Stop it Now! Scotland is the national programme for the prevention of child sexual abuse.

Our vision is of a society where all adults engage in respectful, caring and protective relationships with children and young people; where children and young people grow up free from sexual abuse or exploitation.

Our mission is to prevent child sexual abuse by engaging with and supporting adults, families and communities. Fundamentally we believe that preventing child sexual abuse starts with changing the thinking and behaviour of adults.

We work to make Scotland’s children and young people, and our communities, safer by:-

- providing information about child sexual abuse and sex offending;
- promoting the engagement of communities in preventing sexual abuse and protecting children;
- providing and participating in projects to help individuals, agencies and communities prevent child sexual abuse;
- working in strong partnerships with other agencies and organisations to make Scotland safer.

We believe that child sexual abuse is preventable and that adults must take responsibility for protecting children by seeking early help when they are concerned about their own thoughts or behaviour or that of other people.

Stop it Now! Scotland works within a public health prevention framework. All of our project work and delivery is located within primary, secondary or tertiary prevention. Our two main strategic areas are:-

- community engagement;
- development of services for those affected by child sexual abuse.

General

Our view is that revised budgets should explicitly take account of the need for continued spend in relation to the prevention of sexual offences and specifically sexual offences against children and young people.

We recognise that post-conviction programmes for sex offenders are an important contribution to the tertiary prevention of sexual abuse but, even so, the preventative aspects of this are not clearly understood or consistently reflected in budget allocation or evaluation of delivery and outcomes.

We are concerned that there are areas of deficit in the provision of service and believe that revised budget decisions and allocations offer an opportunity to remedy
this. Traditional models of post-conviction intervention targeting sex offenders tend to focus on relapse prevention and desistence; behaviour change; monitoring; supervision and surveillance (tertiary prevention). Prioritisation of primary and secondary prevention delivery is urgently required to complement and enhance this since the overall reduction in sexual offences against children in the first place is preferable to preventing reoccurrence once offences have already taken place and been detected. No enforcement agenda is practicable without sustained and resourced prevention activity to complement it. It is a question of reflecting this in the distribution and earmarking of budgets at the outset.

Community reassurance and community engagement

The immediate “post Savile” period is an optimum time for developing, delivering and evaluating genuine engagement with the Scottish public and with communities to prevent sexual offending against children from occurring. This requires a co-ordinated sustainable national strategy and a practical application that leads to families and communities across the country being better empowered to play their part in preventing sex offending and managing risk. It is vital that the prevention of sex offending against children is not seen as the domain strictly of the statutory services and that the role of families and the public is clearly understood and developed.

We therefore consider it a matter of priority that baseline survey activity be undertaken nationally to gather an evidence base which informs Government and its partners of the current public ‘temperature’ in Scotland in relation to sexual offending and sexual abuse (public perceptions, attitudes and responses). This should be used to define and design a national strategy to community engagement and as a baseline against which progress and success can be measured. Community engagement should be predicated on the provision of accurate and proportionate information to individuals, families, and communities which can be used as tools to identify risk early, obtain help and inform relevant agencies (as appropriate) of concerns. The provision of information needs to be undertaken in a targeted way; promoted within a context of ongoing ‘dialogue’ and empowerment; and followed up by consistent evaluation and measurement of whether it has effected the desired changes and actions.

Any national programme of public engagement should incorporate the existing Community Disclosure Scheme (Keeping Children Safe) as a key tool for the public to protect children and prevent sexual offending. The future sustainable delivery of the Scheme and its promotion should explicitly feature in the forthcoming policing budget allocation.

