

PE1905/J: Public Inquiry into the response of religious organisations to allegations of child sexual abuse since 1950

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Gaelic submission, 10 June 2024

Thank you for your letter following up on the above petition dated 31 May 2024.

I note the Committee's decision to close the above petition and the Committee's dissatisfaction with the Scottish Government's response to the petitioner's request. New to the post of Deputy First Minister, I want to reaffirm the Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of Scotland's children and young people is a key priority.

As stated in my predecessor's letter dated 2 October 2023, we are taking a range of robust actions to ensure children and young people are protected from all forms of harm. The vital work with our partners to both prevent abuse and respond when harm has occurred seeks to ensure that risk and harm is recognised and acted on quickly and effectively.

I note the Committee has requested a final report on the work being undertaken to consider the findings and recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) for England and Wales and the publication of the implementation progress report and its findings.

The Scottish Government is carefully considering the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) for England and Wales, and how these might apply in a Scottish context. We will keep Parliament updated of progress on improving the child protection system, including how we will implement Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry recommendations. One of IICSA's key recommendations was the introduction of mandatory reporting. In our last letter, we mentioned that we have been working with stakeholders to gather views and consider the potential risks and merits of mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse in a Scottish context. Following this engagement and analysis of evidence from international jurisdictions who have implemented varying forms of mandatory reporting, it was decided that there is currently insufficient compelling evidence to introduce mandatory reporting in Scotland. The feedback we have heard from Scottish stakeholders with an interest in child protection indicates that many are concerned about the potential risks around any introduction of mandatory reporting and how this would fit with the Scottish approach to early intervention and prevention.

Our current focus of activity is to continue to embed GIRFEC and support implementation of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021. This guidance, updated in 2023, sets out the responsibilities of everyone working with children and young people and makes clear that if there are any concerns that a child may have experienced or may experience significant harm, and these concerns

relate to the possibility of abuse or neglect, then police or social work must be notified.

However, the Scottish Government will keep the case for mandatory reporting under review. We are undertaking further engagement with stakeholders on this issue as well as other approaches to addressing child sexual abuse. We will also consider relevant recommendations coming out of the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry.

To support us in tackling Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) in Scotland, we are currently establishing a new national group dedicated to this issue. The group will increase cross-sectoral coordination and capability to address the risks and harms of CSAE in Scotland by scrutinising existing and emerging evidence and practice to inform, prioritise and agree actions. National oversight will support the delivery of effective responses to CSAE in Scotland across the areas of prevention, identification, deterrence and recovery support. The first meeting of this group is due to take place in the summer.

Recommendation 1 of the IICSA called for the improvement of data collection around CSAE. Ensuring data of this kind is collected in a trauma-informed manner which supports and protects child victims is a particular challenge in Scotland, as it is in other parts of the UK and internationally. In Scotland we have some limited data derived from those known to child protection and enforcement services, information from reporting from services working in this area, and data from academic literature. However, we agree on the need to improve CSAE data collection and we will be asking the new national CSAE group to consider how to achieve this.

The need to increase public awareness about CSAE was another recommendation of the IICSA. We recognise that prevention is key to tackling CSAE and in 2022 and 2023 we ran a national public awareness campaign to support parents and carers to help keep their children safer online. This linked to the Scottish Government's Online Safety Hub and Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Hub. Additionally, following a concerning rise in cases of sexually motivated extortion ('sextortion') of young people, we are working with Fearless/Crimestoppers to consider the potential to develop a targeted sextortion awareness campaign later this year.

As noted in the previous response, as part of implementation of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021, a self-evaluation toolkit was developed for local Child Protection Committees (CPCs) to monitor and evaluate implementation up to September 2023. The Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS) analysed returns from all CPCs to produce a report summarising at a national level the progress that has been made on implementation (available [on the CELCIS website](#)). The findings highlighted significant progress had been made by local areas despite challenging circumstances. The report commented positively on the significant level of activity being taken forward at a time of acute workforce, service and funding pressures.

One finding from the evaluation report of relevance to PE1905 is that engaging with the number and diversity of different organisations that work with children is an ongoing challenge for CPCs, and some CPCs reported particular difficulties engaging with faith organisations (amongst others). The Scottish Government has

been discussing with CPCScotland possible ways to improve engagement with faith organisations, including linking with an existing faith network (Faith and Belief Representatives Group) facilitated by the Scottish Government.

Although the evaluation exercise highlighted that significant progress had been made, it also confirmed that implementation is ongoing for many areas and more time is needed for the Guidance to properly bed in. The Scottish Government is therefore continuing to provide support and will continue to monitor implementation of the National Child Protection Guidance through a range of data sources.

Thank you again for your letter. I hope this further information is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

KATE FORBES