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Education, Children and Young People Committee

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2026, Session 6

CONVENER

*Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)
*Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Professor Alexis Jay (National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group)
Craig Naylor (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland)
Deputy Chief Constable Bex Smith (Police Scotland)
Detective Chief Superintendent Sarah Taylor (Police Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 25 February 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Group-based Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning and welcome to the eighth meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in 2026. Our first item of business is an evidence session on group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation.

I welcome our witnesses: Professor Alexis Jay, who is the independent chair of the national strategic group on child sexual abuse; Craig Naylor, His Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary in Scotland; Deputy Chief Constable Bex Smith of Police Scotland; and Detective Chief Superintendent Sarah Taylor, the head of public protection at Police Scotland. I thank them all for attending today and for the written submissions that we have received.

We will move straight to questions. Professor Jay, there has been an informal session with a cross-party group of MSPs, at which you gave a good update on exactly what we are looking at today and on the wider issue. In order to get that into the *Official Report*, please tell us what grooming is and how your independent group and others are looking at that. Also, what is your evaluation of the current situation here in Scotland, in comparison with other parts of the United Kingdom? That is a simple opening question.

Professor Alexis Jay (National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group): I will start with the easier part, which is the question about what grooming is. You will be aware that my personal preference is not to use the term "grooming" and I will explain why that is. What that term implies does not include all child sexual exploitation. That is a very important distinction because exploitation takes different forms.

The concept of grooming first emerged around 2013 or 2014, when I had done the original work in Rotherham. That is when the term started being used and the idea was underpinned by the concept of exchange. I was always a bit ambivalent about that, but it meant that children were persuaded, or in some way coerced, to become involved in sexual exploitation as a result of emotional pressure from adults who were usually not very much older. A standard difference would be that a 12 or 13-year-old child was coerced by a 17-year-old whom they regarded as their boyfriend—until they weren't. There would come a point where the child could be "groomed" through the use of drink and drugs, in some cases, regrettably, until an addiction developed over time, although not immediately.

They were then persuaded to do certain things. For example, persons in a group might think that unless they paid a certain amount, or did something for someone else in that group or in another group, they would get beaten up or something would happen to them. That is the way in which young girls—usually from about the age of 12, but, nowadays, much younger than that, as well—become involved. It is then taken on from there. Sometimes, the individuals are used to recruit, or are intimidated into recruiting, others of their age.

The reason why I do not like using only the term "grooming" is that there are lots of circumstances in which it is not grooming with an exchange of anything—it is crude criminality. There is no pretence of it being in exchange for a relationship, drugs, clothes or whatever. It is just a case of "Do it." There is certainly a movement towards that.

There is also misuse of the word "gangs", because the definition usually implies that pressure is put on a child to engage in sexual activity with two or more people, but, from the public inquiry that I chaired down south, I know that there are circumstances where such things occur that are absolutely not in gangs. For example, we had several examples of monastic orders that passed boys—it was usually boys—around among themselves, but a monastic order is not a gang. It is therefore quite important to distinguish that the term "grooming gangs" has certain connotations, some of which are potentially very unpleasant and inaccurate.

I am mostly concerned about being inaccurate. I know that Louise Casey thinks that it would be sanitising the situation to call these "networks", but it is more accurate to call them "networks", because that term encompasses a much wider range of issues, people and settings. "Gangs" has a certain connotation, and it would be wrong and far too restrictive to think that that is the only way in which the sexual exploitation of children takes place. I do not know whether my colleagues have anything to add to that.

The Convener: We might come on to that, but it is a useful scene setter for what we will discuss. Obviously, there will be a statement in the Parliament later today, and the issue continues to be in the public domain. Perhaps asking about the current scale of the problem in Scotland was too big a question. However, I take it that we all accept

that instances have been missed and that victims have not had justice. Do you agree with that?

Professor Jay: Yes, I do.

The Convener: I will come to you, Mr Naylor. Is the inspectorate partly responsible? You are now part of this review but, prior to that, the inspectorate was there to give reassurance to us as elected members and to the wider public that there is a body that is checking up on others. Did the inspectorate miss instances of networking or grooming gangs?

Craig Naylor (HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland): That is a very interesting question. If you are asking whether we are responsible for this, no, we are not responsible for it.

The Convener: I understand that point. Could issues have been spotted sooner if the inspectorates were more concentrated on the issue, or do you think that it was impossible to spot at an earlier stage?

Craig Naylor: It might be worth explaining the work that we do around children and young people and adults with support needs—I will focus on children because of this committee's remit.

Since 2005, the Care Inspectorate, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland and Healthcare Improvement Scotland have worked together on a programme of inspections that have looked at children at risk of harm or who are subject to a whole raft of things, including measures through the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration and other bodies, and we have reported on that. Our most recent thematic inspection looked at cross-border placements of children into care, which Professor Jay has spoken about considerably in her previous investigations. Therefore, no, I do not think that we have been deficient in what we have done.

We have shown that there are significant strong points in the Scottish approach to looking after children. The initial referral discussion model that was put in place in the early 2000s and the fact that we work across the statutory bodies—and wider—has shown that there are good structures and processes in place.

The biggest issue for me in all this is when children and young people who have been abused do not have the confidence in people around them to report the matter. Nobody can take forward an investigation if they are not aware of the fact that someone has been abused. It is about how we provide support and strength to victims, and those who have been victims in the past, to make sure that they have a voice and are able to come forward in a way that is supported. That is very difficult to find out.

Do I think that we have been deficient? No—we have done a huge programme of work over the past 20-plus years that has improved outcomes for children. Do I think that we could do more? Yes, and that is why, when we were asked by Government before the turn of the year to look at the issue in a different way, we started doing things in a different way. We have changed the way that we are approaching this inspection, based a lot on what Professor Jay has done in the past and also on what Dame Louise Casey has done. We have also learned from the range of professionals in the organisations that are working on the review to take forward a different approach and a different way of doing business to try and find out if there are things that we have not come across during our previous inspections.

The Convener: Initial child social work assessment meetings in 2023-24, which is just in the past couple of years, suggested that there were 13 cases of organised child sexual abuse and exploitation across Scotland, with no cases in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee. As an inspectorate body, are you confident in that figure of 13 cases and that big cities such as Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee had no cases?

Craig Naylor: I do not know what information you are quoting from.

The Convener: Child social work assessment meetings found that there were 13 reported cases of organised child sexual abuse and exploitation identified at those meetings but that there were none in Glasgow, none in Edinburgh and none in Dundee. Does that figure of 13 cases across Scotland sound about right, and do you think that our biggest cities would have no cases at all, or are they not being reported in the right way, being missed or not being investigated correctly?

As the inspectorate that is looking at this issue, does that rough figure sound correct, or do you think—

Craig Naylor: Perhaps I did not make it clear: I do not recognise the information that you are talking about, and I do not know which document it has come from. If it is a document that we have produced, it is not information that I recognise.

The Convener: I am asking about the number.

Craig Naylor: Can I answer the question?

The number seems very low, but on how sexual crime is reported, which is a matter for my colleagues to the right, we did an inspection, I think in 2020, on the recording of crime in Scotland, which found that Police Scotland was good at that. It found that it maintained its national accreditation

for statistics, which meant that when something was reported to it, we showed that it was effective and efficient in doing that.

My understanding is that there is not a category under the crime system for organised child sexual abuse or exploitation. Perhaps that is a deficiency, but would I be content that if a sexual crime was reported to Police Scotland, it would be recorded effectively as a sexual crime? Yes, I would be.

We are about to revisit that inspection on the crime system in April, and we are working with the Office for National Statistics to make sure that the methodology that we use will capture whether Police Scotland is effective in how it records the information.

Do I think that there are only 13 cases of organised child sexual abuse in Scotland in 2023-24? It depends how you define it, which is one of the difficulties that we have had. What we are working on now, and what Chief Superintendent Taylor is very focused on—I will not speak for Sarah—is a review of the work, back to the inception of Police Scotland, in relation to an individual or more victims with two or more perpetrators. Gathering that data from the wide range of systems that all gather data on the wellbeing and welfare of children and the recording of crime is very difficult, because the systems are not set up in that way.

The Convener: Before I move on, you have made it clear that you are staunchly independent of the Government. So that you can get your response on the record, I put it to you that there are some concerns that the inspectorate in Scotland is too close to the Government, because you share buildings with them, for example. How do you respond to that? I hope that you can provide some reassurance to people who are watching and following our proceedings.

09:45

Craig Naylor: We have to use the infrastructure, which includes information technology systems that are on the Government's network and buildings that are provided to us, partly because that is the way that the budget is set. All the people within my organisation, and I am sure that I can speak for the other inspectorate bodies, are appointed through the chief executive, which is my role. We follow civil service commission processes when we appoint senior people, but we are independent and we do not answer to Scottish Government officials about the way that we do our business. We are independent and fight to maintain that. I have said in the Parliament many times, and have had significant recognition of that, that our role as an independent body is understood and respected by members of the Scottish Parliament.

The Convener: My next question is for our Police Scotland colleagues. There is concern that incidents have been missed, whether that relates to how they are reported, recorded or investigated. How do you respond to that? What is your role in trying to get to the bottom of what went wrong in the past? How can you improve things going forward if there are some concerns about Police Scotland's activities during the period that we are looking at, as well as prior to that?

Deputy Chief Constable Bex Smith (Police Scotland): I will start and add a few thoughts. It is really important to note that we have a multi-agency approach to child abuse. We cannot work alone and we have good relationships and partnerships across the system. We learn from past investigations when we have not got it right and we take the learning forward. We also have a strong partnership with the National Crime Agency, which we are proud of, and we work across borders. This type of offending activity does not just happen in local communities; we know that it is international, especially with the availability of the online space. We have seen a 20 per cent increase in online child abuse, which I can see increasing.

We also learn from our inspectorate body reviews. Sometimes, we have a challenging relationship, which is right and proper, and recommendations are made for us, which we take forward. For this review, there will be instances that we have not investigated in the way that we would do now. The way that we investigate child abuse today is very different to how we investigated it years ago. I am proud of the work that the team is doing. The national child abuse investigation unit was set up in 2015. In Scotland, the fact that we are a national service, as opposed to working within borders and local authority areas, provides a different approach across the country.

