

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 25 February 2026
5th Meeting, 2026 (Session 6)

PE2196: Address early sexual offending in Scotland

Introduction

Petitioner Leanne Kelly on behalf of Root The Rot

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to act on early sexual offending in young people and prevent future offending by:

- taking tougher action on gateway offences such as unsolicited sexual images and peer assaults
- educating young people about consent and online harms at school
- creating a culture of parental accountability
- introducing a youth monitoring register for offences committed by young people
- providing real support for victims of all sexual offences

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2196>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 14 January 2026](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government and the Lord Advocate.
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 Lord Advocate, the Scottish Government 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 response to the petition on 14 November 2025](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 540 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
February 2026

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2196: Address early sexual offending in Scotland

Petitioner

Leanne Kelly on behalf of Root The Rot

Date Lodged

16 October 2025

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to act on early sexual offending in young people and prevent future offending by:

- taking tougher action on gateway offences such as unsolicited sexual images and peer assaults
- educating young people about consent and online harms at school
- creating a culture of parental accountability
- introducing a youth monitoring register for offences committed by young people
- providing real support for victims of all sexual offences

Background information

Non-contact sexual offences are too often minimised as “just a photo” or “low level,” yet research shows they are gateways to serious abuse. Victims suffer lasting harm, silenced by dismissals that groom girls to accept harassment and boys to believe it’s normal. In England & Wales, child-on-child sexual assaults rose 81% in 3 years; Scotland lacks this data. My aim is to protect victims and rehabilitate offenders before behaviour escalates. Scotland must catch sexual offending early to protect victims and prevent escalation.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2196 on 14 January 2025

The Convener: PE2196, which was lodged by Leanne Kelly on behalf of the root the rot campaign, calls on the Scottish Parliament to act on early sexual offending in young people and to prevent future offending by taking tougher action on gateway offences such as unsolicited sexual images and peer assaults; educating young people at school about consent and online harms; creating a culture of parental accountability; introducing a youth monitoring register for offences committed by young people; and providing real support for victims of all sexual offences.

The Scottish Government's response to the petition sets out frameworks and approaches that aim to address the issues that are raised in the petition. The frameworks and approaches include the equally safe programme, which focuses on gender-based violence; bairn's hoose, which provides a child-centred approach to delivering justice care and recovery for children; mentors in violence prevention, which is a peer mentoring programme in secondary schools; and the Parent Club website, which provides online information to parents. The Scottish Government states that it has no intention of introducing a youth monitoring register.

The petitioner has provided two written submissions to the committee. She states that the petition addresses a critical gap in the response to early offending in Scotland, where non-contact offences are minimised, interventions are delayed and parental accountability is inconsistent. The petitioner's second written submission states that, although the Scottish Government has outlined relevant frameworks, it has not demonstrated that those measures prevent sexual harm in practice. The submission provides a number of illustrative examples for our consideration. The petitioner concludes by stating that, when early sexual offending by adults or children is minimised, escalation is not an accident but a predictable outcome.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

David Torrance: Time is short for the committee, but I would like to keep the petition open. In the light of the petitioner's on-going concerns, will the committee consider writing to the Scottish Government to ask in what ways it is assessing the effectiveness of the preventive measures that are currently in place and what more can be done to improve them?

Fergus Ewing: I very much endorse that approach, especially as the petitioner has outlined her pretty horrible experience. This is a relatively modern crime that has become a thing over the past few years, and I have increasing concern that, although it might not start off as too serious, it can very rapidly ruin people's lives and even cause them to take their own lives, as has been the case in some of the circumstances that I have read about. It is a newish and alarming development in the sad history of sexual offences, so I very much want to hear the Scottish Government's thoughts about how it can be tackled. We might also ask the Lord Advocate to offer advice about such matters.

The Convener: Do colleagues agree that we should take those actions forward?

