

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

17th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
22 November 2023

PE1947: Address Scotland's culture of youth violence

Lodged on	8 August 2022
Petitioner	Alex O'Kane
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1947

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on Wednesday 28 June 2023. At that meeting, the Committee agreed to invite researchers, Police Scotland, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit and No Knives, Better Lives to give evidence at a future meeting.
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. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,804 signatures have been received.
4. On Monday 22 May, members of the Committee met with a group of young people at 6VT, a youth café in Edinburgh. On Wednesday 24 May, members of the Committee met with the petitioner and families impacted by youth violence in Milton, Glasgow. A note of the session with 6VT can be found at **Annexe C** and a note of the session with the petitioner and families can be found at **Annexe D**.
5. The Education, Children and Young People Committee held a roundtable on [Wednesday 14 June 2023](#) on Violence in Schools. The key issues presented in the petition were not directly addressed. However, the session raised issues such

as school reporting and holistic, community-wide approaches to reducing violence.

6. At today's meeting, the Committee will take evidence from Dr Susan Batchelor from the University of Glasgow and Dr Fern Gillon from the University of Glasgow.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1947: Address Scotland's culture of youth violence

Petitioner

Alex O'Kane

Date lodged

8 August 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland.

Previous action

I have contacted Glasgow politicians, including Paul Sweeney MSP to express my concerns. I have started an awareness campaign on the No1seems2care social media page to try to warn parents about the dangers which currently exist on the streets of Glasgow city centre, it's also important to let the youth know about the dangers they may face. I have written to the Chief Constable of Police Scotland and have received a response from the relevant Area Commander.

Background information

I am the founder of the No1seems2care help group which is based in Glasgow. In recent months I have received dozens of videos, images and first-hand accounts which describe a disturbing culture of youth violence in Glasgow city centre. Children as young as 13 years old have been kicked unconscious and left in pools of blood whilst the incidents are videoed and circulated on social media. Children should be safe in our city.

There are several posts on the No1seems2care Facebook page which show images of some of these violent incidents. The videos are too graphic to show on a public platform. There are also first accounts from people in Glasgow city centre.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1947 on 28th June 2023

The Convener: The next petition, PE1947, lodged by Alex O’Kane, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the disturbing culture of youth violence in Scotland. We last considered the petition on 26 October, when we agreed to engage with communities and families that have been directly affected by the issues raised in the petition. The committee also agreed to write to the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, whose written response states that the primary prevention of violence is the most effective and cost-efficient form of prevention. It highlights work by YouthLink Scotland, which found the social return on investment in youth services to be at least three to one, with a note that that work is a fundamental part of any form of violence prevention work. It points to a survey of young people in England and Wales that suggested that one in seven young people had experienced some form of violence, including threats, bullying and low-level violence.

Members will be aware that, last month, members of the committee met an Edinburgh-based youth group, 6VT, and visited Milton in Glasgow to meet the petitioner and families with direct experience of the issues that are raised in the petition. We were joined on that occasion by our parliamentary colleague Bob Doris. It was one of the most engaging, courageous, moving and disturbing exchanges that those of us present have had with members of the public, who, along with their young people who had been the victims of violence, placed their faith in the hands of the committee and gave us visceral descriptions of the experiences that they had endured. I again thank all those who were prepared to do that. Obviously, and clearly, we uncovered a number of issues. Coincidentally, there was a debate in the chamber that same week, and I was able to make some general reference to the experiences that we had heard about on our visit.

This is an issue on which I feel that, given the faith that was placed in us, we are honour bound to take further action. Alexander Stewart, you were also with me on the visit. Would you like to add something?

Alexander Stewart: You have identified that the visit was very informative. The courage that those individuals and their families displayed was obvious, and the information that we received from them was harrowing, because they were, without question, traumatised by the whole process. They gave one another a level of support and, in both of those locations, we saw the community working to help people, and the support mechanisms that are there. However, I do not think that the support mechanisms in the organisations that were outside those groups of people were as good. That was a concern, as the individuals who were victims were under the impression that they were not necessarily being totally supported.

It was quite disturbing to hear that the perpetrators were able to wander around and do things back in the community while the victims were now feeling a little bit housebound or unable to go places and do things because of that. There is a real concern there.

We also heard about the social media side of things, with trauma being recreated as the event is sent out across the web, which exacerbates the situation for the young individuals who were traumatised by the violence, as they have to revisit it and deal with their trauma again.