I will stop there, but I reassure the committee that we have those relationships in place and will take forward any recommendations. I will bring in DCS Sarah Taylor in a minute to speak a little more about the work that we are currently doing, which will shine a light on some of that. We have taken some cases forward that are complex and challenging in areas in which other organisations may not have done.

The Convener: You have suggested that things have not been investigated appropriately in the past as they would be now. I will not go into the specifics of the case, but I have raised a fairly recent case with you—indeed, it concluded in the court only in the past few weeks; it is not a historical case—in which errors have been made

that we have to look at. Although the incidents may go back many years, it is a recent case and there are recent victims who I believe, from what I know about the case, have suffered as a result of the police investigation, which could have and should have been better. Would the force accept that?

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: I do not think that it would be appropriate to talk about individual cases. The convener is aware that we have agreed to meet the family in question. There will be instances in which we have not done everything that we could have done. We learn from that and move on. In that particular case, we took the learning forward. There is a lot of information that I will not discuss at the meeting. I give my commitment that, when victims come to Police Scotland, we will deal with them in a trauma-informed way and ensure that we listen, learn and do everything that we can to support the individual through an investigation.

This is genuinely a really complex area of work, and I am proud of our organisation for the work that we do, the way that we treat victims and the way that we listen and care and move forward, so I would like to give that reassurance today that that is something that we absolutely do.

Detective Chief Superintendent Sarah Taylor (Police Scotland): I whole-heartedly agree with the deputy chief constable. The important thing is transparency and I appreciate that there will be concerns around how we look back, but the national child abuse investigation unit has a huge amount of experience in dealing with complex investigations and, as you heard from Professor Jay, child sexual abuse is extremely complex.

We take a multi-agency approach, so as well as identifying instances of child sexual abuse ourselves through the work that we do, we also rely on partner agencies raising those concerns and utilising the really robust structures that we have in place for child protection in Scotland. That starts with the inter-agency referral discussion. It is about escalation and about having the ability to have structured conversations with partners where we share information and we can make decisions collectively, as those who are responsible for ensuring that children remain safe within our communities.

In terms of that transparency, we know that we have not always got investigations right and, in light of that, we take that learning, we change our processes and policies and we improve our training. The officers who will conduct this piece of work for Police Scotland are highly skilled. They are specialist officers who have received training in specialist areas, whether it is sexual offences investigations or indeed, as the deputy chief constable says, ensuring that the victim is at the heart of everything that we do. However, that transparency is really important and if we have made mistakes, we will say so.

The Convener: Professor Jay, when you appeared before our committee in December, you said that the one issue that your group had

> "not yet properly clarified is engagement with, or the involvement of, survivors."—[*Official Report*, *Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 17 December 2025, col 6.]

A couple of months on, how has that progressed?

After Professor Jay, I would be keen to hear from the other witnesses about that input from survivors in relation to their own work.

Professor Jay: The point that I made was that we had not resolved how best to become involved and it was a priority for the first meeting of the group, in January of this year. The next meeting is next week and in fact individuals have had a lot of contact with specific groups.

As I said before, this is not a single group and should never be considered to be such. There are very specific circumstances in which the abuse occurred, by whom or where or in whatever setting and so on, but it cannot ever be judged as all being the same.

I am aware that individual members of the independent group have a lot of contacts with different groups that are relevant to their particular services and so on. However, for the next meeting, next week, we are looking at this as a priority and we are looking at instances of work that I am aware of from south of the border and also in Scotland. It is certainly my view that we have to determine a range of ways to do this. I do not think that it will be very difficult because we already have a network of contacts. However, it is a matter of organising that properly and, as I said before, asking people directly how they want to become involved, because different people want to do different things and we should accommodate that.

This is an area in relation to victims and survivors that is very important and it is relevant to the questions you have been asking; there have been quite a number of studies of what we refer to as barriers to disclosure, to find out why victims did not come forward sooner. The responsibility for that should not be with them, ever; it should be with us as to how we organise ourselves. There are many barriers to disclosure, and, indeed, barriers for the individuals themselves. We analysed a lot of this in the public inquiry in England and Wales; I can send you some brief notes on it, if that is of interest.

However, it is most important that all professionals concerned understand what the reasons are and how to be more—"approachable"

is not the right word, but we must know how to ensure that we are doing everything in our power to make it easy for children and young people to come forward with some trust to talk to somebody, because, by a certain age, they will never trust anyone in officialdom again.

The Convener: Mr Naylor, I was looking at the three phases of work on the review. At what point do survivors feature in that, or is that aspect being covered by Police Scotland and the other groups and therefore you are just looking at the bodies?

Craig Naylor: We are looking at the processes and how the bodies work together to make sure that, when someone comes forward and reports, they are given the support that they need—for wellbeing, healthcare and access to the justice processes—and that they are supported through the process in the best way possible, in a trauma-informed way. That does not include us speaking to victims at that point, because we do not think that that would be appropriate. In phase 2, the closest that we will come to victims is when we look at their records to understand what they have gone through.

A very specialist resource is needed to speak to victims without retraumatising them, and we do not think that we are the bodies that should do that. Our view is forward looking. Are the systems, processes and bodies set up for this work? Do they do their job well? Can we make recommendations to improve that?

The Convener: DCS Taylor, you have touched on some of the interaction that you will have with victims and survivors. Is there anything that you want to add?

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: Obviously, every survivor is unique. Each one has their own experiences. I want to give the reassurance that we will tailor our approach to the individual's needs. It comes down to ensuring that wellbeing and support are catered for; that is part of the role of a sexual offences liaison officer.

The Convener: Thank you. We go to Bill Kidd.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): This is an incredibly serious issue. What concerns are there about cross-border group-based child sexual abuse, and how are those concerns already being addressed? What can we learn from the work that is being undertaken in England and Wales? Can we learn from each other in order to move things forward for improvement?

Professor Jay: Others will probably have a more technical answer, but I will tell you what I know from my experience, although it is not backed up with figures. I am aware from the work that was done in England and Wales that there was definitely an issue with the transportation of individuals across the Welsh border in both directions. Addressing that required particular co-operation between the police forces and social services in those areas. From anecdotal evidence, I know that that has also occurred between Scotland and the north of England, around the Newcastle area, and in Dumfries and Galloway, but I know nothing about the numbers in any of that. I am also well aware from the Rotherham days that there was a great deal of traffic in that respect between the north of England and Ireland, although, once more, I do not know the figures. I have no idea whether that trend has continued, but there was a great deal of that activity around that time. It definitely requires cross-border co-operation in every sense. Of course that is all the more true when there is child criminal exploitation.

Bill Kidd: Thank you. Deputy Chief Constable Smith, do you have anything to add?

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: I will add a bit of context to that. This offending does not happen within boundaries. It is not neat. It is complicated, and we know that individuals will travel. One of the ways in which we combat that is through our relationship with law enforcement in the rest of the UK. We have a good relationship with colleagues down south, in the north of England, with the National Police Chiefs Council, the College of Policing and other bodies, and we share learning to understand the problem. We also work closely with the NCA, which is key to our understanding of the holistic picture across the UK of where this travelling takes place, where trafficking offences happen, how these groups are operating and what offending behaviour is being seen nationally and internationally.

10:00

Scotland is in a unique position in having a national service. That is a real positive for us, because we do not have boundaries within a force area as colleagues do in England and Wales. Because of our national units, we have the ability to understand the position in Scotland in a different way from forces in England and Wales, which are perhaps more constrained by boundaries. However, I am confident that we have the relationships to be able to understand what that looks like. As I say, this is a complex area of offending. It does not fit neatly into boundaries, but we are aware of and alive to that.

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: This is where the sharing of intelligence across different forces comes in. It could be the community intelligence that we ingather, such as people seeing different cars turning up at locations and so on. That is critical, because it allows us to use our investigative abilities to track movements and so on across the country.

Craig Naylor: The care review that was done a number of years back suggested a different model of care in Scotland. That has been successful in reducing the number of looked-after children in Scotland, which has freed up a lot of capacity for children's homes, particularly those that are privately run, to take children from outwith Scotland. On the back of that, the Care Inspectorate and HMICS did some work about two and a half years ago on cross-border placements of young people. We made a number of recommendations about that, particularly around information sharing.

Going back to Professor Jay's work on what are commonly called the pull factors in this type of exploitation, in some of the areas that we looked at, where young looked-after people who are not from the local area are going missing regularly, that information can go missing. We recommended that the recording of data and the sharing of that data with health partners, police partners and others should be improved. Work is on-going in that space, but it needs to get sharper.

Bill Kidd: Are the improvements significant enough to be noticed? Can you say how many more children are being kept safe, or is registering that not really viable?

Craig Naylor: It is almost about proving the negative. If children are being kept safe, we do not see the issues coming up. One of the inspections that we did in East Lothian showed that the chief social work officers and social work officers were feeling very pressured because they were putting fewer children into care on the back of the care review. They felt personally responsible that they were taking risk-based decisions to keep children at home, rather than sending them to a children's home or a foster care place, where there can be additional different risks. In that instance, however, we saw professional practice and good work being done on the ground to look after people in their home environment, if that was the safest place to do that, and it caused a reduction in the number of children going into looked-after places.

We cannot prove the negative, however. We cannot say how many people going through that process would have been abused if they had gone into care or another different setting.

Do I think that it is working? The people on the ground are working hard to make it happen and to make sure that the information is shared, as DCS Taylor has talked about, through the IRD process when someone makes a disclosure about some form of abuse or other risk factors come up. It is not just about the individual reporting something. Professionals report these matters to their partners regularly without a disclosure from an individual.

Bill Kidd: Professor Jay wants to come in again.

Professor Jay: Just to make the general point that, as I am sure you already know, child sexual abuse is one of the most underreported and underreferred to areas. Lots of attempted estimates have been made, but it is obviously very difficult to assess, and it is about how much we do not know. However, we always know that the recorded numbers are far less than the actual ones.

Bill Kidd: Are we catching and putting away more of the bad people?