CPPP/S6/26/5/18

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

Lord Advocate written submission, 10 February 2026

PE2196/D: Address early sexual offending in Scotland

Thank you for your letter of 29 January seeking my views on petition PE2196 and the Committee's interest in what further action could help address early sexual offending, particularly in relation to online behaviours by young people.

The petitioner raises important concerns about prevention, early intervention, parental involvement, the handling of "gateway" behaviours such as unsolicited sexual images and ensuring meaningful support for victims. Protecting people from sexual harm, especially children and young people, remains a priority for the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS). Early harmful sexual behaviour, whether online or offline, can have a profound and lasting impact on victims. Our response must support victims, promote accountability, and intervene early to reduce the risk of future offending.

I note that the Scottish Government has provided the Committee with a comprehensive written submission, dated 14 November 2025, setting out the current policy and operational framework. This covers the Whole System Approach, GIRFEC, Bairns' Hoose, Equally Safe, and the range of education and prevention initiatives relating to consent and online safety. COPFS works closely with partners operating within this landscape and supports ongoing efforts to strengthen prevention, improve education on consent and online harms, and ensure that victims receive trauma-informed support.

COPFS takes all sexual offending seriously, including cases involving young people. Online sexual offences, including the sending of unsolicited sexual images, coercing someone to view sexual content, or communicating indecently are already capable of prosecution under existing legislation. We recognise the concerns raised about early or "gateway" behaviours and treat such conduct seriously when it reaches the threshold of criminality.

For each case, COPFS ensures a consistent and proportionate response by carefully assessing the circumstances. This includes considering whether prosecution is necessary, or whether an alternative response, such as diversion or support aimed at changing behaviour, would better meet the needs of the child, protect victims, and reduce harm in the wider community.

While the development of wider policy measures lies with the Scottish Government and Parliament, COPFS will continue to contribute evidence and expertise to inform any future reforms.

I welcome the Committee's focus on the wider multi-agency context in which concerns about harmful sexual behaviour are identified and addressed. Prosecution alone cannot address the full range of harmful behaviours raised in the petition. Strengthening the broader system will help improve outcomes:

- **Strengthening prevention and education**

COPFS supports continued investment in clear, evidence-based education on consent, respectful relationships and online harms. Engagement with young people, schools, parents and carers is key to improving understanding both the risks and the consequences of harmful sexual behaviour.

- **Improving consistency of intervention**

Effective early intervention depends on strong collaboration between social work, police, health, education and the third sector. COPFS continues to support work to strengthen shared standards and decision-making pathways so concerns can be identified and addressed before behaviours escalate.

- **Enhancing victim support**

Victims must remain at the centre of the justice response. Trauma-informed practice, clear communication, and early access to specialist support are vital. COPFS is actively implementing its Trauma Informed Framework, launched in May 2023, which includes mandatory training for all staff.

COPFS is also proud to be working with partners in the development of Bairns Hoose in Scotland. As prosecutors, we fully support its child-centred approach to care, protection and justice. We recognise that children affected by crime may be profoundly impacted by their experiences, and we welcome this new model designed around their needs and views.

We are working with Scottish Government and other partners on implementation of the Victims, Witness and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act, which introduces reforms to improve the experience of victims and witnesses in the justice system, with a focus on cases involving sexual offending.

COPFS remains committed to working with partners across government, education, policing and the third sector to help address early sexual offending and ensure victims receive the support they need.

I am grateful to the Committee for its consideration of these important issues and would be happy to provide further assistance as required.

Yours sincerely,

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE DOROTHY BAIN KC
LORD ADVOCATE

Scottish Government written submission, 13 February 2026

PE2196/E: Address early sexual offending in Scotland

Thank you for your letter of 29 January 2026 on behalf of the Committee, in relation to Petition 2196 Address early sexual offending in Scotland, asking for information on what the Scottish Government is doing to assess the effectiveness of the preventative measures currently in place and what more can be done to address the issues set out in the petition.

