

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 25 February 2026
5th Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

PE1979: Establish an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate concerns about the alleged mishandling of child safeguarding enquiries by public bodies

Introduction

Petitioner Neil McLennan, Christine Scott, Alison Dickie, and Bill Cook

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to launch an independent inquiry to examine: concerns that allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding, and children's rights have been mishandled by public bodies, including local authorities and the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS); gaps in the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry; and establish an independent national whistleblowing officer for Education and Children's Services in Scotland to handle these enquiries in the future.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1979>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 8 October 2025](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Scottish Government and the Petitioners, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. The GTCS [Fitness to Teach review action plan](#) states that updated Fitness to Teach Rules are being developed and will be published by spring 2028.
5. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage](#).
6. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
7. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 28 November 2022](#).
8. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,072 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

9. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
February 2026

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE1979: Establish an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate concerns about the alleged mishandling of child safeguarding enquiries by public bodies

Petitioner

Neil McLennan, Christine Scott, Alison Dickie, and Bill Cook

Date Lodged

3 November 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to launch an independent inquiry to examine: concerns that allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding, and children's rights have been mishandled by public bodies, including local authorities and the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS); gaps in the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry; and establish an independent national whistleblowing officer for Education and Children's Services in Scotland to handle these enquiries in the future.

Previous action

Have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in July 2021 and received a response in August 2021. We are also aware that Oliver Mundell MSP and other MSPs have corresponded with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on this issue.

We support the [**#Unfearie campaign**](#), which was set up by the Children's Parliament in 2017.

Background information

The #Unfearie pledge is to have courageous conversations regarding children's issues and speak up and stand alongside children. We take these principles very seriously, and have supported whistleblowers in raising historic and current allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding and children's rights matters.

The alleged mishandling of child safeguarding concerns in many public bodies (Edinburgh, Borders, Aberdeenshire, East Lothian and the GTCS) have been well publicised, with whistleblowers calling for a public inquiry, open to existing or new whistleblowers and the public to raise recent or historic concerns.

A number of written and oral parliamentary questions highlighting these concerns have been lodged by MSPs. These include questions to the First Minister from Christine Grahame, Willie Rennie, Meghan Gallacher and Douglas Lumsden.

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry focuses on historic abuse and is specific to children in care. A wider inquiry into safeguarding concerns and enquiries from parents, guardians, carers, professionals and the public, which have been mishandled, is needed. This should consider gaps in the existing inquiry; mainstream and specialised settings; and regulated children's activities.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1979 on 8 October 2025

The Convener: Our second continued petition, PE1979—a great year—was lodged by Neil McLennan, Christine Scott, Alison Dickie and Bill Cook, all of whom had an opportunity to address the committee and some of whom joined us from time to time as we considered the petition. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to launch an independent inquiry to examine concerns that allegations about child protection, child abuse, safeguarding and children's rights have been mishandled by public bodies, including local authorities and the General Teaching Council for Scotland; to examine gaps in the Scottish child abuse inquiry; and to establish an independent national whistleblowing officer for education and children's services in Scotland to handle all those inquiries in future.

We are joined by our MSP colleague Edward Mountain—good morning. We last considered the petition on 5 February, when we agreed to write to the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise and to the GTCS. In her response, the minister indicated that work is under way to identify potential solutions to the issues that were raised in her meeting with the petitioners. She also mentioned work that was undertaken alongside the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland to understand current arrangements for whistleblowing and case investigation and potential improvements to those arrangements.

The minister also highlighted other work that was undertaken to improve child protection, including meetings of the new national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group. She reiterated the Government's intention to engage with the recommendations of the Scottish child abuse inquiry once that has been included and to keep under review the statutory requirement for mandatory reporting, on which she said that stakeholder views have been varied.

The GTCS response highlights that a local authority-led process will always be required when investigating concerns, so long as local authorities provide education services and employ teachers in Scotland. It also reiterates its view that a focus on establishing a new whistleblowing officer could draw attention away from identifying where the current gaps are and from implementing effective solutions to fill them.