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: Although I cannot speak for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, the quality of police investigations is a lot better now, because we get sufficient evidence to ensure the best chance of securing outcomes and justice for victims. We know that sexual offending is rising—it was published yesterday that there has been a 9 per cent rise—and that there is an almost yearly 20 per cent rise in online child sexual abuse. However, more and more people are seeing better justice outcomes, which we achieve as a result of qualitative investigations.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): To build on some of the points that Mr Kidd made, I will ask about data. I remember that you spoke about the matter before Christmas, Professor Jay. I think that you said at that time that, although data collection is happening, we do not consider it to be reliable in Scotland or, as it happens, in England and Wales. We know that the short-life working group met in January, and I would like to get an update from you on that, although I know that it is still early days for you to be able to see where that group is going.

The key question is how we share the information that comes from that data. What would the approach be? I will ask you that question first, Professor Jay, because I think that you identified the matter as being key, and you have touched on it already this morning.

Professor Jay: Indeed, I absolutely do and continue to see that as hugely important. I said previously that the whole system of data collection in England and Wales was "confused and confusing". I am not sure that I can apply that phrase to Scotland, but there is a very good chance that it might be the case here, too. Indeed, the convener mentioned some figures earlier, which I also got when I asked the question, and my immediate response was that that was not possible and that the figures must be so far off the mark—although I did not know by how much, it did not make sense.

I have met with the chief statistician who is chairing the group. I cannot pretend that the matter

is straightforward—it is not. However, we must fix the situation, because, as I am sure you know, you cannot accurately plan for how to address some issues until you know the scale of them. We know quite a lot about the nature of the issue, and I hope that we have now found the extent of it, but we do not know the numbers. That is for many reasons, including, not surprisingly, the reluctance of children and young people to come forward and put their trust in people, including their own parents, to tell them what has happened. It is a complex issue.

However, we could, for a start, ensure that the various agencies use identical definitions of the relevant factors and interpret them in the same way. One of the problems that we found in England and Wales is that the 43 police forces were not consistent in what they were doing. They are dealing with bigger numbers, of course, and although they were doing good work, they were not consistently counting the volume, if you like.

The chief statistician is working on the issue and will report back to the group that I chair. I am afraid that I cannot tell you much more right now—you might like to ask him to explain the matter in more detail at a future meeting.

Paul McLennan: I know that it is still early days, as the group has only met once. I will open that question up to the other witnesses, because, as you said, Professor Jay, data collection is really important. How can we tackle a problem if we do not know the extent of it?

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: That is the issue. To my mind, child protection should be relatively simple, but the way in which Scotland is structured, with 32 local authorities, creates silos. Professor Jay is absolutely right: it is about terminology and definitions, and whether there is consistency. There is no consistency in the data that we collect. There are pockets where data is collected by either statutory agencies or some of our key third sector partners, but it is very difficult to put all that together and get a sense of the issue and the scale.

The data is very important, certainly in my opinion, for getting prevention right. That is partly about prevention of perpetrators, because we do not actually understand what that demographic looks like. In my professional experience, the vast majority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are male, but we need to record that because it will help us in looking at prevention policies and strategies from a national perspective. Having a cluttered landscape does not help us in collecting data that could inform trends and—ideally—identify where groups or networks are operating and where there are patterns of behaviour. It is also important to understand what works to protect children. We need that data, but it is very difficult to collect—it is a muddied landscape.

Paul McLennan: Mr Naylor, perhaps you can say something about what the role of the inspectorate looks like as we move forward. I am having a look through the minutes of the first meeting of the data short-life working group. There are about 15 organisations listed, but it is not just about who was at that meeting; the role of local authorities is incredibly important as well.

We will identify the extent of the problem, but how do we ensure that we are always on top of it as we move forward? Has the inspectorate had a look at what its role will be in that regard?

Craig Naylor: As part of the work that we will be doing in phase 1 of our review, we will look at all the statutory bodies, across the 30 chief officer groups and 32 local authority areas, with regard to how they do their business. There is an expectation that we will meet the national guidelines, which were set out in 2023. If they are not following those, that will cause us concern, but we expect them to be doing so and recording things through the IRD process and case conference processes. However, there is no single Scottish IRD database—there is no one source of truth in this area—and we have been very keen to see better alignment on that.

There is some very good practice. I think that Edinburgh, the Scottish Borders and Forth Valley use an electronic IRD system that is shared across statutory partners, which is good. I do not know how good the system is, but the fact that they do that on one system, to which everyone has access, is a good thing. The fact that 32 local authorities do not have one way of doing it causes us some concern, but that is about putting in investment, time and effort to get a good system and roll it out to the whole of Scotland.

As we said earlier, we have some real strengths. Police Scotland is one service that covers the whole of Scotland, and it now has one vulnerable persons database and one crime system—that is a positive. It has also had one intelligence system for 20-plus years.

All of that, to my mind, is good practice as we look to go forward, but we need to consider what happens outwith those areas and how we get a geographic spread of such practice, with people doing the same thing in the same way with the same quality.

Paul McLennan: That will be a key area for our successor committee to pick up on.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I will follow on with the same theme, although I do not want to flog it unnecessarily. We were given figures by the Scottish Parliament information

centre that come from the national audit in England and Wales last summer. The national audit says:

"500,000 children a year are likely to experience child sexual abuse … Police recorded crime data shows just over 100,000 offences of child sexual abuse and exploitation … in 2024".

It goes on to say that,

"Of these contact offences, an estimated 17,100 are 'flagged' by police as child sexual exploitation",

and that, within that,

"The only figure on group-based child sexual exploitation"

is

"around 700".

That suggests, on the surface, that group-based child sexual exploitation is a tiny part of what is going on overall. If that is the case, does that mean that we should not focus on it too much? Alternatively, is the answer either that we do not know what the figures are or that we suspect that the group-based side is much bigger than what has been recorded in the national audit?

10:15

Professor Jay: I am no expert on the figures, but I am aware of what you have just quoted, and those figures are generally accepted as accurate by survivor organisations across the piece. However, you are quite right to raise a question as to what the figures represent: whether that is the actual picture and there are only 700 such offences, or whether offences remain undetected. I would certainly have expected some to be undetected.

I have never thought that it constituted a huge issue—regrettably, a lot of the concerns about child sexual exploitation have been generated in different places for different reasons, and we have never really known the scale of it in Scotland or in England; we still do not. However, I would say that the figures do not really take into account all the undisclosed, unknown numbers. I suppose that we would add to that nowadays child criminal exploitation, because those two offences are becoming increasingly closer and use many similar tactics.

Almost any figures around sexual exploitation of children are underrepresentations. I am afraid that I could not tell you by how much, but I agree that it was quite startling that the numbers—at least the estimates—were generally quite low.

John Mason: As I understand it, you folk are currently carrying out a review and that will lead to whether or not we have a public inquiry. I do not want to go into the timescale of 18 months, because I think that one of my colleagues is going to ask you about that. However, is one of the review's aims to enable you to get a better feel for the size of the problem, which will help you to recommend, or the Government to decide, whether there should be a public inquiry? Is that the route that we are going down?

Craig Naylor: It is very difficult, as Professor Jay highlighted, to totally and accurately understand the scale and scope of child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation, partly because there is a reluctance from victims to come forward and tell somebody. That is not something for the victims to worry about—it is for us to worry about in setting up the systems.

The first stage of the review will look at the understanding across the 32 local authorities and the 30 chief officer groups that manage the child protection systems of the scale and scope, and how they are addressing that.

However, I doubt very much whether that will actually give us definitive evidence of what the numbers are. I do not think that anyone can do that, because they cannot see into the unknown unknowns—the people we do not know about, who have been abused but have not come forward to statutory or other authorities to make that known.

There is also, in my view, a need for greater responsibility on public bodies and third sector bodies to report things when those are made known to them. That raises the idea of a mandatory reporting requirement, which I am very much in favour of.

John Mason: If survivors are not currently coming forward, and given that you do not sound optimistic that they will come forward during the review—correct me if I have picked that up wrongly—would they be more likely to come forward in a public inquiry, or could we go through the whole process and still have a lot of victims not telling us?

Craig Naylor: I do not know whether you picked me up incorrectly; I would not say that I said anything about confidence in people coming forward.

I can talk about the work that I did in Rotherham, where I worked for the National Crime Agency and was the lead officer for operation stovewood. We learned a huge amount from the truth project that was part of Professor Jay's independent investigation into child sexual abuse. The victims that we saw coming through that process had never disclosed anything previously and had no confidence in any professional body but, because the truth project treated them in such a compassionate manner, within a trauma-informed approach, they grew in confidence. The truth project allowed them to have a voice, be heard and

move forward until they began to trust National Crime Agency staff. Members of my team would meet those individuals and met their needs, finding out whether they wanted a criminal justice process to follow. We had a significant number of convictions on the back of that.

That is not perfect, because I know that there are still victims out there. I remember doing a press conference shortly before I left the National Crime Agency and saying that we would have to draw a line under that work at some point, because we did not have the money and could not continue having staff working on it if people were not coming forward. I encouraged people who wanted to come forward and tell us their stories to do that after the truth project had closed, by using the resources of the National Crime Agency. We got some people, but we knew that there were more out there who did not want to engage and who will probably never engage. They will deal with the trauma themselves—that is their way of coping. I admire them for that, but giving them the opportunity to come forward was the right thing to do, and using the offices of the truth project was important.

John Mason: Perhaps I should know more about the truth project, but I do not. Was it like a public inquiry, with lawyers on both sides?

Professor Jay: It was nothing like that. It was done under the aegis of the public inquiry, but was not part of it. We did it because of the need to hear more from victims and survivors.

I will try not to talk for too long but, as Craig Naylor said, it was a significant development. It ran in parallel with, and was almost the opposite of, the public inquiry. We recruited a number of experienced people as facilitators and asked individuals to come forward if they would like to tell us their story and give us an account of the sexual abuse that happened to them as children. In the end, almost 7,000 people came forward and we acquired a huge body of information.