Like others who visited those locations, I learned a lot. As I said, the courage of the families and the young individuals needs to be commended. There is still work to be done on the issue, because there is no question but that there are gaps. The petitioner is strong on what he wants to happen on their behalf, which we have capacity to look at as a committee. The petition crosses over into issues related to the police, education and violence, and areas within the Scottish Government need to realise that. There are also organisations such as the Scottish Youth Parliament that should have a say on all this. A lot more can be done.

10:00

The Convener: One thing that you touched on and that I found particularly chilling was the gratuitous and brutal violence by appointment. We heard about young people as young as 12 who played on the vulnerable among their peer group and solicited their attendance at a site where they had set up others to film the violence that they then perpetrated. They left unconscious two of the people who we met, only for the police, as we understood it, to feel powerless because of the current expectation that people under the age of 25 will not be pursued. That removed any sense of a need for anonymity among the people who did the filming, who actually thrived on the notoriety that they gained from their actions. The whole thing was thoroughly dispiriting.

When we were there, we thought that meeting members of the Scottish Youth Parliament would be a way forward. I understand that a member of the SYP participated in a round-table evidence session with another committee and, although this issue was not the focus of that committee's inquiry, they gave the impression that this is not an issue that the SYP has been pursuing or collecting information on. Nonetheless, as that is an opportunity that is open to us, we might, at some stage, want to meet a representative body of people who encompass all of Scotland and not necessarily just the areas that we have seen.

I wonder whether we might want to take further evidence from some of the organisations and public bodies that might be able to influence the process. That would involve evidence at a future committee meeting from researchers, Police Scotland—certainly—the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, No Knives Better Lives and perhaps other youth representatives. Are there any other suggestions from committee members?

Paul Sweeney: I have some familiarity with the petition and, obviously, the community of Milton. I agree with all the suggested actions and the sentiments that

have been expressed today. There are youth organisations in Glasgow that have demonstrated a positive track record of benefiting their communities. For example, St Paul's Youth Forum in Blackhill, which has achieved significant improvements relating to youth violent behaviour in that community. We might be able to learn from and scale that model in communities where there is a persistent issue with gratuitous youth violence.

The lack of enforcement and lack of engagement with the issue by the police is a deep concern, because it only emboldens the action that the convener has described, which is completely demoralising for a community that already feels alienated.

The Convener: That is very helpful. We were minded to try to hear more from some young people, so, if that group were willing to participate, that would be of value.

I thank the members of the 6VT youth group in Edinburgh who we saw. It is held in a location that is quite central in Edinburgh—just off the Grassmarket—but I had no idea that it was there until we visited it. As I recall, it is on the grounds of the site of the home of Scotland's first suffragette. It is definitely a safe haven where we saw young people growing in confidence, being able to draw on support and—I thought—maturing quickly as they worked together to tackle and combat the issues in their community. I commend them.

We might proceed on the basis that we hope to take evidence from various organisations that are relevant to the experience that we have had. We might come back to the Scottish Youth Parliament, or it might well be that Paul Sweeney's suggestion of a group that could participate in giving evidence would be useful. Perhaps the committee would be content to delegate to me a discussion with the clerks on whether we have a round-table discussion or a formal evidence discussion. We can perhaps consider the merits of those and proceed accordingly. Does that meet with the committee's approval?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Paul Sweeney: I have a supplementary point. I know that you visited Milton to discuss the issue first hand. Perhaps there is an issue with how schools engage with the problem. It might be useful to engage with the schools that have catchment areas in the relevant communities, to get an understanding of whether they have detected the problem and have measures in place to address it or whether they, similarly to the police, feel powerless to deal with it.

The Convener: I should qualify what I said earlier by pointing out that, although we met in Milton, some of the people whom we met had travelled from as far as Cupar in Fife to participate in the discussion. There was a local group that we had hoped to meet that day but, sadly, due to unforeseen circumstances, we were not able to meet. One of the things that I might reflect on with the clerks, if the committee is happy for me to do so, is who might be the most representative body of people that we can bring round the table.

Paul Sweeney: There might be a similar thing with teachers experiencing similar issues, which might be useful to understand.

The Convener: Yes. In fact, that came out of the discussion that we had. Some teachers were inured to it, but some still could not cope and did not know what best to do.

Annexe C

PE1947: Address Scotland's Culture of Youth Violence

External Committee engagement session with 6VT

Introduction

Members of the Committee, Jackson Carlaw MSP (Convener) and Alexander Stewart MSP, met with a group of young people at the Edinburgh Youth Café 6VT. The young people shared their understanding of the key issues raised in the petition, noting that the majority of participants had experienced a form of violence from another young person.

