High surveillance and scrutiny: “Level of scrutiny and governance in children's homes - young people who are not in care might be able to get round it, but young people in care will be under extra scrutiny, widening inequality.”

There is concern about a coming “pull back” after rapid digitalisation in education:

“In school, there's an oncoming issue, & in residential, where a lot of systems are online for discussion, homework on Glow or Google Classroom, but we feel like we're only a year away from bans of phones... We risk a limbo, where particularly those in residential care who are more governed by these frameworks.”

Residential care is where digital inequality is most entangled with risk, control, and institutional culture.

The atmosphere of risk is heavy and requires constant and clear consideration of the real support needed by young people, by trusted individuals, in the context of their lives.

“There's a huge atmosphere of risk and if young people don't have the tools and support, they're just going to internalise the risk, the harm.” “Taking away a digital risk doesn’t remove the wider risk.”

Secure Care

Secure care is a closed, highly controlled environment for young people whose safety or behaviour requires intensive supervision. Digital access is extremely restricted and often mediated entirely by staff.

Throughcare and Aftercare

Throughcare refers to the preparation and support provided to young people as they transition out of care into independence. This includes housing, benefits, education, employment and life skills. Digital inequality is a major barrier during transition:

- **Young people leaving care cannot afford connectivity:** “Young people leaving care and into their own flats, just absolutely couldn't afford to buy or have the connection.”
- **No credit history to get phone or broadband contracts:** “Young people can’t get contracts for phones – no credit score and no parent to help.”
- **High Stakes Digital Systems :** Furthermore, high-stakes digital systems, such as Universal Credit, Housing Benefit and issues related to finding and then

maintaining a tenancy, create fear: “Housing support – it becomes very stressful... the risk is homelessness.” “Universal credit... it’s so hard.”

- **Fear of making mistakes:** “There’s this fear of making mistakes – and the consequences... losing access to services.”
- **Digital skills gaps become visible at this stage:** “Lower confidence in skills needed for ‘living standards’ UC and housing.”

Throughcare is where digital inequality becomes materially dangerous, affecting housing, income, access to positive opportunities and ultimately survival.

We have highlighted the above examples to demonstrate the need for policymakers and corporate parents to consider the different types of care when either implementing MDLS, or choosing not to do so.

This framing is an essential starting point before examining the additional themes drawn from the data.

Digital is an essential, not a luxury

Unsurprisingly, across the data, digital access is framed as a basic condition for participating in everyday life, not an optional extra.

“A few years ago, it (digital) was a luxury but now most people would see it is as an essential. It's access to everything we need. Everything a young person needs.”

“A lot of young people in residential get a clothing budget and we go online to spend said clothing budget, how to navigate these websites and budget (eg. Shein)”

Participants repeatedly described digital as the route into education, housing, income, health, social security, social connection and even basic shopping, citing examples such as college work; council forms; basic bills and access to healthcare (including sexual and mental health care). When that route is blocked, everything else becomes harder and opportunities are lost. As one participant noted, “In today's day, contact numbers are a thing of the past - the digital age just keeps growing and the expectation to be online is just there.”

Digital is therefore experienced as a precondition for exercising rights, especially for young people with care experience, who are already navigating complex systems with fewer safety nets. It also impacts heavily on throughcare and aftercare, as young people move into independent adulthood, dealing with complex layers of digital life administration.

Devices, data and connectivity

Lack of appropriate, up-to-date devices

The most consistent theme throughout the data was not just “no device”, but “the wrong device”, “old device” or “shared device” that doesn't meet the changing realities facing young people with experience of care.

Participants describe:

- “Not having the device they need”
- “Young people don't always have the device they need or one that works well. One young person had a device and her camera wasn't working... she was working as a consultant but didn't have the equipment.”
- “Young people may have been given a device ten years ago but it's no longer usable.”
- “Devices are sometimes given but rarely kept up to date and often 10 years old.”

Smartphones are common but deeply inadequate for many tasks. The tasks and expectations of digital participation are discussed in more detail later in this

“Most young people have a smartphone, but not always a laptop device.” “A lot of young people have a mobile phone, but this can be really restrictive in so many ways.”

