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Dear Clerks to the Committee,

Thank you for your letter and for the opportunity to give evidence to the Criminal Justice Committee on 30th September regarding victim perspectives across the justice system.

Addressing knife crime in Scotland requires us to build continuously on the public health approach that underpins our work at the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU). Knife carrying is often driven by a complex interplay of underlying vulnerabilities, fear, trauma, and social exclusion. Effective prevention must therefore address not only the immediate risks associated with knife crime, but also the wider circumstances that lead young people to carry knives in the first place. In considering what further action is required, I have structured my response around three complementary approaches to prevention:

1. Primary Prevention - preventing violence before it starts
Primary prevention addresses the root causes and structural drivers of violence to stop knife carrying across the population before it begins. Key measures include:

- **Social and emotional learning in the early years:** Teaching young children emotional regulation, interpersonal skills and how to identify safe adults. Early emotional literacy equips children with healthy conflict-resolution mechanisms long before they encounter peer pressure surrounding weapons.
- **Limiting the sale and availability of weapons:** Restricting access to high-risk, purpose-built weapons (such as zombie knives and machetes) removes dangerous instruments from circulation. However, this must come with the recognition that millions of domestic knives exist in homes across Scotland. While retail restrictions are a necessary safeguard, our primary focus must always remain on addressing the underlying motivations that cause someone to carry a weapon.
- **Tackling poverty and inequality:** Strong evidence demonstrates a direct correlation between poverty, economic inequality, and violent crime. Tackling poverty, food insecurity and poor housing removes the systemic conditions that heighten exposure to violence.

- **Reducing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):** Mitigating early life adversity (such as domestic abuse, parental substance use, or household instability) substantially lowers the risk of violent outcomes later in life. Holistic early support ensures families receive help before adversity manifests as behavioural distress or weapon carrying.
- **Sustained investment in youth work and community anchor organisations:** Expanding universal community services, sports programmes and trusted adult mentoring in areas with historically high rates of deprivation and violent crime creates protective environments and prosocial networks for young people.
- **Whole-school trauma-informed frameworks:** Supporting schools with anti-violence initiatives, restorative practices, and early intervention reduces exclusions and keeps vulnerable young people connected to positive learning environments.
- **Regulating digital environments and online sales:** Partnering to monitor social media platforms where weapon carrying is normalised or glorified, alongside enforcing strict compliance around online knife sales, age verification and home delivery.
- **Awareness raising and education:** While generic campaigns have limited impact on individuals already entrenched in violence, well-designed programmes can deter those on the periphery if messages are consistently reinforced. Crucially, fear-inducing campaigns must be avoided, as overly sensationalist messaging can desensitise audiences or inadvertently increase knife carrying out of heightened anxiety.
- **Positive social marketing:** Campaigns to educate the public are effective when they focus on prosocial behaviour and community action. Framing campaigns around positive choices avoids triggering fear while inspiring local activism.
- **Digital literacy:** Equipping young people to navigate social media safely, think critically about algorithms and disinformation and deal with online conflicts – extending into online gaming and messaging platforms.

2. Secondary Prevention - targeted support for at-risk individuals

Secondary prevention focuses on early identification and immediate intervention for individuals exhibiting heightened risk factors or early involvement in weapon-related behaviours.

- **Crisis-point interventions (navigators/youth work):** Scaling up youth work and social intervention teams in places like A&E, but also in communities or in new environments like custody. Reaching individuals in these “teachable moments” – often immediately following a violent incident - allows for safety planning and continuous support when receptiveness to change is highest.

