

PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT BRIEFING

Intensive Whole Family Support for Children and Young People up to Age 25

An Effective Community Alternative to Secure Care
and Custody

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Our Ask

The Scottish Government should commit to establishing a national **Intensive Whole Family Support offer** for children and young people up to age 25 who are at risk of entering, or already involved in, the care and justice systems. Informed by local need, backed by sustainable investment and underpinned by a national delivery framework, this must provide a consistently available, intensive community alternative to escalation into secure care and custody, improving outcomes for children and young people, and keeping communities safe.

The Case for Change

The Scottish Government is committed to achieving The Promise by strengthening prevention, early intervention and whole family support. Central to this ambition is reducing reliance on secure care, custody and other restrictive interventions, ensuring children and young people receive the right support at the right time.

This underpins Scotland's approach to youth and community justice, implementation of the UNCRC and the Secure Care Pathway and Standards, and the shared ambition for every child and young person to thrive within their family and community.

Despite these clear policy commitments, a significant gap remains between ambition and implementation. Children and young people experiencing the highest levels of need and risk do not yet consistently have access to the timely, preventative and holistic community-based support needed to enable them to thrive.

While sufficient specialist secure provision will always be required for the small number of children who cannot safely be supported elsewhere, **secure care should remain a measure of last resort.** Expanding restrictive provision without simultaneously developing intensive community alternatives risks managing pressure at the crisis end of the system without addressing why children reach that point.

The Missing Middle

This is the “missing middle” in Scotland’s system: a lack of intensive, whole family, community-based support for children and young people whose circumstances have become highly complex, but who could still be supported safely within their families and communities. This also applies to provision for young people aged 18–25 who are at risk of, or in conflict with, the law. The need for intensive support does not end when a young person turns 18, yet young people routinely move abruptly from child-centred systems into adult justice, mental health, housing and welfare services, with different eligibility criteria, thresholds and expectations of independence, neglecting the support that families can provide.

Young Adulthood as a Distinct Stage

Scotland’s justice policy recognises that young adulthood is a distinct developmental stage. The Scottish Sentencing Council’s guidelines state that younger people generally have lower levels of maturity and a greater capacity for change and rehabilitation than older adults. The sentencing framework recognises developmental needs up to age 25, but comparable, consistently available community-support infrastructure has not developed at the same pace.

Evidence on Reconviction

Reconviction evidence reinforces the limitations of custody as a response to complex needs. The evidence is particularly stark for short sentences.

62.8% of people released after serving three months or less were reconvicted within one year.

The Scottish Government’s evidence review has concluded that **community sentences are generally more effective than short-term imprisonment** in reducing reoffending and provide greater opportunities for rehabilitation, **where appropriate services and support are available.**

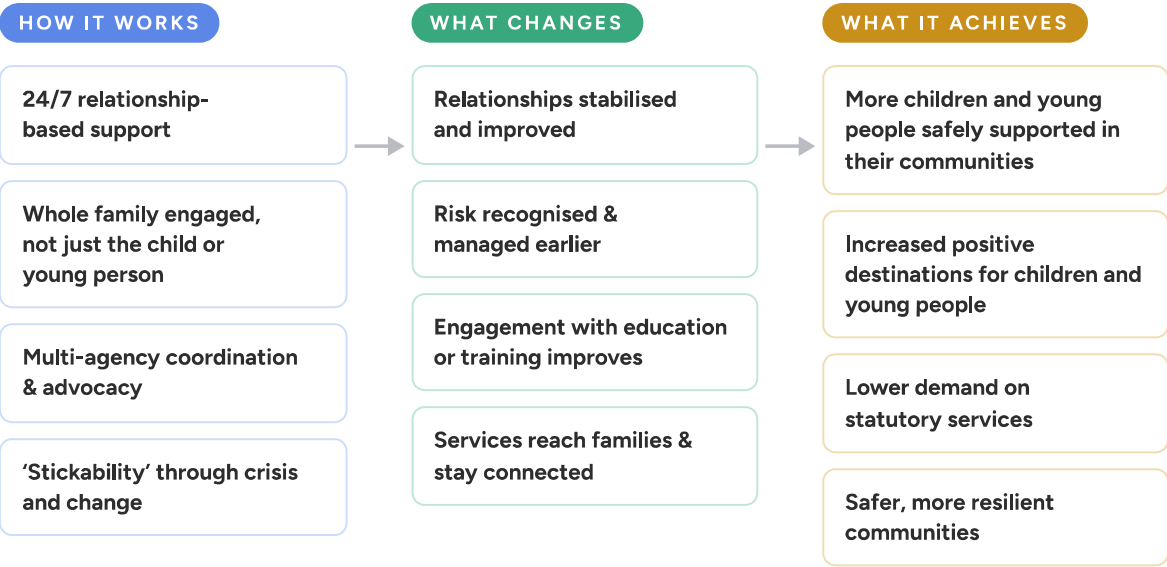
Media and inspectorate commentary has described a prison system struggling to provide meaningful rehabilitation amid overcrowding and workforce pressures. Earlier this year, the Scottish Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission concluded that Scotland cannot achieve a sustainable prison population through prison policy alone.

