

T: 0300 244 4000

E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Collette Stevenson MSP
Convenor
Social Justice and Social Security Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Email: SJSS.committee@parliament.scot

6 February 2026

Dear Collette,

Thank you for your letter of 2 February 2026 requesting an update on Scottish Government actions following the publication of your report “The Financial Considerations When Leaving an Abusive Relationship”.

As I stated in my earlier letters, at Committee and at the debate on this issue, the Scottish Government is resolute in the belief that coercive control, including financial abuse, has no place in Scottish society.

As such we continue to consider your report and draw on it as we shape our next steps in addressing violence against women through our Equally Safe strategy. These next steps will be outlined in the next Equally Safe delivery plan which we will publish in the winter of 2026 (when the current plan comes to an end).

Extensive stakeholder engagement informed the current delivery plan, and, subject to the outcome of the Scottish Parliamentary elections in May, we would expect to undertake a similar exercise as we work to identify the key priorities for the next parliamentary term. In addition to your important report we will consider reports from GREVIO, the UN Special Rapporteur, various pieces of academic research including work on Deaf women experiencing abuse, and learning from pilots initiated in the current delivery plan (such as the work being undertaken by the Mhor collective looking at tech-facilitated VAWG). I hope our recognition of your report and its role in shaping our next steps is understood as recognition of the value of your work.

I will now turn to the specific issues you raised in your letter.

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Fund to Leave

I am pleased to confirm that in this financial year, we have invested £1.5 million in a new national fund to leave, which opened for referrals on 2 February 2026. The national fund to leave will help to reduce the financial burden of leaving an abusive partner by providing financial support to help to pay for the essentials women and children need. We anticipate this will help up to 1,800 women and their children to transition to a more stable and independent future.

In the recent Budget, we announced that we will allocate £2 million from our ending homelessness together fund for the national fund to leave in 2026/27, which will help even more women and children to start a new life free from abuse.

Public bodies and debt

For women who have experienced domestic abuse, public sector debt is often closely linked to financial and economic abuse. Coercive control can involve the creation or concealment of debts, restricting access to household finances, or preventing engagement with public authorities.

We know that public sector debt can be a significant issue for those seeking to leave an abusive partner and Council Tax debt, in particular, can pose a barrier to leaving. Following the success of two previous Council Tax debt pilot projects we have now allocated £2.22 million in 2025-26 to roll out this programme of work to enable increased debt advice provision across Scotland for those in Council Tax arrears as well as the development of national resources which can help support best practice principles in Council Tax collection. In addition, we currently support over 450,000 households through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, helping to protect people from council tax liabilities they cannot reasonably afford.

We will continue to allocate over £2 million to the Council Tax Debt Advice Project across Scotland in 2026–27, to ensure additional capacity for advice services and to support the continued development and sharing of good practice across local authorities.

We will also develop a report reviewing the operation of joint and several liability for council tax arrears, with a particular focus on financial abuse, to ensure that people who have experienced domestic abuse are not unfairly harmed by existing debt arrangements. In line with the requirements of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, the findings of this work will be reported to the Scottish Parliament to inform future improvements in policy and practice.

Alongside this, we will take forward work to review the prescription period for council tax debt in Scotland, including a commitment to consult in the next Parliament on whether current time limits remain appropriate. We will further develop new data-sharing pathways under the UK Digital Economy Act 2017, agreed between HMRC and Scottish local authorities, to support fairer and more effective debt recovery, earlier identification of vulnerable debtors, and increased take-up of Council Tax Reduction. We will also explore how data sharing between Social Security Scotland and local authorities can help identify families with children experiencing council tax debt, enabling earlier and more targeted support.

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Update to Equally Safe Strategy

You have suggested that the Equally Safe strategy should be updated to better reflect financial abuse. We propose to do that, as outlined above, by drawing on your report and ensuring specific visibility of financial abuse within our new delivery plan.

Many respondents to the inquiry noted that our Equally Safe strategy explicitly addresses financial and economic abuse and we are keen to focus on our next steps rather than refreshing a strategy which was only refreshed in 2023. This is because the role of the strategy is to set out the scale of the problem, a definition of VAWG and an agreed approach (a public health approach focusing on primary prevention) to addressing that problem across spheres of government and across the statutory and third sectors. The strategy is, given its function to name the problem and outline the vision for change, necessarily ambitious and high level. As such, in understanding the scale of VAWG, the Equally Safe strategy identifies economic abuse as part of a key data-set. Namely, that a quarter (24.5%) of women who have experienced financial abuse from a partner in the UK are over 60 years of age. (source - Surviving Economic Abuse (2021), Controlling Your Financial Future). In defining the issue of VAWG, the Equally Safe strategy names economic abuse as well as dowry abuse as a specific form of abuse.

