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Douglas Ross MSP

Convener

Education, Children and Young People Committee

3 February 2026

Dear Convenor,

## **EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) ACT 2025 IMPLEMENTATION – SSI EVIDENCE SESSION 7 JANUARY – FURTHER INFORMATION**

## **SCOTTISH BUDGET SCRUTINY 2026-27 — EVIDENCE SESSION 21 JANUARY – FURTHER INFORMATION**

Thank you for inviting me to give evidence at the Education, Children and Young People Committee on 7 January 2026 in relation to two SSIs being taken forward to enable implementation of the Education (Scotland) Act 2025. During this session I was asked questions relating to portfolio interests beyond these SSIs, and this letter provides further information in response to those.

I also welcomed the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee on 21 January 2026 in relation to the Budget 2026-27. This letter also responds to points that arose during that evidence session.

## **EDUCATION (SCOTLAND) ACT 2025 IMPLEMENTATION**

### Accreditation and Qualifications Quality Assurance Reviews

The review of quality assurance processes for Qualifications Scotland qualifications, including National Qualifications, will be the first of these two reviews to be undertaken. Ministers are required to appoint an independent advisor to lead this review as soon as reasonably practicable after the relevant provisions are commenced on 1 February 2026, and no later than 3 months after this date. I will write to the Committee on this appointment as soon as I have received further advice from officials.

The Act also requires that a review of the scope and location of the accreditation function must be undertaken as soon as reasonably practicable after the expiry of the “review period” of two years after the function commences on 1 February 2026. Undertaking the review after this period will ensure it can fully appraise the new governance arrangements for the function within Qualifications Scotland and be informed by wider reform work in the post-school and skills landscape, such as the qualifications audit. Preparation for the review will of course begin well before February 2028 and I expect that Ministers will ensure that Parliament is kept informed as this work moves forward.

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While there is no statutory timeframe for the quality assurance review to conclude, it will be completed before the accreditation review begins so that review can give full consideration to what qualifications the accreditation function should cover across both the school and post-school landscape.

### Higher History 2025 attainment

As I referenced in our discussion during the evidence session, I have been consistently clear that I accepted the findings and actions set out in the SQA's review of the 2024 Higher History exam, including steps to improve how marker feedback is considered. This position remains unchanged and I have not received any new evidence or representations to suggest that this should be revisited, particularly given the time now passed.

However, I remain keen to hear from teachers about any ongoing concerns they may have in this regard and would also encourage them to engage with the awarding body directly on any areas where they consider improvements to processes can be made. The Education (Scotland) Act 2025 introduces a teacher-led governance model for Qualifications Scotland to strengthen the role those responsible for delivering learning and teaching for qualifications have in the organisation. This is emphasised through a range of statutory duties to engage teachers and practitioners in relation to decisions on qualifications. This includes co-producing a Teacher and Practitioner Charter to set out what teachers should expect from Qualifications Scotland, and establishing a dedicated Teacher and Practitioner Interest Committee to ensure educators are engaged around decision-making.

There are always year-on-year fluctuations in pass rates, in both directions, for individual courses. SQA worked in partnership with History teachers to develop and deliver an enhanced and well-received Understanding Standards programme last year. Following the 13.0 percentage point dip in 2024, I was pleased to see that the pass rate improved in 2025 by 14.6 percentage points. Overall, in 2025 the pass rates were up for the National Qualifications at all levels compared to the previous year, and Higher History followed this trend.

SQA quality-assured awarding, including grade-boundary checks, confirmed the assessments worked as intended and that the national standard was consistently applied. SQA data shows that there was a small adjustment to the Higher History grade boundary in 2024, but no adjustments were made in 2025 showing that the assessments performed as expected. Candidates can be confident that their results in both years reflected their hard work and achievement.

Given your continued interest in this issue, I committed to raise it with the Chair and Chief Executive of SQA at my next meeting with them and did so on 14<sup>th</sup> January and can confirm the above position reflects the latest information provided.

## SCOTTISH BUDGET SCRUTINY 2026-2027

At the Committee session on Wednesday 21 January 2026, I agreed to provide more information on a number of matters, which I have set out below.

### £70m uplift in core college funding

The £70 million increase (rounded to the nearest £m) is set out in Table 1 below, as the difference between the 2025-26 and 2026-27 published opening budget positions. College resource increases by £61.4 million and core capital maintenance by £8.2 million.