Generally, the group had experienced forms of violence both in-person and online. Participants stated that they feel scared to walk home at night and that Edinburgh City Centre is a particular area of concern. In terms of behaviours, participants indicated that carrying knives and stealing motorbikes are common issues.

The group felt that the type of individual who may become violent towards another young person would have come from challenging circumstances and would present with a group of people who likely "feel terrified as well".

Causes of youth violence

Participants believed that for some people violence can be a means of 'showing off' in some social settings, especially among 13- to 20-year-olds who might be vulnerable to peer pressure.

Poor mental health was identified as one of the root causes of youth violence. The group shared that young people are taught to "push feelings and emotions down", leading them to abuse drugs and alcohol in order to "numb the feelings". It was stated that being under the influence of substances with unmanaged emotions then causes violence between young people. This group believes that not treating poor mental health creates a cycle which causes youth violence, leading to more young people with poor mental health as victims of such violence.

The group noted that it is easier to access illegal drugs than it is alcohol as a young person. In particular, the group stated that owing money to drug dealers can cause individuals to become victims of violence if they are unable to pay off debt.

The group discussed the impact of social media on both perpetrators and victims of violence. They stated that social media algorithms can suggest violent videos when an individual has not actively sought to view such content. Participants shared that they are exposed to violent content relatively frequently which made them desensitised or, at times, overwhelmed.

Impact on victims

Many participants felt that a lot of people are “let down by the justice system” and don’t feel supported during the reporting process. The group shared their sense that even if they reported a crime and spent a substantial amount of time giving testimonies, the likelihood of “anything being done about it” was very low.

All of these issues were thought to be more severe in sexual violence cases where taboo, disbelief, and low conviction rates are seen as significant additional barriers to reporting crimes and reaching just outcomes.

One participant stated that the justice system process can leave victims feeling vulnerable and in the end, victims are “expected to continue on with life as if nothing happened”.

When asked what they would do in the event of an attack, one participant stated that she would go to 6VT. The group agreed with this sentiment, affirming that 6VT is a safe space where they could seek support without judgement and receive good advice. A staff member also highlighted that 6VT is a remote reporting site, meaning that staff can assist with reporting a violent incident to the police and a statement can be taken on the premises.

Prevention

When discussing what stopped them from turning to violence, especially as they had experienced part of the violence cycle, participants shared a number of preventative interventions in their lives. The interventions included attending 6VT as this gave one participant “something to focus

on” and the group expressed that similar services could play an important role in community building, personal development and, by extension, violence prevention.

One participant had found an interest in music and joined a band. Another shared that his older brothers were involved in gangs, which made him want to “step up and be different”, while others agreed that seeing family involved in violence put them off going down that route.

Participants emphasised the need for a comprehensive approach to mental health and community support; particularly through early interventions, perhaps provided by guidance teachers who could support in building young people’s capacity to deal with difficult emotions in ways that do not include resorting to violence. In this context, addressing long waiting lists for mental health support was seen as a priority.

Annexe D

PE1947: Address Scotland's Culture of Youth Violence

External Committee engagement session with the petitioner and families with lived experience

Introduction

Members of the Committee, Jackson Carlaw MSP (Convener) and Alexander Stewart MSP, met with families at LoveMilton Community Centre.

The families shared their individual experiences with youth violence in the community and the impact it has had on their lives.

Abbie's story

The Committee heard about the experiences of three victims during the session. The text below is the statement provided by Angela Jarvis, Abbie's mother.

"Abbie had met a new friend. She was reassured by this friend that she would keep her safe. This friend knew Abbie had social anxiety. This friend made Abbie feel secure. Abbie loved her.

The said friend text Abbie to meet at the park, so nothing unusual.

At the park the friend had waited to attack. No warning. No fall out beforehand. Just a cold and calculated attack. The first attack, blows to the head, Abbie couldn't process, when she got up she tried to get away. Then came the second attack, more blows to the head and face, Abbie began seeing stars and wanted to vomit but managed to get up to run.

This led to a chase and another attack resulting in Abbie becoming unconscious, you would think the attack would stop them, but it didn't, it continued.

When I found my daughter, I couldn't process it. Her face looked deformed. I wanted to vomit. I felt faint. I was too scared for a minute to touch her. She was covered in blood and vomit. She couldn't speak, she was in and out of consciousness. I was so scared.

Adrenaline kicked in and I managed to think fast. I got her to the hospital, trying to hold her up with one hand and drive with the other.

