

PE2190/C: Hold an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills written submission, 2 March 2026

Dear Convenor

Thank you for your letter of 29 January 2026 regarding PE2190: *Hold an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland*.

In response to the Committee's question please find attached the text of my statement to Parliament today on Protecting Children from Harm.

I have also noted the Committee's ongoing consideration of PE1979: *Establish an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate concerns about the alleged mishandling of child safeguarding enquiries by public bodies*.

Yours sincerely,

JENNY GILRUTH

Presiding Officer,

Safeguarding Scotland's children from harm is one of the utmost responsibilities of the Scottish Government.

Since my last parliamentary statement in December, I have spent further time engaging directly with survivors of child sexual abuse.

Their testimonies are shocking in the extreme.

They tell a story of a system which, far too often, does not believe young people.

These stories, each unique, are bound by a common thread of power being used to abuse, coerce and control.

Survivors have, quite rightly, called for meaningful change.

They want decisive action to uncover, to disrupt and ultimately to prevent these horrendous crimes from ever happening in the first instance.

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry has taken extensive evidence, publishing a number reports into the abhorrent historic abuse of children. I strongly welcome Lady Smith's work in Phase 10, which confirmed that it will be able to hear and act upon evidence relating to grooming and group-based child sexual abuse, where this falls within the Inquiry's terms of reference. This work remains vitally important, and I commend the Inquiry for their approach.

I welcome the updates provided to the Education Committee this morning on the completion of the first phase of Police Scotland's review work and on the ongoing delivery of the National Review.

Some commentary has suggested that the findings of the national review will only be available once the Review is fully complete; I want to be clear with Parliament and survivors today – that is not the case. Phase one of the National Review will report to Ministers by this Summer.

The work of the national review is imperative in providing assurance that improvements will be made at local level.

It will also be instructive given the challenges on reporting and recording of child sexual abuse at local level.

I again reiterate that **if any harm or risk to a young person is identified at any point during the National Review, then this will immediately be escalated through the appropriate channels**, including to Police Scotland as required.

Presiding Officer, I remind Parliament today that our local authorities do already have statutory responsibilities to identify, report and take action to protect any child who is at risk of harm. As a society we all have a responsibility for protecting our children. However, as I made clear in December, there is limited evidence at the current time on the nature and on the extent of group-based child sexual abuse in Scotland.

It is, therefore, imperative that this evidence base is established at pace, to clarify next steps, and to lessen prolonged suffering for the victims of these crimes.

I know that Members and survivors of child sexual abuse want to see accountability and improvements as quickly as possible.

That sense of urgency is shared by Government.

In December I made it clear that the Government would keep the decision on whether or not to establish an inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse under review.

I committed to return to Parliament in February with a more substantive update.

Accordingly, I have been considering this issue very carefully, looking at the evidence available – which continues to evolve - and importantly, listening to the voices of survivors and experts.

Presiding Officer,

To that end I can confirm to Parliament today of my intention to establish a statutory public inquiry, under the Inquiries Act 2005.

This public inquiry will consider directly Scotland's response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation.

I have asked Professor Alexis Jay to lead the inquiry, and I am pleased to confirm that she has agreed to do so.

Professor Jay has unrivalled experience of chairing both statutory and non-statutory inquiries relating to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Professor Jay will have the authority to identify and to take forward any additional or accelerated areas of work she considers necessary, within the scope of finalised Terms of Reference which will now be developed with her input.

Professor Jay will draw on her experience leading the Independent Inquiry in Rotherham, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales, as well as her vast experience in other areas of child protection drawing on over 30 years' of professional experience in social work.

Professor Jay will immediately cease her role providing advice to the National Review, in order to maintain the strict independence of this work, and the inquiry.

While the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry are being developed, Professor Jay will remain Chair of the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group, and these arrangements will accordingly be reviewed going forward.

However, I am of the view that the announcement of an Independent Public Inquiry is critical to maintaining public confidence in the work I have previously announced in December, and to encourage an openness and participation from victims and survivors.