Project specific college capital funding varies substantially year on year as projects progress and conclude, so is excluded in order to provide the most meaningful year on year comparison of core funding for the college sector.

Table 1

	College Capital			
	Net College Resource £m	Core Capital Funding £m	Capital Infrastructure Projects (iii) £m	Total £m
<b>2025-26</b> Published Budget (Link (i) L4 tables following Stage 2 & 3 amendments)	659.7	34.5	30.3	724.5
Add: ABR total transfers	2.4	0.0	(14.9)	(12.5)
<b>2025-26 ABR Position</b>	662.1	34.5	15.4	712.0
<b>2026-27</b> Published Budget (Link (ii) Scottish Budget 2026-27)	721.1	42.7	1.1	764.9
	College Resource	Core College Capital		Total
<b>Increase 2025-26 Published to 2026-27 Published</b>	<b>61.4</b>	<b>8.2</b>		<b>69.6</b>
Increase 2025-26 ABR to 2026-27 Published	59.0	8.2		67.2

- i. [2025-26 Published Budget following Stage 2 & 3 amendments](#) – L4 tables
- ii. [Scottish Budget 2026-27](#), table 6.07 Scottish Funding Council
- iii. [SFC published College Funding Allocations 2025-26](#)

For both the college and university sectors, our headline increases in funding are based on annual comparisons against the 2025-26 Published Budget figures as the baseline, rather than the 2025-26 ABR position.

The 2025-26 ABR position includes both recurring and non-recurring within year transfers which for universities is significant, including over £70m transfers at ABR in 2025-26 for controlled subjects, such as specialist medical and teaching. Given this, the most appropriate comparison for sector funding is the published budget figures – this also enables comparability of funding increases between the two sectors.

The project specific funding excluded from the comparison relates to Dunfermline Learning Campus. There is a £29.2 million reduction in Dunfermline Learning Campus funding between 2025-26 and 2026-27 as the project reaches completion.

### College Tripartite updates

Developed through the Tri-partite Alignment Group, the SFC's College Transformation Framework (CTF) allows colleges to use funding more flexibly to redesign their provision—for example, by delivering shorter, targeted courses that respond rapidly to employer and public-sector needs.

There are currently 2 colleges taking part in the pilot, and work underway, with one college using the framework to design new health and social care courses, with support from the NHS, where another has utilised the flexibility the CTF brings to recruit an additional 250 students, who will benefit from the College's ESOL provision.

The Framework demonstrates how effective partnership working can spark innovation and strengthen collaboration.

Applications for AY 2026-27 opened in November 2025 and will be open until February 2026. The SFC are aware that a number of colleges are keen to utilise the fund for that academic year.

The next phase of the Tripartite Alignment Group's work will focus on supporting initiatives and strategic transformation that improve efficiency, sustainability, and inclusivity, in response to ongoing financial pressures and changing community needs.

A key priority for the next phase is a fundamental review of the funding allocation model—the credit model. SFC, Colleges Scotland and the Scottish Government have already agreed that this review was needed, and the TET Bill now formalises this commitment. The review will build on learning from the transformation framework pilots.

### Fair work

As the Minister for Higher and Further Education announced on 12 January, the Scottish Government is committed to seeing Fair Work embedded in practice across the public sector and beyond in Scotland. Implementation of Fair Work First must be the guiding criteria to promote fairer work practices for staff within tertiary education, and in particular in colleges and universities. The Scottish Government made this clear in its most recent Letter of Guidance to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

Therefore, from April 2027, fundable post-16 education bodies in Scotland will be expected to adopt all Fair Work First criteria and that SFC will look to include these as a condition of grant. In acknowledgement of the fact that these bodies will be at different stages of implementing the five currently non-mandatory Fair Work First criteria, the SFC will take forward appropriate transition periods for planning. Therefore, an individual body may be given a longer lead-in time to implement a specific criterion, where they, in partnership with recognised trade unions or work representatives, can make a case to do so.

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This will be done alongside ongoing work by the SFC to undertake closer monitoring of governance at colleges and universities, and consider enhancements to its current processes, including in relation to Fair Work, through its Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model.