[Referring to photographs:] This is my daughter when she would wake up and say she is scared, please don't call the police mum she will kill me. [...] I assured her she won't ever have to see this girl again. This is a serious crime, the girl will be locked away for this. Abbie still passing out and coming round again.

There wasn't one bit of her face and head that had not been kicked or punched. The bruises I just kept finding. Inside her mouth was all torn. Her head was disfigured.

[Referring to photographs:] This is the day CID arrived, this is the day I had to sit with her and hear that the likelihood is that no consequences would be given to this girl. My heart broke in two again and my daughter's fear was horrendous. My baby was broken and my heart was shattered.

My eldest boy had travelled up from England and said "see mum, I told you we should have dealt with the consequences, the system is useless."

I always thought that the police were there to protect and the justice system served justice. I couldn't process this.

Doing my homework afterwards, I learnt this girl had attacked no less than 20 children and was well known with the police and in fact I still continue to get videos or stories of attacks weekly.

Why do no consequences still stand? This is something I don't understand.

Since the attack which happened in October last year, Abbie has felt let down by the world. She has attempted to leave this world twice and won't leave the house without me [there] with her. She has lost an education through fear of school and being around teens. She has no trust. Outside is a frightening place and not a place of fun and laughter that she can enjoy before adulthood.

My son is angry and I have had to counsel him. He wanted to take things into his own hands because he sees the pain Abbie continues to suffer.

Abbie's youngest sister can no longer go where she used to go play with her friends through fear this girl will attack her.

At least we had a bit of peace of mind that we managed to get bail [i.e. the attacker was granted bail only subject to conditions, including keeping away from Abbie].

In February the said girl approached our property with a gang of boys to stare and intimidate.

Phone police. Bail is broken. There is no bail.

I still don't know to this day why there is no bail, as a victim's mum and as a victim, you don't matter. As a perpetrator, they know what's going on.

We were let down again.

Abbie's PTSD went through the roof. Having dreams of being chased. Jumping at her own shadow. And wanted to be anywhere but at her home she used to love.

Abbie has been in 24 hour care. Even moving her into my room to always be there for her.

And as a mum I am constantly thinking "how am I going to keep my daughter alive?" How can I show her that the assault was wrong?

Police Scotland told us to just keep ourselves safe, lock the doors and contacted Victim Support which provide us with three cameras.

Cameras that record. Which, yes, is evidence. But we had evidence of her beating my child almost to death, so what good are cameras that show evidence of her coming to our home?

It was providing us with a small sense of security.

In the meantime, the perpetrator attends school, has made new friends, can go out and enjoy her teenage life, and in fact continue to inflict violence and fear on others. Whilst Abbie is locked up. No education. No counselling. No friends. No summer being out enjoying herself. Often no sleep while she continues to process. Abbie feels let down by all the services. Abbie is going to go on a child protection plan because she hurts herself, but no child protection plan is in put in place when a child hurts others.

The perpetrator has all the protection. You can't share her name, you can't approach her or provide your own punishment for the crime. But

she can continue to message, intimidate and beat Abbie again if she likes and her life won't change.

If this was your child, how would you feel? Would you agree that the perpetrator should have all of the protection and no consequences?"

M's story

Members then heard about an attack on another young girl by the same perpetrator. Her experience was similar in that the perpetrator and her friends brought M into their group. M shared that the perpetrator was known for being violent but that she became friends with her because she felt that would give her protection.

On the day of the attack, M was at a shopping centre with the group and began to realise the attack was coming when they tried to convince her to leave the shopping centre (so as, she assumed, to be out of view of CCTV).

M alerted her mum by text, who then contacted the shopping centre security to beg them to prevent any attack until M's dad could arrive. Her mum was informed that the security guards could not intervene unless an attack had begun, and they were splitting it up – there was nothing they could proactively do to prevent the attack from happening.

M was attacked by the group in the shopping centre and it was broken up by the security guards.

Her mum emphasised a lack of police action following the attack. She was initially told the attacker would be charged and believed this, particularly as there is CCTV footage of the attack to use as evidence, but she has not been given an incident number and has not had contact from the police in months since the attack.

K's story

K's mum told Members about how her daughter was attacked on a school bus on the way home one day. She shared that K was scratched, had her hair pulled out and was stamped on by the attacker. Within an hour, her mum had been sent seven videos of the attack. The police and school explained that the consequences they could put in place were limited as the perpetrator was 12 years old. By way of punishment, the perpetrator was issued with a one-day in-school exclusion as her only

sanction. K's mum emphasised a lack of support from the school, sharing that while the perpetrator receives daily counselling through the school, K only received three sessions. K is now escorted between classes and cannot leave the school grounds at lunchtime, while the perpetrator has none of those restrictions.