For some, even basic phone use is constrained: “I didn't have credit on my phone, so I couldn't contact you.”

Throughout the conversations, participants noted that while some local authority areas *might* provide access to technology through their direct support, others did not. There was also a lack of clarity, even within local authorities, about potential pathways.

Temporary, project-based and conditional access

Access is often short-term, conditional or easily withdrawn. This creates a cycle of hope and loss:

“Sometimes devices are loaned or some through short-term funding - this creates inequality.” “We sometimes get devices through project-based activity. This isn't ownership, so for a period of time, young people have access and then they lose it, which is almost worse.” “Many projects loan devices, and although helpful for that period, it can cause challenges too - taking the device away once the project is over.”

Temporary access is repeatedly described as “problematic” and as having “a real impact on lives”. It undermines continuity in education, work and relationships, and reinforces a sense that young people's needs are only worth meeting in short bursts of funding.

Connectivity gaps and poor infrastructure

Connectivity is a major fault line, especially in kinship care and residential settings:

“Kinship care, young people staying with older adults, grandparents- they often didn't have broadband or good connections. Young people couldn't access college course and education due to this.” “Children's houses - WiFi standard is terrible - not accessible at all. Often young people also didn't have data so were fully excluded.” “Children's Houses - have sketchy wifi and when young people move in in Glasgow there's a huge waiting list for devices, and they're so often out of date and unusable.”

Public access is not a realistic substitute:

“Public access(libraries) are not always accessible.” “It's all very well saying there's a library but are you supposed to go in every day to check to see if you have an interview? How would that work? We wouldn't expect to do that.”

Restricted data is a constant constraint: “young people can be restricted to pay as you go data and that limits them significantly” and “Some young people are using mobile

data for everything which is more expensive but admin barriers like credit” make contracts inaccessible.

A further complexity is that young people in Scotland can live independently from age 16 but will be unable to apply for mobile phone contracts to access data at that point. They are also unable to access free sims from the majority of free suppliers/third sector networks.

Devices as tools of control and punishment

In some settings, devices are not just scarce: they are controlled, shared or used as leverage:

“Out of date tech, not accessible for young people. Residential care - shared devices and sometimes shared with staff. young people don’t get personal devices.” “Devices are used as a weapon and can be removed as a punishment.” “If young people broke their devices, they would go to the bottom of the pile and there's a lack of trauma informed practice and so they were punished.” “Young person breaks the device in a state of crisis, and then has to wait months, maybe even a year because of one incident this can feel like a punishment, a lack of care.”

Carers’ attempts to protect can also create exclusion:

“Often carers will place restrictions on the access - trying to protect the young people but often creating barriers to access.” “Restricted devices can also impact on a young person's use. I was trying to advocate that this was something everyone needs but restrictions are an issue.”

This sits in tension with young people’s rights to connection, learning and fun.

Education: deepening inequality

Education is a major site of digital inequality and was referred to repeatedly through the data. College and school systems assume stable access, skills and support:

“Definitely college - all college work has to be done online and we have young people who have to engage with housing.” “At college you have to use Moodle. I didn’t know how to. I couldn’t have done it without a laptop.” “Moodle for college, doing your work and tracking attendance.”

Participants describe how simply providing a device is “just like dropping your child at the school gate - it's only the door in. You need the supportive environment, the trusted adult.” Without someone at home to help, “learning online... just doesn't work.”

Young people who have “stopped going to school” or “haven’t had the easiest transitions” miss out on basic digital skills:

“Young people that haven't had the easiest transitions and then stop going to school, they don't have access to basic word packages, for young people who struggle with school they're losing out on a real skill.”

The assumption that all young people are “naturally digital” is strongly challenged:

“It's a nonsense belief that all young people can use digital. We have this inherent belief that all young people can - but computers are so different from smart screens.” “One in 8 kids in Scotland go to a school with no computing teacher. There's absolutely nothing about being young that means you have digital skills, nor that you've ever experienced a laptop.”

A further issue discussed in the data was also the potential longer-term issue of *unsupervised* access, especially in younger years and how this might impact learning and participation.

“We see two ends of the extreme - having devices, access and opportunity - but then the issue of unregulated access in early years is an issue. This has a huge impact on education with regards to attention...it’s almost a mark of privilege when young people at primary talk about going on walks and things, rather than games and Netflix.”

