

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance

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 have 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 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