The Scottish Government is committed to addressing early sexual offending in Scotland. Please find below additional information in response to your request.

Online Safety Taskforce – The Online Safety Taskforce was established in 2025 by the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, to provide a coordinated approach to the wide range of activity taking place across Scottish Government to tackle online harm to children and young people.

The Taskforce, which is made up of senior leaders from across Scottish Government, will be publishing their Action Plan before the election. Senior level participation will ensure that the Taskforce is flexible and able to adapt to the ever changing nature of the online environment. The Taskforce last met in January 2026, attended by Directors and two Ministers. Recognising the need for flexibility, the Action Plan and governing documents for the Taskforce will be reviewed every six months to calibrate our response to this fast moving issue.

Bairn's Hoose – The aim of the Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder phase is to test the implementation of the Bairns' Hoose Standards and capture and share learning from a range of geographical and operating contexts which will allow us to understand and address the complexity of the required systemic change.

During this phase, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and the Care Inspectorate have developed a Self-Assessment and Readiness Tool (StART), which supports local partnership improvement while providing a national baseline of progress against the Bairns' Hoose Standards. The analytical component of the programme during the Pathfinder phase brings together the analysis of two submissions of StART (in 2024 by Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) and in 2025 by Ipsos Scotland), analysis of funding reports and qualitative research with key professionals. A final research report developed by Ipsos Scotland will be published after the Scottish elections. The report will inform the development of the National Guidance. Findings from the analytical tasks have been shared regularly through our Insights series and Collaborative Learning events.

In parallel, Scottish Government analysts are working closely with partnerships and stakeholders to co-develop core Bairns' Hoose indicators which provide a national picture of Bairns' Hoose, track progress across the programme and support a future evaluation of the incremental national roll-out phase planned from summer 2027.

Sextortion Campaign by (Fearless (part of Crimestoppers) – Crimestoppers launched their impact report in June 2025 alongside a new resource to support education professionals discuss sextortion with secondary school pupils.

Campaign Evaluation

Since its initial launch on 18th November 2024, Fearless has seen very positive engagement with the campaign, including:

- Over 8.9 million social media impressions of the youth ads targeted at young people with 61,387 swipes to the sextortion youth landing page at Fearless.org to learn more
- Over 1.3 million social media impressions of the adult ads, with 6,399 clicks to the adult focused landing page at Fearless.org to learn more
- In addition to the significant social media reach, webinars were delivered to 399 youth professionals from Health, Education and Youth Work across Scotland. More than 95% of the attendees felt the campaign increased their knowledge of sextortion, with the majority going on to share their learning with colleagues and making plans to highlight to young people.

Since the campaign stakeholders have reported that:

- 85% have shared their learning with colleagues
- 55% have spoken to a young person in their personal life about sextortion
- 37% have spoken to the young people they work with about sextortion
- 22% have shared the social media assets on the personal and/or organisations accounts
- 8% selected 'other' activities incl. including the adult sextortion video in professional training sessions

Consultation on deepfake intimate images - The Scottish Government keeps relevant laws under review and is about to launch a consultation seeking views on new offences relating to the creation of deepfake intimate images. While existing Scots law can respond to the sharing of such deepfake intimate images, we are considering whether further laws are needed to deal with those individuals who create such images in the first place. The views offered will help inform decisions for the next administration in the next session of Parliament about whether new laws are needed and how best to provide for them. While new laws are only part of a necessary approach to help respond to the challenges of early sexual and sexualised behaviour, they are important especially where technology advances and provides new tools for people, including young people, to engage in such harmful conduct.

Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA) - The Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA) published [a report](#) based on data from 2024 – 2025 in June 2025. This report tells us that there was a 9.4% decrease in the number of children being reported to the Children's Reporter for an offence when

compared to data from 2023/24. In 2024/25, 2,447 children were referred for offending.

