

PE2196/B: Address early sexual offending in Scotland

Scottish Government written submission, 14 November 2025

Does the Scottish Government consider the specific asks of the petition to be practical or achievable? If not, please explain why.

The petition calls on the Scottish Government to undertake a range of actions to act on early sexual offending by young people, many of which we do, see next question. The clarity of the petition is not clear to it is hard to assess if practical or achievable eg what “tougher action” or “real support” refers to. We would also note decisions on charging and sentencing are made by independent bodies such as Police Scotland and Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service.

What, if any, action the Scottish Government is currently taking to address the issues raised by this petition and is any further action being considered that will achieve the asks of this petition?

1. Taking tougher action on gateway offences such as unsolicited sexual images and peer assaults

Scotland's Whole System Approach (WSA) provides a framework for responding to children and young people involved in offending behaviour promoting early intervention, diversion and proportionality rather than punitive measures. Through Early and Effective Intervention (EEI) concerns about a young person's harmful or sexual behaviour are addressed promptly via multi-agency discussion to identify the most appropriate, least intrusive response.

Grounded in Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC), the approach ensures that support is coordinated and centered on the child. Multi-agency collaboration between social work, education, health and police is essential to assess risk, provides support, and ensure both public protection and positive outcomes for the young person. The emphasis is on prevention, rehabilitation and capacity for change, with formal justice measures reserved for the most serious or persistent behaviours.

Equally Safe focuses on gender-based violence, primarily by men against women and girls. It challenges gender inequality and harmful norms, strengthens legal protections, and equips public sector staff to support those affected. Funded work aligns with the strategy's outcomes and priorities.

Bairns' Hoose provides a child-centred approach to delivering justice, care and recovery for children and will ensure that any child under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour may have caused serious harm or abuse, including sexual harm, will have access to trauma-informed, needs-focused support and recovery. The Bairns' Hoose provides an environment in which the context of the behaviour which caused harm can be understood and investigated. This supports

victims' rights to an investigation whilst ensuring that positive interventions can be made to minimise the risk of further harmful behaviour.

2. Educating young people about consent and online harms at school

PSE (Personal and Social Education) is a taught subject which covers aspects of health and wellbeing. Through Curriculum for Excellence, health and wellbeing is spread right across the curriculum and it is one of the three core areas that are the responsibility of all staff in the school, the other two areas being literacy and numeracy. Schools are encouraged to develop the curriculum to suit their local context and meet the needs of children and young people. It is good practice for schools to consult with children and young people and respond to their views appropriately, to ensure this meets the needs of all children and young people in the school or educational setting.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring all children and young people receive high quality relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education, which is an integral part of the health and wellbeing area of the curriculum. The curriculum sets out specific learning outcomes on respect, boundaries and behaviours and what constitutes a healthy relationship both online and offline. They also include learning outcomes on consent, gender stereotypes, power dynamics in relationships and where to access support if required. To support learning and teaching, Education Scotland provides links to [RSHP lesson plans](#) that include learning about [Online abuse and exploitation](#), [Child Sexual Exploitation](#), [Identify, understand and respond appropriately to sexual behaviours in young people](#) and the importance of the principle of consent.

The Scottish Government has also published a resource for professionals to help them support young people aged 11-18 in their understanding of [Healthy relationships and consent: key messages for young people resource](#).

In addition to this, we fund Rape Crisis Scotland to help deliver programmes which aim to tackle sexual harassment and violence in our schools. Young people can find help and advice on dealing with rape or sexual harassment on the Young Scot website or from their local Rape Crisis centre.

Whilst regulation of internet and online service providers remains a reserved matter, we continue to liaise closely with the UK Government and Ofcom on the implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023. Via our Delivering Equally Safe Funding, £110,822 has been provided to the South West Grid for Learning Trust Ltd to deliver helpline advice to those who have experienced Intimate Image Abuse and improve awareness and understanding throughout Scotland. Our [Safer.Scot](#) page includes advice and information on intimate image abuse.

Sextortion has a devastating impact on young people and their families, and we know that it can be a difficult topic to discuss, or that families are unaware it even goes on. Police Scotland have information for victims and links to support services on their [website](#). Last year the Scottish Government worked with Police Scotland and Fearless, Crimestoppers' youth service, to launch a powerful social media campaign across Scotland to help protect young people from sextortion and to raise

awareness for adults who work with and look after young people. In June 2025, the partnership launched a new [Sextortion educational resource](#). The resource is focused on raising awareness of sextortion amongst young people. Work continues through the establishment of a national oversight group.

We are investing in the ongoing delivery of the Mentors in Violence Prevention peer mentoring Programme in secondary schools, co-ordinated through Education Scotland (ES) as the national co-ordination delivery team. The messaging is also being directed towards primary school aged practitioners so they can become knowledgeable and confident to address gender based violence behaviour and attitudes being seen in younger aged children. MVP, through peer education, explores gender norms and how they relate to violence, particularly gender-based violence. Some of the scenarios look at issues connected to online harm.