This highlights again the issue that the well-being and success of young people with experience of care across Scotland is often very different from that of their peers in the general population.

Digital-first systems that are not fit for purpose

The following section considers the systems that young people have to engage with, particularly those in throughcare and aftercare. Participants repeatedly say:

“The system is set up to be a barrier.” “Governed by a system that is not fit for purpose.” “For me, the biggest barrier is the whole system- you can talk about the nuanced elements, but the whole system, digital first, is the problem.”

Benefits, housing, and identity systems

Digital-first benefits and identity systems are experienced as hostile and high-stakes:

“Universal credit isn’t an easy system.” “Universal credit - I have seen that young people are very capable and able to work their way into the systems but it's so hard.” “Housing support - it becomes very stressful as the risk is homelessness - they don’t always have the means to access the services.” “It creates such stress - I can see it immediately - that threat of homelessness.”

Accessing HMRC and ID is described as “ridiculous” and “so difficult”:

“To get your HMRC login details, what a faff that is, it’s ridiculous, in order to get your national insurance and tax numbers, it's so difficult” “digital ID... a lot of places won't actually accept it, you're showing your digital ID, but they say they won't accept it. They can pick and choose when they want to accept it.”

SAAS and name changes expose how digital systems fail to recognise complex care biographies:

“SAAS - it's a system where I've seen particular impacts on young people in care when their birth certificate doesn't match their ID, or a family name change. Something in the biography story has shift... When there's a change in the narrative story, it can be so challenging to change. And the reasons for change can be so deeply personal. It might just look like a system.”

Financial systems

Digital banking came up as an ongoing system locked behind digital gates, despite the potential to give young people a greater sense of control and autonomy, as well as improving financial resilience.

“Banking is a massive one - I went into the bank to get help and they just said use the app.” “My gran can no longer use her banking app and can't actually get out the house

anymore and there's just no other option other than someone doing it for her so she's completely lost that privacy.”

Healthcare

There were several examples of the way young people with experience of care are disadvantaged when trying to access essential healthcare. “Sexual health services - trying to get help at 9:00 on a Monday morning - if you don't have reliable wifi how can you get in? Getting sexual health stuff is like that panic trying to get concert tix.”

‘Even to get doctors' appointments... you need access to a phone to get an appointment.’

No real offline alternative

Even where paper options technically exist, they are discouraged or more expensive:

“Some things that have the option to do a paper application (eg. passport) but they push you to do it online because it's cheaper, people are thinking well 'whats the cheapest way to do it'.” “Some of the online systems are so hard that you can't actually use them and there's no paper alternative.” “No paper alternative.”

Libraries are not a realistic fallback for time-sensitive processes like job interviews or benefits:

“Library - not a reasonable alternative... are you supposed to go in every day to check to see if you have an interview? How would that work? We wouldn't expect to do that.”

Gaps, postcode lotteries and fragmented responsibility

Participants describe a huge variation between local authorities and placements:

“Gaps between kinship/foster carers/residential is huge - it's all so different.” “Between local authorities there's no connection - no pathways.” “It's a postcode lottery. It's so sad.”

Small projects are doing good work, but cannot compensate for systemic failure:

“Small wee projects are helping 4,5 maybe 10 young people but there's still 100's of young people without. ” “Hundreds of young people are having to be without because the systems and processes are not fit for purpose and we're trying to put a bandaid over a bullethole.”

Emotional landscape: shame, fear, and trust

Shame and reluctance to disclose

Shame is a recurring emotional barrier:

“Young people often don't feel comfortable disclosing their situation immediately.” “There's a lot of shame around these conversations with young people. The balance between not finding out and prying....” “Peer pressure - you so often wouldn't admit that

you don't have." "There's a level of shame there for some young people. They feel silly, and so they don't want to learn and that limits opportunities."

This shame is compounded by expectations that "everyone" can do digital:

"Not everyone knows how to do these things." "They feel silly or stupid, they don't want to learn then because they don't quite understand it, which impacts their ability to grow in a way others might."

Pride and self-reliance also play a role:

"Pride and 'I can survive on my own' can stop people from asking for help." "Pressure to cope on our own."

Fear of consequences and high-stakes mistakes

Young people are acutely aware that mistakes online can have serious consequences:

"Young people have a fear of lack of knowledge." "The fear of that lack of knowledge, not having all the knowledge and making mistakes that have real-life consequences - the threat of losing access to services or support." "Fear of making mistakes - and the consequences of what happens if they get it wrong."

This is especially intense for those without a "constant point of contact and support":

"Young people with care experience feel more fearful as they don't have the constant point of contact and support to help."

What's working and what people say they need

Emerging practices that help

There are glimpses of effective, relational practice:

- Workers “being aware of potential challenges - seeking funding for devices” and “looking for devices and funding” when issues arise.
- Using schemes like Access to Work: “Access to work can help funding things like this, so I was able to subsidise.”
- Creative and youth work spaces that “create a positive space, to step out of worries.”
- CLD and community learning courses were highlighted : “CLD can work; me and my sisters did it and learned a ton of skills (CV building etc) if you are going to give someone the tools and equipment, there has to be some sort of package with it.”

But a far stronger message across the dataset was young people also highlighting the value of structured, low-pressure learning:

“Support that is friendly/relaxed for people that don't like engaging with education systems, support within existing networks as different ages etc will be involved.”

Trust, relationships and adults who are “just there”

Trusting relationships are described as the gateway to disclosure and support:

“Young people often don't disclose their barriers until relationships have been built and trusted.”

“When information is disclosed, it's often in a 1-1 situation when trust is built.” “The need comes out really later, in one-to-one conversations.”

Staff training is framed not just as skills, but as relational presence:

“Training staff is important as they're the people who are just there. It's nice for young people to go to people who are 'just there' beside them.”

“Trust is important, particularly in residential care. Trust has to be part of supporting young people to use the internet safely.”

At the same time, mistrust of social work can block access to help:

“People don't have trust in social workers so don't feel comfortable asking for help in case they are judged or deemed unfit.”

Clear pathways, rights framing and entitlements

There is a very strong call for clarity, rights-based framing and consistent pathways:

“A clear pathway to access and data and support.” “We need a clean, clear pathway to devices and data.” “We need to know where to get devices, and data. It has to be clear, and fair, so that every young person can access.” “All support systems should have clear expressions of entitlement and how to access support, where do you go?”

Rights language is explicit:

“We need it framed as a right.” “Making it known it’s young people rights to have access to digital and devices.” “Young people need to know what they're entitled to and how to ask for this.” “Foster carers and kinship carers also need to know their right and entitlements too.”

Participants connect this directly to MDLS:

“Kinship Care - the MDLS is this standard and if SW applied that it could help in that social work could implement the MDLS for young people in kinship care.”

Long-term, stable, trauma-aware provision

Short-term fixes are seen as inadequate and sometimes harmful. People are asking for:

“Sustainable connectivity, for the longer term.” “We absolutely need a long-term, stable initiative.” “We need a follow-up, say three years later. A commitment to make sure that people still have what they need.” “It's not enough to say there's a year's funding out, and this is a quick fix. As a country, we could make this commitment.”

There is also a call for trauma-aware responses when devices are damaged or misused:

“Taking away a digital risk doesn’t remove the wider risk.” “Young person breaks the device in a state of crisis, and then has to wait months... this can feel like a punishment, a lack of care.”

Responsibility, safety and regulation

Young people and practitioners are not asking for a risk-free internet, but for shared responsibility and better regulation:

“Sometimes there’s a focus on the safety of the technology.” “Carers need to be equipped to educate young people and guide them through the online world.” “A lot of

the young people I've worked with are vulnerable; there needs to be a bigger conversation on regulating social media.” “There’s a need for better regulation of the apps. That’s where the risk is.”

AI is emerging as a new, poorly understood risk:

“Young people are more and more using AI, almost as a friend, but the information isn't real, it isn't what they need.” “AI always gives you an answer but it's not the real answer. We're so far behind with AI, we don't know how to help. It feels like we're already decades behind.”