The project was different because things happened in locations that were carefully chosen to suit people. They sometimes did not want to go anywhere in their home area, because they did not want to be identified, so people in Wales might choose to go to Liverpool. We paid all their expenses and, if they had to stay overnight, we paid for that, too. A facilitator would take them through the session, which was entirely at their pace. The facilitator did not ask loads of questions, because the constant questioning was one thing that people really did not like about dealing with officials, and it could be quite traumatising. We put a safeguarding ring round any individual who came. They were contacted in advance and talked through what would be involved as well as being spoken to on the day, and afterwards, to ensure that they were okay.

We had all sorts of arrangements in place and it was an effective way of working. The data that we obtained was fascinating. From that cadre of people, we found out that the average length of time from when an individual was abused as a child to when they told anyone about it was 26 years. I may have said this in a previous meeting, but it was almost never a one-off experience: the average length of time for which people experienced abuse by an adult was four years. There is an idea that abuse is a one-off and that people should get on with life and forget about it, but that is not the case. They would not have been able to get on with life anyway, even if it had been a one-off, but it was not.

We learned a great deal—more than most research would tell you—from that enormous range of people, and everything was done to make the process victim-focused. We are going to bring someone who organised that project to the national group that I chair, because it is an interesting model and need not cost what a public inquiry costs. It could be done in a different, and considerably cheaper, way. We learned loads, and it is an interesting way of involving people, because it puts things under their control, which matters a lot when they are dealing with authority. It really is interesting.

John Mason: You sound enthusiastic about that and you have enthused me. That project fed into your public inquiry.

Professor Jay: There are caveats to that. People gave us their stories. In some instances, that had been legally tested, because they had been through a judicial process but, if that had not happened and it was the first time that they had spoken to people, we could not use that as evidence, because it had not been tested. We could aggregate information and learn a lot from it and, with their permission, we referred that to the police. For example, if they had been abused in a primary school at a certain time, even if they did not want to be identified, we could tell operation hydrant and that added to what was known about pupils in that particular school or area. We could not use information unless there were some witnesses in the public inquiry, which was not very likely with some of the people who came through the truth project, but we could use directly relevant information.

The aggregated data that we got from people's experiences was hugely relevant to understanding how everything took place. You asked a question about numbers. The vast majority of sexual abuse of children occurs either within the family home or within the family network.

John Mason: I am drawing my questions to a close and am interested in how the review will lead into a public inquiry or something else. Could that sort of truth project stand alone? Would it be worth while doing that, or is it better, as was done down south, to have it relate to or be under the aegis of a public inquiry?

Professor Jay: The truth project was under the aegis of the public inquiry because we had the money to do it. That was one reason. We wanted to do something for victims and survivors and knew from consulting them that that was what they wanted. They advised on all sorts of things that would make them feel comfortable, including what the rooms would be like. That was not directly related to the public hearings, but it provided us with an additional source of data and information about how all that occurred, which mattered to the victims and survivors as well as to us.

There is a great deal of enthusiasm from people such as Craig Naylor who have had contact with that project and know how it can assist. I will be bringing a speaker to the group next week to see how that idea goes down. If there is the kind of enthusiasm and support that I am conveying to you, it is also important to look at how such a thing would be resourced. We had the enthusiasm of more than 7,000 victims themselves, which is a big number.

John Mason: I realise that I have not asked anyone else. Does anyone want to come in before I hand back to the convener?

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: It is important to place any survivor at the heart of whatever we do and to listen to their needs and wishes.

Professor Jay is absolutely right about the length of time taken before a disclosure, which can also come in stages. Many survivors have no trust in statutory figures, so it takes time to build a relationship before they make a disclosure. We must ensure that everyone has the ability to say that they do not want to go to court or give the police a statement and we must acknowledge that.

There are other things that we can do on the back of that. Information can be passed to the police in the form of what you might call sanitised intelligence, so that we can look at alternative options if we know that there is a risk within a community. The truth project had some fabulous benefits.

10:30

John Mason: Would people trust a public inquiry, or is that too formal a setting?

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: We have a public inquiry at the moment, which is looking at a specific period, as well as locations, establishments and so on. Something very similar is set up there, in that people can go directly to the inquiry—several people have done so—and be asked whether they want to report things to the police. Something is already in place there, although I do not know where those statements are taken and how victims are catered for. However, it is slightly different, because it goes back to 1933 and some of the survivors are older now, and the abuse has happened across a huge range of settings.

In relation to CSE, victims can come from a variety of backgrounds, but predominantly they have at some point been in local authority care—I do not mean that it is only those who have been in residential care but that they have been open to local authority care, because of their life experiences. It is about how to find that blend, and the only way to get it is to ask survivors what they want and what will give them the outcomes that they want in a timely manner.

The Convener: Before I move on, I want to go back to the truth project. Professor Jay, I think that you mentioned that 6,000 individuals were involved.

Professor Jay: Actually, in total, the number of people across all our survivor activities was 7,200, but more than 6,000 of those people were part of the truth project.

The Convener: You mentioned that some people went from Wales to Liverpool. Were any Scottish survivors included who had been victims in England and Wales, or was the project only for people who are or have been permanent residents in England and Wales?

Professor Jay: We did not have such exclusions, but we did not get a lot of those requests, although the facilitators came up to Scotland on several occasions, because people had ended up there for I do not know what reasons. However, others had been in Scotland and moved to England, so we did not make any difference. If people applied to have a session, we would of course agree, whatever the situation. As I said, people were often visited in Scotland if that was the preference, but sometimes the visits took place across the border somewhere else, so that they were truly anonymous.

The Convener: I will come to you in a second, Mr Naylor, because you might want to add to that. The cost of the project has been mentioned quite a bit. What was the cost of the truth project?

Professor Jay: I do not want to frighten the horses. The whole project cost £11 million.

The Convener: Was that for the truth project?

Professor Jay: Yes. We were fortunate to have the funding there. However, when I spoke to the key person, whom I have said that we are arranging to speak to about it, he said that we could have trimmed the cost considerably. We did not know that at the time but, for example, instead of using office spaces in different areas, we could have used what are normally referred to as pop-ups. We could have used a hotel and simply chosen to go to different parts of Scotland if we had wanted to. To cut a long story short—although I am not sure that he would thank me for quoting the amount of money, I will, given that he managed all that—he thought that it could be done for £1.5 million.

Craig Naylor: I want to clarify a wee point. The 7,200 people that Professor Jay talked about were not all survivors of group-based child sexual abuse. There was a wide gamut of different locations for the abuse, including education and religious settings. I wanted to put that on the record.

Professor Jay: That is correct, and the types of abuse did not include family-based abuse, except where the parents were compliant in the abuse and were acting as exploiters themselves.

The Convener: That is a helpful clarification.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I have a couple of questions. The first is about the 18-month timescale for the national review to be undertaken by the four inspectorates. What is the reason for taking that amount of time to make a recommendation?

Craig Naylor: The 18 months comes from two sections of work. The first section of work, or phase 1 as we are calling it, commenced before Christmas. We then had a session with the 30 chief officer groups on 9 February, when we launched our information request and said how we are going to do the first phase, which is very much an assessment based on self-evaluation. They have to answer a large number of questions, gather evidence and provide it to us, and assess their behaviour in ways that they have not done before. We are therefore taking a fairly unique approach.

The four inspectorate bodies have worked closely together to design the information request and self-evaluation process. We have given the chief officer groups 12 weeks to answer the questions, and we are looking to get back a significant amount of information. We will then assess that against the eight lines of inquiry that the cabinet secretary asked us to look at and provide a report by the end of the summer. Therefore, that is probably a six to eight-month period.

Since we were asked to do the review, and as we go on, we are designing what we are calling phase 2, which is more about assurance. It will be risk based, and we will use the evidence that we get in phase 1 to design and look at where we go next. That could and should include reading case files and looking at the reporting mechanisms, data sets and a whole raft of information about how business is done. Because we are looking at 32 local authorities areas across the country, it will take a significant period of time. I am not saying that we are going to look at every local authority area, but we will look where we believe there is good practice or where we think that there are risks that we need to identify. We estimate that that will take another year or so from when we first report.

A formal report will be laid before the Parliament, in the same way as all statutory bodies do, when we report on phase 1 at the end of the summer.

Miles Briggs: Thank you for that clarification. The Scottish Government now says that, until that review comes back, it cannot take a wider view. There is therefore concern that it will take quite a long time to get the Government to take a decision.

The Convener: Louise Casey was able to do it far quicker in England and Wales. Do you accept that?

Craig Naylor: Not at all.

The Convener: Why not?

Craig Naylor: If you read the report, you will see that Louise Casey did a very different piece of work.

The Convener: But she was able to do an audit.

Craig Naylor: I think that she looked at 33 cases. We are looking at 32 local authority areas, and if we are doing a case file reading within that, we will look at a considerable number of cases. I suspect that it will be more than Dame Louise Casey looked at in her whole audit of England and Wales. We are not comparing similar things.

The Convener: Has there been any pressure from the Government to speed up the review? Is it content with the 18-month timescale?

Craig Naylor: I am sure that the Government will answer for itself, but we are bringing our professional independence to taking, for the first time in Scotland, a truly independent look across the specific topic of group-based child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation. It will be a deep dive into some areas, but it is also a risk-focused piece of work. We are doing something different to that which Dame Louise Casey did, and I would not want the two things to be conflated. We

will deliver what the Scottish Government has asked us to do against the timeline that we have set out, which is six months for phase 1 and probably a year thereafter for phase 2.

The Convener: But when victims and survivors look at what was done elsewhere, even if we are perhaps not comparing apples with apples, will they not think that it is a very long time to wait just to get to the next stage? They have waited for a long time to get to where we are now and they will have to wait for another 18 months while, as Mr Briggs said, the Scottish Government says that it cannot do much until it hears from you. Is there no way of reducing the timescale to allow us to progress quicker on behalf of the victims and survivors?

Craig Naylor: If you want accurate information, you need to allow us to gather the information and assess it, and use the information that we have built up across the four agencies to allow that to happen. I would much rather do something right than cut corners and deliver a message to Government, which would then make a decision on whether there would be a public inquiry, and have that reviewed in a number of years' time and found to be deficient. We are going to do this in a way that is professional and which considers what is needed from the victims' perspective.