Action Plan for the Violence Prevention Framework included an action for the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit to lead work with YouthLink Scotland and Medics Against Violence to identify opportunities to specifically target the effects of social media on violence (Action 6). Leading to the development of a campaign with resources [Quit Fighting for Likes](#) to support young people to think about and discuss attitudes, behaviours and the impact around the filming, sharing and liking of violent incidents online. It launched on 11 September 2024, and ran initially for 4 weeks. A week of Action was held on 10-14 February 2025 (to coincide with Safer Internet Day on 11 Feb) The campaign was rerun again across social media to coincide with the Easter holidays in March 2025 and will be re-run again in autumn of this year.

3. Creating a culture of parental accountability

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of preventing children and young people from being involved in harmful behaviour, including online. We are committed to promoting the wellbeing and safety of all children through a rights-based approach, as set out in our national child protection policies and the GIRFEC framework.

Prevention is key to tackling harmful behaviour, including online and we are taking a range of actions to raise awareness about online safety with parents and carers, including providing advice and support through the Scottish Government's Parent Club website: [Online Behaviour and Safety Hub](#) and [Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Hub](#) and through Education Scotland's [Parentzone Scotland](#).

4. Introducing a youth monitoring register for offences committed by young people

We have no intention of introducing a youth monitoring register, however under 18s are still subject to the sex offenders register. Any individual convicted of a relevant offence under Schedule 3 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 is subject to the Sex Offender Notification Requirements (commonly referred to as the sex offender register). The 2003 Act also provides that any offence can lead to an individual being subject to the notification requirements if the sentencing court determines that there is "a significant sexual aspect to the offender's behaviour in committing the

offence". The length of time that an individual is subject to the Sex Offender Notification Requirements is determined by the sentence received. This is for all people including those under 18.

Where a child requires ongoing compulsory measures to manage concerns about their behaviour, they can be referred to the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration, and may become subject to a Compulsory Supervision Order made by a Children's Hearing. The grounds of referral to a Children's Hearing include where a child has committed an offence, but can also apply where the child's conduct has had, or is likely to have, a serious adverse effect on the health, safety or development of the child or another person.

5. Providing real support for victims of all sexual offences

We are providing £32m to 23 organisations between 2025-2027 under our Victim Centred Approach Fund as part of our commitment to putting victims at the heart of the justice system. This includes funding for two Victim Navigators who have provided support ongoing victim support in this case. Funding over the two-year period includes £12m for specialist advocacy support for survivors of gender-based violence and over £8m to support victims of human trafficking and exploitation.

Through the Bairns' Hoose programme (backed by over £20 million Scottish Government investment to date), we support child victims by providing, children and young people with a safe space to access a system of holistic support comprising child protection, recovery, health and justice services.

The Scottish Government introduced the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform Bill to the Scottish Parliament in April 2023. Parliament agreed to pass the Bill on 17 September and it gained Royal Assent on 30 October, becoming the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act. The Act contains a package of reforms that will improve the experiences of victims of witnesses in Scotland's justice system, with a focus on sexual offences. The measures in the legislation that will particularly benefit victims of sexual offences include:

- a new national Sexual Offences Court, which will not only support the development of specialist and trauma-informed approaches to the management of sexual offences cases, but will also help to identify and resolve issues that delay cases coming to trial.
- an automatic right to independent legal representation in sexual offence cases when applications are made to lead evidence of victims' sexual history or character in sexual offence cases.
- an automatic right of lifelong anonymity for victims in sexual offence and certain other cases.
- a legal right for victims of rape and serious sexual offences cases to access their court transcripts free of charge.
- strengthened protection for victims through reforms to non-harassment orders and other protective orders.

We are currently working with stakeholders on implementation of the Act, which will be phased to ensure that reform is carefully managed and does not disrupt the operation of the system.

Is there any further information the Scottish Government wish to bring to the Committee's attention, which would assist it in considering this petition?

The Expert Group on Preventing Sexual Offending Involving Children and Young People was established in 2018 to respond to evidence relating to the occurrence of harmful sexual behaviours among children and young people and to consider proposals for further action to better prevent and respond to such behaviours. The group was wound down and published their [report](#) in 2020, detailing recommendations to prevent harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people. The Scottish Government's Child Protection Unit then set up the Harmful Sexual Behaviour Delivery Group with cross-sectoral representation, from education, social work, health, CPCScotland, Police Scotland, COPFS, COSLA, and the third sector, to implement the report's recommendations. Examples of completed work include: Guidance for staff in education and training settings, inclusion of 'Child displaying HSB' as a vulnerability factor/concern at child protection registration, within the revised Minimum Dataset for collection by Child Protection Committees and delivery of the NSPCC HSB Audit Tool pilot across three Child Protection Committees. The delivery group was wound down in 2024.

In 2024, the group also developed [guidance](#) for frontline practitioners across Scotland, providing professionals with the information and tools to identify what sexual behaviour in children and young people is harmful, steps they should take if they identify harmful behaviour, and what approaches can help to support prevention of this behaviour.

To support implementation of the guidance, Scottish Government provides funding to the Lucy Faithfull Foundation Scotland (a charity dedicated solely to the prevention of child sexual abuse), and Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) to run a practitioner forum for staff who work with children and young people.

Harmful sexual behaviour learning and development materials have also been developed by CELCIS (Centre for excellence for children's care and protection)_to further support practitioners to identify and intervene when children and young people display harmful sexual behaviour.

Child Protection Unit, Children's Rights, Protection and Justice