The overall number of referrals to the Children's Reporter in respect of offending decreased by 15.1%. The most common types of alleged offences were threatening or abusive behaviour, assault and shoplifting.

Police Scotland's own figures show that the total number of serious assaults by 11- to 18-year-olds has fallen by 27% over the last 5 years.

Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) – The MVP programme uses surveys as one way of assessing its impact in schools. The Impact Survey is completed annually in May. Last year's survey gathered 73 responses from MVP school leads across 19 local authorities, evaluating the impact of the MVP programme on senior mentors, younger mentees, and whole-school culture.

Staff reported in the survey that mentors and mentees show increased understanding of healthy and unhealthy relationships and a clearer recognition that violence includes more than just physical acts. Mentors demonstrate a deeper understanding of gender based violence and the harmful impact of stereotypes, while mentees show improved recognition that gender stereotyping is damaging.

In addition, staff reported that mentors are more likely to act when they become aware of abusive behaviour, and mentees demonstrate greater awareness of safe ways to help when they witness concerning behaviour.

Staff gave many examples of mentors safely intervening in bullying and acting as positive role models. They reported increased help seeking in younger pupils, a greater willingness to disclose concerns, and more peers supporting friends experiencing harm, including online.

Staff also report that there is a positive impact on school ethos and culture with:

- 71% of staff reporting that younger pupils are more likely to raise concerns or seek help following MVP delivery
- 88% agree MVP has helped build more positive relationships within the school community.
- 95% agree that younger pupils view gender-based violence as unacceptable following MVP engagement.

Staff also describe improved behaviour between pupils, increased involvement in gender equality action groups, and more open discussions about GBV as a result of the programme.

Parent Club - The information on Parent Club surrounding [online safety](#), [child sexual abuse](#) and [harmful sexual behaviour](#) is regularly reviewed and updated to ensure it remains relevant and helpful to parents and carers. Since our response to the petition in November 2025, two new emails have been planned to be sent to our database of 50,000 parents on Safer Internet Day (10 February) and new information

and advice around misogyny and misogynistic content online is going live on 16 February, to coincide with a Scotland-wide campaign.

Lucy Faithfull Foundation – We fund the Lucy Faithfull Foundation to provide increased awareness raising on the prevention of child sexual abuse, to professionals and the public, and to provide support services for:

- Families affected by the aftermath of arrest and criminal investigation of a family member for online sexual crimes involving children, and
- Children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour

- Enhancing Scotland's approach to child sexual abuse through membership and active participation on the National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Group

- Delivery of Harmful Sexual Behaviour Practitioner Forum in partnership with the Centre for Youth & Criminal Justice (CYCJ)

- Support for adults who are worried about their sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviours towards children through 1-1 sessions and groupwork programmes

Progress is monitored on an annual basis and is reported [2024/25 Year in Review](#)

I hope this further information is helpful.

Directorate for Children and Families

Petitioner written submission, 16 February 2026

PE2196/F: Address early sexual offending in Scotland

1. Context: Rising Sexual Offences and Early Intervention

Recent responses to this petition have emphasised overall reductions in youth offending. However, aggregate youth crime figures do not reflect the documented rise in sexual offending by under-18s. As previously highlighted, youth sexual offending increased by 8%. SPICe data shows a 36% rise in rapes and attempted rapes where the accused is under 18 between January and September 2025 compared with 2024.

While general youth offending may be decreasing, the most serious forms of sexual violence involving young people are increasing. When sexual offences are absorbed into broader crime reductions, the seriousness of this trend risks being obscured. Parents and communities may be reassured by overall figures without being aware that harmful sexual behaviour among young people is escalating.

Research referenced by organisations such as the NSPCC indicates that harmful sexual behaviour most commonly emerges in early to mid-adolescence, typically age 14. This represents a critical prevention window. If early behaviours are minimised or

inconsistently addressed, escalation into more serious offending should not surprise us.

This petition therefore concerns whether existing frameworks are consistently identifying and responding to early harmful sexual behaviour before it escalates.