The Scottish Government recognises the challenges caused by the shortage of veterinary surgeons and is working with universities, employers and the industry to alleviate the pressure. It should be recognised that Veterinary Science is not a controlled subject, so there are no Government set intake targets for individual institutions. However, the opening of the Scottish Rural College's Veterinary School, with a focus on mixed and rural practice, is welcome and should help to increase the supply of veterinarians. Since academic year 2025-26, the SFC has also been working with the Scottish Rural College in recognition of their new Veterinary School and the increasing population as cohorts are recruited over this and future academic years

This is a complex problem where supply of new graduates, but also profession abandonment, increased demand for veterinary services, and changes to immigration rules, play a part, with no easy solutions.

### Public Sector efficiency plans

The Education & Skills Portfolio Efficiency and Reform Plan sets out the specific contribution of the portfolio to the Scottish Government's wider public service reform and fiscal sustainability objectives. Over the period 2026–27 to 2028–29, the portfolio has identified new recurring savings in efficiencies and productivity (totalling £19.7m, £10.6m and £12.8m respectively), workforce savings (£18.4m, £7.4m and £9.5m), and savings from shared services and digital improvements (£1.3m, £3.2m and £3.3m). These figures reflect actions across the portfolio to manage corporate costs, improve productivity and modernise organisational functions.

Strategic programmes within the portfolio are focused on reducing operating costs while protecting frontline education delivery and learner outcomes. Public bodies within education and skills are identifying workforce controls and organisational redesign as key levers for delivering productivity gains, with some bodies already implementing significant changes to manage costs and modernise services. Reform of national qualifications and inspection arrangements, supported by the Education (Scotland) Act 2025, and structural changes in the post-school skills landscape, including changes to the roles of national bodies, are integral parts of this work and are expected to deliver long-term efficiencies.

This portfolio-level contribution sits within the broader framework of the Public Service Reform Strategy and the Fiscal Sustainability Delivery Plan, which set out the Scottish Government's approach to delivering around £1.5 billion cumulative savings over the Spending Review period through efficiency, productivity improvement, service redesign and preventative investment. Across all public bodies, there is a requirement to reduce annualised corporate function costs by £1 billion by 2029–30 and an average workforce reduction of 0.5% per year to 2029–30, with estimated savings of around £700 million through managed workforce changes, aligned to service redesign and digital transformation.

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The Education & Skills portfolio's reform activity is intended to support these broader commitments while sustaining and improving key learner and skills outcomes, and further detail on projected savings and transformation activity will continue to be developed. As noted in the committee session, detailed figures at the portfolio level remain under refinement and will be shared with the Committee as the plans mature.

### SCOTPAG

I confirm following the Committee meeting that a response to SCOTPAG correspondence has now been provided by officials and arrangements are being put in place for senior officials to meet with the organisation to discuss their concerns.

### McManus Review

During the discussions at Committee Miles Briggs raised an important point about the involvement of the Health portfolio in the McManus "short, sharp" review of Additional Support Needs (ASN). The focus of the McManus Review will include national and local system conditions that support ASN delivery, the experiences of delivery in schools and how policy is translating into effective practice. While it would not be appropriate for me to judge the outcome of the Review, which is being delivered within a very compressed timescale, I agree with Miles Briggs' point in principle about the need for greater involvement of services beyond the education portfolio in ASN delivery. I can confirm that I intend to discuss the outcome of the McManus Review with my Cabinet colleagues including the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care prior to deciding on next steps on Additional Support for Learning improvement activity in the next Parliamentary session. My office is in the process of organising a further cross party roundtable in order to facilitate direct discussion between Ms McManus and opposition spokespersons in relation to her review.

### Sunday Show briefing note on grooming gangs

During the evidence session on 21 January 2026, you mentioned my correspondence of 16 January which responded to a range of points raised during my appearance at Committee on 17 December 2025. You asked whether I could send the Committee a copy of the briefing note on grooming gangs that was provided to me to support my appearance on the Sunday Show on 14 December 2025. Please find this note attached.

I hope this information is helpful and provides the clarification you and members were looking for.

Yours sincerely,

**JENNY GILRUTH**

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**12 December** - Scottish Conservatives write to the independent advisers to the ministerial code requesting that they launch an investigation into SNP justice secretary Angela Constance

**10 Dec** –Taylor tells ITV following meeting with FM she is not happy review being carried out by the same groups that let her down. Survivor ‘Amy’ case files reveal care staff saw signs of grooming but social workers described it as ‘prostitution and sexual relationships with older men’.