K's mum shared that her daughter is now quiet and withdrawn. K no longer goes out after school with friends, suffers from anxiety, and has given up previous hobbies she enjoyed. Her siblings have also been attacked, and she receives constant messages containing threats and insults both while at school and at home.

Causes of youth violence

The group expressed concern about a lack of discipline culturally and recognised that young people are still "figuring out who they're going to be as adults" between the ages of 12 and 14. One parent stated that a lot of young people are "given up on at home because they don't have the discipline or structure", she believes that those young people are then left without direction.

In the cases shared during the session, there were no drugs or alcohol involved and therefore did not appear to be a cause of any attack.

The participants felt that social media platforms have a role to play as young people can feel encouraged to participate in and film violence with a view to sharing it online. The parents believe that social media platforms allow violent videos to be circulated without accountability as parents do not receive responses to their communication with the platforms. The group felt that social media platforms should have a responsibility to remove videos containing such violence.

However, participants also noted that not all attacks are recorded.

Impact on victims

The participants raised concerns about the lasting impact on victims, including their families. In particular, they emphasised that the impact is exacerbated by a lack of support from formal structures within both the education and justice systems.

The families shared their fears over the safety of their children in the local community and the young people stated that they can no longer go outside without fear. One parent added that living in a small community “makes it difficult to get distance and space” from perpetrators.

When considering the mental health impact of violence, parents shared their fears over losing their children to suicide and noted that the waiting list for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services is significant.

One mother asked:

“What society do we live in when we can’t keep our kids safe?”

In one instance, the child did not receive support from the school, which has left her scared to walk between classes alone. The parent stated that the system “was created to support the perpetrator” and that this is done at the “expense of victims”.

The group shared that at the time of reporting, families had been reassured by the police that action would be taken. However, communication stopped soon after that point. The group expressed that not being informed about the process made them feel more vulnerable to the perpetrators.

A significant sentiment from the group was that the lasting impact on victims following a violent attack is exacerbated by a lack of consequences for the perpetrators. One expressed the view that nothing will change until a child is killed or a parent takes matters into their own hands and is imprisoned for assault.

Consequences

Throughout the session, participants emphasised a lack of consequences as the key issue for consideration. They shared concerns about rehabilitation in the community, noting that such interventions fail due to insufficient resources, which results in more violence occurring. It was suggested that for some individuals, it is necessary to remove them from the community and provide rehabilitation where they are separated from the victims.

Frustration about the justice system was expressed, with details of circumstances in which the police were unable to proceed with criminal charges due to the age of the perpetrator, including incidents with video footage and where an individual had attacked multiple people. The

police had been unable to take further action because the perpetrators were under 15 years old. In one instance, the perpetrator went on to attack more people.

More broadly, there was a sense among the group that the police hear about online threats of violence so frequently that “they become immune to it” and have stated to a concerned parent that “nine times out of ten” no attack occurs as a result of online threats. The parent’s reaction was to wonder “what if my child is the one (out of ten)?”

Another parent said of the violent children: “They are laughing in our faces – they have all the power, and they know it”. Some of these children are also attacking adults, stealing from shops and starting fires. The girl who attacked Abbie and M is now reported to be carrying a knife.

Initially the families had thought that their situations would be handled by the justice system but were left asking “what’s the point in contacting the police?”

The group discussed the impact of family and home life on perpetrators, reflecting that some parents are unable to acknowledge their child’s behaviour while others recognise the issue but feel unable to bring forward consequences at home. They emphasised the importance of parental responsibility to bring forward consequences, noting that their own children are aware that it is wrong to be violent towards other people.

When discussing the approach taken by schools, it was noted that teachers are not permitted to intervene in fights or violent attacks. By way of punishment, single day in-school exclusions were noted as common occurrences but that in other circumstances they could only provide in-school counselling for the perpetrator.

Overall, it was felt that the justice system should look at each situation on its individual circumstances and bring forward different consequences for different incidents.

Prevention

The participants felt that schools and the police should be better supported to stop violence from happening and that when perpetrators

face consequences this will reduce the likelihood of more violence occurring in the future.

The importance of youth work was raised but with the caveat that it is “very difficult” to run such work due to funding and safeguarding requirements. One parent stated that “youth groups and individuals are trying to make a difference but it’s difficult”.