

**SCOTTISH LABOUR PARTY DEBATE –  
CALLS FOR GROOMING GANGS INQUIRY  
WEDNESDAY 3<sup>rd</sup> DECEMBER 16:00-17:10**

<b>What</b>	<p><b>Opposition (Scottish Labour Party) Business – Education and Skills</b></p> <p><b><u>S6M-19980</u> : Pauline McNeill: Transparency in Tackling Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse</b></p> <p>That the Parliament believes that there should be independent oversight of the Police Scotland review into group-based sexual exploitation of children, and calls on the Scottish Government to urgently clarify whether it will conduct an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland.</p> <p><b><u>S6M-19980.2</u>: As an amendment to motion S6M-19980 in the name of Pauline McNeill</b></p> <p>insert at end:  “and, in doing so, to give consideration to the continuing work of the statutory Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, which is considering the abuse of children in care in Scotland, the effects of that abuse and if changes to the law, policies or procedures are needed; recognises the independence of Police Scotland and that the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 stipulates that the Chief Constable is responsible for the policing of Scotland, and is accountable to the Scottish Police Authority, and acknowledges that the information and data being gathered by members of the National Child Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group is necessary to ensure that informed evidence-based decisions are taken on the need for further independent inquiries or reviews.”</p>
<b>Where</b>	Scottish Parliament
<b>When</b>	<p>The debate is scheduled between 16:00-17:10 on Wednesday 3 December 2025</p> <p>Ms Gilruth will open the debate – 5 minutes</p> <p>Ms Constance will close the debate – 5 minutes</p>
<b>Key Message(s)</b>	See annex A
<b>Supporting official</b>	<p>Section 38(1)(b) - Child Protection Unit mobile: Section 38(1)(b)</p> <p>Section 38(1)(b) -- Child Protection Unit</p> <p>Section 38(1)(b) – Police Sponsorship and Governance</p>

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**Annex A – Key Messages**

- Protecting children from harm is an absolute priority for me and my Government. Sexual abuse and exploitation are abhorrent crimes with devastating impacts on the victims and their families.
- The issue of grooming gangs is a very complex one, to which the Government is giving detailed consideration.
- I continue to give serious consideration to this important issue. Members, and the public, can have confidence and assurance that the Government is looking in detail at all these questions. Nobody is putting their head in the sand.
- The Police Scotland review is based on identifying cases of possible interest, followed by an initial review by trained police officers and investigators.
- I am assured that if evidence of group-based Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation is identified, cases will be referred to the National Crime Agency. Should they determine further investigative action is needed, cases would be referred back to Police Scotland.
- Police Scotland met with ministers last week and provided reassurance that we have strong foundations in Scotland, including the ability of the police to take a national approach to this most serious of issues through the National Child Sexual Abuse Investigation Unit.
- 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.
- 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.

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**Annex B – Overview of recent Parliamentary and Media activity**

**27 Nov** – ‘Taylor’ and her mother speaks to ITV news about her grooming gang experience in Glasgow. FM approached about ‘list of 46 children at risk of sexual exploitation’ from 2013 prepared by Police Scotland.

**27 Nov** - FM tells the Herald Government will come to a decision before Christmas on the subject of an Inquiry.

**25 Nov** – Daily Record calls for national inquiry and reports FM has agreed to meet ‘Taylor’. Meeting taking place on 9 December.

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

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

**23 Nov** – Mail on Sunday reports on third grooming gang victim ‘Sarah’

**22 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”.

**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.

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**Annex C – Overview of CSAE in Scotland**

**Child sexual abuse** is an act that involves a child under 16 years of age in any activity for the sexual gratification of another person, whether or not it is claimed that the child either consented or assented.

**Child sexual exploitation** as a form of child sexual abuse occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person under 18 into sexual activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.