2. Lived Experience of Minimisation

When I reported harmful sexual behaviour by a young person, my concerns were dismissed rather than addressed through safeguarding procedures. During contact with police, I was described as “snide,” reframing a safeguarding report as interpersonal conflict.

Parental responses reinforced this pattern. Rather than recognising the behaviour as harmful, it was repeatedly minimised, a known risk factor in escalation.

Our landlord confirmed there were no housing policies addressing online abuse between tenants, leaving my family living in fear given the close proximity involved. Social work similarly dismissed reports, reinforcing the message that intervention was unnecessary.

3. Escalation and Responsibility Shifts

The behaviour did not stop. The young person later received another charge. Following this escalation, this person attempted to contact my child online. Given their history, she feared she had been targeted with a sexual image, causing significant distress.

She followed safeguarding guidance: she did not engage and she reported the concern. Despite this, both police and social services dismissed her fear and my safeguarding concerns. Rather than addressing attempted contact by an individual with a known history of harmful sexual behaviour, the response focused on my daughter’s online presence. Police said she shouldn’t be on Snapchat, despite being of an appropriate age, and should simply block the individual. This shifted responsibility onto a child who had acted appropriately rather than addressing repeated boundary violations.

This approach contradicts safeguarding guidance, which is clear that responsibility lies with managing those who pose a risk, not restricting the lives of children who report concerns.

4. Institutional Non-Response

Social services dismissed the attempted online contact and no safeguarding action followed. An MSP sought clarification as to why no action was taken and was ignored for months. Eventually, I copied the MSP into an email to Social Services and we were informed that no further action was required, without explanation.

I submitted formal complaints to my local council regarding the handling of safeguarding concerns by social services. These complaints were ignored.

My child has since lost trust in both police and social services. When she later disclosed a sexual assault by the same person at a much younger age, no follow-up or support was offered. This reflects a pattern of early harmful behaviour that was never meaningfully addressed and which has had a lasting impact.

5. Public Experiences of Online Sexual Harm

Public responses to non-contact sexual harm consistently reflect minimisation. Many individuals describe not reporting incidents due to lack of confidence in police response. Others report being dismissed or blamed. As a result, victims frequently take responsibility for their own safety by blocking perpetrators or leaving platforms entirely. These responses show how failure to address so-called “low level” sexual offences shifts the burden of safety onto victims.

6. Public Narratives That Undermine Accountability

This culture of minimisation is reinforced by public narratives that deny or downplay sexual harm. An organisation known as Justice for Innocent Men in Scotland operates publicly and provides a platform where convicted offenders and their families deny guilt and frame reports as false allegations. Women and girls are frequently portrayed as false accusers. By providing a space where convicted offenders and families can meet others convicted of serious sexual offences against women and children, deny guilt, and minimise harm, such platforms normalise denial and retraumatise survivors.

7. Transparency and RSHP Education

Following a Freedom of Information request regarding Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP) provision, I received a generic response without detail on content.

Shortly afterwards, I received a text notification that my child would begin an RSHP block. Upon further enquiry, I was informed that RSHP is delivered annually.

While annual delivery confirms structured provision, serious sexual offences involving under-18s have risen significantly. Harmful sexual behaviour most commonly emerges in early adolescence. In that context, annual blocks of education, without transparent information about reinforcement throughout the year, raise reasonable questions about sufficiency.

Prevention requires clarity, consistency, and repetition proportionate to the scale of harm.

8. What This Petition Seeks to Address

This petition does not call for punitive responses to children. It calls for credible, consistent, and accountable early intervention.

Rising serious sexual offences among under-18s, alongside lived evidence of minimisation and inconsistent safeguarding responses, indicate a gap between policy intention and operational reality.

Without meaningful change in how early harmful sexual behaviour is recognised and addressed, serious sexual offending among young people will continue to rise and reflect systemic as well as individual failures.