Reducing demand requires greater investment in prevention, community intervention and rehabilitation.

Restrictive intervention alone does not resolve the trauma, family difficulties, exploitation, substance use, mental ill health, housing insecurity and lack of opportunity that may contribute to a young person’s behaviour.

What Intensive Support Makes Possible

FROM DAILY PRACTICE TO SYSTEM CHANGE



For children at risk of secure care, intensive whole family support can stabilise relationships, help families manage risk, coordinate services and respond rapidly when circumstances deteriorate. For those leaving secure care, the same approach can provide continuity, prevent abrupt endings and support successful return to family or community life.

For young people at risk of custody, intensive community support can make diversion, bail, electronic monitoring, structured deferred sentencing and other community-based interventions more credible and effective. For those leaving prison, sustained relational support can help them reconnect with family, secure housing, access treatment, enter education or employment and comply with justice requirements.

The consequences of failing to provide this support are felt across the public sector. **Crisis intervention places significant pressure on social work, education, health, housing, police, courts, prisons and residential services.** It can result in children and young people being supported through the most restrictive and costly parts of the system when earlier, sufficiently intensive intervention could have provided a safer, more effective and more sustainable response.

Intensive Whole Family Support provides the missing tier between early intervention and crisis: support robust enough to work alongside children and young people experiencing high levels of need and risk, while enabling them to remain safely within their families and communities wherever possible.

The next Programme for Government should establish a national commitment to the development, funding and consistent availability of Intensive Whole Family Support across Scotland for children and young people aged 12–25.

What Do We Mean by Intensive Whole Family Support?

Intensive Whole Family Support is not simply ‘more of the same’ family support. It is a distinct level of intervention designed for children and young people experiencing the highest levels of complexity, vulnerability, and risk, particularly where there is a risk of family breakdown, secure care or custody.

Key Components of Intensive Whole Family Support

Twelve features that together define this level of intervention.

 24/7 Availability Dedicated shift patterns across seven days a week, supported by a national helpline and in-person responses when required.	 Relationship-Based Practice Consistent support from trusted practitioners who remain alongside children and families through change and uncertainty.
 Rapid, Flexible Response Support when families need it, including evenings, weekends and periods of escalating risk or crisis.	 Wider Family Support Addressing the needs of the whole family and wider family networks rather than focusing intervention solely on the child or young person.
 Intensive and Sustained Support Support delivered as frequently as circumstances require, including multiple support visits each week.	 Risk Management and Crisis Prevention Supporting families to recognise and manage escalating risks, reducing unnecessary reliance on secure care and custody.
 'Stickability' Maintaining support through difficult periods rather than withdrawing when children and families are hardest to engage.	 Community-Based Delivery Engagement with families in their homes and communities, and through schools, GP practices and police custody suites.
 Multi-Agency Coordination Ensuring education, mental health and other services respond promptly, including proactive liaison, challenge and escalation.	 Evidence-Informed Intervention Structured tools addressing trauma, emotional wellbeing, exploitation, harmful behaviours, substance use and future planning.
 A Skilled and Supported Workforce Management oversight, reflective supervision, continuous professional development and access to 24/7 management support.	 Outcomes-Focused Practice Strengthening family resilience and protective relationships, reducing offending and improving longer-term outcomes.

Where support is delivered

Homes and communities	Schools	GP practices	Police custody suites	Out-of-hours helpline
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The Impact of Intensive Whole Family Support

The case for Intensive Whole Family Support draws on Scotland’s experience of delivering intensive community alternatives to secure care and custody; emerging evidence from Whole Family Wellbeing Funding; wider evidence about trauma, relationships, family and community-based intervention; and Includem’s own experience of supporting children, young people and families experiencing high levels of complexity and risk.

Taken together, this evidence supports a model in which intensive, flexible and sustained support is available around the child or young person and their family before circumstances escalate to restrictive intervention, and to avoid repeated cycles of restrictive interventions.

Outcomes for Children, Young People and Families

The factors which draw children and young people into offending and other harmful or risk-taking behaviour are rarely individual in nature. Trauma, grief, fractured relationships, poverty, poor mental health, exploitation, disengagement from education and unstable care arrangements can interact and compound one another.

Intensive Whole Family Support provides a relational response to these interconnected circumstances. Rather than focusing solely on enforcement or an individual presenting behaviour, it seeks to strengthen the relationships, stability and protective factors surrounding the young person.

Scottish Government analysis of Whole Family Wellbeing Funding activity in 2024–25 identified reported improvements for children, young people and families including fewer escalations to crisis or statutory services, improved family relationships, increased confidence and resilience, improved school attendance and improvements in health and wellbeing.

In **Stirling**, a multi-agency Family Wellbeing Team was developed specifically to provide intensive support to families on the edge of statutory intervention, filling what local partners described as an “in between” in existing provision. Local partners reported examples where this support had prevented families from requiring statutory involvement.

These findings are important because they demonstrate that high levels of need and risk do not automatically require a child or young person to be removed from their family or community. With sufficiently intensive support, risk can be addressed while maintaining the relationships, routines and community connections that are important to sustainable change.

System Impact

Families experiencing the greatest complexity frequently interact with multiple parts of the public sector, including social work, education, health, police and justice services. When support is fragmented, inaccessible or insufficiently intensive, challenges are compounded and difficulties can escalate until services are required to respond at crisis point.

Intensive Whole Family Support offers an opportunity to intervene differently: bringing support around the whole family, coordinating agencies, responding rapidly when risk increases and maintaining involvement rather than repeatedly referring families between services. Emerging evidence from Whole Family Wellbeing Funding provides examples of improved multi-agency working and earlier intervention, while some local partnerships have reported that activity is beginning to reduce pressure on statutory services.

The same principle applies to youth justice. Scotland’s Whole System Approach is based on preventing unnecessary use of secure care and custody through effective services, diversion and coordinated community responses. For this approach to succeed, professionals, and the wider public, must have confidence that credible alternatives are available when children present significant levels of risk.

Effective community intervention is integral to keeping communities safe.

Intensive Whole Family Support addresses the interconnected factors that contribute to risk and harm, strengthens protective relationships, and builds family and individual resilience—supporting sustainable change, preventing escalation and improving safety for children, young people, families and communities.

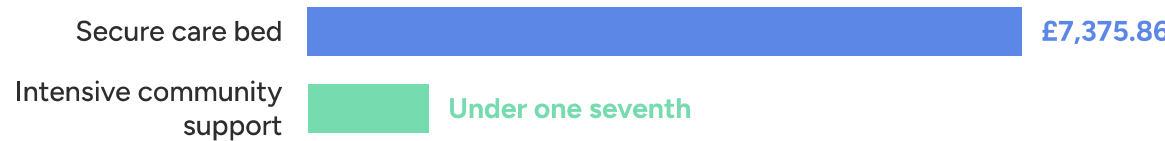
Economic Value

There is a compelling economic rationale for shifting investment towards effective community support before circumstances escalate to crisis. The most restrictive responses available to children and young people are necessarily resource intensive.

£7,375.86 / week

Weighted average cost of a secure care bed in Scotland, 2024–25. Intensive community-based whole family support can be delivered at less than one seventh of this cost.

Weekly Cost Per Child, 2024–25



Intensive Whole Family Support is not proposed as a replacement for secure care in every situation, but the economic opportunity lies in ensuring children and young people do not enter high-cost crisis provision where their circumstances could have been safely managed through sufficiently robust community support.

PREVENTING ESCALATION MAY REDUCE DEMAND ON

👤 Police contact	🏠 Court proceedings
📞 Emergency social work	🏠 Placement breakdown
📅 School exclusion	📄 Repeated referrals
🏥 Acute health intervention	⚖️ Later justice involvement

A national Intensive Whole Family Support model should therefore be accompanied by robust economic evaluation, capturing both direct costs and its impact on demand across wider public services.

Intensive Whole Family Support in Practice

CASE STUDY — J, AGED 17

J (17) was referred to Includem's intensive family support service following repeated offending and growing concerns about the risk of further harm. He was frequently missing from home, using alcohol and drugs, had stopped attending school and his relationship with his mother had deteriorated significantly. Previous services had struggled to engage with him consistently and there were increasing concerns that, without more intensive support, the risks around J could escalate towards secure care.

Engagement was difficult to begin with. J was suspicious of services and did not see the value in engaging with Includem. Despite this, Includem support workers persisted. Our practitioners continued to make contact through text messages which was J's preferred method of communicating, and visiting his home, building a relationship with his mother. Includem workers became a steady presence in his life without making continued support conditional on his consistent engagement. Over time, this 'stickability' allowed a relationship to develop. The workers made an effort to learn about J's interests, including fishing, and offered opportunities to spend time together at fishing spots that J would otherwise struggle to access.

This familiarity with workers, and their persistent efforts to build a relationship with them resulted in J phoning the Includem helpline late on a Saturday night following an argument at home, when he was intoxicated, distressed and refusing to return home. Out-of-hours support is built into Includem's model, and therefore a response did not have to wait until services reopened on Monday. Includem responded immediately. A worker met J, helped him manage immediate risks and worked with him and his mother to find a safe way through the night. The following day, workers supported J and his mother to repair communication and avoid a crisis becoming a family breakdown or an emergency placement.

Following the incident, Includem workers brought together social work and other relevant partners to coordinate a shared plan addressing the interconnected risks and needs around J, including offending behaviour, substance use, education and family relationships. J was connected with specialist substance misuse services, and Includem workers accompanied him to his appointments to ensure he was attending, and to reduce barriers around transport, routines and anxiety connected with new services and supports.

At the same time, Includem worked with education partners to advocate for a realistic route back into learning and training that reflected his needs and aspirations. Intensive work continued with J and his mother to repair their relationship, improve communication and manage healthy boundaries.

Throughout this period, the support offered to J’s mother helped her understand age and stage appropriate behaviours and responses to these, tools to manage risk, and her own emotional wellbeing.

Through frequent support visits, rapid responses when circumstances changed and active coordination of the wider professional network, Includem provided the continuity that enabled the wider network of services to reach and remain connected to J and his mother.

25 years

Working alongside families since 2000

9+

Local authority areas served today

12–25

The age range this offer must cover

Includem's Ask for the Programme for Government

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Scotland does not need a new model of support for children and young people. It needs to build on what works, ensuring that intensive, relational and community-based support is consistently available before needs escalate and restrictive interventions become necessary.

About Includem

Founded in 2000, Includem works alongside children, young people and families facing some of the greatest barriers to accessing consistent and trusted support.

For more than 25 years, our approach has been underpinned by “stickability”—building enduring relationships, remaining alongside children, young people and families through periods of crisis and providing support when it is needed rather than when traditional service structures dictate.

A Better Life

Our practice is delivered through Includem's structured, evidence-informed framework, which places trusted relationships at the heart of sustainable change.

Includem has extensive experience supporting children and young people involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, the justice system, including young people affected by exploitation, organised crime, serious violence and gang affiliation. Our experience of intensive community intervention contributed to the development and implementation of Scotland's Intensive Support and Monitoring Service, providing intensive one-to-one support as part of credible alternatives to secure care.

Sector Leading Services

Today, Includem delivers intensive whole family support across more than nine local authority areas. In February 2026, the Care Inspectorate described our services as “**sector leading**”, recognising the quality, consistency and impact of our relationship-based practice.

Our model combines flexible delivery, highly personalised support, sustained relationships and a national 24/7 helpline. We engage children, young people and families wherever support is needed—including homes and communities, schools, GP practices and police custody suites—and work alongside statutory and community partners to address the interconnected circumstances affecting their lives.

Our experience demonstrates that children and young people experiencing significant levels of complexity and risk can be supported within their families and communities when sufficiently intensive, flexible and relationship-based support is available.



GET IN TOUCH

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