

PE2196/C: Address early sexual offending in Scotland

Petitioner written submission, 16 December 2025

Introduction

This submission responds to the Scottish Government's written response (PE2196/B, 14 November 2025) to Petition PE2196. While it outlines frameworks such as the Whole System Approach (WSA), Early and Effective Intervention (EEI), and the Harmful Sexual Behaviour Delivery Group, it does not demonstrate that these measures are preventing sexual harm in practice, nor does it adequately address several core elements of the petition.

In particular, the response:

- fails to address early non-contact sexual offending by adults as gateway behaviours;
- relies heavily on online resources without evidence of delivery or uptake;
- prioritises "least intrusive" intervention even where harm is ongoing or escalating; and
- relies on aggregate youth offending statistics without disaggregating sexual harm.

The examples below are illustrative rather than exhaustive and reflect documented patterns of minimisation, delayed intervention, and escalation, consistent with the SPICe briefing (18 November 2025).

1. Adult Non-Contact Sexual Offending

The Scottish Government response does not address early non-contact sexual offending by adults, despite these behaviours being widely recognised as gateway offences.

A recent case (STV News, September 2024) shows minimisation's risks: a man bailed after train flashing later raped and assaulted multiple women, including a court officer. Non-contact acts are warnings, yet responses remain reactive.

Online, non-contact sexual harm is also normalised. Reports shared with the petitioner describe adult dating platforms permitting sexually explicit imagery as profile photos, exposing users to sexual content without consent. This constitutes mass cyberflashing. Despite criminal law and the Online Safety Act, this behaviour persists, demonstrating failures in enforcement and platform accountability.

2. Youth Sexual Offending Masked by Aggregate Statistics

SPICe data shows 1,569 under-18s accused of sexual crimes in 2024, and 1,274 between January and September 2025, with over half involving rape, attempted rape, or serious sexual assault.

Based on the data available to date, this indicates an approximate 8% increase in the monthly average rate of the most serious youth sexual offences in 2025 compared with 2024. While 2025 figures currently cover fewer months, the comparison is made on a monthly-rate basis and suggests an upward trend in the most serious forms of sexual harm involving children. This contradicts assurances provided to the petitioner that youth offending is decreasing. Although overall youth offending is presented as falling, serious sexual offending by children appears to be increasing and is obscured within aggregate youth offending statistics that do not disaggregate sexual crime.

Although the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration reports an overall reduction in youth offending referrals, these figures are not broken down by offence type, meaning sexual offences cannot be separately assessed. The Scottish Government has confirmed it does not hold data on Early and Effective Intervention (EEI) completion rates or outcomes for sexual offences. Without such data, claims of effective early intervention cannot be substantiated.

England and Wales report an 81% increase in child-on-child sexual assaults between 2019 and 2022. Scotland's failure to publish comparable data prevents meaningful scrutiny.

3. Early and Effective Intervention (EEI)

EEI is described as a preventative framework, yet documented evidence shows it often fails to interrupt harmful behaviour.

In one documented case, a young person engaged in non-contact sexual offending following a history of concerning behaviour that had previously been dismissed. Despite agency awareness, behaviour escalated and safeguarding responses failed to prevent continued risk.

Where harmful behaviour continues after agency involvement, EEI is failing operationally. A system that allows repeat or escalating sexual harm following "early intervention" cannot reasonably be described as effective.

4. Minimisation in Schools

In one documented school safeguarding case, repeated peer-on-peer sexual touching and harassment were dismissed over an extended period. Safeguarding action only occurred after the victim physically defended herself, at which point the victim, not the perpetrator, was threatened with police involvement.

This response reverses safeguarding responsibility, deters reporting, and reinforces the message that sexual harm will be tolerated until it becomes disruptive.

5. "Just Block Him" Is Not Safeguarding

In one documented case, Police Scotland advised that a child should "just block" a boy who attempted online contact following prior sexual harm, despite known risk indicators and offline proximity.

This response shifted responsibility for managing sexual harm onto a child and reframed safeguarding as a digital inconvenience rather than a protective duty. Blocking does not stop offending behaviour, prevent escalation, or protect other potential victims.

6. Consent Education

Although sex education is described as statutory, delivery is determined locally, resulting in significant inconsistency. Evidence shared with the petitioner from secondary school children indicates that some pupils receive little or no meaningful consent education beyond early secondary years.

Consent education must be regular, direct, and discussion-based, particularly during adolescence. Online resources alone do not ensure delivery or impact.

7. Parental Accountability

This petition does not seek to criminalise children or punish parents. Harmful sexual behaviour is increasingly learned and normalised, shaped by online content, peer culture, and adult minimisation.

Parental accountability should be established in law as a support framework, including mandatory guidance, rapid access to advice, and joint education for parents and children. Persistent minimisation of harmful behaviour constitutes a safeguarding concern.

8. Youth Monitoring Register

The Government has rejected a youth monitoring register, citing existing mechanisms for serious cases. However, this leaves a gap for persistent non-contact or early offences not meeting conviction thresholds.

A confidential, non-criminal framework with safeguards, education, counselling, and review would enable early rehabilitation and bridge the gap between EEI and formal justice.

9. Scotland Remains Reactive

Scotland's approach to sexual harm remains predominantly reactive. Preventative measures are frequently implemented only after serious harm has occurred.

A clear example is the installation of CCTV in a public park only after a woman was raped, despite years of warnings and requests from the public and elected representatives. Action followed serious harm, not risk.

Conclusion

This petition calls for early, firm, and compassionate intervention.

The Scottish Government has confirmed that outcomes for EEI in sexual cases are not measured and that youth sexual offending data is not published. Aggregate statistics cannot demonstrate success where serious sexual harm remains hidden.

When early sexual offending, by adults or children, is minimised, escalation is not an accident; it is the predictable outcome. Prevention is a safeguarding duty, not an optional ambition.