The Highland Council

Agenda Item	**11**
Report No	**HCW/29/26**

Committee: **Health, Social Care and Wellbeing**

Date: **11 November 2026**

Report Title: **Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Report**

Report By: **Assistant Chief Executive - People**

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 On 3 December 2025, the Scottish Government announced a National Review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation, to determine the nature and scale of the issue in Scotland. This review is being led by the Care Inspectorate and includes all 30 Public Protection Chief Officer Groups in Scotland.

1.2 On 25 February 2026, the Scottish Government further announced a Statutory Public Inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation. This will be chaired by Professor Alexis Jay and will examine how public agencies detect and act upon risks of exploitation. The Public Inquiry will focus on the prevalence of abuse where two or more individuals coerce, manipulate, or deceive a child. It will also ensure survivors have an opportunity to share their experiences.

1.3 Phase 1 of the National Review concluded in June 2026. Feedback was provided to all Public Protection Committees in September 2026.

2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

i. **Note** the National Report from Phase 1
ii. **Note** the feedback provided to Highland following Phase 1 completion
iii. **Note** that Phase 2 of the National Review has been paused in line with national activity in relation to group-based exploitation

3 Implications

3.1 **Resource** – There are no resource implications noted at this time.

3.2 **Legal** – Statutory bodies have a legal requirement to contribute to national Inquiries. Highland's responses were co-ordinated by Donna Munro, Lead Officer for the Child Protection Committee on behalf of the Highland Public Protection Chief Officer Group (COG).

3.3 **Risk** – Any findings and actions which stem from this national review will be published at a later date.

3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – No identified implications.

3.5 **Gaelic** – No identified implications.

4 Impacts

4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.

4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.

4.3 This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

5 National Review of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) – Phase 1

5.1 Phase 1 (Assessment) of the National Review consisted of three stages:

Step 1: Highland Data Return submitted by 17 April 2026
Step 2: Highland Information Return submitted by 8 May 2026
Step 3: Structured Interview with representatives of Highland Public Protection Chief Officer Group held on 11 June 2026

5.2 All returns were agreed by the Highland Public Protection Chief Officer Group prior to submission to the Care Inspectorate.

5.3 The Care Inspectorate published the Phase 1 national report on 7th September 2026. A full copy of the report can be accessed on the Care Inspectorate website: National Review of Group-Based Child Sexual Abuse | Care Inspectorate

5.4 The review focussed on three key lines of enquiry:

1. Chief Officers' understanding of the scale and nature of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation.

2. Local governance arrangements, guidance and processes for the prevention, identification and response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation.

3. Available data and information on children and young people's experience of support if they were at risk of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation or child criminal exploitation.

5.5 **National Review Findings**

The review found that while Scotland has strong child protection foundations, there is insufficient intelligence, data and assurance to understand the full prevalence and impact of group-based child sexual abuse and child criminal exploitation.

Key Findings

- There was a lack of accurate national data related to group-based harms. While some partnerships collected local data, they were not required to collect or report data on group-based harms. This, together with the absence of a definition, limited the chief officers' groups' ability to report on the scale, prevalence, characteristics and threat of group-based harm. As a result, there is no reliable picture across Scotland of these types of harms.
- Most partnerships identified a range of quality assurance mechanisms that helped them to demonstrate the effectiveness of public protection arrangements.
- Chief Officers' groups were confident in their public protection arrangements.
- Inter-agency referral discussions (IRDs) helped partners to effectively share child protection information and plan joint actions to protect children and young people.
- Police Scotland's Partners Intelligence Portal (PIP) enables secure submission of key information by partnership agencies, which contributes to a broader intelligence picture on child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation. (**note**: there is not national agreement regarding this being used)
- There was consensus across partnerships that children and young people impacted by criminal exploitation required protection and trauma-informed care and support.
- National initiatives such as Bairns' Hoose, Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) and trauma-informed practice were helping partners to prioritise the experiences and views of children and young people. These approaches helped partners demonstrate effective practice and support service improvement.
- Chief officers were confident that education services had established policies, procedures, guidance and learning to identify children and young people at increased risk of significant harm.
- Contextual safeguarding, and similar approaches, were valued and helped staff to address harm beyond the family home, but implementation across Scotland was variable.
- There is variable strategic oversight, intelligence sharing and disruption activity.
- There are missed opportunities for early identification and intervention.