- Section 30(b)(i)

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**Annex D – Lines to take**

**1. CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION**

**27 NOVEMBER FMQS EXTRACT:**

- The issue of grooming gangs is a very complex one, to which the Government is giving detailed consideration. On Monday, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise, I was briefed by Police Scotland and the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group on the prevalence of those issues in Scotland. The national group met to review those issues yesterday, and I have personally conducted a discussion on them with Professor Alexis Jay.
- I hope that putting all those details on the record today will give Pam Gosal and colleagues in Parliament the confidence and assurance that the Government is looking in detail at all those questions. Nobody is putting their head in the sand. These matters are being looked at in detail. There are complexities around the interaction of the call that has been made for us on the issue with the child abuse inquiry that we have already statutorily established, so there are no straightforward ways through the issue. However, I assure Parliament that the Government is giving every serious consideration to this important issue.

**Alexis Jay Times Interview Extracts – published 2 December**

A grooming gangs inquiry in Scotland must be set up urgently, a leading child abuse expert who investigated English scandals has said.

Professor Alexis Jay...said too little was known about child sexual exploitation north of the border and that an investigation could lead to a full-blown public inquiry.

“It could be a precursor to a public inquiry and that is why I think it is quite urgent to do soon.”

Jay said grooming gangs made up one component of child sexual exploitation, but another element was online, sometimes involving viewers around the world paying small sums to watch and direct child abuse.

“My point is we do not have a clear or reliable picture of what the present situation is in Scotland, therefore I think it is important that should be established.” She added: “My impression of having looked at a range of materials is at this point we do not know enough of the scale of child exploitation in Scotland.” A “deeper dive” looking at the extent and nature of the problem would inform the next stages, Jay said, later adding that an investigation “could inform other decisions” such as “whether an inquiry into child sexual exploitation was necessary”.

On hearing Jay’s support for a Scottish review, Reid said: “Alexis Jay is the UK’s premier expert on child abuse and her words really matter. Scottish government ministers were willing to quote her as the final word in the argument when they mistakenly thought she was opposed to an independent investigation, and so they would be nothing more than hypocrites if they failed to act now.

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**TOP LINES:**

**Protecting children from harm is an absolute priority for me and my Government. Child sexual abuse and exploitation are abhorrent crimes with devastating impacts on the victims and their families.**

- Our recognition of this abhorrent crime is why we formed the expert National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group which brings together key services and expert stakeholders including Police Scotland and Professor Alexis Jay to inform and strengthen our collective action against this horrendous form of abuse.
- It is uniquely positioned to assess current challenges and make informed recommendations to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation so we can ensure we are doing all we can to tackle it through prevention and early intervention.

**INDEPENDENT NATIONAL REVIEW:**

**We are announcing today that Ministers will be directing the Care Inspectorate, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland and other inspectorates involved in scrutinising health and education services, to lead an Independent National Review of responses to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation in Scotland.**

- The National Review is intended to ensure there is scrutiny of individual areas' and organisations' understanding and response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. That understanding and response will be evaluated by the Inspectorates, in a process which will also engage local authority Chief Officers of local authorities.
- Work is underway to finalise the specific approach to be taken by the Inspectorates. That will be set out in due course, but it is the Government's expectation that it is undertaken at pace to provide clarity on this issue and in a manner which will be shared regularly with Parliament.
- Professor Alexis Jay has had sight of the planned independent review proposal and has agreed to provide expert advice in both developing the methodology, and at key stages of the review process, drawing on her substantial experience.

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**CALLS FOR A GROOMING GANG INQUIRY:**

**I am prepared to give every consideration to a grooming gang inquiry in Scotland if we feel it is necessary.**

- There is currently a range of work underway to gather evidence and help inform any future decision.
- This is an absolute priority for me. I met Police Scotland representatives last week alongside Justice and Education Ministers 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.
- The Police Scotland review is based on identifying cases of possible interest, followed by an initial review by trained police officers and investigators.
- I am assured that if evidence of group-based Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation is identified, cases will be referred to the National Crime Agency. Should they determine further investigative action is needed, cases would be referred back to Police Scotland.
- I was also 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.