Sector as community and trusted messengers

Finally, there is a strong sense that the sector itself can be a vehicle for change:

“Our sector is a community. We could get information out there, go to the trusted people.” “The sector is a community where we are all working together, word of mouth is going to be massive.” “Trusted people within the sector are going to have to take big responsibility of the benefits and entitlements.”

The focus on trust and relational approaches offer spaces for developing digital resilience beyond access.

Our summary

Across the data, we see the clarity of need for young people with care experience. As has been highlighted across research for the last decade, this data reemphasises that digital is a basic condition for exercising rights, accessing support and living an ordinary life. It's how young people connect, communicate, access education, healthcare, employment, support and opportunity.

It's not news that young people with care experience face layered inequalities that have, for decades, limited life choices and opportunities. It's also not news that digital inequality adds a further layer to this: the data clearly reflects the widespread impact of unstable or inappropriate devices, poor connectivity, high surveillance, and systems that assume digital skills and stable access.

These inequalities are not just about hardware, but they are about relationships, trust, trauma, shame, and the absence of a consistent, rights-based framework across placements and local authorities. Short-term, project-based interventions help a few but leave "hundreds of young people... without", reinforcing a sense of lottery and precarity: a sense of risk for the future rather than opportunity.

Young people and practitioners are already articulating what a better system would look like: clear entitlements to devices and data that are universal across Scotland, with clear signposting and processes, stable long-term provision that is cognisant of the different types of care. They've also noted the positive impact and ongoing potential of trauma-aware practice, relational support, and a sector that acts as a community of trusted messengers, if the resources, training and support is there to ensure this.

Recommendations

Scotland has already made a clear commitment through The Promise that children and young people with care experience must grow up loved, safe and respected, with the same opportunities as any other young person. The Minimum Digital Living Standard (MDLS) reinforces that digital access is now a basic condition for participating in education, employment, relationships, health care and civic life. Yet the evidence from young people and practitioners shows that this commitment must be tailored to meet the needs of **all** young people. Digital inequality continues to mirror and deepen the structural inequalities of the care system itself, leaving young people in kinship care, foster care, residential care, secure care, throughcare and aftercare without the tools, connectivity, skills or support they need to thrive. Unless national and local policymakers act decisively to embed MDLS within the implementation of The Promise, digital exclusion will continue to undermine young people's rights, limit their opportunities, and produce poorer outcomes than their peers who have not experienced care. The following recommendations set out what must change to ensure Scotland keeps its Promise.

1. Devices: must be personal, appropriate and sustained

Every young person with care experience needs to have personal, up-to-date devices that meet MDLS, across all care settings and transitions.

- **Statutory entitlement to a personal device**

Recommendation: Create a national entitlement, linked to MDLS, for every young person with care experience (including kinship, foster, residential, secure, throughcare and aftercare) to have a personal device suitable for education, work, communication and participation, not shared with staff or other residents.

- **Lifecycle and replacement policy**

Recommendation: Require local authorities and corporate parents to adopt a clear replacement cycle (e.g. every 3–4 years) and trauma-informed replacement policy when devices are lost or damaged in crisis, so that loss of a device is never used as punishment.

- **Parity across placement types**

Recommendation: Mandate parity of provision across kinship, foster, residential and secure care, with ring-fenced funding so kinship carers are not left to “make do” without devices or support. Kinship care should be treated as priority.

2. Connectivity: stable, affordable and fit for purpose

Young people with care experience need stable, high-quality connectivity in every placement and during/after transition.

- **Minimum connectivity standard for all care settings**

Recommendation: Embed MDLS connectivity requirements into inspection and registration standards for children's houses, secure care and foster/kinship placements (e.g. minimum WiFi quality, coverage and reliability).

- **Funded broadband for kinship and care leavers** Young people in kinship care and those leaving care cannot afford connection and often rely on expensive PAYG data.

Recommendation: Create a national scheme to fund home broadband and mobile data connectivity for kinship carers and for young people in their own tenancies up to at least age 26, with simple, proactive enrolment via social work/throughcare teams.

- **MDLS is part of placement** Without connectivity, young people cannot access education, housing, UC, health or family contact on equal terms with peers

Recommendation: Make it explicit in *The Promise* implementation and inspection regimes that placements must meet MDLS connectivity standards.

