



Standing Committee for Youth Justice

Rt Hon David Hanson MP and Rt Hon Beverley Hughes MP  
C/o Joint Youth Justice Unit  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT

12 May 2009

Dear Ministers,

**RE: Decision not to renew contracts of three secure children's homes**

I am writing to you on behalf of the Standing Committee for Youth Justice (SCYJ) to register concerns about what has been happening to secure children's homes (SCHs) with the recent announcements, by the Youth Justice Board (YJB), that contracts with Orchard Lodge in Annerley, South London; Sutton Place in Hull; Kyoel House in Northumberland, and the Atkinson Unit in Exeter are not being renewed.

Secure children's homes are widely regarded as providing the very best of care and safeguarding for the minority of children requiring a restriction of liberty, whether on criminal justice or welfare grounds. This has been evidenced quite recently by Ofsted inspections, which consistently confirm the high standard of work that many secure children's homes engage in, often with better staffing levels, expertise and a strong commitment to children's welfare than can be found in other custodial options available. This evidence is supported by the recent report of the Children's Rights Director for England: *"Life in Secure Care" (Ofsted, 2009)*, where many young people viewed living in secure children's homes as a chance to sort themselves out:

*"You're safe and can't get into trouble"*

*"Ain't gonna get no better than this"*

In criminal proceedings, custody for children continues to be used unnecessarily in many cases, contrary to government policy that it should be a 'last resort'. However, in the small number of cases where restriction of liberty is genuinely needed for children, then it is the secure children's home model that should be used. What is most unthinking about this latest round of decommissioning is that we know that the two secure children's homes now facing closure (Orchard Lodge and Sutton Place) are amongst the very best in the country. In addition, the closure of these two secure children's homes threatens to reduce even further what should be regarded as an essential national resource.

We are extremely concerned that the decommissioning announcement coincides with the news that Oakhill Secure Training Centre is to increase its capacity, following the need for a reduction in capacity due to unsafe conditions there including what HM Chief Inspector of Prisons termed 'staggering levels of use of force by staff'. The Ofsted report giving rise to the restoration of capacity gave Oakhill only a 'satisfactory' rating. We continue to have serious concerns about the regime in Secure Training Centres and in particular their ability to care for children and young people who are, or should be, assessed as 'vulnerable'. Further, the closure of Orchard Lodge will leave the London area without a SCH meaning that vulnerable children will have to be accommodated as far away as Bristol, Southampton or – if in Oakhill – Milton Keynes.

What would appear to have been overlooked in this latest round of commissioning is not only the reduced options in meeting the custodial needs of particularly vulnerable young people within the three affected regions, but also those of children in need of secure care on welfare grounds as envisaged through the provisions of Section 25 of the Children Act 1989. The effect of its latest commissioning, combined with the failure of an effective national strategy for the use of secure children's homes, will lead to limited secure provision for very complex and highly vulnerable young people.

We can already predict that some of our most vulnerable young people from within these regions will be exposed to even greater risks of harm. If, as the government has been right to emphasise, that keeping children safe is "everybody's business" then it should start by intervening to encourage the YJB to work together effectively with local authority providers of secure children's homes to address what is all too often preventable serious harm to, or even deaths of, children.

We would further encourage government, to think again before letting these three exemplars fall to the vagaries of 'local' demand, merely for the want of a rationale and coherent national policy on the need for secure welfare beds in this country.

Yours sincerely,



**Sally Ireland**

**Chair**

**Standing Committee for Youth Justice**

The **Standing Committee for Youth Justice (SCYJ)** is a membership body which:

- Provides a forum for organisations, primarily in the non-statutory sector, working to promote the welfare of children who become engaged in the youth justice system; and
- Advocates a child-focussed youth justice system that promotes the integration of such children into society and thus serves the best interests of the children themselves and the community at large.

*Members are: Action for Children, Association of YOT Managers, Barnardo's, Catch22, Children Law UK/TACT, The Children's Society, Children's Rights Alliance for England, Council for Disabled Children, The Howard League for Penal Reform, Just for Kids Law, JUSTICE, Nacro, National Youth Agency (NYA), National*

*Association for Youth Justice (NAYJ), NCB, NSPCC, The Prince's Trust, Prison Reform Trust, Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, Secure Accommodation Network, SOVA and VOICE.*

*The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views of all member organisations.*