**CALLS TO JOIN INQUIRY IN ENGLAND AND WALES:**

**This inquiry has not yet been established, and furthermore is intended to be structured as a series of local investigations.**

- This approach is in-line with the Independent National Review proposal that we are taking forward which alongside the work of Police Scotland will provide a detailed picture of the scale and nature of group-based offending in Scotland.
- I am confident that this comprehensive approach, which Professor Jay is involved in, alongside her role providing expert advice to Ministers, will ensure that any decision on this issue is based on clear evidence of need and the best use of our collective resources and efforts as we seek to tackle all forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

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**ALEXIS JAY COMMENTS:**

**I spoke to Professor Alexis Jay who told me that at the current time we do not have an accurate picture of the nature and extent of child sexual abuse in Scotland, as indeed is the case elsewhere in the UK.**

- She went on to state that establishing this would allow us to make an informed decision about the necessity of an inquiry

**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 Chair 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.

**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.

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**POLICE SCOTLAND INVESTIGATION AND OVERSIGHT:**

**Ministers met Police Scotland representatives last week 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.
- The Police Scotland review is based on identifying cases of possible interest, followed by an initial review by trained police officers and investigators.
- I am assured that if evidence of group-based Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation is identified, cases will be referred to the National Crime Agency. Should they determine further investigative action is needed, cases would be referred back to Police Scotland.
- The Scottish Police Authority provides independent oversight of Police Scotland. It is responsible for the governance, oversight and administration of Police Scotland and holds the Chief Constable to account for the Policing of Scotland.

**The Scottish Police authority was established as a national public body under the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 and came into being on 1 April 2013.**

- It is responsible for the governance, oversight and administration of the Police Service of Scotland, the provision of Forensic Services and for Independent Custody Visiting Services.
- The Authority's main statutory functions as set out in Section 2 of the Act are to:
  - maintain the Police Service of Scotland;
  - promote the statutory policing principles;
  - promote and support continuous improvement in the policing of Scotland;
  - keep the policing of Scotland under review; and
  - hold the Chief Constable to account for the policing of Scotland
- The Authority is responsible for the allocation of the policing budget. The Authority's Chief Executive is designated by the Permanent Secretary of the Scottish Government as the Accountable Officer for this budget.

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**SURVIVOR VOICE AND INVOLVEMENT:**

**We are committed to ensuring that existing work and the future actions are developed with adults and children who have experienced abuse.**

- We have done this to date through the National Strategic Group, with its expert membership bringing wide experience of working with victims of abuse, and through engagement with the Cross Party Group in the Scottish Parliament on Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse, with the most recent meeting taking place yesterday.
- However, the National Group has agreed that a more strategic approach to engagement was required, and proposals will be discussed by the Group at its next meeting in January 2026.

**DATA ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION:**

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

- A programme of work is underway under the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group to improve data on Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation.
- This work will bring together experts to consider a range of data sources that can be collated and analysed to build a more comprehensive picture of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in Scotland.

**Although child sexual abuse and exploitation is an area of growing concern, we should also not lose sight on other forms of abuse which still account for the majority of child protection cases.**

- The most recent annual child protection statistics identified that the most common concerns for children registered during the year were domestic abuse (45% of children registered), neglect (42% of children registered), parental substance use (39% of children registered), parental mental ill health (37% of children registered), and emotional abuse (33% of children registered).
- We acknowledge that our data on child sexual abuse and exploitation must also improve however and a programme of work is underway under the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group to look into this.

**THIRD SECTOR FUNDING:**

**The Scottish Government has supported third sector organisations in work to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation.**

- In 2024/25 alone we provided around £570,000 to third sector organisations involved in child safeguarding and prevention of child sexual abuse and exploitation
- This includes funding to 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.
- £221,000 additional investment in 2025-26 in measures aligned with the priorities of the National CSAE Strategic Group, which include investment in Police Scotland capability and support for survivors.