3. Digital skills and AI/ media literacy: embedded, relational and trauma-aware

Young people with care experience must be able to confidently use digital tools and systems required for education, work, benefits, housing and everyday life, and have a meaningful understanding of media literacy in the context of their lives.

- **Core digital skills and media literacy as a corporate parenting duty**

Recommendation: Require every corporate parent (schools, colleges, local authorities, health boards, DWP partners) to plan and deliver MDLS-aligned digital skills and AI/media literacy support for young people with experience of care, including practical tasks (Moodle, UC, HMRC, SAAS, banking, housing portals).

- **Relational, low-stigma learning offers**

Recommendation: Fund relational small-group and one-to-one digital learning embedded in trusted spaces (youth work, creative projects, advocacy groups), explicitly designed to reduce shame and fear.

- **Staff training across the workforce**

Recommendation: Make digital inclusion and MDLS a core component of training for social workers, residential staff, foster/kinship carers, and throughcare/aftercare workers, including how to spot digital inequality and respond without blame.

4. Support: clear pathways, entitlements, accountability

Young people and carers know what they are entitled to, how to get it, and who is responsible.

- **National MDLS-for-care-experienced framework**

Recommendation: Develop a national framework that translates MDLS into specific entitlements for care-experienced young people (devices, connectivity, skills, support), with clear roles for local authorities, corporate parents and national government.

- **Single, visible access pathway in each area**

Recommendation: Require each local authority/corporate parenting partnership to create a single, well-publicised access route (digital or phone) for devices, data and digital support for young people with experience of care and their carers.

- **Rights-based communication and advocacy**

Recommendation: Resource independent advocacy and sector networks (e.g. NLN STAF, kinship organisations, youth projects) to communicate MDLS entitlements in youth-friendly language and support young people to claim them.

- **Monitoring and public reporting:** Without measurement and accountability, postcode lotteries and “bandaid over a bullet hole” projects will persist.

Recommendation: Integrate MDLS indicators into *The Promise* oversight and local Children’s Services Plans, with annual public reporting on digital access and outcomes for care-experienced young people.

5. Safe participation & wellbeing: beyond risk-only approaches

Young people with care experience can participate fully and safely online, with support that recognises both risks and rights.

- **End punitive digital practices:** “Devices are used as a weapon” and removal after crisis entrenches exclusion and shame.

Recommendation: Prohibit the use of device removal or connectivity restriction as punishment in any care setting; require trauma-informed responses when harm occurs online or devices are damaged.

- **Balanced safeguarding guidance:** Blanket restrictions currently block legitimate learning and identity exploration, and widen inequality.

Recommendation: Update national safeguarding guidance to explicitly balance protection with MDLS and *The Promise*, recognising social media as a key route to family contact, and avoiding blanket bans and over-blocking (e.g. religious sites, LGBTQ+ content).

- **Health specific support**

Recommendation: Ensure online health services are accessible to young people with care experience (devices, data, privacy), and develop guidance for practitioners on the impact of digital inequality for young people who have experience of care.

6. Transitions: throughcare and aftercare as critical MDLS moments

No young person should fall into 'digital poverty' (or poverty) at the point of leaving care or moving placement.

- **Digital transition plans as standard**

Recommendation: Require every pathway plan/throughcare plan to include a digital section covering devices, connectivity, key accounts (UC, HMRC, banking, housing, education), and where to get help, as young people face “threat of homelessness” and complex systems at the exact point when support drops.

- **Guaranteed continuity of connectivity and device**

Recommendation: Ensure that when a young person moves placement or into their own tenancy, their device and connectivity move with them or are replaced immediately with no gaps. Temporary, project-based access and breaks in service are described as “almost worse” than never having access.

- **Extended support to at least 26**

Recommendation: Align digital entitlements with aftercare duties up to 26, recognising that digital systems (benefits, housing, work) remain complex and high-stakes well into early adulthood.

Conclusion

Failing to implement these MDLS-aligned changes within *The Promise* architecture will mean that digital inequality continues to contribute to wider social inequality for young people with experience of care, baking poorer education, health, housing and employment outcomes into the lives of young people who have already been promised better. Implementing them is not an optional enhancement; it is a core condition of keeping the Promise.



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