



Let's change the Act: MSP briefing on abortion law reform in Scotland

May 2026

1. Introduction

Let's change the Act is a [coalition of 55 organisations and over 1000 individual members](#) calling for the decriminalisation of abortion in Scotland and modernisation of the law. Our members include medical bodies, abortion and reproductive health specialists, women's and human rights organisations, community groups, legal experts and trade unionists.

We urge MSPs to support a new framework for abortion care in Scotland that is based on international health standards and is compliant with human rights. Our calls for Scottish Government are to:

- Introduce legislation that decriminalises abortion in Scotland for all parties
- Replace the Abortion Act 1967 with a modernised, health-based framework for abortion care.

Abortion law reform is overdue because:

- **The legal framework prevents modern medical and healthcare practice**
- **Scotland is not meeting international health and human rights standards**
- **Abortion care directly impacts gender equality and women's rights**
- **Marginalised groups and vulnerable individuals are most at risk of harm**
- **Criminalisation creates abortion stigma and barriers to access**
- **Scotland is the only part of the UK where women can still be criminalised for ending a pregnancy**

For too long women in Scotland have had to settle for a system of abortion law that does not put their needs, health and rights first. [Abortion is routine healthcare, accessed by around one in three women in Scotland](#) in their lifetime. Yet it is treated uniquely under the law without medical justification. We deserve a modern abortion framework that is in line with best-practice healthcare standards, upholds human rights for all those that need abortion and safeguards against harmful police investigations and prosecutions.

Northern Ireland acted to decriminalise abortion in 2019. In 2025, MPs voted to ensure that women in England and Wales women cannot be prosecuted for ending their own

pregnancy. It is now only women in Scotland who are not protected against criminalisation, meaning our abortion framework is the least compatible with international health guidance.

Support for abortion rights in Scotland is clear. Repeat polling shows the [overwhelming majority of the Scottish public \(83-97%\) agree that “women should have the right to an abortion”](#), and [71% of Britons public support decriminalisation](#).

2. Background: The Scottish Government Abortion Law Review report

In 2024, the Scottish Government commissioned a review of abortion law in Scotland with the remit to “**ensure that abortion services are first and foremost a healthcare matter**”. Over the course of a year, a group of independent experts comprehensively examined global evidence on legal reform and submissions from a wide range of stakeholders. It concluded that abortion should be removed from the criminal justice system and made a [series of recommendations](#) to improve compatibility with best-practice health standards.

As session 7 of the Parliament begins, it is vital that this work is taken forward. The rise of anti-rights movements, internationally and in Scotland, poses a profound threat to the right to abortion healthcare. The overturning of *Roe v Wade*, the constitutional right to abortion in the United States, has demonstrated how [organised and well-funded anti-rights movements](#) can reverse abortion access to devastating effect. There is growing evidence indicating that these same anti-democratic groups have been [rapidly expanding funding across the UK for anti-abortion and anti-rights attacks](#).

We are asking that this Scottish Parliament acts decisively to strengthen our abortion care framework against such threats and to safeguard women’s health for future generations.

3. What is the issue?

The legal framework for abortion in Scotland is a patchwork of laws that [stem from as far back as the 17th century](#). In practice, abortion is governed primarily by the Abortion Act 1967, which dictates how, where and when abortion care can be accessed. Outwith the parameters of the Act, [abortion can be criminalised in Scotland](#). Control over abortion law was devolved to the Scottish Parliament in 2016.

The law is in urgent need of modernisation

When the Abortion Act was passed in 1967, women experienced greater inequality with men. Only 4.5% of MPs were women and neither the Equal Pay Act nor Sex Discrimination Act had been introduced. The 1967 Act is therefore out of step with women’s rights and the reality of women’s lives in modern Scotland, where abortion is routine healthcare.

Healthcare standards have also evolved significantly since the 1960s, with advances in medicine transforming how abortion is delivered. [Restrictions set out in the Abortion Act](#),

such as the requirement for two doctors to approve an abortion, now block the use of clinical best practice and act as a drag on NHS services under extreme pressure.

Younger women and girls, disabled women, trans and non-binary people, and those in remote and rural areas are among those most likely to be harmed by the law's failure to keep pace with advances in medicine, and evolving human rights and social standards.

Women in Scotland are not protected from criminalisation like in all other parts of the UK

Scotland is the only part of the UK where women and pregnant people [can still be criminalised for ending their own pregnancy](#). In April 2026, women were removed from the criminal law related to abortion in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, abortion was decriminalised and made available on request during the first trimester in 2019.