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**POLICE FUNDING:**

**This year, we have increased police funding to £1.64 billion, an increase of £90m on 2024-25, to support police capacity and capability.**

- There are more police officers in Scotland, per 10,000 population, than in England & Wales and our officers receive the best basic pay in the UK, at the minimum and maximum of each rank.
- As of 31 March 2025, there were around 30 FTE officers per 10,000 population, compared to around 24 FTE officers per 10,000 in England & Wales.
- The Chief Constable has made clear that she intends to bring frontline policing to its strongest possible position and that frontline strength goes beyond an overall officer headcount.
- We continue to press the UK Government to fully fund the additional costs of employer national insurance contributions which have left public services in Scotland, including police, facing a £400m shortfall.

**In 2025-26, we have increased police funding to £1.64 billion, an increase of £90m on 2024-25, to support police capacity and capability.**

- We have increased capital funding to £70m for investment in the police asset base including estate, technology, fleet and investment in body worn video.
- We have increased police funding year on year since 2016-17, investing more than £14.6bn since the creation of Police Scotland in 2013.
- The savings delivered by the creation of Police Scotland will total over £2.5bn by 2026, more than double the level targeted in the outline business case for police reform (£1.1bn).
- The Scottish Government has also provided an additional £10m to support Police Scotland's reform and modernisation programme.
- We have provided £15.2m to cover the additional costs of the increase in employer National Insurance contributions.
- The SPA Board approved its 2025-26 Budget on 27 March 2025.

**SOCIAL WORK FUNDING:**

**We know there are systemic challenges affecting social work and recognise the need to support the workforce. We need to work differently to address the challenges facing this vital profession in Scotland.**

- The National Social Work Agency will be an executive agency of the Scottish Government and be accountable to Scottish Ministers and will be launched in Spring 2026.
- The National Social Work Agency will have oversight of social work and will lead and advance the profession in Scotland. It will raise the profile of social work and ensure Scotland has a national approach to the numbers of social workers needed now and in the future, and support implementation of national policy.
- Through the delivery of the Trauma Responsive Social Work Services Programme, we have invested in Scotland's social work services to enable professionals to both recognise where people are affected by trauma, and to respond in ways to support their recovery and reduce the risks of retraumatising.

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**Social workers are employed by local authorities and third sector organisations and it is an employer’s responsibility to ensure they have the necessary staff to deliver their statutory duties**

- The Scottish Government provides the majority of funding for local authority social workers through the local government settlement.
- The social work workforce is primarily employed by local authorities and in the third sector.
- We recognise that no one organisation can address the issues affecting the workforce which is why we have established the Scottish Social Work Partnership with COSLA and Social Work Scotland. This will bring both national and local government together to address workforce issues.

**The Scottish Government provides a £6.4 million to SSSC to support social work education and to help alleviate the financial pressure on students**

- We understand the financial pressures on student social workers, linked to cost-of-living increases. From this academic year 2025 to 2026, we have uplifted the value of the postgraduate social work bursary administered by the Scottish Social Services Council (the SSSC) to £11,000 per year of an eligible qualifying course.
- We have also funded the SSSC to provide an additional discretionary allowance of up to £1500 for postgraduate social work bursary recipients who are experiencing financial difficulties.
- In academic year 2024 to 2025 we introduced a Practice Learning Support Grant of £750 to assist social work students undertaking their assessed practice learning opportunities. Up to £2000 additional funding is also available to students living in or travelling to a practice learning opportunity in a remote area.
- As part of SSSC’s statutory duties, they receive £2.35m which they disburse to universities to ensure that employers providing practice learning opportunities are compensated for their role in supervising the student.

**EDUCATION FUNDING:**

**Education Budget:**

- The 2025-26 budget provides local government in Scotland with record funding of over £15 billion; one of the largest increases in funding in recent times; maintains our commitments to supporting 24-25 pay deals by baselining and reinstating funding; increases funding for local priorities; increases funding for teachers and additional support for learning; and there is additional funding to tackle the climate emergency.