Implications for Local Partnerships

- Strengthen governance and assurance arrangements.
- Improve local intelligence and data collection.
- Embed contextual safeguarding approaches.
- Review workforce development and exploitation training.

The review highlights the need for stronger national and local arrangements to identify, prevent and disrupt child exploitation and provide greater assurance to Chief Officers and Child Protection Committees.

5.6 **Summary of Findings – Highland Specific**

On 3rd September 2026, Highland Chief Officers Group received Care Inspectorate feedback following Phase 1 of the national review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE).

Overall Assessment
The review found that the Highland partnership has strong awareness and oversight of group-based exploitation risks, including organised crime groups and county lines activity. The partnership was seen as prioritising the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, particularly those who are care experienced or otherwise vulnerable.

Key Strengths Identified

Public Protection
- Dedicated child sexual abuse and exploitation services are in place.
- A multi-agency referral pathway supports identification and intervention.
- The partnership gathers intelligence on emerging trends and patterns of exploitation.

Leadership and Governance
- CSAE and CCE are prioritised within strategic child protection arrangements.
- Clear governance structures exist.
- Annual data reporting supports oversight and accountability.

Information Sharing and Intelligence
- Effective information-sharing arrangements exist across agencies.
- The partners' intelligence portal is used by statutory and third-sector partners (**note**: this is not formally agreed)
- Contextual safeguarding approaches contribute to assessing threats and risks.

Early Identification and Protection
- The PLACE (Prevent, Learning and Awareness of Child Exploitation) referral mechanism provides a coordinated multi-agency response.
- Children affected by group-based harm have access to specialist services.

Support for Victims and Families
- Targeted services help children, young people and families understand and respond to exploitation risks.
- Evidence of improved outcomes was reported.
- A new advocacy service for young people affected by substance misuse may strengthen responses to drug-related criminal exploitation.

Investigation and Disruption
- The PLACE process supports identification and disruption of perpetrators.
- Police and partners work together to share intelligence and protect children at risk.

Support for High-Risk Groups

- Strong confidence was expressed in staff vigilance and safeguarding responses for care-experienced young people.
- Targeted care and support services contribute to positive outcomes.

Workforce Development

- Widespread training on child exploitation, including online harms, is available.
- Relational practice and supervision support a positive safeguarding culture.
- High referral rates through PLACE suggest staff are recognising and responding appropriately to concerns.

Areas for Improvement

The review identified a small number of areas where further development would strengthen practice:

- Develop a clear local definition of group-based CSAE and CCE.
- Improve clarity within local definitions to better distinguish between sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation.
- Further strengthen responses for children and young people with additional support needs, who may be at heightened risk.

Conclusion

The feedback received was positive. Inspectors concluded that Highland has strong governance, effective multi-agency working, good intelligence-sharing arrangements, well-established specialist services, and a trained workforce contributing to the protection of children and young people from exploitation. The main recommendations relate to refining definitions and strengthening support for young people with additional support needs.

6.0 Next Steps

6.1 Phase 2 of the National Review has been paused due to the level of national activity in relation to group-based exploitation. Highland has responded to the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (Phase 11) as well as the National Review.

6.2 Highland Child Protection Committee is currently developing further contextual safeguarding approaches to support children and young people affected by extra-familial harm, including those who are criminally and/or sexually exploited. This work will report to the Highland Public Protection Chief Officer Group.

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Background Papers:	N/A
Appendices:	N/A