Our focus is very much forward looking so that, if someone comes forward today, or in six weeks, or six months, and says, "I have been a victim," we can provide the best assurance possible on the service that they will get as a victim and that will meet their needs. That is our focus. The historical side of things, which is what a public inquiry would be more likely to look at, is not something that we are truly considering. We are looking at the scale and the capacity now and how that serves the nation of Scotland and the people within it.

Miles Briggs: Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor talked about historical abuse and the on-going inquiry. What is the witnesses' assessment of the on-going abuse within public bodies, and of the fact that it is not being investigated at this time?

A petition is going through Parliament at the moment—I am pleased to see that some of the petitioners have come to this session—that calls on the Scottish Government to establish an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate such concerns, specifically the mishandling of child-safeguarding inquiries by public bodies. However, the suggestion seems to be that we should look only at historical cases, when in fact this is often a live issue. Professor Jay outlined some of the concerns in that regard.

I just wonder whether, in your professional capacity, you think that there is any point in looking at a historical case if we are not also going to examine what is happening today and take action on that. I will put that to DCS Taylor first.

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: You are right: we know that child abuse is happening now, across different areas. We know that there is familial abuse, peer-on-peer abuse, abuse by people in positions of trust and child sexual exploitation.

If you are referring to mandatory reporting, we spoke earlier about ensuring that children and young people feel empowered to speak. They must have someone they can trust, but they must also have the confidence that, if they raise an issue, something will happen and someone will listen. Police Scotland's position on mandatory reporting is that we support it.

Professor Jay: In the England and Wales public inquiry, the temporal scope was defined as "within living memory". That was for very particular reasons: there were still people alive who had been part of the child migrant scheme in the 1930s and 1940s—not many, but they were every bit as entitled as anyone else to have what they would call their day in court.

The issues that they had encountered were truly horrific. They were sent to various parts of the empire and were sexually abused by religious orders and by others. They were very badly treated, all round. Some of them were still alive and it was correctly determined in advance that they should have the opportunity to try to find out what had happened to them. Often, their experience was that they were told their parents were dead, and that is why they had been sent abroad. Of course, it turned out that that was not the case. These children experienced such terrible things that I could never say that we should have a cut-off date that would not take into account their experiences. They needed to have the opportunity to hear what actually happened, which would perhaps give them some peace.

Miles Briggs: We know that a number of local authorities are dealing with complaints concerning individuals who are still working in education departments. When reports on live cases are made, how does Police Scotland decide whether to investigate them?

10:45

Also, what about the wider picture of prevention? I sat on the Health and Sport Committee in the previous session of Parliament, and one of our inquiries looked into disclosure checks of people working with young people in sports organisations. The findings were pretty shocking. We discovered that there was a backlog of applications and that, at that point, the Scottish

Football Association was letting people work with young people before the checks had been completed. Luckily, that situation was investigated and completely turned round. However, sometimes such situations are allowed to carry on—safeguards are not properly put in place, and people are allowed to work before being investigated.

What is Police Scotland's position? Reports are often brought to us as MSPs, and we send people to the police, but it often does not feel like a proper, active investigation process is taking place.

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: I want to make it really clear, in response to the earlier discussion about time, that time is not a barrier to justice. Whether someone has been abused in the past or that is happening now, Police Scotland would absolutely encourage them to come forward and report that to us. Genuinely, time is not a barrier to that.

In relation to your question on investigations, I will make a couple of points. If someone reports something to us—whether that is an individual who is a victim, or a third party, an organisation or a local authority reporting on their behalf—we will absolutely take that report and investigate it. We work with partners in relation to rules on disbarring and removal of licence, or whatever it might be—you talked about sports coaching and taxi firms. We do that in any investigation in due course.

Working with the victim in a trauma-informed way is really important. We have talked a lot about time today, and you had a question about the 18-month timescale. It is really important to understand that, when victims come forward, they will often talk to us at their own pace, and that is absolutely right and proper. Sometimes we will get what I think Sarah Taylor referred to as multiple disclosures of information, and we will get staged disclosures. Sometimes it might take longer to work through an investigation because of that, but it is still the right thing to do. Historically, as agencies, we have sometimes put pressure on individuals to try to get information as quickly as we can so that we can take action. That is not the right way to do that.

We have also talked a bit today about getting a criminal justice outcome, but sometimes that is not right for a victim, either. When a victim comes forward, whether that is to a third sector organisation, a partner or a different agency, we work with that individual to understand what the best possible outcome will be—Professor Jay referenced the truth project in relation to that. That is really important. This is not simple—there is no clear line to a prosecution or a quick investigation. It is really complex, and we must acknowledge that.

As I said at the beginning of my answer, this is genuinely not about time being a barrier. Whether something happened recently or in the distant past, we encourage anyone to come forward, and we will treat them in the most appropriate and professional manner we can.

Miles Briggs: The committee has been undertaking work on the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill, which the Government introduced following the Promise. We have been doing some really good work on that. Many of those who have given us evidence are care-experienced individuals who reported their vulnerability and abuse, much of it historical.

I have been concerned that, in our work on the bill—which the Parliament is considering in order to improve outcomes for care-experienced young people—we have not looked at the mandatory reporting and criminal justice elements that could be in it. A number of the witnesses have raised the issue of mandatory reporting. Have any of you considered the bill as an opportunity for Parliament to do something about that? Have there been any conversations on that? Parties are still working on stage 3 amendments. The bill provides an important opportunity. We know the levels of reported abuse of care-experienced young people, and there is an opportunity to do more on that in the bill.

Professor Jay: I want to make it perfectly clear that I am a strong supporter of mandatory reporting, having worked through the process down south. I had some input to the bill there, too.

In all the different ways in which we encountered victims and survivors—whether as formal witnesses in the public inquiry, through the truth project or through the forums and other events that we held—we always asked what you might call "last questions." We asked, including in the public hearings: "What would have made a difference to your experience? What would you like to see delivered, above all else?" Unequivocally, they would say the truth project—or, I should say, a truth project, because the possibility has been floating around for years and years. There is always a debate about whether there should be criminal offences, fines or whatever, and people are working through all that, but I have no doubt that that is what matters most.

We quite often find that there is resistance from professionals—some for good reasons and others for not-so-good reasons. It happened just before I arrived, but in the national group that I chair, an independent person was appointed to chair a group on mandatory reporting to gauge a range of views on it. We will see where that work goes, but

I can tell you only about my own experience across the piece in England and Wales.

Miles Briggs: Do you think that having a national whistleblowing officer would add to that?

Professor Jay: It probably would. I do not know the detail of what that would involve, but it is certainly something else to consider. Indeed, all these things should be considered, provided that you do not crowd out the landscape—although there is not much danger of that at the moment, given that what I have referred to as the barriers to disclosure are fairly high.

Craig Naylor: I am hugely supportive of taking the right steps to get in place mandatory reporting, but we must ensure that there are routes through that and that it is recognised that it is not just those who are care-experienced who should be subject to mandatory reporting. Throughout my career, I have been frustrated at being told, after the event, "Yes, we knew about that, and yes, we were aware that a person was being abused, but no, we didn't want to do anything because we thought there was a data-protection issue with reporting it"—or that there was an issue with a health record, or something similar.

To get the best outcomes for victims, we need to be victim focused in the first instance, and we need to allow them to say how they want things to be done. However, the question is, if there is no victim telling a story, how does a body meet its responsibility to report a situation about which it is concerned? That brings me back to some of the Rotherham issues. Care homes were aware of the same taxis picking up the same children on a regular basis, but there were no reports from the children, and those in the care homes were simply thinking to themselves, "Well, what do we do with that information? Where do we push it? Who takes responsibility for this?" Nobody took responsibility, so it all fell down. My view is that we need more than something happening only when a victim tells a story—there needs to be a wider responsibility for observing the landscape.

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor talked about soft intelligence and its being reported to the appropriate body, and Police Scotland has done some good work on opening up that capability through the use of a portal, but my view is that that should become a statutory responsibility for those who have a statutory duty.

Professor Jay: I would just add that although the legislation down south is applicable—it is more or less what we recommended—there are variations. The first range of people to whom it applies are professionals who have that responsibility, but it should also include those in what we refer to as positions of trust, such as sports coaches, people in religious organisations and a range of others. They should absolutely be included, too.

Miles Briggs: That is grand. As I have said, meetings are on-going with ministers on having some framework for all this. Thank you.

The Convener: We have already covered quite a lot of ground, but there is still quite a bit more that the committee would like to examine. I am therefore going to call a break, and we will reconvene in 15 minutes.

10:54

Meeting suspended.

11:08

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. We will go to Ross Greer.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will follow up on the point about mandatory reporting. I do not disagree with anything that Craig Naylor or Professor Jay were saying about that, but there is an element of trade-off, as some people would not come forward to a person from who they would seek pastoral or other support if they felt that that was going to be referred and reported. What mitigations can be put into place with a mandatory reporting system so that we do not have a situation in which people will not simply not come forward for support that they may otherwise have received?

Professor Jay: I do not entirely understand your question.

Ross Greer: What would happen if, for example, as you mentioned, we were to apply mandatory reporting obligations for religious organisations? What would happen if church ministers were covered by mandatory reporting requirements and a young person who comes to them to disclose that they have been abused said, "I do not want you to take this to the police. I am coming to you only because I need pastoral support"?

There is a risk that, if we introduce mandatory reporting, some people would not approach anyone to receive support. I do not disagree with your point about mandatory reporting, but how do we militate against such circumstances?

Professor Jay: I understand your question now. The provisions are included in the Crime and Policing Bill, which will apply to England and Wales. Under the bill, child telephone lines, such as that run by the Samaritans and Childline, will be excluded from the reporting requirement, unless explicit permission is given. I am not sure how far

the provision will be extended. As you know, it is a controversial issue, which depends on age and capacity, as we might describe it, and how a child might feel about something being reported. Certainly, I would not want that requirement to be used to allow someone to avoid reporting a crime to the authorities, which would usually be the police or social services. It is tricky but, as you know, if you have too many opt-outs for those things, they can become meaningless.