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## **2. ONLINE SAFETY**

### **TOP LINES:**

#### **In January 2025, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise announced the establishment of an Online Safety Taskforce.**

- The Scottish Government Programme for Government 2025-26: Building the Best Future for Scotland, published on 6 May, includes the commitment to: take forward the Ministerial Online Safety Taskforce to strengthen our approach to keeping children safe online, providing oversight and direction across Scottish Government and identifying what more can be done to protect children and young people.
- The Taskforce has joint Ministerial leadership from the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety.
- Membership of the Taskforce comprises of senior policy officials covering a wide number of areas including children and families, justice, safer communities, mental health, equality, digital, learning etc.
- The Taskforce is currently agreeing its approach, reviewing activities taking place across SG to protect children and young people from online harm and considering priorities for action within the devolved powers that are available to the Scottish Government. This includes how engagement will take place with stakeholders with expertise and lived experience, including through existing groups, with academics and technical experts, relevant organisations and children and young people.

### **ONLINE SAFETY ACT:**

#### **Regulation of internet services is reserved to Westminster.**

- The Online Safety Act 2023 (“the Act”) received Royal Assent on 26 October 2023.
- The Act makes platforms – including social media, gaming services, dating apps, discussion forums and search services – legally responsible for protecting people in the UK from illegal content and content harmful to children, including harms that disproportionately affect women and girls.
- Since October 2023, Ofcom have launched a number of major consultations on the Act including:
  - a. The ‘Protecting people from illegal harms online’ consultation
  - b. ‘Guidance for service providers publishing pornographic content’ consultation
  - c. ‘Protecting children from harms online’ consultation
  - d. Online Safety – Additional Safety Measures
  - e. ‘Draft guidance for super-complaints under the Online Safety Act 2023’ consultation
- Scottish Government responses were developed for each of these consultations and approved by Ministers. All are or will be available on the Ofcom website.
- As of 17 March 2025, platforms have a legal duty to protect their users from illegal content online; Child Protection Codes of Practice came into force on 25 July 2025

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**TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED VAWG**

**Our Equally Safe strategy recognises that, just as violence against women and girls takes place in all communities and places, the same applies to all online spaces.**

- Action is therefore required across government, the wider public, third sector, industry, and wider society, to respond to the added risks this may pose to women, children, and young people.
- Recognising the cross-cutting nature of technology-facilitated VAWG, we have established a policy forum within the Scottish Government to better align and strengthen efforts across different policy areas.
- Services must be competent to support women, children, and young people experiencing VAWG in online settings, and to improve understanding of digital and online VAWG.
- Through our Delivering Equally Safe fund, we fund the South West Grid for Learning Trust Ltd (£262,178 over 4.5 years). This funding supports the delivery of practical support for people affected by intimate image abuse through the Revenge Porn Helpline. Additionally, the funded activity includes work to raise awareness and understanding of intimate image abuse and support available through the helpline in Scotland.
- We will continue to engage with Ofcom as it carries out its duties under the UK Online Safety Act.

**DIGITAL INCLUSION AND VAWG PROJECT:**

**Our Equally Safe Delivery plan includes actions to identify the digital inclusion needs of women and girls who have experienced technology facilitated VAWG and improve support available to them. We are working closely with the Mhor Collective and specialist VAWG services to take this forward.**

- We have established a VAWG Digital Inclusion Network made up of specialist VAWG services to consider how we can improve access to information and advice for survivors of technology-facilitated VAWG.
- This includes developing and sharing appropriate resources with the organisations supporting survivors and building the digital skills and confidence of staff and volunteers working in those organisations.
- We are funding the Mhor Collective, who have a long track record of digital inclusion work, to lead this work.
- Recognising the barriers that exist for certain groups, we are considering the digital inclusion needs of minority ethnic women and girls, women involved in commercial sexual exploitation and women in rural and remote areas.

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**3. MANDATORY REPORTING**

**Protecting children from harm is a key priority for the Scottish Government.**

- In Scotland all healthcare and education professionals already have a duty to report child abuse. However, we are considering the case for a broader, statutory requirement of mandatory reporting of child abuse and we are engaging closely with key stakeholders, including the Cross Party Group on Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse, as well as Police Scotland, Social Work Scotland and Child Protection Committees Scotland and others on this issue.
- **The Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation National Strategic Group has agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to develop options for a Scottish mandatory reporting model.**
- We will also consider all relevant recommendations coming out of the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, which is already one of the widest ranging inquiries ever undertaken in Scotland and includes an extensive review of child protection policy and practice and will report with recommendations for further development.