We therefore urge the Justice Committee, while scrutinising the draft budget, to consider specific allocation for:

- A national Sex Offending community engagement strategy and prevention activity including baseline survey activity and evaluation within the overall justice budget;
- The national Community Disclosure Scheme (Keeping Children Safe) within the policing budget.
Online offending - alternatives to custody

Stop it Now! Scotland has, for some years, provided individual interventions and group learning programmes for people under investigation for accessing and downloading illegal and indecent images of children (child pornography). These interventions are provided during the investigative period prior to conviction and are unique in Scotland. Our findings show that this population of offender responds well to interventions provided during the period of crisis that ensues following discovery and arrest helping to build insights into offending behaviour, optimise engagement with ensuing behaviour-change programmes, and contribute substantially to future desistence from offending and pro-social behaviour.

It is also our experience that there are considerable correlations between this offending behaviour (for adults and young people) and other areas of adversity such as early experience of trauma including child sexual abuse; witnessing and living with domestic abuse; bullying; child and adolescent mental health problems; adjustment and developmental issues; etc.

Similarly Stop it Now! Scotland has developed personal and groupwork services for the families and partners of people under investigation for accessing and downloading illegal and indecent images of children online (child pornography). This population are invisible within criminal justice provision but are key to the future management of offenders, risk reduction and desistence. These services remain unfunded but are an important contributor to family cohesion, child protection, risk reduction and desistence from offending.

We firmly believe that early interventions with internet offenders and with family members prior to conviction and close to the point of arrest are vital to reduce suicide ideation and attempts; provide insights and cognitive change; prepare for subsequent conviction and behaviour change programmes.

Adult offenders – “internet” offending

There continues to be an exponential growth in online offending including grooming children and accessing/downloading indecent and illegal material concerning children (child pornography). The police cannot be expected to meet this challenge alone and an emphasis on enforcement is potentially disproportionate to the overall needs of this population of offenders and to reducing the likelihood of re-offending. We believe that good outcomes are more achievable when early and proportionate intervention is delivered in a consistent way. This needs to be tailored to the needs of the offender and their families so that opportunities for improved personal functioning, desistence, and offence-free futures are optimised.

- We therefore urge the Justice Committee to specifically address the apportionment of budgets required for this population of offenders and particularly to do so through the lens of preventative spend. Early intervention programmes (at the point of arrest) should be seen as an important part of a suite of alternatives to custody which can meet the mental health needs of individuals and address offence disposed thinking in a way which, for some offenders, can produce good outcomes (for the individual, their family and the public) without the need for custody. These may also
complement subsequent post-conviction intervention and, indeed, provide an important alternative where community based provision (post-conviction) is unavailable or not required.

Families of “Internet” Offenders

We also believe that specific funds should be made available for direct work with the families of offenders. Partners and family members of internet offenders are often overlooked in the allocation and delivery of criminal justice services both during the investigative phase and post-conviction. Immediate family members are often seriously negatively affected by the behaviour of the offender and subsequently by the revelation of the offending through the interventions of statutory agencies and potential public knowledge. This unnecessarily jeopardises the integrity of families and undermines the capacity of partners and family members to play a key role in the future management of risk and rehabilitation of the offender. We believe that early intervention with family members is a vital contributor to the prevention of sex offending and successful rehabilitation of such offenders within communities and families.

- We urge the Justice Committee specifically to consider the need for targeted services for the families of such offenders as a key aspect of prevention, reduction of risk and successful rehabilitation and to ensure that the distribution of budgets takes account of this.

Young offenders

The involvement of young people in a range of offending behaviours undertaken through the use of communication and information technology is exponentially growing and provides a serious challenge to agencies in the community as well as to parents and families.

Effective interventions to meet this challenge require urgently to be developed but it is our view that, where possible and appropriate, these should be delivered early; should not unnecessarily criminalise young people or stigmatise them with lifelong consequences; and should focus on changing their thinking as well as their behaviour.

- We therefore urge the Justice Committee to consider the budget requirements and apportionment necessary to put in place effective and proportionate interventions and services for young offenders detected and reported for offences involving communication and information technology and the need for this to be prioritised in the delivery of community based services as a direct alternative to custody and/or criminal prosecution.

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