There are many varied models of mandatory reporting across the world in different places. In some parts of Australia, every adult is subject to those requirements. In other parts of Australia, the requirement has been introduced for professionals or others to start with, after which the requirement has been extended.

There are other issues that are a little trickier. I am not entirely sure how they will be dealt with in the English system but, no doubt, we will hear a lot more about that. One of the key statements might well be that there is never an absolute guarantee of confidentiality. That sounds hard, but I do not know how the system can operate without that being given as a clear message. That certainly applies to social workers and other professions, as you know. It would work, and currently should be working, on that basis, but there are far too many children for whom nothing is being done, which emerged time and again during the English inquiry.

Craig Naylor: It is a really tricky area. Mandatory reporting does not necessarily mean that there will be a mandatory police investigation. If you do not know, you can never investigate, but if you know something, you can ensure that safeguarding steps are put into place to prevent future offending and future harm.

In all of this, everyone needs to take responsibility for vulnerable children—and every child, to be honest. If we do not introduce something that is better than what we currently have, we will continue to get what currently exists, which is risk, and the potential for gaps in the system that allow people who are either prolific offenders or are regularly victimised to remain in that space. Having a responsibility for sports coaches, ministers and statutory professionals will allow us to start to close some of the gaps. Some safeguards will be needed related to understanding the needs of the victim and taking a trauma-informed approach to what they want. That is where I would like to see it going.

The Convener: Paul O'Kane is joining us remotely.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): At the outset, I remind the committee that my husband is a registered social worker and a service manager in children and families social work.

Good morning to the panel. Professor Jay, the last time that you were with us, you and I had an exchange about the progress of the review and some of the complexities and confusions. We are a number of months on. I have heard some of this already this morning, but is it your view that things are progressing well? Will the review be able to pull together many of the themes that we discussed when you were with us before Christmas and those that we have discussed this morning?

11:15

Professor Jay: Since the beginning of this year, I have met nearly every week with colleagues from the inspectorates. I have been impressed by the level of co-operation among them and the quality of the work, which is being done at some pace, having started in November. They have used me appropriately for my knowledge of the subject matter, and I have been content with that.

It is not easy or quick to ensure that you do any of this properly, but I have been content with it so far. I should say, as I have said elsewhere, that I am not a decision maker in any of this, of course; I am there to provide advice. So far, I have certainly been very content with how things have progressed.

Paul O'Kane: That is a helpful update, Professor Jay.

I will ask Mr Naylor a question, because he was not here before Christmas when we discussed the issue of the confusion about when inspectorates were asked to do this work and who had a level of knowledge of what they were being asked to do by the cabinet secretary and others. Does Mr Naylor want to offer a reflection on his knowledge of when the inspectorate was asked to do this work and what the terms of reference and those sorts of things were going to be?

Craig Naylor: We were asked, at very short notice, at a meeting on 11 November last year, and the "we" that I am talking about are the Care Inspectorate and myself. We met officials from the Scottish Government, who highlighted that they wanted to understand what the art of the possible would be and what we could do to provide assurance on organised child sexual abuse and exploitation.

After speaking with colleagues, we realised that this was a piece of work not just for us. We spoke with the chief executives of Healthcare Improvement Scotland and HMIE within a week to pull together some proposals, which we submitted to Government by the end of November. We

shaped those proposals and considered who else might be a key party. Hence, we can work with other inspectorates or scrutiny bodies within the instruction that we were given.

An announcement to Parliament from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in December outlined what we were going to do, and we were given instruction that day: the four bodies got a letter of instruction, which we all replied to the same day. We submitted media output on the same day—I think that it was 16 December.

We were instructed during that period to work up what could be done. The proposals, which we have talked about, were in three phases, and there were the three key priorities and eight areas of investigation that are in the letter. It took about a month to go from the very start of the process to what you know now in terms of what was announced to Parliament.

Paul O'Kane: Given that you have been in your current role for, I think, four years and you have extensive experience beyond that, were you surprised that there had not been that level of work prior to November and prior to pulling together those proposals, which seemed quite quick and rushed to some of us? Were you surprised that that work had not been on-going among the four inspectorates?

Craig Naylor: I go back to my earlier comments. We have been inspecting children's protection services for 20-plus years. That has been mandated and we have been given budgets for that, and we have reported against every local authority area during that time on many occasions.

We are looking at child protection at the macro level, rather than looking at specific areas of group-based child sexual exploitation. We have looked at how services work for children, at how the agencies operate together and at many of the things that we have talked about here, including IRDs, case conference work and the chronologies on a child's record that show what has been reported, who knows about it and when that happened.

That has all improved over time. As Sarah Taylor said, there has been significant work to improve on what was some very poor practice in the early 2000s, around the time of the deaths of Caleb Ness and other children. We have seen significant improvements in what is a specific area of emerging understanding. Professor Jay has made a significant contribution and we are all learning from that.

The scrutiny plan for my body talks about doing a piece of work on the investigation of child protection in the financial year 2027-28. We were alive to the fact that we were going to do something slightly different, although probably not with other partners, at that time, but that has been accelerated and we are happy with what we are doing now.

Paul O'Kane: I have listened to what you said there and to your exchanges with other committee members. Professor Jay's work has been going on for some time and we know from examples in England that there are issues with some discrete groups. I entirely appreciate what you said about the role of the inspectorates and the high standard of work that they are doing on behalf of us all, but is there a sense that this came to a head and became a clear issue just before Christmas, and that the response has been to pull the inspectorates together? Should that have happened much sooner? Would you have welcomed an impetus from the Government or from Parliament to do that sooner so that there was a longer lead-in time for such important work? I am heartened to hear that Professor Jay thinks that the work is progressing well, but should that have happened sooner?

Craig Naylor: We make three-year business plans of what we are going to scrutinise and are currently on our second three-year plan. We wrote to every single MSP when we were preparing for that plan and for the previous one, but no one raised the issue. We got just four responses from MSPs following our request for information about what you would like to see us scrutinise across justice and policing.

Paul O'Kane: Although I take your point that members did not respond directly to your call for views, I respectfully suggest that that was being raised in other ways, including in the chamber and in committees. Do you accept that there has been a debate for at least a year or two?

Craig Naylor: I became aware of it last summer. I did not see an awful lot of debate prior to September, when it was raised while a bill was going through Parliament.

Regarding my understanding of the issue, child protection services will be absolutely relevant to the work that we are now doing and our knowledge and understanding will be built on work that we have previously done. Police Scotland scrutinises many threats to the people of Scotland and deals with those effectively. We try to cast our nets across many of those and we seek information from a number of stakeholders and from the public to understand what they feel are the biggest issues. As I said, we were planning to do some work 18 months from now to look at child protection matters in a slightly different way.

We are alive to the issue, but we have finite resources, as do all the inspectorate bodies, and there is finite capacity for chief officer groups and

professional bodies to respond to our inspections. We do not want to have too heavy a footprint. To go back to the principles of the Crerar review, Police Scotland is one of the most heavily scrutinised bodies in Scotland, if not the UK, because so many scrutiny bodies look at police business.

I feel as if I am going round the houses, Mr O'Kane, and I do not want to do that. We are aware of the issue. A lot of what we were doing in our inspections on children at risk of harm, and in our wider joint inspections on looked-after children with the Care Inspectorate, covered the issues that that were being raised. It came as a bit of a crescendo from September through until November. Yes, we are happy to bend in a different direction to do a piece of work that we think is important, but we were already doing some of that, as I have stated previously.

Paul O'Kane: Thanks, Mr Naylor. That is useful for the committee's consideration. I do not want to do a disservice to the work that has been done because we are making progress, which is important, and you have clearly done work previously.

I will pivot to Bill Kidd's line of questioning. We heard that there are cross-border issues that the various agencies are working on. Will you expand on where the interaction is happening? Is there a particular issue in terms of large urban centres? In the city of Glasgow, for example, there are known issues around the transport network in and around Central station. What interaction is happening on that?

I heard Professor Jay mention that there was a particular cross-border issue between Ireland and the north of England at one point. I am interested to know whether there is a similar issue with the proximity of Northern Ireland to Scotland in relation to trafficking and other such issues. What interaction would Police Scotland have with the port of Cairnryan, for example, which is the major link? What does the issue look like in a Scottish context? Is it a predominantly urban issue in and around transport hubs?

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: I will start and then hand over to Sarah Taylor to give you a bit more detail from a child protection perspective. You raised some interesting questions around ports and borders and how we work in relation to that particular issue. I reassure you that we absolutely work with partners outside the borders of Scotland. We have a border policing command within Police Scotland that does an awful lot of work with partners to understand the issues that we face within the common travel area, for example. work with Border Force and other agencies to understand what the threat picture looks like.

As I referenced earlier, we work with NCA colleagues to understand the national threat assessment in key areas of activity and the key issues facing our borders, into Scotland as well as into England and Wales, so I am confident that we are well linked in around that. Of course, there are lots of national footprints within that picture, not least in counter-terrorism, but also in border command, Border Force and the National Crime Agency. We do that work to a great degree.

You mentioned issues in Glasgow and other areas. We would of course have intelligence around those, which is fed in from other areas of UK policing, as Sarah mentioned, whether that is soft intelligence—small pieces of information—or a bigger package of intelligence from a different agency, as a consequence of which we would take action. We are absolutely privy to intelligence on that and we would act on it.

I will hand over to Sarah to talk about how we manage issues in larger urban areas versus how we manage them within rural areas and across the border from north England into Scotland and so on.

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: We also engage with the British Transport Police on sharing information, including access to the vulnerable persons database. Information about vulnerable people travelling on the rail network can be flagged to us early doors, which is positive.

We have local arrangements through our local partnerships, which are absolutely critical. What I would say is that child sexual abuse happens in every location; it does not have to happen within an urban location. Traditionally, some of our larger-scale investigations have focused on areas of central Glasgow such as George Square where people congregated. The main point for me is that we are able to utilise our local community teams on the ground to engage with children and young people. Barnardo's, for example, had workers who went out at night to engage with children and young people to understand what drew them to a particular location or area. That goes back to the point about local intelligence on why a particular location, premises or area has attracted young people—it might be because there is wi-fi there, although I know that our technology has moved on considerably—because they feel safe there or because they were able to meet people, which then made them easy targets for predators. I am quite content that we have those structures in place at local level.

