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Rt Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State for children, Schools and Families
Department for Children, Schools and Families
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

23rd July, 2008

Dear Minister,

The Secure Accommodation Network (S.A.N.) represents the remaining secure children's homes in England and Wales. Over the past five years the number of these homes has reduced to just twenty and all the indicators are that the number will continue to fall if decisive action is not taken to reverse this trend.

The Secure Accommodation Network believes that where it is necessary to secure children they should be placed in small units where their social, educational, emotional and health needs are best met. Secure children's homes, in our opinion, offer this option and a real chance to not only confront the reasons for their placement but to bring about positive change both to improve their life opportunities and to return them to the community successfully.

Secure children's homes are subject to rigorous inspection by Ofsted, have to be licensed by the Department for Children Schools and Families and work within a tight regulatory framework.

Despite the high quality of the care provided by secure children's homes, the number of welfare referrals has dropped significantly suggesting that other less regulated forms of care are being used, often at greater cost and which in S.A.N.'s view do not meet or enhance the life chances of the children placed there.

Whilst the role of the Youth Justice Board in purchasing secure homes beds has raised standards in some areas, it has also skewed the market in their favour. In all likelihood the next round of tendering for beds by the Board, due to commence shortly for Contracts to begin in July 2009, will result in further closures. This is because they have reduced the beds they require from 235 to around 207 and have adopted, in our view, a market orientated view to purchasing based on costs and the size of units rather than focus on the children to be cared for, in for example the distance they are placed from home or the setting in which vulnerable teenagers are placed.

In this climate S.A.N. believes that more Local Authorities will join the list of those who have already closed secure homes. The 1990's saw a huge financial investment in secure care, the first decade of 2000 will see a growing list of homes closed. This will result in the loss of an integral part of resources for children in crisis for whom, at that time in their lives, living safely in the community is not considered an option.

The Secure Accommodation Network has been campaigning relentlessly in recent years in the face of this continuing loss of secure units. We are a small self funded organisation trying hard to raise the profile of an area of work which attract few plaudits and which too often is viewed, wrongly in our view, negatively. We work hard not only to represent the work we do but to develop and share good practice driving up the standards of our work.

I am writing to you on behalf of S.A.N. to make you aware of the current position of secure children's homes which I believe to be a crisis. I am asking for your help in both raising the issue where you can and bringing what influence you can to bear on policy and decision makers. In the context of the Every Child Matters Agenda, there are those for whom secure children's homes can make a vital difference and indeed both a life saving and enhancing difference. I am not aware of any secure unit that has closed re-opening. What is lost is not just a building but an opportunity and the experience and commitment of staff working in a challenging environment where they want to make a difference.

In 2001 there were over thirty secure homes, in 2008 there are just twenty. How many will there be in 2010? Can we afford to stand by and see this important cog in the continuum of care be diminished further? What will be left in its place? More importantly what can be done to support this important area of child care provision. If children have to be 'locked up' does it not make sense to do in a child centred, child focussed environment with high levels of staffing and where their social, emotional, health and educational needs are met?

With best wishes.

Yours faithfully,

Roy Walker,
Manager, Sutton Place
Chair – S.A.N.