Since reviewing the official GTCS response, the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care's review of the fitness-to-teach process was published, and the GTCS is working on an action plan that is based on the PSA recommendations.

The petitioners have welcomed some of the work that has been undertaken, but they continue to highlight the power imbalance against those who raise concerns and say that current mechanisms do not provide the level of security that is required to identify validity of safeguarding concerns.

Edward Mountain would like to address the committee.

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Thank you, convener. I realise the pressure that is on the committee as we come to the end of the parliamentary session. I would like to go back to a couple of comments that were made when the

petition last came before the committee on 5 February. At that time, Ash Regan said that she believes that public bodies are “defensive” and Fergus Ewing said that he profoundly believed that the current system is “inherently flawed”. That remains my position, and I think that that is the position of the petitioners.

Since I came to the committee on 5 February, more cases have come to light in the Highlands, some of which are deeply concerning. Pupils are being dragged out of classrooms by their feet and teachers are being suspended but no evidence has been given as to why they have been suspended. As far as their colleagues are concerned, it remains the case that they have done nothing wrong when the parents and the pupils know that they have done something wrong. That is why we need, more than anything else, a whistleblowing officer to look at issues and to address them.

If we are going to get it right for every child—which we must do—we need to ensure that children are heard and that, when evidence is provided on mistreatment, especially in schools, it is made available when the person is suspended. At the moment, too many teachers across Scotland are getting away with things because the authorities are hiding behind GDPR regulations that say that they cannot disclose whether a person has been suspended.

I think that that situation will go on for ever, until we get a whistleblowing officer, which is why I am keen to ensure that the petition continues. As I said, I know that time is an issue for the committee, but I think that your committee is the only one in Parliament that can keep open petitions into the next session. Considering that the children of Scotland are affected, I urge the committee to consider keeping it open, because we have not got things right at the moment. I will leave it at that, because I could get emotional over this, as I think that we are letting our children down.

The Convener: Yes, keeping open the petition is an option, but it is one that we would exercise very carefully, because it might not be helpful to the next committee in the next session of Parliament were it to have a significant body of open petitions before it.

Do colleagues have any suggestions for action?

Fergus Ewing: I speak in support of what my colleague Ed Mountain said. I, too, have constituents who have profound concerns about the way in which complaints are dealt with. They feel that they are kept in the dark. No information is ever given to them about anything, and they are left feeling completely impotent. That might be because of GDPR or the law, and it might not be; I do not know.

What I know is that the system is inherently wrong: public bodies are failing to observe the first basic principle of any justice system, which is *nemo judex in causa sua*. To put it in plain English, they are marking their own jotters. Any public body, when facing criticism, will circle the wagons and defend itself. That is an instinct. It is very simple: there is an inherent conflict of interest between defending its own interests as a public body and dealing with a complaint from a third party.

This petition has been on the go for three years. To supplement what Mr Mountain has said—I drew this to the convener’s and the clerks’ attention prior to the

meeting—I point out that fairly recently, on 26 September, we published the petitioners' supplementary submission. In that submission, they make new substantive points. The first is about the growing support of MSPs; they mention all the MSPs who have supported the petition. Then, they talk about the GTCS and the patent defects of its filtering out of child safeguarding referrals at the initial stage. The defect is that the GTCS basically goes what with the education authority says—so much so that, according to the submission, the statistics show that

“only 26% of referrals received from the public”

were investigated

“compared with 92% of employer referrals.”

That was the finding of the Professional Standard Authority, which is, itself, independent and which also criticised the system, having

“found that the GTCS relied solely on the referral information”.

No one acting in any judicial capacity can rely on hearing only one side of the case. That is a breach of a second principle of natural law: *audi alteram partem*, which, as Latin scholars will know, means “listen to both sides of the case”. It could not be more elementary and yet, three years on, we are no further forward.

