

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will now hold an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland, in light of the recent reported comments by the NSPCC that the country lacks a clear understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse and exploitation are abhorrent crimes with devastating impacts on the victims and their families which is why the protection of children is an absolute priority the Government.

That is why we established the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group, of which NSPCC is a valued member. At a meeting today, the Strategic Group agreed next steps in its programme of work to improve our response to child sexual abuse including ongoing actions on workforce, data and consideration of mandatory reporting.

As set out to Parliament on several occasions, the Scottish Government will give every consideration to an inquiry if we feel it is necessary, it is the work of the Group as well as the ongoing work by Police Scotland, which will help inform our thinking.

25 Nov – Daily Record calls for national inquiry and reports FM has agreed to meet ‘Taylor’ (note no response as yet to FM letter).

25 Nov – Herald report NSPCC call ‘ministerial leadership’ on grooming gangs.

24 Nov – FM and Education/ Justice Ministers meet with Police Scotland.

23 Nov – Scottish Daily Express report Child Protection registration statistics show 666 cases of child exploitation reported since 2016 with Liam Kerr claiming “figures suggest...vile gangs operating in every part of Scotland”.

23 Nov – Mail on Sunday reports from third victim ‘Sarah’ who claims she was victim of ‘Asian grooming gang’ whilst in care in Edinburgh.

22 Nov – Susan Dalgety in Scotsman calls for urgent grooming gang inquiry.

21 Nov – Daily Mail report Liam Kerr calls for SG to expand remit of Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (SCAI) to investigate grooming gangs.

19 Nov - Scottish Daily Express, Holyrood report on Justice Secretary not present to answer urgent question in Parliament

18 Nov – Urgent question from Liam Kerr on Alexis Jay being “misrepresented”.

18 Nov – Herald speaks to ‘Talyor’ who accuses Scottish Government of playing party politics and calls for an independent look at files to tell the truth.

18 Nov – Record, Herald, Express report CabSec Justice ‘misled’ MSPs ‘urged to issue public apology after 'misrepresenting' Alexis Jay position during Victim’s Bill debate.

14 Nov – Scottish Daily Mail reports victim Fiona Goddard (one of four survivors who resigned from the UK grooming gang inquiry in Oct over Jess Phillip’s role) claims Pakistani “grooming gangs” in England took her to Scotland to be raped. Says she “would like to meet” the FM.

14 Nov – Scottish Conservatives launch campaign on their website for a Scottish grooming gang inquiry.

TOP LINES

Protecting children from harm is an absolute priority the Government. Sexual abuse and exploitation are abhorrent crimes with devastating impacts on the victims and their families.

- The Scottish Government takes the shocking and abhorrent abuse of children totally seriously.
- That is why we are taking action on a number of fronts with the expert National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group informing and strengthening our collective action against this horrendous form of abuse.
- This includes work to better equip frontline staff with the skills and knowledge to identify and disrupt harm, continued training on interagency referral discussions to better share information and put plans in place to protect vulnerable children, and rollout of the Bairns’ Hoose model of support for victims and their families.

- Work is also underway through our Online Safety Taskforce and continued engagement with the UK Government and online platforms to improve how we disrupt, prevent and respond to the increased risk of online harm against children.
- We also provide funding to a range of third-sector partners including NSPCC Childline and Barnardo's Scotland which provide resources to reduce harm, the Moira Anderson Foundation which provides counselling for child survivors of sexual abuse, and the Lucy Faithfull Foundation Scotland which delivers preventative and risk reduction interventions to children.

STRATEGIC GROUP

The national multi-agency Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group is considering previous inquiries, evidence and practices across social work, education, police and healthcare to prioritise and agree further actions and recommendations for national improvement and reform.

- The Group met earlier today, to review progress to and to discuss proposals in relation to mandatory reporting of child abuse and to improve scrutiny of local responses to child sexual abuse.
- The Group agreed that workstreams on improving workforce skills and enhancing data should continue at pace.
- These efforts, alongside those of Police Scotland, are integral to informing any future decision on whether a similar Inquiry is required in Scotland on group-related child sexual abuse.

CURRENT WORK

I met Police Scotland representatives earlier this week alongside the First Minister and Justice and Education Cabinet Secretaries to receive a progress update on their work on group-related child sexual abuse and exploitation.

