

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee  
Wednesday 29 May  
10th Meeting, 2024 (Session 6)

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

### Introduction

**Petitioner** Angela Rosina Cousins on behalf of the UK XJW's Support

**Petition summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to order a public inquiry into the actions taken by religious organisations in response to child sexual abuse allegations since 1950.

**Webpage** <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1905>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 6 September 2023.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Deputy First Minister.
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 then Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the petitioner which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial position on 5 November 2021.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 380 signatures have been received on this petition.

### Action

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

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**May 2024**

## **Annexe A: Summary of petition**

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

#### **Petitioner**

Angela Rosina Cousins on behalf of the UK XJW's Support

#### **Date Lodged**

25 October 2021

#### **Petition summary**

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to order a public inquiry into the actions taken by religious organisations in response to child sexual abuse allegations since 1950.

#### **Previous action**

I contacted my MSP about this matter who I believe also spoke to the relevant Government Minister.

#### **Background information**

I am a survivor of child sexual abuse. Like many others, when I reported that I was abused, I was failed by people within my church.

I supplied my evidence to the inquiry for England and Wales however, they could not use it as that inquiry didn't pertain to Scotland. Although there is a Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, it is focussed on investigating the abuse of children in care.

There needs to be an investigation into the response of religious organisations, who were informed about allegations of abuse against children who were not in care. I would like the inquiry to investigate how many victims and how many alleged abusers there were, and what these organisations did to protect the victims.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales has just released its report. Scotland now needs its own inquiry.

## **Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1905 on 6 September 2023**

**The Convener:** The first of the continuing petitions is PE1905, which was lodged by Angela Rosina Cousins on behalf of UK XJW's Support. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to order a public inquiry into the actions that have taken by religious organisations in response to child sex abuse allegations since 1950.

Since our last consideration of the petition, we have written to the Scottish Government, highlighting the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales. As part of that communication, we again called for the Scottish inquiry to have its terms of reference extended or for the Scottish Government to investigate the possibility of establishing an alternative inquiry in order to match the scope of the inquiries that are taking place elsewhere.

We have since received a response from the then Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, restating the Scottish Government's position that widening the inquiry's remit is not practicable, as it would make the inquiry "unmanageable in scope". The response states that it is imperative that resources are dedicated to on-going work to implement the national guidance for child protection.

Do colleagues have any comments or thoughts in the light of the former Deputy First Minister's latest response?

**David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP):** I am reluctant to close the petition, even though the Scottish Government has said that it will not widen the scope of the inquiry. We should try again, by writing to the new Deputy First Minister to reiterate the committee's recommendations that the Scottish Government extend the Scottish child abuse inquiry's terms of reference to include religious organisations or establish a separate public inquiry to address the issues that are highlighted in the petition and to ask what work has been undertaken since the submission in January to consider the recommendations in the report on child protection in religious organisations and settings in England and Wales. We should also ask how the Scottish Government monitors the implementation of national guidance for child protection, what steps it is taking to ensure that religious organisations are aware of and adhering to the guidance, and how it demonstrates its function of supporting and challenging religious organisations on those issues.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** I very much support what Mr Torrance has recommended, but perhaps I can supplement it by asking that, when we do write that letter, we draw specific attention to the useful material that the clerks have provided in paragraph 9 of their paper. The paper mentions the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse in England and Wales, which published its final report in October 2022. The paper then refers to recommendations 2, 9, 13 and 19 of that inquiry report, all of which appear to have relevance. In his reply, Mr Swinney says that the on-going inquiry might well consider the issues that are of relevance here,

but he does not really go into any specifics; however, at least four of those specifics have been drawn out by the clerks, and there might be others, too.

The point that I am making is that it would be useful to give the Deputy First Minister a steer on this and suggest that, as well as the general points that Mr Torrance has made, it would be useful to hear whether the existing inquiry will specifically consider all the pertinent and relevant recommendations made by the English inquiry. If we are to accept the Government approach, we can do so only on the basis that it will cover all the relevant issues, albeit in a different way—and even, perhaps, unsatisfactorily, given that we have not heard evidence et cetera.

I just wanted to make that specific point, convener.

**The Convener:** I think that that is fair. Are we content with that?

**Members *indicated agreement.***

## **Annexe C: Written submissions**

### **Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance submission of 29 November 2023**

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

Thank you for your correspondence in respect of the above petition which you last considered at your meeting on 6 September 2023.

I would like to respond to the specific points you have raised in your letter, and also reiterate that harm to a child in any setting is unacceptable.

Following publication of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021, Scottish Government has been devoting significant resource to supporting the implementation of the Guidance across the country. A National Child Protection Guidance Implementation Group was established for a period of two years to provide strategic oversight and offer support to local areas. As part of this group, a Monitoring and Evaluation subgroup was established to develop and implement an approach to monitoring and evaluating implementation of the Guidance up to September 2023. A self-evaluation toolkit was developed which has been shared with Child Protection Committees (CPCs). We have asked that CPCs return completed versions of this self-evaluation toolkit by the end of October 2023. We will then be working with the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS) to analyse these returns and produce a report at the start of 2024 summarising at a national level the progress that has been made on implementation.

Alongside the work of the Monitoring and Evaluation subgroup, the Scottish Government is also monitoring national data to monitor implementation. The Scottish Government's annual Children's Social Work Statistics return has been reviewed and amended to align with the National Guidance. This will enable us to monitor trends over a longer timeframe.