Within the strategy itself is recognition that perpetrators control finances and women's access to employment and opportunities. It highlights that women's financial inequality with men enables that abuse. It acknowledges that structures and systems exacerbate that inequality and act as a barrier to women leaving. Furthermore, in analysing VAWG as a cause and consequence of women's inequality, the strategy outlines the link to women's financial inequality and the economic realities of gender inequality. It recognises the gender pay gap, persistent gender segregation across several industries and occupations which leads to women being over-represented in lower paid sectors, insecure working conditions, women's caring responsibilities, and the cost of child-care as structural inequalities which need addressing.

Improved Advice to Survivors

We recognise the importance of advice to survivors. That is why we are providing over £815,000 in 2026/27 to fund Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline. This service provides a confidential and sensitive service to anyone experiencing domestic abuse and those supporting them. Support is available by telephone, text/WhatsApp, email, online chat and in a variety of languages.

The Scottish Government allocated £16.9 million in 2025-26 for the provision of welfare, debt and income maximisation advice services and over £16 million has been allocated in the 2026-27 Scottish Budget. In recognition of the additional barriers faced by those experiencing financial abuse and coerced debt, we provided additional funding in 2025-26 to Financially Included – a partnership project between GEMAP Scotland and the Glasgow Violence Against Women Partnership.

This additional funding is supporting the development of a new Scottish helpline for economic abuse, which is now operational, as well as increasing the provision of specialist advice and support for those experiencing economic abuse. This funding is also helping to provide increased resources and training for front line workers to raise awareness of the impact of coerced debt and economic abuse and how to support those experiencing it.

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We also provided funding to Scottish Women's Aid to pilot a small debt advice project to provide regulated debt advice directly to women experiencing domestic abuse who are currently receiving support from local Women's Aid groups.

Legal Aid

The Scottish Government recognises that longer-term transformational change is needed to ensure that we have an adaptable, flexible, affordable and sustainable legal aid system that supports people. This is why we are taking forward actions outlined in the [Legal Aid Reform Discussion Paper](#) that we published in February 2025.

We introduced regulations on 15 December 2025 to improve and simplify the judicare model for children's and criminal legal aid. The regulations will also improve access to justice in criminal cases by simplifying legal aid processes, standardising eligibility, and ensuring fair and sustainable remuneration for solicitors. These changes will reduce complexity, support early resolution, and guarantee timely representation for those most in need.

Regulations have also been laid in Parliament for approval to offer solicitors who provide legal aid a 13% increase in legal aid fees from September this year. The fees increase is part of a wider package of support and demonstrates our commitment to a legal aid system that works for everyone.

The Scottish Government has also met its commitment to establish an Independent Fee Review Mechanism Group to examine the fundamental changes required to create a legal assistance system fit for the 21st century, including developing a more transparent, evidence based and sustainable approach to reviewing legal aid fees.

As part of this wider support package, we anticipate the support of solicitors to continue with the constructive engagement on the development of planning and roll out of improvements that would enhance the early stages of justice system reform.

The Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Act received Royal Assent on 27 June 2025, after being passed by the Scottish Parliament on 20 May 2025. Once commenced this Act will increase access to justice by introducing provisions to widen access to legal services. It will enable innovative service delivery models, including liberalising alternative business structures, enabling competition which will benefit the sector and clients. This change will help ensure that legal services are available in a way that meets the needs of a modern, diverse society. The Act also removes restrictions on third sector bodies, to allow them to employ solicitors, and represent some of the most vulnerable in society, including those fleeing domestic abuse.

Since the committee debate, the Scottish Government welcomed the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee's inquiry into what is and is not working within the current Civil Legal Aid system, which the Minister for Victims and Community Safety provided a response to in November last year, detailing what changes could be made in the short and longer term to address access issues. Furthermore, a debate on Legal Aid also took place in January where the scope of the debate in many ways aligned with the Scottish Government's plans for short, medium, and long-term reform as published in the Discussion Paper last year.

The Scottish Legal Aid Board (SLAB) recently updated their online guidance for people fleeing or in an abusive or controlling relationship. This is not a change in policy, but a

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clarification of the discretions SLAB can apply. SLAB understands that people in these situations may not know about all their financial resources and/or where they can access financial evidence. Where this lack of information and/or evidence is explained in the Financial Eligibility form 2, SLAB can use its discretion to either disregard income or capital where they consider it reasonable to do so in the circumstances or provisionally assess financial eligibility based on the information available. SLAB can, and do, apply discretion.

We continue to support survivors of domestic abuse through targeted grant funding and pilot projects. We work closely with our stakeholders to support women to get the right access they need, and listening to them is vitally important. This is why a national referral project was started between the Scottish Legal Aid Board's Civil Legal Assistance Office and Scottish Women's Aid to help clients find solicitors which match their needs. The Scottish Legal Board have reported that this has been operational for over two years and already it is providing information on the types of cases and locations which are more challenging. The Scottish Legal Aid Board intend to provide further advice to the Scottish Government on how this new referral project can be further developed which will also aim to cover areas of the country not currently served by the Civil Legal Assistance Office's casework services.

These measures reflect our commitment to trauma-informed service delivery and inclusive access. We are committed to continue working closely with our stakeholders to support women to get the right access they need.

I hope this update is helpful to the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

KAUKAB STEWART

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