- I am assured by their efforts to review investigations and the Government is clear that it is essential we build a clearer picture of the nature of such group-based abuse in Scotland, and consider the scale of this threat alongside other forms of child sexual abuse, including the growing risk of online harm.
- I was reassured that we have strong foundations in Scotland, including the ability of Police Scotland to take a national approach to this most serious of issues, including through the National Child Sexual Abuse Investigation Unit, which provides capacity to investigate complex cases, supporting local policing teams, and as a result of the inter-

agency referral discussion process, that brings together multiple agencies to consider child protection concerns.

- The National CSAE Strategic Group, which is co-chaired by Police Scotland also met earlier today with agreement that further work is required on this issue on data and scrutiny to better understand the scale and current response to group-related sexual harm.
- In support of this Ministers are giving urgent consideration to options to review how services respond to child sexual harm and identify opportunities for improvement.

CALL FOR A GROOMING GANG INQUIRY – EXISTING WORK

The Government is prepared to give every consideration to a grooming gang inquiry in Scotland if we feel it is necessary, and work is underway by Police Scotland to explore cases as part of that scrutiny.

- The recently published minutes of the Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group in October illustrate the scale of the work being done by Police Scotland:
 - Police Scotland has created a timeline of action on child sexual exploitation since 2012, and reviewed the actions taken - including training of officers and specialist roles in investigations. This concluded that there were no present day large-scale investigations known to Police Scotland that meet the definition of group-based abuse as outlined in Baroness Casey' audit in England and Wales. But the group also make clear that **[QUOTE] “there is no room for complacency on this most important issue”**.
 - Police Scotland has also reviewed five previous relevant large-scale investigations and reported that the expected investigative standards were applied to those inquiries.

DAILY EXPRESS REPORTING ON ‘CLUSTERS’ OF GANGS

The Scottish Government is continuously looking to improve local and national data and evidence around child protection.

- Analysis of supposed spikes or clusters of registrations linked to child sexual exploitation found that the main abuser was a parent in the vast majority of cases, in keeping with the national picture, therefore the evidence does not back up the reports that the annual Child Protection Statistics suggest that grooming gangs are operating within Scotland.
- This does not mean there are not grooming gangs, and multiple agencies are vigilant in this regard.

- A programme of work is also underway under the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group to improve data on Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. The annual Child Protection Statistics are being considered as part of this work, however it is clear that other data sources also need to be collated and analysed to build a more comprehensive picture.

CALLS TO WIDEN SCOTTISH CHILD ABUSE INQUIRY

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry currently taking place is one of the widest ranging ever undertaken in Scotland, and includes an extensive review of child protection policy and practice in Scotland.

- Our commitment to the survivors of in-care abuse is for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry to complete as soon as is reasonably practical.
- It would be for the Inquiry itself to consider how to take group-based abuse into account within the scope of its existing remit.

CALLS FOR MS CONSTANCE “PUBLIC APOLOGY” on ALEXIS JAY QUOTE

During Stage 3 of the Victims Witnesses and Justice Reform Bill, in replying to Mr Kerr’s amendment that the new post of Victims Commissioner should carry out research into child sexual abuse, the Justice Secretary raised awareness of the work led by Professor Alexis Jay, who now sits on our National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group.

- Ms Constance noted specifically that Professor Jay had been the chair of an independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales - and had put on record in the past that in regard to child sexual abuse and exploitation [QUOTE] “people should just get on with it”.
- Professor Jay minuted at the Strategic Group’s meeting in October, that the quote was correct, and was from January, and not made in relation to the amendment or the Victims Bill.
- Ms Constance did not state that Professor Jay was speaking directly about the amendment, she made a general point on Professor Jay’s views on calls for inquiries and that she also wanted to get on with the work needed to protect our children.

TIMELINE OF ALEXIS JAY REQUEST FOR CLARIFICATION

Professor Jay wrote to the Cabinet Secretary following the debate on the Victims and Witnesses Bill in September.

- Officials contacted Professor Jay who herself agreed with the approach to clarifying her quote at the October meeting of the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group.
- Professor Jay remains a very valued member of the Group, and we are grateful for her contributions alongside our other expert partners in our shared ambition to tackle this terrible form of child abuse.

CONSERVATIVE AMEND TO VWJR BILL NOT ESTABLISHING AN INQUIRY

Legislating through the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill was not the right route to address this most serious of issue.

- Liam Kerr's lodged amendment would have required the victims and witnesses commissioner - who has not yet been appointed - to undertake research to consider whether any further action was required.
- Because the commissioner is not in post, that is not something that could happen today. So it is a complete and utter distortion to say that there was a grooming gangs inquiry proposal in front of the Parliament that was not supported.
- There is already meaningful action progressing right now, through the national multi-agency Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group - which is best placed to assess and make recommendations for action to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation, rather than a Victims Commissioner.