- **Custody diversion pathways:** Expanding rapid-access support for people entering police custody, offering immediate assistance with housing, mental health, substance use, and education/employment before violent behaviours escalate further.
- **Contextual safeguarding in local communities:** Strengthening multi-agency partnerships across education, health, social work and the third sector to map localised harm outside the home (e.g. criminal exploitation, peer-group dynamics, or dangerous public spaces) and intervene earlier than we currently do.
- **Targeted mentoring:** Connecting at-risk individuals with trained, trusted adult mentors is a proven method for reducing knife carrying, provided mentors are well-supported and genuine connections are built.
- **Targeted educational and bystander campaigns:** Embedding discussion-based programmes - such as Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) - in secondary schools and youth settings to empower peers to safely challenge harmful attitudes, recognise early warning signs and foster peer accountability before weapon carrying becomes entrenched.
- **Maximising school inclusion:** School exclusions should only be used as a last resort for safeguarding purposes. To keep vulnerable pupils in mainstream education, schools must be resourced with dedicated support for complex behavioural needs.
- **Alternative Education:** For young people where traditional academic routes are unsuitable, providing high-quality, practical vocational training (e.g. mechanics, trades) maintains engagement and creates direct pathways into employment, reducing criminal justice involvement. Increasingly, young people are telling the SVRU that they are struggling with the core curriculum, and solutions such as accredited learning in manual skills is more likely to keep some of the most at-risk young people in schools.
- **Consequences for under-18s:** As discussed at the committee, there is a perception in parts of Scotland that there are no consequences for under-18s. Interventions for under-18s who offend must go beyond traditional justice measures to include restorative justice, targeted education, counselling and social work. For consequences to be effective, young people must see a clear, direct connection between their actions and the outcome. With this said, we also know that under-18s are being exploited by adults and forced to get involved in violence. It is vital that we address the issue of adults driving child criminal exploitation, and not solely focus on punishing those under-18s.
- **Consequential thinking and emotional regulation:** Delivering interventions that help build the emotional literacy of young people to manage triggers, understand the impact of their actions and overcome impulses. Building peer mediation literacy amongst young people is a vital part of this solution.

3. Tertiary Prevention - intervention, recovery, and preventing reoffending
Tertiary prevention targets individuals already involved in serious knife violence or victimised by it, aiming to reduce long-term harm, facilitate recovery, and break cycles of reoffending.

- **Comprehensive, trauma-informed victim support:** Ensuring long-term psychological, medical and practical advocacy for victims of knife crime. Unaddressed trauma and hypervigilance may act as drivers, leading individuals to carry weapons for self-protection, making robust victim care a critical violent prevention mechanism.
- **Restorative justice and desistance support:** Expanding safe, voluntary, and well-resourced restorative justice options that hold individuals accountable, while helping them understand the human impact of weapon violence, alongside intensive community reintegration alternatives to custody.
- **Peer-led mentoring and exit pathways:** Supporting individuals seeking to leave violent networks through intensive lived-experience mentoring. Connecting individuals with structured sports, creative arts and vocational pathways helps build positive identities separate from violence.
- **Recovery and rehabilitation programmes:** Providing accessible, trauma-informed addiction treatment, mental health support, and cognitive-behavioural interventions in both prison and community settings to support sustained desistance.
- **Supported employability programmes:** Access to meaningful employment is vital for long-term stability. However, individuals with complex trauma or limited work histories may benefit from ongoing mentorship to navigate workplace environments, financial management and daily routines. Apprenticeships can be a crucial start of a pathway for a young person.
- **Focused deterrence initiatives:** Implementing multi-agency, focused deterrence models (such as Community Violence Intervention frameworks) that combine clear, swift enforcement consequences for violence with immediate, tailored support services and community-led engagement. This reflects certainty of support, and certainty of consequence.
- **Addressing childhood criminal exploitation:** Recognising that children exploited by adults into violent crime or drug supply are victims first. Proactive use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) ensures child-first protection, allowing criminal justice resources to target adult exploiters rather than exploited youth.

When understanding these issues and designing the solutions, Scotland must continue to include young people and those with lived experience to ensure relevancy, effectiveness and genuine co-production. Scotland must also continue to invest in prevention: it is morally and

economically the right thing to do, and vital to help us deliver our mission of a Scotland free from violence.

Please extend my gratitude to the Committee convener and members. I would be delighted to provide further detail or briefing papers on any of this should the Committee require it.

Best wishes,

Jimmy Paul
Head of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU)