

# Cross-Party Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Wednesday 18th February 2026 from 18.00-20.00

This was an online meeting.

## Minutes

## Present

### MSPs

Ruth Maguire SNP	Co-convener
Rhoda Grant MSP Scottish Labour	Co-convener
John Mason MSP Independent	CPG MSP Member

### Non-MSPs

Susan McKellar	Scottish Women's Convention
Lynn Benevento	PA to Ruth Maguire MSP
Sasha Rakoff	Not Buying It
Beverley Johnston	Individual
Teresa Little	Individual
Bryan Little	Individual
Janice Wilson	Soroptimist Scotland
Sasha Rafkoff	No Not Buying It
Venessa Macleod	Nordic Model Now
Diane Martin	AMFS
Anne Martin	Individual
Sally Jackson	FiLiA
Ann Hall	Not for Sale
Chris Hall	Not for Sale
Maren Schroeder	Researcher to Ms Ash Regan MSP Independent
Susan Smith	For Women Scotland
Chris Ringland	Evangelical Alliance
Emily McDonald	Individual
Jacci Stoye	Secretary

## Agenda item 1

### Welcome and apologies for absence

Linda Thomson	Women Support Project
Laura Nacyte	Women Support Project
Steve Rawbone	Individual

Janet Warren	Individual
Sophie Reymbaut	Individual
Nina Humphries	AMFS
Jeremy Balfour MSP	Independent
Roseann Cameron	Routes Out
Agnes Tolmie	Scottish Women's Convention
Bronagh Andrew	TARA

## **Agenda Item 2 – General Feedback from the Stage 1 Debate**

**In order to reflect the egalitarian and informal nature of the debrief, the information has been conveyed as bullet pointed ideas, reflections and conclusions.**

### **Reflections on the Debate and Vote**

- Significant work had gone into the Bill, and none of it is considered wasted.
- Timing was challenging, though some felt there was enough time had political will existed.
- Resistance within government structures and the civil service was noted.
- Some MSPs received briefings supporting full decriminalisation, indicating organised opposition.
- Few MSPs actively argued for the government's position during the debate.
- Disappointment that MSPs who had previously spoken strongly on the issue voted against it.
- Concern that arguments used mirrored those of pro-decriminalisation lobby groups.
- Frustration that the government attempted to appear supportive while voting the other way.
- A sense of shame and anger about how the issue was handled politically.

### **Political Dynamics**

- Internal party tensions and personal politics may have influenced the outcome.
- Members' Bills require extensive behind-the-scenes work, which was difficult to secure.
- Despite defeat, the Bill progressed further than any previous attempt.
- Some key supportive MSPs will not return after the election, creating uncertainty.

### **Legal Challenge Discussion**

- A question was raised about whether the vote or committee process could be legally challenged.
- Legal advice suggested it would cost around £10,000 to explore options.
- General consensus that a legal challenge would be unlikely to succeed and not a good use of funds.
- Parliamentary decisions are considered democratic, even if politically influenced.
- Resources would be better spent on campaigning.

### **Committee Process**

- The committee did not fully meet certain procedural expectations, but this is not legally actionable.
- Complaints may prompt future improvements but cannot overturn the decision.

## **Future Legislative Possibilities**

- A new MSP could take up the issue in the next session.
- Reusing previous consultation work may be politically difficult due to earlier criticisms.
- There have been many consultations over the past two decades; fatigue among respondents is real.
- Analysis of submissions suggested strong support for criminalising buyers.

## **Opposition Campaigning**

- Pro-decriminalisation groups were active at party conferences and will continue to mobilise.
- They have significant funding and organisational backing.
- Their limited public engagement during the committee stage was seen as a positive sign.

## **Survivor Voices**

- Claims in the chamber that survivors had not been heard were viewed as debating tactics.
- Survivor events have been held for decades; the issue is political listening, not lack of testimony.
- Encouragement at seeing younger survivors speaking out.
- Need for more Scottish survivor voices, as these carry political weight.
- Importance of ensuring survivors are supported and safe when speaking publicly.

## **Public Opinion and Cultural Context**

- Polling shows strong public support for criminalising buyers.
- High-profile cases (Epstein, grooming gangs) have increased awareness of exploitation.
- Irony noted that the strongest support comes from voters of a party whose MSPs oppose the Bill.
- Some argued voters should reconsider party support based on this issue.

## **Campaigning Reflections**

- Anger at defeatist arguments suggesting prostitution “can’t be wished away.”
- Recognition that the Bill’s existence galvanised opposition, so campaigning must continue.
- Need to build a stronger grassroots movement capable of influencing MSPs directly.
- Constituency pressure is powerful; MSPs respond to voter contact.
- Concern that some major women’s organisations have been silent.
- Suggestion to use the Epstein analogy more explicitly in campaigning.

## **Appreciation and Solidarity**

- Gratitude expressed for the work done by MSPs, survivors, and organisations.
- Despite disappointment, the movement is seen as stronger and more visible than before.
- Media language has shifted away from “sex work” narratives.
- Commitment to continue fighting regardless of the Bill’s defeat.

## **Agenda Item 3 – What Next?**

### **Immediate Reflections**

- Strong disappointment but a shared sense that the work is not over.
- Recognition that the Bill advanced further than any previous attempt.
- Acknowledgement that some political allies will not return after the election.
- Survivors and campaigners expressed exhaustion but determination to regroup.

### **Building a Renewed Public Campaign**

- Broad agreement that a civil society campaign must be rebuilt and strengthened.

- Public understanding of prostitution in Scotland needs to be deepened.
- Survivor voices remain central but must be supported safely.
- Younger Scottish survivors speaking out is encouraging and politically impactful.
- Public opinion is already favourable, and recent scandals have increased awareness.

## **Strategic Campaigning Priorities**

- Build a broad, visible grassroots movement capable of influencing MSPs.
- Encourage constituents to contact MSPs directly.
- Strengthen alliances with women's organisations, despite concerns about silence from some.
- Consider using the Epstein analogy more explicitly.
- Explore opportunities to influence other CPGs focused on men's violence.

## **Working with Trade Unions**

- Trade unions were decisive in Norway's success; Scotland needs similar long-term engagement.
- Union policy changes take years, so early and consistent work is essential.
- Directly challenging unions' current positions is unlikely to shift policy quickly; relationship-building is required.

## **Political Strategy for the Next Parliamentary Session**

- A new MSP could take up the issue, but reusing previous consultation work may be difficult.
- Committee submissions showed strong support for criminalising buyers.
- The Bill's defeat reflects political dynamics, not public opposition.
- Voters may need to reconsider support for parties whose MSPs oppose action on CSE.

## **Maintaining Momentum During the Election Period**

- Opportunities exist to raise the issue during hustings and campaign events.
- Parties may be more responsive to public pressure when seeking votes.
- Messaging should emphasise: strong public support; long history of survivor testimony; government failures on violence against women; need for meaningful commitments rather than commissions.

## **Long-Term Movement Building**

- A sustained, multi-year strategy is needed, not a short campaign tied to a single bill.
- Learning from international models (Norway, France, Sweden) can guide future work.
- The movement must prepare for a marathon, not a sprint.
- Despite setbacks, the movement is stronger, more visible, and more united than before.

## **Concluding Statement**

Both co-conveners of the CPG for CSE, Ruth Maguire and Rhoda Grant will be standing down at this election. Currently, there is no MSP who is willing to take on this CPG, should they return to office. Consequently, this may be the last meeting of the CPG for CSE. Going forward, the conveners have encouraged members to join other CPGs with similar aims to ours to bring our knowledge and understanding of commercial sexual exploitation to the parliamentary table in that way.

Ruth, Rhoda and Jacci were given thanks for their hard work and commitment, and in turn, fellow members were thanked for all they do in their own spheres to stop this appalling trade of misery and violence.