MINUTES OF JULY MEETING SAYING "NO EVIDENCE OF ISSUES IN SCOTLAND"

The actual minute of the Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group meeting in July of this year, which Russell Findlay quoted last week at FMQs, says [QUOTE]:

- *"it was noted that while there is no current evidence that the issues identified in Casey are presenting in the same way in Scotland, **there is no room for complacency and the further work that had been discussed will provide a more comprehensive picture**".*

SURVIVOR VOICE

I recognise the vital role of survivors to inform our work to tackle Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. It is important we do this sensitively and with the utmost respect and consideration for those that have already suffered so much.

- The Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic group recognises the importance of survivor voice to inform their work, and its Chairs recently met with the Cross Party Group for Adult Survivors to ensure the survivor voice is represented in their work with a further meeting due to take place in December.
- Survivors were represented on a working group that has identified opportunities to improve workforce skills and training on child sexual abuse and exploitation, and the group will continue to consider how the experience of survivors informs and shape our collective efforts.
- Our services also continue to support child victims and witnesses through the Bairns' Hoose programme, backed by over £20m Scottish Government investment to date. This is key to our ambition to Keep The Promise and provides children and young people a safe space to access a system of holistic support comprising child protection, recovery, health and justice services.

NSPCC statement and SG response

Joanne Smith, NSPCC Scotland Policy and Public Affairs Manager, said:

“Child sexual abuse in all its forms devastates lives. Through our Helpline and Childline, we hear directly about the toll sexual abuse can take on a child’s mental and physical wellbeing. It is vital that we come together in Scotland to prevent child sexual abuse, and to ensure victims have access to the specialist support they need to help them recover.

“The formation of the Scottish Government’s National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group has been an important first step in helping to assess Scotland’s response to this issue, but much more needs to be done, which includes Ministerial leadership, obtaining a clearer picture of the problem and greater investment in prevention and recovery.

“Understanding the true scale and nature of child sexual abuse in Scotland is vital to developing effective prevention and response strategies. There is much work to be done in identifying and connecting data that’s already available to better understand the risks to children and where the gaps in our knowledge are.

“To date the system response to child abuse has focused largely on bringing perpetrators to justice and providing some children with therapy and support. But child sexual abuse is an endemic problem, and the complexities demand that this issue is given serious, concerted and sustained attention.

“As a society, we should be focusing our efforts on ensuring that child sexual abuse is prevented before it occurs. This includes making sure all pupils in Scotland receive appropriate, consistent and high-quality relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education to address both on and offline risk comprehensively.

“We all have a role to play in keeping children safe. Public, private, and voluntary sector agencies need to work together to prevent this devastating crime. By taking a public health approach to the prevention of sexual offending against children, they will be able to grow up in a safer Scotland protected from harm both offline and online.”

A Scottish Govt spokesperson said:

“The First Minister has been clear about how deeply saddened he is to hear of any cases of sexual abuse and his admiration for those with courage to speak out.

“That is why we formed the expert National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group which is uniquely positioned to assess current challenges and make informed recommendations to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation. We are grateful for NSPCC’s contribution as a member of the group, and for their contributions alongside our other expert partners in our shared ambition to tackle this terrible form of child abuse.

“The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring all pupils receive high quality relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education. Updated guidance on RSHP education for schools is being finalised, which recognises young people’s interactions with

the internet and the potential harms that it brings, informed by public consultation that included engagement with children and young people.”

Background

[The minutes from the October meeting](#) of the National CSAE Strategic Group show that Scottish Government officials and partners are also taking forward approaches to scrutinise practice on CSAE-based harm in Scotland and will engage the Group and local leadership on this work.

RSHP education aims to equip young people with knowledge and understanding of issues such as consent, appropriate relationships and boundaries to help them make informed choices that promote and protect their own and others’ health and wellbeing. Teachers have flexibility under Curriculum for Excellence to use their professional judgement to choose topics that meet the needs of children and young people.

There are a range of actions in schools to address gender based violence and sexual harassment including [Mentors in Violence Prevention \(MVP\) Scotland Programme](#), [Equally Safe at School](#), and the [Gender Based Violence in Schools Framework](#). These complement the [Key Messages for Young People on Healthy Relationships and Consent](#).