11:30

Paul O'Kane: I am grateful for that insight. Professor Jay, I apologise if this has been reported on and I have missed it, but in the work that you did in England, did you see a strong correlation between county lines and drugs and child sexual exploitation in terms of the young people who got involved in that sort of activity? That goes to the point about moving out from the urban centres to different locations. Did you see a correlation there?

Professor Jay: I chaired a review for Action for Children, which, as some of you will know, is one of what are called the big four children's charities in the UK. It has been active in the field for years and years, and I believe that it started the first services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It was an interesting review. I immediately saw the overlaps with child sexual exploitation in all sorts of the processes that were used to draw children in. For example, it was frequently said that the groups that were involved in criminal exploitation would sit at the edges of a housing scheme that accommodated a lot of people who might not have had a great deal of resources and, as the schools came out and children were going back home, they would pick out or target those kids who looked needy and draw them in. It is pretty shocking.

Subsequently, and certainly in the past year, I have heard a lot more about the overlap with child sexual exploitation. Indeed, at the time I was aware that sexual violence was often used on young boys and girls for what might be described as non-compliance. If they wanted out, and were being supported to get out of a particular network, they would refuse to do some of the many things that they were asked to do, which were increasingly criminal, such as transporting weapons as well as drugs and carrying out violent acts, car breaking and so on. If they wanted to get out of it, it was difficult to do so.

The work that support workers and others do with these young people is dangerous, because of the consequences that the young people face for non-compliance. These groups are increasingly using sexual violence as a means of compelling young people to do things. It is very serious and, from my perspective and from what I know from talking to workers in the field, I can say only that it is getting worse, especially the nature of the violence.

Of course, it is not just an urban issue, because the very nature of the activity means that these people are going to far-flung parts of Scotland. I have heard it described as an arc from Inverness round to Aberdeen, down to Dundee, and they use boat links from places such as Aberdeen to Shetland. I do not know the extent of it, but there are people who do—perhaps the police know something about it. In my personal view, it appears to be getting worse.

Paul O'Kane: That is a useful overview.

I will ask a final question—I was going to put the same point to Police Scotland. I appreciate that there will be limitations on what you can say about any operational matters or on-going investigations. There is sometimes, from some quarters, a sense that we in Scotland do not have the type of county lines problem that exists in other parts of the UK, so it would be good to get a sense of the situation from you. I represent the west coast outwith Glasgow, and I see evidence of some of those issues in some of our coastal communities in particular. It would be useful to hear any reflections from Police Scotland on that.

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: I am happy to come in on that. I would say that we do have a county lines problem in Scotland. We can evidence that—we have on-going operations that target and disrupt those groups.

As always, our approach comes through experience and learning. Previously, we saw young people who were involved in county lines as just difficult children—they are victims, and it is about child protection. We recognise that, but we are talking about human trafficking, in its most simple, basic form. The investigations that are wrapped around those young people therefore involve a number of different specialist areas to target and dismantle those groups; it is not only a child protection response. That remains a key priority for us.

Craig Naylor: One of the benefits of having a single national service is that we can look at the local, regional and national picture and join up that information. A huge amount of work is done to address those issues, in particular in some of the more rural areas of Scotland, in a trauma-informed manner.

In the review, we will look at how that work joins up with the 32 local authorities, a number of health boards and other statutory partners, which might not be as aware of the macro picture as Police Scotland is.

We see utilising the Police Scotland services and databases that are common across the whole country as a good thing; understanding the local, regional and national perspectives is key to what we will be doing.

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: The county lines point is important. I would add that we treat those investigations as serious and organised crime, because that is what they are.

To go back to Sarah Taylor's point, it is a child protection issue, but we have at our disposal the

ability to use covert resources and capabilities in that space to target various crime groups and we can bring those to bear on county line networks, because we understand how important that is. Those children are victims, and it is about not only using safeguarding approaches to deal with the victims, but at the high end of high harm, being able to utilise some of the resources that we have as part of our covert capabilities within serious and organised crime groups. We are able to deal with the county lines issue in a different way from how we might have dealt with it in the past. I reassure the committee that we are absolutely alive to that and are dealing with it in the most appropriate way.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Good morning—it seems a wee while since we started. I take the opportunity to thank you all not only for coming along today, but for the briefings that you provided and for the private briefing before the meeting. As difficult as it can sometimes be to hear such information, it is very useful to us.

We have heard about the work that has been undertaken in England and Wales on child sexual abuse and group-based child sexual abuse. How will the learning from that work be used to inform the work that is now being undertaken in Scotland?

Professor Jay: I dare say I should start on that. We produced something like 50 or 60 publications, and, in the formal part of the public inquiry, 20 investigation reports on a wide range of issues. Those reports essentially related to the institutions, but some were thematic. There is a lot there—it cost a lot of money, and there is a great deal to learn from it.

However, perhaps more important from my perspective has been the campaigning that we unfortunately have had to do to try to ensure that the Government implemented our final 20 recommendations, because there is not much point in a public inquiry unless the recommendations are delivered. Unfortunately, very little was done in the early stages following the final publication.

This is perhaps more about public inquiries but, before that, we had a system in place. We not only published reports as we went along but, within six months, we also wrote to the organisations to which the recommendations were directed—local authorities, religious organisations and others—to ask what they had done about them, kept on at them every six months and were able to publish their responses. Of all the recommendations, they delivered 87—very few were not delivered.

I suggest that getting your recommendations out and checking up on them is the most effective and important aspect of public inquiries. Unfortunately, the inquiry comes to an end and does not exist any more, and that meant that we had to set up a campaigning group alongside victims, survivors and others to try to ensure that the recommendations were delivered. They have not all been delivered yet, so a campaign is still going on.

There is a vast amount of information—we had research reports and publications from which a great deal can be learned, and I hope that people will take advantage of that. All of it is accessible on the internet. It should be made use of in Scotland, and I am sure that it is, by various vested interests, if you like. However, it absolutely should not go to waste. It cost £188 million and took eight years, including lockdown in the middle of it, where we continued to do the work and ran the truth project.

Jackie Dunbar: I will not go into details, but were some of the recommendations not taken up because there were sticking points for particular organisations that meant they were unable to act? If that were to happen in Scotland, could there be a way to unstick those problems?

Professor Jay: This is for England and Wales, of course, but quite a lot of discussion took place in various locations about trying to ensure that recommendations of public inquiries, when they come to an end, are monitored and tracked. There was discussion about whether parliamentary committees in Westminster or Cardiff ought to take on that role, which would be another useful means, although I do not know whether there would be downsides to that.

An inquiry cannot really engage with the process of monitoring because it must be entirely impartial and separate as it goes through, which is really important. My view is that it is much more advisable for an inquiry to publish as it goes along, with recommendations, and for there to be some kind of monitoring throughout that period—assuming, naturally, that whichever Government is involved agrees with that. We did not see a great deal of enthusiasm at certain stages for certain things in England and, although the process is moving along now, it is still slower than we would want.

Jackie Dunbar: It just makes sense to me: if an inquiry publishes the recommendations as it goes along, it gives people a better chance to discuss them and say, “Well, that’s a good idea, but this is the sticking point.” It means that people are not faced with the final conclusion, when all they can do is say, “Well, great, we agree with this, but how are we going to do it?” Therefore, what you are suggesting makes a great deal of sense—to me, anyway.

Mr Naylor, do you want to come in?

11:45

Craig Naylor: I think that it is a really good question. There has been a huge amount of learning; I was involved in the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales and provided statements to IICSA when Professor Jay was in the chair. The organisation that I was working with spent a huge amount of time preparing evidence, and then preparing for the recommendations and considering how we would implement them.

Since we started this piece of work in November, we have, I think, met every week, either in person or virtually, to draw out learning, particularly on how to develop a methodology that will allow us to do something different from what has been done before, in order to get to the outcome that we are trying to deliver. We have been doing that learning, reading the reports and so on—indeed, we have all been through tome after tome to get us to the position that we are at. We have taken advice and, although we continue to respect our independent role, we feel that it is really important to have an expert in the room when we have these difficult development conversations.

That brings me back to my day job and how we manage recommendations within HMICS. We have good relationships, but good relationships go only so far. For the past year, we have been publishing all of our recommendations, and we also publish a tracker for those recommendations and what state they are at. Police Scotland, the Scottish Police Authority and the authority's forensic services are subject to scrutiny by the SPA's audit and risk committee, and they are kept on quite a tight rein with regard to their progress with the recommendations.

I absolutely agree with Professor Jay that, if we come across something and then wait a couple of years to make a recommendation on it, we will not be making the improvement at the time. On many occasions, we have been working towards a recommendation and, before it has been published, Police Scotland will have picked it up and said, "No, we're going to do something about that now, because we see the need for it."

A very strong example of that is the vetting review that we had two and a half years ago, when Police Scotland entirely changed the way in which it did its vetting and improved it considerably during our inspection. The Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Act 2025, which is now in place, will change the way in which Police Scotland does its vetting from 1 April and take it to a much stronger and better place, safeguarding people right across Scotland.

Recommendation management that is based on good knowledge, experience and evidence is absolutely where we need to be.

Assistant Chief Constable Smith: Craig Naylor has just made a really good point. We try to do a lot of internal improvement work ourselves; Craig mentioned reports, and when we think of reviews and reports sitting on a shelf and recommendations not being acted on, we know that that is not how we want to work.

We are really cognisant of reviews in England and Wales, and we take those recommendations and look at how they might impact on us. As I have said, we do a lot of the internal work ourselves to ensure that we are learning from best practice, from investigations and from colleagues, and then we work to those recommendations ourselves.

The thought of a review taking a really long time, with recommendations coming only at the end of it, is just not helpful. When we work with HMICS and other scrutiny bodies, we get recommendations as and when they come up, which is really useful for us. Sometimes we have already come across a particular issue ourselves and have acted upon it.

I absolutely support the view that it is important to get recommendations out as and when, so that we can start working on them internally, as opposed to two years down the line, when we have already started to do a lot of the things ourselves and, as a result, some recommendations have become redundant. I think that that is a really important point that has been made.