Scotland is not meeting international human rights standards

With a few high-profile exceptions, countries across the world are [increasingly modernising their legal frameworks on abortion](#). Laws in Scotland trail behind more progressive regulatory frameworks in most other European countries. [Britain is one of only six \(out of 50\) European countries where abortion is not available on request](#).

Scotland has not kept pace with international human rights standards. The United Nations and other bodies have made clear that access to safe, legal and timely [abortion is a fundamental human right](#) that must not be regulated using criminal law and penalties.

Stigma persists

Abortion is treated differently under the law than other healthcare, without medical justification. This is despite being one of the most routinely used and safe forms of health procedure, [accessed by one in three women in Britain their lifetimes](#). In all other fields of healthcare, professional health bodies shape guidance and regulation based on evolving clinical standards and best practice, rather than complex and criminal laws from a bygone era. This creates harmful stigma around an essential health service.

Support for modernised abortion law is widespread

The Scottish public overwhelmingly support abortion rights. In April 2026, repeat polling on abortion by YouGov showed that [92% agree women should have the right to an abortion](#).

The [World Health Organisation recommends full decriminalisation of abortion](#), due to impacts on quality abortion care, equality and human rights. The WHO also advocates against policies that restrict access to abortion, such as the UK's 'two doctors' requirement.

[Decriminalisation is supported by all relevant professional medical and healthcare bodies in the UK, UN human rights treaty bodies, trades unions and equalities advocates](#).

4. What is the impact?

Under the current law women and pregnant people in Scotland have no legal right to end a pregnancy. That decision ultimately sits with doctors, two of whom must authorise the request for an abortion. This layers unnecessary complexity onto service delivery and creates delays and barriers for women, particularly in rural areas. Young women, women from Black and minority ethnic communities, disabled women, LGBT people, migrant women and other marginalised groups are likely to be particularly disadvantaged by the ‘two doctors’ rule’ and other restrictions set out in the Abortion Act. Women on low incomes are disproportionately impacted by flaws in the abortion framework, with the termination rate in Scotland’s most deprived areas double that of the least deprived areas.

The sharp increase in prosecutions for abortion related offences in England over recent years has led to reform of the law. Some women investigated by police were found to have suffered miscarriage or stillbirth and others experienced devastating impacts on their long-term health and circumstances. However, the threat of criminalisation in Scotland and the possibility of a similar spike in police investigations is ongoing. This perpetuates stigma, creates a ‘chilling effect’ for clinicians providing abortions, and may create barriers to access. High profile media cases have led to uncertainty for health staff and patients, with clinicians describing a ‘climate of fear’ due to the prospect of criminal investigations in the workplace.

5. What has been done so far?

The Abortion Law Review Expert Group comprehensively reviewed the law and sought evidence from a wide range of sources. The group’s findings and recommendations were published in November 2025.

In line with the group’s remit to make **“abortion services first and foremost a healthcare matter”**, membership included the Women’s Health Champion, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the College of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare and the Scottish Abortion Care Providers network. The group also comprised legal expertise and civil society representation. The review engaged with and received submissions from groups that do not support abortion.

Let’s change the Act welcomes the Expert Group report and the changes it recommends. We support full decriminalisation of abortion and the replacement of the Abortion Act 1967 with a modern, health-based framework for care. The proposed changes would have a significant impact on abortion stigma and the rights, dignity, and autonomy of women, girls and all those who can become pregnant across Scotland.

6. The solution

MSPs must now take action and bring Scotland’s abortion law up to speed with other parts of the UK and Europe. At present, **Britain is an outlier in Europe, as one of only six (from**

50) countries that does not allow abortion on request and Scotland is the **only part of the UK where women can be criminalised for ending their own pregnancy.**

We are calling for MSPs to support and prioritise legislation in the Scottish Parliament that:

1. Decriminalises abortion in Scotland for all parties – those having, providing or assisting with an abortion
2. Disapplies the Abortion Act 1967 in Scotland
3. Establishes a new framework for abortion care in Scotland that is human rights compliant and based on international health standards

About Let’s change the Act

Let’s change the Act is a **coalition of 55 organisations and over 1000 individual members.** calling for the decriminalisation of abortion in Scotland and modernisation of the law. We call for the full decriminalisation of abortion, alongside a modernised health-based system of abortion care in line with international health and human rights standards.

Our members include the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), the Royal College of Midwives (RCM), the College of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare, Engender, Young Women’s Movement, Abortion Rights Scotland, Back Off Scotland, Humanist Society Scotland, Scottish Women’s Aid, Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC), Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, Equality Network, Inclusion Scotland, Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (CRER), and Amnesty International UK.

Please contact us at info@letschangetheact.co.uk or visit [our website](#) for further details.

