

Education, Children and Young People Committee  
Wednesday 25 February 2026  
8th Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

## Group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation

### Introduction

1. In December 2025, the Scottish Government formally requested that the Care Inspectorate and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMCIS) lead a joint inspection, working with Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE), and any other scrutiny bodies as appropriate, to conduct a national review of responses to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation.
2. The review will establish the nature and extent of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and whether instances are being identified and acted on appropriately by those services responsible for public protection in Scotland.
3. At its meeting on 21 January 2026, the Committee agreed to seek an update on the National review and the role of the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group at a future meeting.

### Committee meeting

4. At its meeting today, the Committee will take evidence from the following witnesses—
  - Professor Alexis Jay, Independent Chair, National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group
  - Craig Naylor, HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary Scotland
  - Deputy Chief Constable Bex Smith, DCC (Transformation), Police Scotland
  - Detective Chief Superintendent Sarah Taylor, Head of Public Protection, Police Scotland

### Supporting information

5. A SPICe briefing has been prepared for this meeting. This is included at **Annexe A**.
6. A joint submission from the Care Inspectorate, HMICS, HIS and HMIE has been provided in advance of today's meeting. This is included at **Annexe B**.

Clerks to the Committee  
February 2026

## Annexe A



**Education, Children and Young People Committee**  
**Wednesday 25 February 2026**  
**8th Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)**

# Group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation

## Introduction

The Committee will take evidence from Professor Alexis Jay CBE and representatives from Police Scotland and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) on the issue of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation, including work being done to understand the scale of the issue in Scotland.

## Background to calls for a Scottish inquiry

In recent years, there have been a number of reports on the issue of child sexual abuse and group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation in England and Wales at a national level, leading up to the announcement in December 2025 of the establishment of an independent Inquiry into grooming gangs. Following on from the work carried out in England and Wales, there have been calls for an inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse in Scotland.

The sections below provide brief background on reports and inquiries in England and Wales and the background to current work being undertaken in Scotland.

## England and Wales

In October 2022, the [Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#) was published. This [inquiry was established by the Home Secretary of the UK Government](#) in 2015 to look at “the extent to which institutions in England and Wales have discharged their duty to protect children from sexual abuse”. Professor Alexis Jay was appointed to chair the Inquiry in 2016.

The main recommendations of the inquiry were:

- the introduction of mandatory reporting of allegations of child abuse for those in certain roles and professions
- the establishment of a redress scheme in England and Wales for child sexual abuse victims let down by institutions.
- the creation of a Child Protection Authority in England and Wales.

In February 2025, the [UK Government established a National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation](#) in England and Wales. The audit was overseen by Baroness Louise Casey and the overall purpose of the audit was to:

“...evaluate our understanding of the scale, nature and drivers of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) at a national and local level”. – [UK Government, February 2025](#)

The [National Audit was published in June 2025](#). It found that, in England and Wales:

“The data we were able to identify shows that:

- Around 500,000 children a year are likely to experience child sexual abuse (of any kind). However, for the vast majority, their abuse is not identified, and it is not reported to the police either at the time or later.
- Police recorded crime data shows just over 100,000 offences of child sexual abuse and exploitation recorded in 2024, with around 60% of these being contact offences (and the remainder online offences).
- Of these contact offences, an estimated 17,100 are ‘flagged’ by police as child sexual exploitation in police recorded crime data.
- The only figure on group-based child sexual exploitation comes from a new police dataset (called the Complex and Organised Child Abuse Dataset - COCAD) which, while suffering a number of limitations, has identified around 700 recorded offences of group-based child sexual exploitation in 2023.

Given how under-reported child sexual exploitation is, the flaws in the data collection and the confusing and inconsistently applied definitions, it is highly unlikely that this accurately reflects the true scale of child sexual exploitation, or group-based exploitation. It is a failure of public policy over many years that there remains such limited, reliable data in this area.” – [National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation, June 2025](#)

Recommendations of the National Audit included:

- tightening the law in England and Wales to recognise that children (those under the age of 16) cannot consent and “adults who intentionally penetrate the vagina, anus or mouth of a child under 16 receive mandatory charges of rape”
- there should be a national police operation and national inquiry looking into child sexual exploitation in England and Wales
- data collection on the ethnicity and nationality of suspects in child abuse cases should be mandatory
- mandatory information sharing between statutory safeguarding partners should be enforced
- child sexual exploitation investigations should be approached like serious and organised crime.