I accept entirely that we are moving towards the end of this parliamentary session. However, there are six months left in it. I hope that colleagues feel that this is fair: given the cross-party support for the petition, its obvious strong points and the petitioners submission in September, the least that we should do is invite the Scottish Government to respond specifically to the points that were made in that submission. It sets a good example: as the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, we must ensure that the Scottish Government responds to the other side of the case.

I know that we are under a lot of pressure to close petitions and I will not be arguing that every petition should be kept open. There are only two this morning that I think that about—which, for me, is a very modest bag—and this is one of them. It has an extremely strong case and, three years later, we are not any further forward.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Ewing. If I may trade Latin with you, *tempus fugit*.

Fergus Ewing: Well—*festina lente*, you know.

The Convener: Mr Ewing recommends that we invite the Scottish Government to respond to the petitioners' latest submission.

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): Education is a public service. Is there not another public body, such as the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, that could take on that role? It is a public service that is being provided and there is a flaw in the public service. That is the PSO's role.

The Convener: That might be beyond the scope of the committee's ability to properly explore.

In the first instance, are we happy to pursue Mr Ewing's suggestion? Then, we will have a further opportunity to decide whether, as Mr Ewing is suggesting and as Mr Mountain is hoping, it might be one of our legacy petitions—or whether we think that it would be best served by a fresh petition in the next parliamentary session. We will write to the Scottish Government to seek a response to the petitioners' latest submission. Are colleagues content to proceed on that basis?

Members indicated agreement.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Scottish Government written submission, 14 November 2025

PE1979/LL: Establish an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate concerns about the alleged mishandling of child safeguarding enquiries by public bodies

Thank you for your letter dated 20 October 2025 in relation to the submission dated 16 September 2025 regarding Petition PE1979.

I would like to begin by underlining Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring children and young people in Scotland are protected from all forms of harm and are supported to reach their full potential.

The updated [National Child Protection Guidance](#) supports local areas to develop effective, evidence-based responses to all forms of child abuse and neglect. We are working with partners across Scotland to implement the guidance and support consistent and robust child protection practices across Scotland.

Scottish Government Responses

In the petitioners submission, it is highlighted that the offer to meet with the Deputy First Minister was not accepted. As portfolio responsibility for the safeguarding of children, including within an education setting, sits with the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise, it was therefore more appropriate for this Minister to meet with petitioners. In this meeting, the Minister welcomed discussions around the concerns raised by petitioners and highlighted ongoing work being taken forward by officials. It is important to note that Scottish Government's Chief Social Work Adviser was also in attendance at this meeting.

In relation to the committee's recommendation of an independent national whistleblowing office, Scottish Government maintains the view that there are already a set of bodies and processes in place (such as the Care Inspectorate or the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman) in Scotland to provide independent inspections and investigations into specific incidents.

Work in this space remains a key priority for Scottish Government. Officials are actively considering the concerns raised by the petitioners and Ministers have also responded to the Petition to note that the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry is undertaking an extensive review of child protection policy and practice in Scotland and will report with recommendations for further development in due course.

Engagement and analysis is ongoing to understand complaints and whistleblowing processes across organisations (including those within education). This issue has been discussed by the National Public Protection Leadership Group (NPPLG) who acknowledged the complexities associated with whistleblowing procedures, especially in terms of clarity and confidence among staff to raise concerns, and agreed to support further work at its upcoming January meeting.

This builds on the previous work of an information sharing working group – established in 2022 with the aim of clarifying how information flows between various bodies once a child protection concern is raised, or when allegations are made against a professional which would impact their suitability to work in a role that involves responsibility for children - and has involved engaging with a range of relevant stakeholders including local authorities, the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), COSLA, Education Scotland and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES).