The inquiry will be distinct from the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry. It will focus specifically on group-based child abuse and exploitation, whereas the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, while it is looking at these issues, has a far broader remit.

It will focus on the potential prevalence of group-based abuse now and in the more recent past, whether brought forward by survivors or in relation to the findings from the National Review or, Police Scotland's review of case files.

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry will remain critical. As I have made clear previously to Parliament, the existing Inquiry has heard and continues to take evidence in relation to group-based harm and child sexual exploitation of children in care, wherever this abuse took place. It will also in due course, make recommendations about our system of protection of children in care, based on all the evidence that it has heard.

I met with Lady Smith this morning, alongside the Deputy First Minister, to inform her of the decision to announce the new inquiry, and I have confirmed that the new inquiry will not duplicate the ongoing valuable work of the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry in this area.

Presiding Officer, taking the decision now to establish an inquiry also enables us to make progress in parallel with the ongoing National Review and the Police Scotland review of cases.

And establishing this inquiry will also provide additional assurance to survivors that there will be independent scrutiny of the findings of the National Review.

While I, Professor Jay, and the Inspectorates themselves are confident in the robustness of these processes, which are very much operationally independent, we know this additional layer of independence will provide survivors further assurance and confidence.

Presiding Officer, for many survivors, distrust is rooted in lived experience: past failures to protect children from organisations, to address allegations, or to take concerns seriously. There is a perception that institutions act defensively to protect organisational reputations, rather than prioritise truth-seeking or accountability. This has been a consistent theme in my discussions with survivors.

All too often, when victims spoke up, institutions knew. And institutions with the powers to act – and importantly, the powers to help – all too often did not act to prevent abuse from occurring.

The inquiry will, therefore, have the fullest investigatory powers required. With Professor Alexis Jay as chair, I hope this provides survivors and the public with confidence in the process and the necessary, in my view, Independence of this work.

Survivor engagement was a key theme in my update to Parliament in December. Getting this right is imperative.

I am therefore pleased to confirm to Parliament today, that John O'Brien, who led the Truth Project in England and Wales, has agreed to lead the development and delivery of a Truth Project in Scotland.

John O'Brien brings a wealth of experience and expertise in delivering a successful project, which has already supported thousands of survivors in England and Wales, to support our work.

I met with Mr O'Brien last week to understand more about the approach he built to support the Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales.

Our approach in Scotland will seek to mirror this work to ensure that we hear from survivors and allow them the opportunity to share their experiences, helping to inform policy change and importantly, providing access to support. The National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group will also consider how it can engage survivors in its work.

Presiding Officer, given the scale and costs of public inquiries to the public purse, this is not a step that the Government has taken lightly.

Nonetheless, I consider the establishment of a public inquiry is now an essential one.

Whilst it will be for the Chair to consider, in our discussions thus far, I know that Professor Jay wants to ensure that the inquiry is carried out at pace. Presiding Officer, this Government is determined to act decisively to protect children from the horrendous harm of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The work of the National Review and Police Scotland's ongoing review of cases of group-based abuse will ensure that any improvements must be made in practice or action being brought to bring perpetrators to justice is taken as quickly as possible. The Truth Project will ensure that the voice of survivors is central to our collective efforts so that every action is informed by their experience and brings about the changes they have told me must be made.

The involvement of John O'Brien and his particular expertise and experience of delivering a successful project to support the one we establish in Scotland will be essential. And the statutory Inquiry chaired by Professor Alexis Jay will contribute to an even more comprehensive response.

In closing, it is imperative that all organisations with responsibilities for safeguarding work to ensure our children are protected use their powers to do so.

We know that has not always been the case in the past. We also know, that children and young people have been let down as a result and lives – frankly – have been ruined.

Announcing an Independent public inquiry today will not cure all which has come before. But it is a statement of intent from this Government that we will leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of justice for survivors of child sexual abuse.

Indeed, those brave Survivors should expect no less.