The UK Government announced the establishment of an Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs in December 2025, in response to the recommendation in Baroness Casey's National Audit calling for this to be set up.

Baroness Anne Longfield CBE was appointed to chair the Inquiry and is currently consulting on the draft terms of reference. The draft terms state the purpose of the inquiry is to:

“...identify failures in practice and hold to account the individuals and institutions responsible for those failures. It should drive meaningful change in safeguarding systems at both local and national levels, ensuring that lessons are learned and that victims and survivors are placed at the centre of reform.” - [Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs: draft terms of reference, December 2025](#)

The final terms of reference are expected to be published in March of this year.

## **Scotland**

Following on from reviews and reports on child sexual abuse and group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation in England and Wales, there have been calls for an inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse in Scotland.

The Scottish Conservatives put [forward amendments to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform \(Scotland\) Bill](#) that would have seen an inquiry into group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse in Scotland, undertaken by the Victims Commissioner to be established by the Bill. These amendments were not passed. Cabinet Secretary for Justice Angela Constance MSP stated that the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group (explored in further detail later in this briefing) is:

“...best placed to assess and make recommendations for additional action to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation.” – [Official Report, 16/09/2025](#)

During the Stage 3 debate, the Cabinet Secretary stated:

“Is Mr Kerr aware of the work led by Professor Alexis Jay, who was the chair of an independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales and who currently sits on our national strategic group? She shares my view and has put on the record and stated to the media that she does not support further inquiries into child sexual abuse and exploitation, given the significant time and resource already spent in the review that she led, the Casey audit and other reviews. She says that it is now time that ‘people should just get on with it’.

I contend that that is what the Scottish Government is doing right here, right now—we are getting on with the work that we need to do to protect children.” – [Official Report, 16/09/2025](#)

Professor Jay later contacted the Cabinet Secretary and Officials to request a clarification be made, as her statement referred to England and Wales, rather than Scotland.

A complaint was later made to the First Minister's Independent Advisers seeking independent investigation of the use of the quote from Professor Jay. [This investigation concluded](#) that there were two breaches of the Ministerial Code in relation to the matter, and that the two breaches:

“...were inadvertence without any deliberation or intention to mislead. That is at the lower end of the spectrum provided for in the Code and therefore does not call for anything beyond a reprove which should be formal and in writing accompanied by a statement to Parliament by Ms Constance to clarify the words used and thereby add to the Official Record.” - [Ministerial code investigation: complaint about Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, 6/01/26](#)

During a [Ministerial Statement on 17 December 2025](#), Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Jenny Gilruth MSP set out the Scottish Government's stance on holding an inquiry:

“...the Scottish Government has not ruled out the establishment of an inquiry into group-based child abuse and exploitation. The experts on the national strategic group have been clear, however, that there is limited evidence at the current time on the nature and extent of the issue in Scotland. It is, therefore, imperative that that evidence base is established at pace, to clarify next steps and lessen prolonged suffering for the victims of these crimes.” – [Official Report, 17/12/25](#)

During the statement, the Cabinet Secretary announced the establishment of a national review into group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. Further information on this is set out in the 'National review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation' section of this briefing.

In [evidence to this Committee also on 17 December 2025](#), Professor Jay said that not enough was currently known about the situation of child sexual exploitation in Scotland, and there were low levels of reporting of child sexual exploitation by organised networks.

Professor Jay later added:

“...data is the most important aspect of this phase in getting an accurate picture of what is happening. It is difficult to say that there are immediate steps that ought to be taken until we know the nature and scale of what we are dealing with and where. There are distinctive roles for different agencies. The review of past cases would be helpful for survivors, for a start. As I understand it, the police intend to consider past cases that are unresolved to ascertain whether further investigation is required. If that were to occur, that would certainly give comfort to some victims in the circumstances.” - [Official Report, 17/12/25](#)

## **National child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group**

The [National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group](#) (National Strategic Group) was established by the Scottish Government in 2024.