Child Protection Committees (CPCs) were established in each local authority in Scotland in 1991. CPCs are the key local bodies for developing, implementing and improving child protection strategy across and between agencies, bodies and the local community. As noted in our previous response, and as set out in the Guidance, faith organisations should have designated child protection leads who have a role in passing on concerns about children to police or social work, and in developing and maintaining organisational policies and procedures. These individuals should undertake regular training and be aware of the local Child Protection Committee and procedures.

Nevertheless, to raise the profile of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland with religious organisations, Scottish Government officials presented to the Faith and Belief Representatives Group in January 2022. This group provides a regular forum for faith and belief communities in Scotland to discuss policy matters. It is an opportunity for both Scottish Government and faith and belief communities to

raise issues with each other, with a view to identifying potential solutions. The group aims to facilitate an effective flow of information between the Scottish Government and faith and belief organisations, allowing for greater awareness and understanding on both sides.

We by no means view the Guidance as a static document, and are working with stakeholders to ensure that it is kept relevant and helpful, and that it is updated to address the issues raised with us and the experience of local areas using it. We therefore published an [updated version](#) on 31 August 2023 and will continue to make sure that the Guidance reflects the constant improvements and developments we are working with partners to make across the system.

Recognising that prevention is key to tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation, we are taking forward a wide range of work with our partners to both prevent abuse and intervene early to ensure that risk and harm to children and young people is recognised and acted on quickly and effectively. The Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise and Minister for Victims and Community Safety set out the detail of our approach during a [debate](#) on tackling online child abuse, grooming and exploitation on 21 September.

Acknowledging that the scale and complexity of this issue requires a strategic and coordinated approach, we are establishing a new advisory group to review and further develop work underway. In the course of its work this group will consider all opportunities to strengthen Scotland's shared response to child sexual exploitation and abuse, including engagement of religious and other institutions with a role in safeguarding children from abuse.

Stop It now! Scotland have confirmed that they would still be keen to meet with the petitioner to learn from her experiences and to ensure that this informs their training and resources aimed at those safeguarding children in faith contexts. We will write to the petitioner to introduce her to Stop It Now! Scotland and to extend the offer of a meeting.

While Scotland has a unique child protection system and approaches in place which differ from those in England and in Wales in important ways, we also know that many of the findings and recommendations made by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse for England and Wales have relevance to the Scottish context and have therefore been taking forward work to consider where and how these are applicable to our system. For example, 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. This work is ongoing, and we will also need to take into account the recommendations made by the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry in future.

Thank you for your continued engagement on this important topic and for giving me the opportunity to set out some of the critical work we are doing to improve outcomes for, and minimise risk to, children.

I hope that the Committee and petitioner find the information above helpful.

Shona Robison MSP

## Petitioner submission of 15 October 2023

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

I have read the response from Deputy First Minister Shona Robison in full and I am happy that the Scottish Government recognises abuse is unacceptable. My worry is that the Jehovah's Witnesses will not engage with services like "Stop It Now" or any advisory groups or committees. I have no problem in meeting with the charity Stop It Now! however I don't know how this will help as I suspect that my former religion will not engage with such groups due to them having a problem with "worldly" institutions that are not Jehovah's Witnesses. They insist that anyone who is not a Jehovah's Witness are part of Satan's world.

Paragraph 18

<https://www.jw.org/en/library/books/True-Peace-and-Security-How-Can-You-Find-It/Survivors-Must-Be-No-Part-of-the-World/>

My experience has already been iterated to government officials through the committee with extensive documentation on how my former religion works. No one can truly stop or prevent abuse happening however what we can do is respond to it effectively so that the child is believed, heard and reparations being put in place for them. As I have said previously, we do not want Jehovah's Witnesses to be shut down, banned or anything of that nature. All we want is for them to call in the authorities when they become aware of abuse through the confessional arrangements they have.

These confessional arrangements are made up of 3 men, Elders within the congregation. In my experience, they held a meeting with me and I told them about the abuse I had been suffering at the hands of my father. Their response was to call upon him to confess within the confines of a kangaroo court with me present. There was no mention of them contacting the police to hand over an alleged criminal. We went home that night and suffice to say, I was scared about what my father would do because he is abusive.

A Jehovah's Witnesses parent company have previously highlighted that prevention of abuse is a parental responsibility. I take issue with that because it was my parent that was carrying out the abuse. In my view therefore, the leadership in my religious community should have informed the police on my behalf, because at that point - they had an alleged criminal in front of them. Instead, they kept quiet, urged me to keep quiet to spare the congregation of this dirty shame. When they did that, that gave my father the liberation to continue. They may have thought that he was repentant, however, he continued his crimes perpetuated on children by then harming another member of my family and another young girl within the congregation. The congregation are like family in my experience, called "Brothers and Sisters" within it and therefore, close connections are established.

The betrayal and hurt I experienced within the organisation are part of the childhood trauma I endured and continue to endure - which is why I must reiterate that it has to be law that the leadership within religious communities become mandated reporters. This will enable my former leaders to have to comply with the law and report any allegations of abuse to the authorities.

The Jehovah's Witnesses parent company, have said that they will comply with secular laws. Currently, it is not written within Scottish Law that they must inform the authorities when an allegation of abuse, rape, or any criminality towards children becomes apparent. When that criminal is the parent of a child, it is easy for that criminal to evade justice. Children are taught within the organisation to be "No part of the world" which helps abusers specifically as teachers within schools do not become aware of abuse because children are taught to distrust them and only trust the education being provided by Jehovah's Witnesses.

Paragraph 16

<https://www.jw.org/en/library/magazines/watchtower-study-may-2019/love-justice-face-of-wickedness/>