These issues were also discussed at the Education and Childcare Assurance Board (ECAB) in September 2025. The ECAB, established in April 2025, is a time-limited group to enable both the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the COSLA Children and Young People spokesperson to consider key national and local level data, discuss and set strategic priorities, and build a shared understanding and joint approach to those priorities, in line with Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC).

It was a helpful discussion where the Cabinet Secretary underlined the assurance she requires about the robustness of these important processes, and the key role that local authorities, COSLA and ADES have in providing this assurance.

General Teaching Council Scotland - Fitness to Teach Review

The submission also sets out several concerns in relation to GTCS and the Fitness to Teach (FTT) process. Robust regulation of the teaching profession is essential to safeguarding children and young people—ensuring that only those who are safe, skilled, and accountable are entrusted with their care and education.

We acknowledge the important report by the Professional Standards Authority, commissioned by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), in their role as the independent regulator for teachers in Scotland. Scottish Government will consider the findings of this report, and the summary of GTCS's call for views, carefully.

Scottish Government officials are staying in close communication with GTCS while it implements the recommendations of the PSA Report. The GTCS is an independent regulator and, therefore, it is within their remit to take forward improvement work of their processes.

Impact of Delays on Child Safeguarding

In response to concerns around safeguarding issues that have arisen since the petition launched in 2022, Scottish Government remains live to specific concerns with child protection practice and we use all experiences shared with us to inform our ongoing review and improvement of child protection policies in Scotland. We would also highlight that there has been a significant amount of work that has been done since 2022 to improve child protection practice in Scotland, including the implementation of the updated National Child Protection Guidance. If new concerns regarding individual cases have emerged then we would strongly urge that these are reported to the appropriate authorities, particularly Police Scotland, so that they can be properly investigated.

In relation to the child safeguarding allegations in Edinburgh, highlighted in the submission, the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise wrote to the Care Inspectorate in July 2025, asking it to carry out an urgent inspection in relation to the leadership of Children's Social Work Services in Edinburgh. The report of this inspection is expected to publish before the end of the year and we will be considering the findings very closely.

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

In response to concerns raised in the submission in relation to the role of civil servants supporting both Ministers and the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (SCAI), the Inquiry staff are entirely focused on supporting the Inquiry, and do not support Scottish Government Ministers.

Scottish Government has a small number of staff who manage sponsorship of the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, including managing the requirements of the Government's role under the Inquiries Act 2005 in relation to the Inquiry, such as Chair appointment and remuneration and funding the Inquiry, and also managing Government response to questions and correspondence from the Parliament and the public to Government and to Ministers in relation to the Inquiry.

I hope the information set out above provides reassurance that Scottish Government is taking these concerns seriously. As work continues in this space, we remain committed to engaging with relevant stakeholders including COSLA, ADES, Education Scotland, ECAB and the NPPLG to ensure views are represented and captured.

Children's Rights, Protection and Justice

Directorate for Children and Families

Petitioners written submission, 6 January 2026

PE1979/MM: Establish an independent inquiry and an independent national whistleblowing officer to investigate concerns about the alleged mishandling of child safeguarding enquiries by public bodies

This latest submission from PE1979 petitioners responds to the Scottish Government's submission of 14 November and developments since October's committee.

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

Petitioners welcomed the continued cross-party support of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee when they last considered PE1979 on 8 October and their decision to request that the SG respond to the safeguarding points within our September submission.

We appreciate the committee's understanding of the serious child safeguarding concerns behind the petition and the need for an independent national whistleblowing office.

Whilst frustrated about the lack of progress, petitioners would agree with the suggestion from members, particularly Fergus Ewing MSP and Edward Mountain MSP, that our petition be kept open, and as summarised by the Convener, that “*...it might be one of our legacy petitions.*”

In our opinion, these serious child safeguarding matters should be prioritised over any administrative inconvenience for new MSPs and so that speedier progress can be embedded into the next parliament’s agenda.

Scottish Government Submission

It was again with disappointment that petitioners read the SG’s November submission and what is believed to be yet another defensive response and a failure to understand the safeguarding concerns well-raised in the petition’s parliamentary journey.