Professor Jay took over as chair in January 2026. Prior to this it was co-chaired by:

- Office of the Chief Social Worker, Scottish Government
- Head of Public Protection, Police Scotland.

Group membership also includes a range of public, and third sector organisations including children's charities, local authority representatives, and public sector organisations involved in children's health, child protection and justice.

The [role of the group](#) is to increase national level coordination and capability to address risks and harms of child sexual abuse and exploitation by scrutinising evidence and practice to agree actions.

The remit of the group is to use available evidence to agree priorities to "improve and evolve" practice in Scotland. It uses the definitions etc set out in the [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland \(updated 2023\)](#). The group can agree areas for further evidence gathering undertaken by sub-groups comprising practitioners, academics and topic experts; oversee delivery of agreed outcomes to address child sexual abuse and exploitation harms; consider how the views of children, young people, families and victims are used to inform the work of the group; and explore issues linked to child sexual abuse and exploitation. While the group is not formally accountable to Ministers, its work does inform advice and policy development.

At its November 2025 meeting, the [National Strategic Group agreed to set up a Task and Finish Group](#) to look at mandatory reporting.

A Workforce sub-group has been set up to focus on engaging with the workforce.

The National Strategic Group has also set up a Data Short Life Working Group (see section on Data Short Life Working Group below).

In evidence to this Committee on 17 December 2025, Professor Jay said that the group's engagement and involvement with survivors was an issue needing further clarification:

"[The National Strategic Group] is a large group and has been from the beginning but I appreciate the fact that there are many people with years of experience and knowledge in the area of child sexual abuse. I believe that we have an appropriate grouping of people to do what needs to be done for Scotland to be more proactive in the area.

The one issue that we have not yet properly clarified is engagement with, or the involvement of, survivors. My personal view on that is that the first thing that we need to do is talk to them. There is no such thing as a single survivor community. There are lots of different people who have totally different and equally awful experiences, but they come from different areas and have differing views about how to be engaged in these matters. I know all that from my role as chair of the public inquiry in England and Wales, where more than 7,000 survivors were eventually significantly involved in the inquiry. However, with the strategic group, it was important that we talked to people, heard what

they had to say and found ways of accommodating in different formats how they wanted to be involved with the group's work." – [Official Report, 17/12/25](#)

## Data Short Life Working Group

The National Strategic Group has formed a Data Short Life Working Group to take forward work on establishing the nature and scale of child sexual abuse and exploitation. This work is not limited to group-based abuse and exploitation.

The Short Life Working Group met on 21 January 2026. Police Scotland is represented on the group. The [minutes of the meeting](#) include the following:

"The chair set out that the key purpose of this group is to coordinate and oversee activity to improve Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) data in Scotland. The key analytical question we are looking to answer is 'how do we get an understanding of scale and nature of CSAE in Scotland'. This group is proposed to run for the next calendar year and will develop proposals/recommendations to improve CSAE data."

"It was agreed that the terms of reference should clarify that this group will look at all forms of CSAE, following the previous item on national review specifically looking at group-based CSAE."

At the Committee's 17 December 2025 session, Professor Jay stated that while data collection is happening currently:

"...we do not consider it to be reliable in Scotland—or, as it happens, in England and Wales. For example, different places could be using different definitions even of what a network is or of what child sexual exploitation is. We have standard definitions, but they are not always applied. There needs to be a great deal more rigour and consistency." - [Official Report, 17/12/25](#)

## National review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation

In December 2025, the Scottish Government requested a national review into group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. It is important to note that this review is separate to the work being carried out by the Data Short Life Working Group, and [January 2026 minutes state](#) that avoiding duplication between the national review and the short life group was a subject of discussion.

This review is being led by the Care Inspectorate and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS), working with Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) and HM Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE).

The review is tasked with establishing whether instances of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation are being identified and acted on appropriately by those services responsible for public protection in Scotland.