Jackie Dunbar: Thank you.

How are survivors being engaged with and involved in the national review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation? How will the review ensure that they are being involved in a meaningful and trauma-informed way?

Craig Naylor: We are purposely not going back to victims and survivors directly. If someone wants to come and tell us about something they experienced, we will suggest that they tell the social work department or the police and get the service that will give them the best possible outcome. Our role is to look at the processes and procedures so that, if someone comes forward, they get the best outcome for them.

It is not within our gift to seek to do what Professor Jay has spoken about in something such as a truth project. If something like that is set up, we will absolutely make the best use of the information that comes out of it, which would probably be anonymised for us. We will consider the learnings and lived experience and look at how services are delivered to ensure that they are the

best they can be for the people who are using them.

The Convener: I will ask about document retention. DCC Smith spoke about there being no time bar against coming forward to Police Scotland, but some people may have come forward previously and not got the outcome that they expected at the time. Although things have changed since then, if someone goes to a local police station and says, "I reported this 30 years ago and I don't think that it was handled correctly," how confident are you that the relevant documents will be available and accessible?

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: The organisation has weeding and retention policies that we stick to. There are instances when we have gotten rid of documents from years ago and there have been some incidents with buildings that have caused that to happen, through no fault of our own. However, I encourage anyone to come forward if they have made a previous report, as we will probably have a record of it.

We retain millions of paper documents. Currently, we are going through the process of digitising them, so that we have an accurate record on the system and so that we do not have huge volumes of paper. Some of our older, larger investigations over the years have relied on the original paper-based records. Some of the bigger investigations are also put on to our home system, so that we have a record of them. I do not have the details to hand on the numbers that are involved, but I would hope to be confident that, if someone came forward and said, "I reported this to my local police station," we would have a record of the report, whether it is digital or on paper.

The Convener: So is it correct that you are not allowed to destroy historical group 2 crime reports?

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: Yes.

The Convener: Much of that is in paper form. You know where the paperwork is, and it is currently being digitised—is that correct?

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: Some of the paperwork is being digitised. I do not know the details of how far we are with that, the volume of records or the time that it will take. I do not know whether Sarah Taylor has more information specifically about group 2 historical sexual crime.

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: There are very clear retention periods for sexual crime records, which we reviewed on the back of a recent Supreme Court hearing to ensure that the structures were being adhered to.

As part of our response to the Scottish child abuse inquiry, we put a moratorium in place on the destruction of records pertaining to sexual crime and child abuse. The moratorium relates to the records that we hold, which have been catalogued.

The Convener: You will be aware that another inquiry is under way in Scotland into a public body that was told to do exactly what you are doing, but documents were destroyed, even though there was a "do not destroy" order. Should that be of any concern? Do you think that what has happened in NHS Tayside could not possibly happen in Police Scotland?

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: I will not speak on behalf of another authority or statutory authority. I have confidence in our processes for the retention of documents, bearing in mind that we lead a range of investigations from those that are large scale and complex down to simple, what we would call lower-level, lower-risk investigations. I would be very surprised if there was anything that was similar to what has happened in NHS Tayside, as you have described it. I do not know the circumstances of that, but our policies and operating procedures are clear about the retention of documents, particularly in relation to sexual crime.

The Convener: How confident are you that any crimes that have been recorded under the group 2 historical offences in antiquated paper form have been transferred onto the new Unifi system? Have all those records been transferred, and are they up to date and correct?

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: I do not have the detail of the number of records that have been migrated over, but what I do know is that the exercise of migrating records from legacy systems took place. We had hundreds of records in Police Scotland where we took the data and put them on the new database.

There was also an exercise in digitising paper records, as I said, and we invested in technology that can read handwriting to be able to facilitate that. For investigations into historical crimes, that makes it easier and quicker for people to access old investigations because they have the information to hand, as opposed to having to go through boxes of data. We are able to digitise that information and put it on the system.

However, in relation to specific offences and numbers around historical group 2 crime, I do not have the data to hand.

The Convener: Some of this information came to me from a whistleblower who is a police officer. Have you had reports, through whistleblowing, of any concerns?

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: I do not have that information to hand, convener. I can find out and get back to you.

The Convener: Mr Naylor, paperwork is going to be a huge part of your 18 months' work. You made the point earlier that it will be extensive. Have you had any experience so far of paperwork being missing? What powers do you have to compel the retention of paperwork, and do you need more?

Craig Naylor: We are not aware of any—

The Convener: I suppose that that would be proving a negative, as you suggested earlier, but there may be gaps that arise that look strange.

Craig Naylor: That will become a risk factor. If we see six-month gaps or geographic gaps or if other things become obvious, we will obviously dig further.

We are not aware of what you describe in terms of the whistleblowing. I would be keen to see what sort of investigation can be done on the back of that whistleblowing as to what is happening, and I am sure Police Scotland colleagues would like to see that as well.

On Police Scotland's work on its records and retention, particularly on the crime system over the past number of years, there is clear evidence of criminal trials and historical matters being brought to conclusion, so Police Scotland would seem to be if not exemplary then certainly very good. Its retention, particularly in the forensic services space of DNA and other samples for long periods of time, must be applauded. That is certainly not something I was aware of when I worked in England and Wales.

I am not sure that I can put you totally at ease on the question, but I can say that what we have seen is professional and competent, and we do not see any change to that pattern of behaviour.

The Convener: A whistleblower has got in contact with me during today's meeting to reiterate this point. I am aware of the issue, but I will ask you about it first: do you accept that there is a significant backlog and a demand on the officers who are currently working in public protection units?

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: Yes, I absolutely do. We see the demand on local public protection units daily, which then creates additional impact on people's health and wellbeing because of the workloads that they are carrying. We are doing everything we can to manage that better.

As we said at the start of the evidence session, sexual crime has gone up. Crimes of violence against women and girls have gone up and are increasing time and again. We have to flex resource to deal both with the current high harm and high threat that comes in today, and with historical cases, because, as the DCC said, every survivor of abuse should be listened to and have a voice, irrespective of what they are the survivor of—whether it is domestic abuse, sexual abuse or child abuse. However, we have to make sure that we have the right resources in place. I will be perfectly honest and say, as head of public protection for Police Scotland, that I do not think we have the right resources to meet the demand of today.

The Convener: How short of resources are you?

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: It is very difficult to say, because such a wide variety of crimes are investigated by a local public protection unit. We are talking about coming in in the morning to 20 or 30 domestic incidents that have occurred in a 24-hour period.

We need to look at what local public protection demand looks like. However, it is not just about putting people into roles: training has to be undertaken so that they have the skill set and the specialisms to be able to respond to interviews and so on, whether with children or adults.

12:00

The Convener: I asked whether you accept that those demands and pressures are significant within PPU because I have been asked to ask you whether you believe that, in all instances, Scottish crime recording standards are being adhered to and that the statistics that Police Scotland and the rest of us use are correct and up to date.

Detective Chief Superintendent Taylor: I am sorry, but I do not understand what you are suggesting by that.

The Convener: With all the pressures that officers are under within PPUs and with all the demands that they are facing—and you have just accepted that they do not have enough resources and could do with more—are they following through with the Scottish crime recording standards? I do not know whether Mr Naylor or DCC Smith want to come in on that.

Deputy Chief Constable Smith: I can come in first and then pass over to HMICS. Our crime recording is independently scrutinised, and I am sure that Craig Naylor will want to talk about that.

You made a point about pressure and public protection. We have made no secret of the fact that crime in that area is increasing. We were open about our scrutiny around budget and investment, particularly in relation to online child sexual abuse and online crime. We know that most areas of crime now have a digital footprint, and we want to be at the forefront of that. We want to utilise

modern digital technology to tackle crime, and we also want to invest in our public protection resources, tackle violence against women and girls, and so on. These areas of threat and demand are increasing, and that is where we want to be.

You will know that we did not get the additionality in the budget, so we are now evaluating what that means for our response. However, to reassure you, these are areas of high threat and high harm that we absolutely will investigate. We will listen to victims, we will take reports, and we will deal with them. That will mean re-evaluating policing's response so that we are able to manage the increasing demand.

Sarah Taylor talked about community policing, which is important. We asked for investment in the reporting, intelligence, information and preventative activities that we do at the community level so that we can start from the ground up by working with children and others in communities. Unfortunately, we did not get that investment so we will have to understand the impact of that on how we can still tackle those high-threat, high-harm areas. That is absolutely right and proper, but you might see changes in service.

We have a lot of on-going work in mental health and how we manage that within policing. There is more to come on that, convener, but you raise an important point. I will hand over to HMICS at this point.

Craig Naylor: I have a couple of points to make, convener. We inspected the crime recording standards five years ago, I think it was. Unlike forces in the rest of the UK, Police Scotland was given accredited status for its statistics. That means that it met the ONS standards for recording.

We will launch a new inspection of that space in April this year. We will be testing the methodologies and looking at the high-risk areas. We are defining the methodology at the moment, so we will be looking at crimes of violence and sexual crime and making sure that the dip sampling that we do is statistically significant.

I know from my time as a young detective constable that when you are reporting these matters, which are very victim-focused, there is a personal responsibility as well as an organisational responsibility to capture the information accurately, particularly if you have not solved the case there and then. You want to have the very best opportunity to solve the case and for the people who are the victims to know that you are doing your utmost to find the offender that you have described in your crime report.

I would therefore be very disappointed if someone in a PPU or elsewhere in Police Scotland is saying that they are just not going to do it. That would be a significant dereliction of their duties and, if someone has evidence of that in their own area of business—I am not saying that they should do it by themselves—I encourage them to use the whistleblowing lines in Police Scotland and make sure that they bring it to the attention of their supervisor or someone within the professional standards department to take action.

It would not be good enough for the victims—and that is who we need to think about.

The Convener: Absolutely.

I thank you for your attendance today, for the information that you provided in advance of the meeting, and for the work that you will be doing in the weeks, months and years ahead. The committee will now move into private session to consider its final agenda item.

12:05

Meeting continued in private until 12:07.

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