In this submission, we would firstly continue to welcome any action which robustly improves child safeguarding and commend the work being taken forward by the many dedicated professionals.

Our focus, however, continues to be on the alleged mishandling by public bodies and what happens when something goes wrong.

It is the experience of the whistleblowers and survivors who continue to approach petitioners for support, and potentially the many others out there, that health, careers and lives are all negatively impacted by daring to allege the mishandling of child abuse concerns by public bodies. And, whilst again noting the list of improvements cited by the SG, it is felt that these are merely sticking plaster solutions.

In responding to the SG’s familiar points, petitioners continue to highlight the advisory nature of the national child protection ‘guidance’ and the power that it places in the hands of local authorities and their multi-agency partners; the conflicts of interest that thrive at those levels and even amongst the membership of the groups listed within the submission - and indeed the civil servants drafting government answers to questions about the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry; and the time and money that would be better spent directly engaging with and empowering the voices of whistleblowers and survivors.

We also continue to highlight the limited investigation and legislative powers, as well as the complex and lengthy processes, of the existing bodies which the Scottish Government believe to be sufficient. This includes the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and Care Inspectorate – both of whom have negatively featured in petition related cases. And too, the potential of the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry to identify the fullest child safeguarding truth, accountability and systematic change given its scope of care and the gaps within its own terms and references.

Petitioners note the SG’s close working relationship with the GTCS as they independently implement the recommendations of the PSA Report. We have long raised the investigative weaknesses within the GTCS Fitness to Teach process and welcomed the PSA’s independent recognition of these safeguarding concerns. However, we again raise that this was based on a small sample of cases provided by

the GTCS and therefore continue to call for all child safeguarding referrals to be independently investigated - and ultimately by an independent national whistleblowing office.

Of particular interest within the SG submission was the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise's July request of the Care Inspectorate to carry out an urgent review into the leadership of Children's Social Work in Edinburgh – the report of which has since been published. This was new information to petitioners and follows our writing to Edinburgh Council's Chief Executive about the alleged mishandling of past and present child abuse concerns as relates to residential care.

Sadly, whistleblowers and survivors were again dismayed to note the serious conflicts of interest at a senior level relating to this review and the terms and references limited to process rather than the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Petitioners are aware though of the wider re-investigation taking place and again sadly, concerns about conflicts of interest.

On reading the report, it felt like those raising concerns about the safety of children were being blamed for doing so and for the related publicity that led to the review. At the same time, it was not a surprise to learn that staff did not have trust and confidence in the safeguarding culture and engagement with the senior leadership. This would echo the views of whistleblowing staff – none of who were aware of or contributed to the review.

Wider Safeguarding Developments

Petitioners have watched with interest the developments around the national review of group-based child sexual abuse response, and the familiar concerns about multi-agency bodies leading on the marking of their own homework and concluding whether there should be a public inquiry.

Whilst our focus is on independent investigation of all mishandled child abuse and safeguarding concerns by public bodies and through the vehicle of an independent national whistleblowing office rather than more costly inquiries that lead to little justice and accountability, we welcomed Professor Alexis Jay as the independent chair.

We also very much welcomed Professor Jay's comments at the Education, Children and Young People's Committee on 17 December 2025. In response to a question from Miles Briggs MSP about whether she supported PE1979's call for an independent national whistleblowing office for education and children's services, her initial thoughts were "*I cannot think that it would be anything but helpful to have that, but I do not know the detail of the petition.*".

Petitioners would absolutely highlight the call as helpful... and indeed believe it to be vital.

For over 3 years now, we've shared that the mishandled allegations include and have relevance to serious and organised child sexual exploitation, with common threads across cases that require more robust and independent scrutiny to ensure the fullest child safeguarding truth and better keep children safe.

We call on the committee to support the petition's legacy and progress in the next parliament.