**10 Dec** – Douglas Ross UQ asking to release all correspondence between the Scottish Government and Professor Alexis Jay. Pauline McNeill queries independence of National Review and claims list of ‘46 children who were victims’ passed to Police Scotland. Asks if this would be part of review.

**10 Dec** – ITV News interview with Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

**9 Dec** – FM meeting with survivor ‘Taylor’.

**9 Dec** –Baroness Anne Longfield CBE announced by UKG as chair Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs. Panel and Terms of Reference also set out with specific focus on group-based abuse and ethnicity of perpetrators.

**8 Dec** - Kemi Badenoch announces own alternative ‘rape gang inquiry’ with a focus on groomers’ religion and ethnicity and tells GB News the UKG grooming gang inquiry must extend to Scotland.

**7 Dec** – Herald publishes Joani Reid opinion piece. She says review is exploiting survivors and criticises Prof Jay not being “ultimate decision maker”.

**7 Dec** – Sunday Times Alexis Jay interview where she says not enough known about the scale of child sexual exploitation in Scotland.

## **TOP LINES**

**Firstly, I want to ensure that any discussion of this issue is handled sensitively and with the utmost respect and consideration for those that have already suffered so much as victims of child abuse.**

**These are the steps we will take on the issue of grooming gangs: There will be an Independent National Review of the response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation in Scotland.**

- This will be undertaken by the Care Inspectorate, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education and Health Improvement Scotland
- It is important to be absolutely clear that these inspectorates and agencies are independent of Government and have the ability to require public authorities to provide information they request.
- Further detail will be set out in the Government’s statement next week.



## **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.

## **What DFM said on BBC Radio Scotland Breakfast – 12 December**

- *The Angela Constance that I know and have worked with for many years is caring. She's credible and she's competent, and over the last few years in particular, she has done a huge amount of complex work in the justice system, putting victims at its very heart.*
- *[The] vital work of protecting vulnerable children at risk from grooming gangs by establishing the facts of what's happening in Scotland...is the priority, and that everybody agrees is something that we need to be able to get on with.*
- *... Angela Constance made a general point in response of the importance of getting on with the job of protecting children, and she quoted Professor Alexis Jay that people should just get on with it now. Those were remarks given by Professor Alexis Jay, who, of course chaired, convened a grooming gangs inquiry in England and Wales. Those comments were made in January, and she was clear that this was a general comment about getting on with the job of protecting children...*
- *Professor Jay confirmed in October, which was the following month at the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group, that the quote was correct that it was made in January, but it wasn't*



*made in response to the victims bill or the amendment, and she herself agreed with the approach of providing that clarity on her quotes at the National Child [Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group].*

- ... we are getting on with the work of investigating grooming gangs. Now Alexis Jay has agreed to provide expert advice. She has been appointed the independent chair for the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group.*
- the Scottish child abuse inquiry is established that even where grooming took place out with the establishments themselves, they may, depending on the particular circumstances be part of their Terms of Reference. And Lady Smith has conducted a very thorough process, and there is an inquiry. It is taking place right now.*
- the point of this whole debate, and it goes back to your first questions, is whether the priority should be establishing more bureaucratic processes or votes of no confidence in Parliament, or whether we should use the processes that we have right now to establish the facts and get on with the job of protecting children at risk of grooming.*
- this has always been an issue for the Child Protection minister, and that has always been an issue that has sat with the cabinet secretary who is responsible for children and for education. So the minister has been in parliament on a number of occasions over the last few weeks. The full extent of the correspondence has now been published, and critically Professor Alexis Jay was content with the process.*
- It was about the context. Angela Constance was making a general point using Professor Alexis Jay's quote from the seventh of January in an interview to BBC Radio, which were that people should just get on with it. So the quote itself was accurate. It was made in January. It wasn't made in response directly to the victims bill or the amendment. It was a general point about getting on with the job of protecting children, rather than as the Conservatives were calling for in their amendment, a long winded process using a commissioner that hadn't even been established.*
- I completely reject any suggestions of exceptionalism. We strongly believe that the priority here is establishing the facts. So the Cabinet Secretary announced that there would be an independent national review of the response to group based child sexual abuse and exploitation Scotland, and that will be undertaken by a number of inspectorates that are completely independent of government to establish the full scale of potential grooming in Scotland. That's the care inspectorate, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland, His Majesty's inspector of Education and Health*