The intention is that the review will focus on current practice – primarily looking at evidence from the two years preceding the commencement of the review.

Those involved in the review plan to carry out the work in three phases:

- phase 1 (assessment) – will evaluate the understanding and oversight of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation (including the scale and nature of abuse and exploitation)
- phase 2 (assurance) – will involve scrutiny to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the prevention, identification and response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation
- phase 3 (improvement) – will identify areas for improvement and highlight where these are national or may require a national response to promote improvement.

The aim is to complete the review within 18 months, with a report on phase 1 by the summer of this year.

In a [parliamentary statement](#) on 17 December 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills commented that:

“The national review has been established in part to scrutinise the effectiveness of local responses. It will be led by four statutory inspectorates that are, importantly, independent of Government and the organisations that they scrutinise. Crucially, those agencies have powers to compel public authorities to provide information that they request. Those powers will be critical to the success of the review. Public agencies will not be able to refuse to co-operate, and the inspectorates will help obtain the evidence that is needed to inform future decisions and investigations.”

Further [information about the review](#) is set out on the Care Inspectorate’s website and in the joint written submission for today’s evidence session from the four inspectorates.

## Definitions

Scottish Government [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland](#) (updated 2023) provides descriptions of what it describes as key concepts, including:

- physical abuse
- emotional abuse
- sexual abuse and exploitation
- criminal exploitation
- trafficking.

Paragraphs 1.34 to 1.42 of the National Guidance, which describe the above concepts, are reproduced in the appendix to this paper.

Police Scotland has indicated (e.g. see freedom of information (FOI) [response 25-0084](#)) that it refers to the Scottish Government's definition of child sexual exploitation set out in the Scottish Government's National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland.

## Nature and scale of the problem

In terms of assessing the scale and nature of group-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) and abuse, the limitations of information held by Police Scotland was highlighted in responses to several FOI requests in 2025. For example, [response 25-2198](#) stated that:

“Our crime recording system has a tag for ‘child sexual abuse and exploitation’, which can be added by the officer if they suspect exploitation may be a factor, but again, there is nothing specific to group-based CSE.”

FOI responses also noted that a range criminal offences might be involved, all of which would need to be individually reviewed for relevance. On this basis, response indicated that collating relevant information from police records on the number of cases involving group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse would exceed the FOI cost threshold.

A news release from Police Scotland in November 2025 ([‘Chief Constable sets out policing response to child sexual exploitation and abuse’](#)) referred to work being done to identify cases of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse:

“In response to Baroness Casey’s recommendations, the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the National Crime Agency established Operation Beaconport, to identify cases where police forces and the Crown Prosecution Service made the decision to take no further action against suspects involved in group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Police Scotland undertook an aligned exercise to ensure a UK wide law enforcement approach could be achieved.

We are identifying crimes recorded between January 2013 and the present which involve one or more victims and two or more suspects and where the victim is under the age of 18.”

Information about Operation Beaconport, which involves the reviewing of cases in England and Wales, is available in a [news release](#) (5 November 2025) from the National Crime Agency.

In her [parliamentary statement](#) on 17 December 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills commented that:

“As I previously set out to Parliament, the Scottish Government has not ruled out the establishment of an inquiry into group-based child abuse and exploitation. The experts on the national strategic group have been clear, however, that there is limited evidence at the current time on the nature and extent of the issue in Scotland. It is, therefore, imperative that that evidence

base is established at pace, to clarify next steps and lessen prolonged suffering for the victims of these crimes.”

The Cabinet Secretary went on to say:

“This Government is determined to take action to establish the potential extent and scale of child sexual exploitation. That includes conducting an independent national review to assess the prevalence of this type of abuse and the effectiveness of local systems, and identify any risks or evidence that require early action.”

The work which is being undertaken as part of the national review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation is outlined above.