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**4. BAIRNS HOOSE / RECOVERY**

**Bairns' Hoose provides Scotland with an opportunity to offer a genuinely child-centred approach to delivering justice, care and recovery for children.**

- We recognise the profound impact that experiencing abuse can have on children. Bairns' Hoose embeds a whole system, trauma-informed response that minimises the risk of traumatisation and supports children's recovery and wellbeing.
- We know that without timely, co-ordinated support, impacts of abuse and trauma can disrupt emotional, cognitive, and social development which can persist into adulthood, increasing the risk of poor outcomes across education, health and wellbeing.
- The overall vision of Bairns' Hoose is that all children in Scotland who have been victims or witnesses of abuse or violence which has caused, or is likely to cause, significant harm will have access to trauma-informed recovery, support and justice.
- The challenges children face in interacting with the justice system has been one of the driving forces behind Bairns' Hoose and continues to be integral in our approach to implementation.
- In working towards a national Bairn's Hoose model, we work closely with delivery partners across the sector including, police, prosecutors and those delivering vital support services for child victims and witnesses.
- Bairns' Hoose is based on the internationally recognised Barnahus model, adopted in over 30 European countries. Evidence shows it reduces trauma, improves access to justice, and delivers coordinated, child friendly support – making it a leading example of best practice in child-centred justice.

**Bairns' Hoose can be an important part of our efforts to better address the significant impacts of child sexual abuse and exploitation.**

- It will play a vital role in enabling us to ensure that children who have been subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation are safe and receive the support they need.
- Children who have been victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, and who are at significant risk of harm, will be able to provide their statement in an environment that feels comfortable and supportive. This can help them provide their best evidence, enabling agencies to determine where safeguarding measures may be needed and whether criminal charges are appropriate.
- Where criminal charges are brought, Bairns' Hoose can ensure that children and their families are supported throughout their interactions with the justice system, in some cases providing a venue from which children can give their evidence for trial.
- Bairns' Hoose will also provide access to support services which will help children and non-abusing family members to recover from the impacts of the trauma experienced as a result of the abuse.

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**5. 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.**

- The Inquiry is examining the nature and extent of abuse of children whilst in care in Scotland from within living memory up to 17 December 2014.
- Our commitment to the survivors of in-care abuse is for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry to complete as soon as is reasonably practical.
- Baroness Casey's report specifically highlights the vulnerability of children in care to sexual exploitation and is likely to be a further source of evidence for the Scottish Inquiry to draw on.
- It would be for the Inquiry itself to consider how to take group-based abuse into account within the scope of its existing remit.

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**6. CHILD TRAFFICKING / CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION**

**A child victim of human trafficking and exploitation is a victim of child abuse and the child's safety remains the principle consideration.**

- Our children and young people have the right to be cared for, protected from abuse, harm and exploitation, and to grow up in a safe environment in which their rights and needs are respected.
- Child exploitation is complex, and often hidden, and we are working with partners to take action to ensure that children and young people at risk of, and victims of, abuse are identified, supported and offered high-quality, timely support.

**Child trafficking and exploitation victims must be cared for and supported within the context of Scotland's child protection system and the national Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) approach.**

- In August 2023 Scottish Government published the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 – Updated 2023 which includes detailed advice for all practitioners who support children and families on identifying and supporting victims of human trafficking and exploitation, including criminal and sexual exploitation.
- In all cases where it is suspected that a child may be a victim of exploitation or trafficking, the child's safety is paramount and child protection procedures must be activated immediately and an inter-agency referral discussion (IRD) should be undertaken.
- To support partners with implementation of IRDs risk assessment processes, the Scottish Government has developed and piloted a training course which will be rolled out Scotland-wide this year. This training reinforces the message that child criminal exploitation is a child protection issue.

