

Information for partnerships: overview and scope

February 2026

Background

In December 2025, Scottish Ministers formally requested a national review into group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. The request outlined that this review is to be led by the Care Inspectorate and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS), working with Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE) and any other scrutiny bodies as appropriate.

The national review will be conducted under S.115 of the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 and the Public Services Reform (Joint Inspections) (Scotland) Regulations 2011. This enables inspectors to carry out a range of activities for the purposes of gathering evidence including reviewing records.

Why this review is important

Child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation are significant harms that have a devastating impact on survivors, their families and carers, and wider Scottish society. Group-based exploitation of children and young people is complex and requires careful consideration. This national review will gather evidence which will support Scottish Government Ministers' considerations of whether there should be a future public inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation.

What the review will look at

The review will consider how well public protection partners are working together to prevent, identify and act appropriately on instances of **group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation**. It will also assess Chief Officers' Groups' level of understanding of the current scale and nature of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation in Scotland. In order to focus on current practice, we will request and review evidence from the two years preceding the commencement of the review. Where the joint inspection team identify a need to request or follow-up information prior to the two-year time frame, a rationale will be provided to local partnerships.

- Acknowledging the varying legal definitions of a **child**, we will use the term in this context to encompass children and young people under the age of 18. This includes young people who are now over the age of 18 years but were under the age of 18 within two years preceding the commencement of the review. It is important to note that this definition encompasses all children and young people who meet the criteria, regardless of their current educational or training situation. This includes, for example, those in mainstream,

special or home education, post-school education and training, as well as those participating in community learning provision.

- During this review, we will use the term **child sexual abuse and exploitation** to include child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation according to their definitions outlined in the [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland \(updated 2023\)](#).
- We will use the terms **group-based** child sexual abuse and exploitation and **group-based** child criminal exploitation. By **group-based**, we mean where multiple [i.e. two or more] individuals take advantage of a power imbalance to coerce, manipulate, or deceive a child into sexual and/or criminal activity. We will include children and young people at risk of harm as well as those who have been subject to harm and this harm includes both in-person and online harm. We will explore the understanding of relevant terms with public protection partners during the review process.

Approach to the review

The national review is underpinned by the [quality framework for children and young people in need of care and protection \(November 2022\)](#). This framework is informed by the principles of the European Framework for Quality Management (EFQM) model which incorporates three tenets: **direction**: clarity of purpose and strategy to achieve aims; **execution**: implementation of the strategy through delivery; and **results**: what results have been achieved.

We will consider the following **key lines of enquiry**:

1. Strategic and operational leaders work together to ensure there are effective arrangements in place for the prevention, identification and response to incidences of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.
2. Effective processes are in place to support the prevention, identification and response to children and young people at risk of or subject to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.
3. Supports are helping to improve the safety and wellbeing of children and young people who have experienced or have been at risk of experiencing group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.

Through the key lines of enquiry, we will specifically address:

- Strategic leadership, governance and challenge
- Threat assessment, data, intelligence and information sharing
- Early identification, referral and access to protection
- Survivor protection, advocacy and support
- Investigation quality, disruption and prosecution
- Care experienced children and young people and other high-risk cohorts
- Workforce capability, culture and challenge
- Public protection interfaces

How we will carry out this review

We will notify all local Chief Officers' Groups of the national review on 9 February 2026 and aim to complete it within 18 months. The review will take a phased approach, with phase one lasting for six months. We will report on this by Summer 2026, in accordance with our standard reporting practice. Subsequently, we will complete phase two and report on our findings by Autumn 2027.

Phase one: assessment

During phase one, we will evaluate Chief Officers' Groups' understanding and oversight of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation. This includes:

- Chief Officers' Groups' understanding of the scale and nature of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.
- Local governance arrangements, guidance and processes for the prevention, identification and response to child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.
- Any data and other information about children's experiences of support and protection where they are at risk of or subject to child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation.

This will be achieved through 32 local partnership submissions via the 30 strategic Chief Officers' Groups, supported by a structured interview with representatives of the local Chief Officers' Group. The joint inspection team will robustly analyse the data and information received which will culminate in a report at the end of this phase.

Phase two: assurance

Phase two will be informed by phase one. It will involve a risk-based, flexible and targeted scrutiny approach to identify strengths and areas for improvement in the prevention, identification and response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation. We reserve the right to undertake activities to help us understand children's experiences taking into account the different local arrangements.

Phase three: improvement

Phase three will build on phases one and two. Scrutiny partners will identify areas for improvement and highlight where these are national or may require a national response to promote improvement in experiences and outcomes for children and young people. We will provide a national report for the Scottish Government to consider in terms of response and an improvement programme.

Governance and oversight arrangements

All four scrutiny bodies are independent from the Scottish Government and the services responsible for public protection in local areas throughout Scotland. The scrutiny bodies developed the approach and methodology for the review and will independently report joint findings and conclusions at the end of each phase.

Throughout the review, the joint inspection team will gather, analyse and evaluate evidence to ultimately reach conclusions. They will highlight what is working well and where further developments are needed to improve how well children and young people are being protected from group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and group-based child criminal exploitation. Inspectors will retain records in accordance with record retention policies from each of the four scrutiny bodies involved, adhering to data protection processes and the relevant legislation. If at any point, inspectors have any immediate cause for concern, these will be escalated immediately. We will update Scottish Ministers and other relevant parties on progress throughout the review process.

The national review will be overseen by the chief inspectors of the four scrutiny bodies through an executive level review group, providing leadership, quality assurance and consistency and linking to Scottish Government and other national bodies as required.