## Criminal offences

The foreword to Baroness Casey’s report on the [National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#) commented that the term ‘group-based child sexual exploitation’ is a sanitised version of what it is. Adding that:

“I want to set it out in unsanitised terms: we are talking about multiple sexual assaults committed against children by multiple men on multiple occasions; beatings and gang rapes. Girls having to have abortions, contracting sexually transmitted infections, having children removed from them at birth.”

In a Scottish context, potential offences relating to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation could include:

1. Sexual offences set out in the [Sexual Offences \(Scotland\) Act 2009](#) (e.g. rape, sexual assault and sexual coercion). There are specific provisions relating to young children (under 13) and older children (under 16).
2. The offence of human trafficking set out in section 1 of the [Human Trafficking and Exploitation \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#) (e.g. where the trafficking relates to prostitution and sexual exploitation).
3. Crimes of violence such as common law assault.

Police Scotland should be able to comment more fully on the range of offences which may be involved.

## Police resources

In response to an FOI request seeking information on the resources deployed in the investigation of group-based child sexual exploitation, Police Scotland said in January 2025 (see FOI [response 25-0084](#)):

“Police Scotland do not have any specific units or teams that are dedicated solely to investigating group-based CSE.

Every division within Police Scotland have specialist public protection officers, some of whom are based in dedicated Child Abuse Investigation Unit. These

officers are trained to investigate child protection matters including but not limited to, child protection concerns, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, child exploitation and child neglect.

These specialist officers are frequently required to work alongside statutory multi-agency partners to protect children from harm and provide the necessary safety and support mechanisms to children and their families.

In addition, within Police Scotland there are three National Child Abuse Investigation Units which were launched in April 2015 and comprise of police officers and police staff based within the East, West and North of the country. These units provide a national specialist investigative resource which can be dedicated to divisions to support complex and high-level cases of child abuse, child death and child exploitation across Scotland, in addition to proactively capturing intelligence and information on those individuals posing significant risk to children within Scotland's communities.

Another national resource within Police Scotland is the Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (OCSAE) Unit, which works closely with the NCAIU and local police divisions. This was formed as part of Police Scotland's response to the investigative challenges of online child sexual abuse and provides a proactive response to this issue mainly through enforcement of National Online Child Abuse Prevention Packages.

The overarching and primary consideration is the ongoing safety of children, whether that child is the victim of the perceived offending, is within the same household as the offender, or to whom the offender may have access. The OCSAE unit has dedicated resources based in the North, West and East command areas and can provide specialist assistance to divisionally based child abuse investigations, especially where online exploitation is apparent."

## Appendix

### Child protection key concepts

The following reproduces some descriptions of key concepts taken from the Scottish Government's [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland](#) (updated 2023).

---

#### Physical abuse

1.34 Physical abuse is the causing of physical harm to a child or young person. Physical abuse may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning or suffocating. Physical harm may also be caused when a parent or carer feigns the symptoms of, or deliberately causes, ill health to a child they are looking after.

1.35 There may be some variation in family, community or cultural attitudes to parenting, for example, in relation to reasonable discipline. Cultural sensitivity must not deflect practitioners from a focus on a child's essential needs for care and protection from harm, or a focus on the need of a family for support to reduce stress and associated risk.

#### Emotional abuse

1.36 Emotional abuse is persistent emotional ill treatment that has severe and persistent adverse effects on a child's emotional development. 'Persistent' means there is a continuous or intermittent pattern which has caused, or is likely to cause, significant harm. Emotional abuse is present to some extent in all types of ill treatment of a child, but it can also occur independently of other forms of abuse. It may involve:

- conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate or valued only in so far as they meet the needs of another person
- exploitation or corruption of a child, or imposition of demands inappropriate for their age or stage of development
- repeated silencing, ridiculing or intimidation
- demands that so exceed a child's capability that they may be harmful
- extreme overprotection, such that a child is harmed by prevention of learning, exploration and social development
- seeing or hearing the abuse of another (in accordance with the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018)

## Sexual abuse

1.37 Child sexual abuse (CSA) is an act that involves a child under 16 years of age in any activity for the sexual gratification of another person, whether or not it is claimed that the child either consented or assented. Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening.