*Improvement Scotland, these inspectorates and agencies are independent, and the point here is that they should be free to do what Jackie Baillie, I think is calling for, which is to do to establish the facts.*

- *My message to them would be to reiterate what the First Minister said personally on Tuesday, where he apologised to a survivor, because it was obvious from what she said to him that she had been failed as so many young people in care have been failed, and that is why this government established the Scottish child abuse inquiry. It's why we commissioned the independent review of care. It's why we're taking forward the delivery of the promise, and it's why we have appointed Professor Alexis Jay as the independent chair for the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. We take these issues extremely seriously, and I don't think anybody listening to your program and listening to these interviews can leave with any other view, but that the government is extremely concerned and wants to establish the facts in the best way possible, most effective way possible.*

### **TIMELINE OF ALEXIS JAY REQUEST FOR CLARIFICATION**

**As the published information sets out, Professor Jay wrote to the Cabinet Secretary following the debate on the Victims and Witnesses Bill in September.**

- Officials contacted Professor Jay who agreed with the approach to minuting her quote at the October meeting of the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group.
- This information has been in the public domain since the minutes of the October meeting were published on 18 November, openly and transparently.

### **Timeline**

- **16 September** During debate on the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform Bill, Justice Secretary responded to a Q from Liam Kerr in which he pressed for the Conservatives amendment to include provisions for an inquiry into grooming gangs in the Bill: *"It is important that we get the right type of data, and that work is of course under way. Is Mr Kerr aware of the work led by Professor Alexis Jay, who was the chair of an independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales and who currently sits on our national strategic group? **She 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. She says that it is now time that "people should just get on with it". I contend that that is what the***

***Scottish Government is doing right here, right now—we are getting on with the work that we need to do to protect children.”***

- **26 September** Professor Alexis Jay writes to the Cabinet Secretary noting she had been correctly quoted that ‘people should just get on with’ action on child sexual exploitation and clarifying that was in context of IICSA in January 2025. She went on to say she had no views on Liam Kerr’s amendment but said SG should ‘urgently take steps to establish reliable data about the nature and extent of child sexual exploitation by organised networks...In the context of the national strategic group, I have had discussions with officials about how this might be achieved.’
- **3 October** Officials contact Professor Jay to agree approach to minute her clarification of 26 September as part of the next National CSAE Strategic Group meeting.
- **6 October** Professor Jay replies to officials email of 3 October agreeing with the approach set out.
- **7 October** Officials update Ministers on the exchanges of 3 and 6 October with Professor Jay and note agreed approach.
- **8 October** Meeting of CSAE Strategic Group where the clarification to Professor Jay’s comments were raised and noted.
- **18 November** Minutes of the CSAE Strategic Group were published on the Scottish Government website.
- **25 November** In response to an urgent question on group based abuse, Children’s Minister responded to ask from Douglas Ross MSP for all correspondence between SG and Prof Jay to be released – saying she did not have the information available and that Minister would write to the member.
- **3 December** Labour Party Business debate on group based abuse.
- **9 December** Douglas Ross MSP raised a point of order having received a letter from Ms Don-Innes which stated that the information will be published by the end of the year as a Freedom of Information request response.

**[Continues]**

- **10 December, 16:41** Correspondence between Prof Jay and the Scottish Government is published online, and a letter is sent to Mr Ross confirming as such ahead of Urgent Question to be answered by Children's Minister, providing a copy of the correspondence released. Correspondence included an email from Prof Jay to officials, dated **26 September** stating: *"I have expressed no views on Mr Kerr's amendment, but I am of the opinion that the Scottish Government should urgently take steps to establish reliable data about the nature and extent of child sexual exploitation by organised networks, of which so-called 'grooming gangs' is only one component. In the context of the national strategic group, I have had discussions with officials about how this might be achieved."*
  - Correspondence released goes on to show that Alexis Jay confirmed to officials that she was content for her clarification to be placed on the public record in minutes of the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group meeting of **8 October**. Those meeting minutes were published on **18 November** – as above.
- **10 December, 1710** Children's Minister responds to Urgent Question from Mr Ross, explaining: *"It was minuted at the strategic group's meeting in October that **the quote was correct but that it was from January and not made in relation to the amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) 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 said that she also wanted to get on with the work needed to protect our children. Given the seriousness of the issue at hand, I think that that should be the focus of all of us in the Parliament going forward.**"*
- **12 December** Scottish Conservatives write to the independent advisers to the ministerial code requesting that they launch an investigation into SNP justice secretary Angela Constance