**In June 2023, the Scottish Government published Practitioner Guidance on Criminal Exploitation on behalf of the Serious Organised Crime Taskforce.**

- The Guidance aims to support a shared understanding of criminal exploitation of children and adults, and to help practitioners and frontline staff to identify and support those at risk from serious organised crime and criminal exploitation.
- Police Scotland works closely with agencies across Scotland, across the UK, and internationally to disrupt the supply of drugs and dismantle the organised crime groups responsible.
- This has delivered significant success particularly through UK-wide disruption activities which has seen the removal of significant quantities of illegal drugs from our streets and has led to numerous arrests in Scotland as well as the seizure of firearms, ammunition and explosives.

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**7. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS**

**Violence against women is totally abhorrent and unacceptable which is why we are delivering our Equally Safe Strategy, Scotland’s strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls.**

- Equally Safe sets out a vision to prevent violence from occurring in the first place, build the capability and capacity of support services, and strengthen the justice response to victims and perpetrators.
- We announced a **£2.4m uplift** to the Delivering Equally Safe Fund for 2025/26, to allow all fund recipients to continue the vital work they undertake to prevent violence and support survivors.
- This increase will bring the total Scottish Government investment in Delivering Equally Safe up to **£21.6m for the year ahead**, supporting 115 projects from 107 organisations.
- Between October 2021 and March 2024, the Delivering Equally Safe-funded organisations have supported **67,004 adults, children and young people**. The stories of the transformative impact on their lives demonstrate the importance of the work.
- We awarded **£48m to victims’ organisations** for the period 2022-2025 under our Victim Centred Approach Fund as part of our commitment to putting victims at the heart of the justice system.
- This fund now forms part of our Fairer Funding pilot, under which the intent is that recipients will continue to receive awards for the next two financial years (1 April 2025 to 31 March 2027).
- This means we will provide £32m to 23 organisations between 2025-2027, including £12m for specialist advocacy support for survivors of gender-based violence.

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## **8. CHILD PROTECTION PROCESSES**

**We are committed to ensuring that robust child protection measures are in place across Scotland and always followed.**

- National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021, updated in 2023, sets out the responsibilities of everyone who works with children, young people and their families.
- This guidance makes clear that all concerns that a child has been abused or is at risk of abuse must be reported to the police or social work.
- Initial local implementation of the Guidance was supported for two years by a national multi-agency group, coordinated by Scottish Government officials and chaired by the Deputy Chief Social Work Advisor. The Implementation Group concluded on September 2023.
- A CELCIS evaluation report published in March 2024 highlighted significant progress by local areas despite challenging fiscal and workforce circumstances, including improved alignment between local child protection processes, GIRFEC and The Promise.
- The Guidance supports improved cross-agency working and outcomes for children at risk, with high quality and consistent collective risk assessment through Interagency-Referral Discussions (IRDs) being a central component of the required local service development.
- The Guidance is prescriptive in how IRDs should be undertaken and provides an agreed process for coordinated decision-making about further investigation and action as may be needed to ensure the safety of the child or young person
- All local authorities in Scotland operate an IRD protocol to identify and respond to children at risk of harm. Following a successful pilot phase the Scottish Government is now working with police, social work and health professionals to roll out a national IRD training course to further improve practice in this area.

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**9. EDINBURGH COUNCIL – LEADERSHIP OF CHILDREN’S SOCIAL WORK SERVICES**

2 December – Care Inspectorate publish report on the leadership of children’s social work services in the City of Edinburgh Council. The Care Inspectorate was requested to undertake an inspection by the Minister for Children and Young People and The Promise, following reported concerns about the culture and leadership within City Of Edinburgh Council in the last few years, including evidence given at the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry.