1.38 For those who may be victims of sexual offences aged 16-17, child protection procedures should be considered. These procedures must be applied when there is concern about the sexual exploitation or trafficking of a child.

1.39 The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative or non-penetrative acts. They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at or in the production of indecent images, in watching sexual activities, using sexual language towards a child, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

1.40 Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person under 18 into sexual activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact. It can also occur through the use of technology. Children who are trafficked across borders or within the UK may be at particular risk of sexual abuse.

## Criminal exploitation

1.41 Criminal exploitation refers to the action of an individual or group using an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, or for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator. Violence or the threat of violence may feature. The victim may have been criminally exploited, even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation may involve physical contact and may also occur through the use of technology. It may involve gangs and organised criminal networks. Sale of illegal drugs may be a feature. Children and vulnerable adults may be exploited to move and store drugs and money. Coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons may be involved.

## Child trafficking

1.42 Child trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt, exchange or transfer of control of a child under the age of 18 years for the purposes of exploitation. Transfer or movement can be within an area and does not have to be across borders. Examples of and reasons for trafficking can include sexual, criminal and financial exploitation, forced labour, removal of organs, illegal adoption, and forced or illegal marriage.

**Lynne Currie and Frazer McCallum, Senior Researchers, SPICe**

**18 February 2026**

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP [www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot)

## Annexe B

### **Written submission from Care Inspectorate, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS), Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS), and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE) dated 16 February 2026**

Thank you for your invitation to provide written evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee on the national review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation work that we are undertaking with our partners, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS), Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS), and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE).

In December 2025 the Scottish Government asked the four scrutiny bodies to conduct a national review into group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. The review is being conducted under S.115 of the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 and the Public Services Reform (Joint Inspections) (Scotland) Regulations 2011. This enables inspectors to carry out a range of activities for the purposes of gathering evidence including reviewing records.

On Monday 9 February, the chief inspectors and chief executives of the scrutiny bodies and I met with the Chief Officers' Groups across Scotland to set out the full scope of the national review. Representatives from Police Scotland were also in attendance.

I attach a copy of the scoping document provided to attendees at the event. This sets out our approach to the review, methodology and timescales for each phase.

I hope that this will provide a suitable update for the committee, but we are happy to provide any further information required ahead of the Committee meeting on 25 February.

Yours sincerely,

Jackie Irvine	Craig Naylor	Robbie Pearson	Graeme Logan
Chief Executive	His Majesty's Chief Inspector of	Chief Executive	His Majesty's
Care Inspectorate	Constabulary in	Healthcare	Inspectorate of
	Scotland	Improvement	Education
		Scotland	

## Information for partnerships: overview and scope February 2026

### Background

In December 2025, Scottish Ministers formally requested a national review into group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. The request outlined that this review is to be led by the Care Inspectorate and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS), working with Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE) and any other scrutiny bodies as appropriate.

The national review will be conducted under S.115 of the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 and the Public Services Reform (Joint Inspections) (Scotland) Regulations 2011. This enables inspectors to carry out a range of activities for the purposes of gathering evidence including reviewing records.

### Why this review is important

Child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation are significant harms that have a devastating impact on survivors, their families and carers, and wider Scottish society. Group-based exploitation of children and young people is complex and requires careful consideration.

This national review will gather evidence which will support Scottish Government Ministers' considerations of whether there should be a future public inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation.

### What the review will look at

The review will consider how well public protection partners are working together to prevent, identify and act appropriately on instances of **group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation**. It will also assess Chief Officers' Groups' level of understanding of the current scale and nature of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation in Scotland. In order to focus on current practice, we will request and review evidence from the two years preceding the commencement of the review. Where the joint inspection team identify a need to request or follow-up information prior to the two-year time frame, a rationale will be provided to local partnerships.

- Acknowledging the varying legal definitions of a **child**, we will use the term in this context to encompass children and young people under the age of 18. This includes young people who are now over the age of 18 years but were under the age of 18 within two years preceding the commencement of the review. It is important to note that this definition encompasses all children and young people who meet the criteria, regardless of their current

educational or training situation. This includes, for example, those in mainstream, special or home education, post-school education and training, as well as those participating in community learning provision.