### **What FM said at FMQs on 11 December**

- "The comments that the Justice Secretary made in the stage 3 proceedings on the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill were, as I said to Mr Findlay last week, a reflection of the general comments that were being made about the issues at that time.
- The issues that Professor Jay raised were corrected in the minutes of the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which were published as a consequence of that meeting, and the

release to the public of that information clarified the point that Professor Jay was concerned about.

- What the government is doing, which is what the Justice Secretary was setting out to Parliament at that time and which has been set out to parliament on numerous occasions, is taking forward the essential work that is necessary to make a judgement about whether a separate grooming gangs inquiry is required, because the view that has been expressed to us is that the evidence base is not sufficient for us to take such a decision at this time.”

**It was always our intention to provide the information requested on correspondence between the Government and Professor Alexis Jay.**

**I also announced last week that Professor Alexis Jay has been appointed the independent Chair for the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group.**

- Professor Jay has had sight of the planned independent National review proposal and has agreed to provide expert advice in both developing the approach of the independent review and at key stages of the process, drawing on her substantial experience.
- In support of this, Professor Jay met with the Chief Inspector of Constabulary and Senior Officials from the Care Inspectorate to offer her expertise and progress this work at pace.

**Once the Independent National Review is complete, the Group – independently chaired by Professor Jay – will consider the findings and provide expert advice to Ministers on our next steps.**

- As I have previously said, I am prepared to give every consideration to a grooming gang inquiry in Scotland if we feel it is necessary.
- It is vitally important to me and this Government that we gather the necessary evidence and expertise to inform such a consideration, and that is exactly what I have just described is intended to do.

## **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. 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 last week.
- **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.**
- 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.

[section 30(b)(i)]

**Alongside this, Police Scotland continue with their work to review child sexual and abuse exploitation cases**

- I received an update and assurances the priority of this work from Police Scotland when we recently met. Parliament will be updated regularly, and the Cabinet Secretary has written to opposition leaders and spokespeople to offer a briefing with Professor Jay and Police Scotland on this work, to take place in the New Year.

[section 30(b)(i)]

**POLICE SCOTLAND REVIEW**

**The review will identify cases of possible interest, followed by an initial review by trained police officers and investigators.**

- This review is a critical in informing next steps and I met the Chief Constable alongside the First Minister and other Ministerial colleagues to receive a progress update.
- The review covers cases since 2013 involving one or more victims aged under 18 and two or more suspects where Police Scotland and the Crown and Procurator Fiscal Service made the decision to take no further action.
- This work closely aligns with similar activity by English and Welsh forces as part of Operation Beaconport, established by the National Police Chiefs' Council and the National Crime Agency in response to Baroness Casey's recommendations.
- [section 30(b)(i)]

- 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.

## **UPDATING OPPOSITION LEADERS**

**I have written to opposition leaders and spokespeople to offer a briefing with Professor Alexis Jay and Police Scotland on this work to take place in the New Year.**

[section 30(b)(i)]

## **FM MEETING WITH ‘TAYLOR’**

**FM and Taylor agreed to have a private meeting.**

[section 30(b)(i)]

## **FURTHER DETAIL ON WORK OF THE NATIONAL 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 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.

**The Group has been extremely active in its work to enhance our response to child sexual abuse and exploitation.**

- 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.
- A programme of work is also underway under the Group to improve data on this issue which 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 in Scotland.



[section 30(b)(i)]

## **WORK AROUND ONLINE SAFETY**

**Police Scotland outlined to me the changing nature of sexual exploitation of children, with online abuse increasingly the focus of their recent investigative work**

- They have been developing their capabilities in this area but significant future work will also be required to effectively counter this increasing threat to the safety of children
- Ministers are leading an Online Harm taskforce to identify what further action is needed from Government to deal with the changing nature of the threat to children, and we are engaging with Police Scotland as part of that work.

## **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.

## **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 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.

[section 30(b)(i)]

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