**The wellbeing and safety of children at risk of harm is of paramount importance.**

- While the Care Inspectorate report highlights promising improvements around governance, reporting and performance frameworks, there are clearly significant ongoing challenges around trust, culture and meaningful engagement between senior leadership and staff at the City of Edinburgh Council.
- Senior council leaders must demonstrate leadership and the capacity for sustained improvement as they urgently address the issues raised.
- The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise wrote to the council leader on 2 December to request an update on progress. The Scottish Government will support the council and partners to make the necessary improvements in any way we can.

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**10. PE1979 / COMPLAINTS AND WHISTLEBLOWING**

PE1979: an ongoing petition calling for an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate concerns about the alleged mishandling of child safeguarding enquiries by public bodies.

**Protecting children from harm is a key priority for the Scottish Government.**

- Officials are actively considering the concerns raised by the petitioners and Ministers have also responded to the Petition to note that The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry is undertaking an extensive review of child protection policy and practice in Scotland and will report with recommendations for further development in due course.
- Evidence from Inquiry hearings and reports are being considered as part of ongoing improvement work. We have also considered learning from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales.
- Widening the Scottish Inquiry would delay the publication of findings and recommendations which would mean we would fail to meet our commitment to survivors of in-care abuse that we will learn from their experience and address the systemic failures which existed.
- The updated National Child Protection Guidance supports local areas to develop effective, evidence-based responses to all forms of child abuse and neglect. We are working with partners across Scotland to implement the guidance and support consistent and robust child protection practices across Scotland.
- Issues related to complaints and whistleblowing in education were discussed at the Education and Childcare Assurance Board in September 2025. It was a helpful discussion where the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills underlined the assurance she requires about the robustness of these important processes.
- This issue has also been discussed by the National Public Protection Leadership Group who acknowledged the challenges with current whistleblowing procedures, especially in terms of clarity and confidence among staff to raise concerns and agreed to support further discovery work on this issue.

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**Annex E – Labour Party Press Release**

Scottish Labour has today demanded the SNP Government vote to back calls for clarity on the process for an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland.

There must also be independent oversight of the Police Scotland review into group-based sexual exploitation of children, the party will say.

It comes just weeks after Scotland's Justice Secretary, Angela Constance, failed to appear at the Scottish Parliament to answer an Urgent Question on what the Government's response is to reports that she misrepresented the views of Professor Alexis Jay on the issue.

The SNP Government has so far refused to back calls for a national inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland and refused to allow an independent body to review the evidence for one.

During a Scottish Parliament debate, Ms Constance told MSPs that Prof. Jay "shares my view and has put on the record and stated to the media that she does not support further inquiries into child sexual abuse and exploitation, given the significant time and resource already spent in the review that she led, the Casey audit and other reviews".

However, minutes from the Scottish Government's National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group meeting in October this year, of which Prof. Jay is a member, stated: "During the debate on the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill in Parliament on 16 September, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice quoted the views of Professor Alexis Jay on calls for further inquiries into child sexual abuse.

"Co-chair clarified that Professor Jay shared these views in January of this year in the context of her work on the Independent Inquiry in England and Wales and was not related to the debate on the Victims Bill or the position in Scotland."

In a parliamentary debate tomorrow (Wednesday), Scottish Labour will call for the Scottish Government to "urgently clarify whether it will conduct an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland".

The party will also call for independent oversight of the Police Scotland review into group-based sexual exploitation of children.

Scottish Labour justice spokesperson Pauline McNeill MSP said: "We urgently need clarity on this vitally important issue.

"Victims of child abuse must be at the very forefront of everything we do. However, it is clear that the Justice Secretary has not provided an accurate representation of the views expressed by the eminent Professor Jay.

"Angela Constance must set out the Scottish Government's position on this crucial issue, to ensure that we can have confidence in deliberations going forward.

"We are also calling for there to be independent oversight of Police Scotland's review of historic and current cases, so that they are not effectively marking their own homework.

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“This issue is far too important to be muddied by misquotes and misinformation. The Justice Secretary must provide an explanation as to why she appears to have painted an inaccurate picture of Professor Jay’s views – and indeed, tell us whether the Scottish Government will conduct an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland.”