- During this review, we will use the term **child sexual abuse and exploitation** to include child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation according to their definitions outlined in the [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland \(updated 2023\)](#).
- We will use the terms **group-based** child sexual abuse and exploitation and **group-based** child criminal exploitation. By **group-based**, we mean where multiple [i.e. two or more] individuals take advantage of a power imbalance to coerce, manipulate, or deceive a child into sexual and/or criminal activity. We will include children and young people at risk of harm as well as those who have been subject to harm and this harm includes both in-person and online harm. We will explore the understanding of relevant terms with public protection partners during the review process.

## Approach to the review

The national review is underpinned by the [quality framework for children and young people in need of care and protection \(November 2022\)](#). This framework is informed by the principles of the European Framework for Quality Management (EFQM) model which incorporates three tenets: **direction**: clarity of purpose and strategy to achieve aims; **execution**: implementation of the strategy through delivery; and **results**: what results have been achieved.

We will consider the following **key lines of enquiry**:

1. Strategic and operational leaders work together to ensure there are effective arrangements in place for the prevention, identification and response to incidences of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.
2. Effective processes are in place to support the prevention, identification and response to children and young people at risk of or subject to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.
3. Supports are helping to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and young people who have experienced or have been at risk of experiencing group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.

Through the key lines of enquiry, we will specifically address:

- Strategic leadership, governance and challenge

- Threat assessment, data, intelligence and information sharing
- Early identification, referral and access to protection
- Survivor protection, advocacy and support
- Investigation quality, disruption and prosecution
- Care experienced children and young people and other high-risk cohorts
- Workforce capability, culture and challenge
- Public protection interfaces

## **How we will carry out this review**

We will notify all local Chief Officers' Groups of the national review on 9 February 2026 and aim to complete it within 18 months. The review will take a phased approach, with phase one lasting for six months. We will report on this by Summer 2026, in accordance with our standard reporting practice. Subsequently, we will complete phase two and report on our findings by Autumn 2027.

### **Phase one: assessment**

During phase one, we will evaluate Chief Officers' Groups' understanding and oversight of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation. This includes:

- Chief Officers' Groups' understanding of the scale and nature of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.
- Local governance arrangements, guidance and processes for the prevention, identification and response to child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.
- Any data and other information about children's experiences of support and protection where they are at risk of or subject to child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.

This will be achieved through 32 local partnership submissions via the 30 strategic Chief Officers' Groups, supported by a structured interview with representatives of the local Chief Officers' Group. The joint inspection team will robustly analyse the data and information received which will culminate in a report at the end of this phase.

### **Phase two: assurance**

Phase two will be informed by phase one. It will involve a risk-based, flexible and targeted scrutiny approach to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the

prevention, identification and response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation. We reserve the right to undertake activities to help us understand children's experiences taking into account the different local arrangements.

### **Phase three: improvement**

Phase three will build on phases one and two. Scrutiny partners will identify areas for improvement and highlight where these are national or may require a national response to promote improvement in experiences and outcomes for children and young people. We will provide a national report for the Scottish Government to consider in terms of response and an improvement programme.

### **Governance and oversight arrangements**

All four scrutiny bodies are independent from the Scottish Government and the services responsible for public protection in local areas throughout Scotland. The scrutiny bodies developed the approach and methodology for the review and will independently report joint findings and conclusions at the end of each phase.

Throughout the review, the joint inspection team will gather, analyse and evaluate evidence to ultimately reach conclusions. They will highlight what is working well and where further developments are needed to improve how well children and young people are being protected from group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation. Inspectors will retain records in accordance with record retention policies from each of the four scrutiny bodies involved, adhering to data protection processes and the relevant legislation. If at any point, inspectors have any immediate cause for concern, these will be escalated immediately. We will update Scottish Ministers and other relevant parties on progress throughout the review process.

The national review will be overseen by the chief inspectors of the four scrutiny bodies through an executive level review group, providing leadership, quality assurance and consistency and linking to Scottish Government and other national bodies as required.