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Frances Done
Chair
Youth Justice Board for England and Wales
1 Drummond Gate
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3rd February 2012

Dear Frances

Re: Secure children's homes contract extensions

It was with regret that I received your letter of 1st February to inform the Howard League that the decision had been taken to impose yet further cuts to the number of beds that will be available to vulnerable children in the children's homes sector.

Secure children's homes provide the highest standards of care and rehabilitation for the few children in trouble with the law who have to be detained in custody. Although the recent reduction in the number of children in custody is to be welcomed, this should have been used as an opportunity to close failing prisons, which cannot meet children's needs. It is unacceptable that nearly 2,000 children are to be left languishing in young offender institutions and secure training centres.

We are not aware of any evidence of why secure children's homes have been subjected to a decade of decommissioning – these decisions have been made in isolation of a needs analysis of children in the criminal justice system, population projections, or evidence of outcomes of 'what works' in addressing the underlying needs of children in trouble with the law. At the various meetings as part of the stakeholder consultation of the future of the secure estate there has been firm opposition to the suggestion that any beds in secure children's homes should be closed. The fact that this has been ignored suggests that these consultation events were little other than a propaganda exercise.

Given the secure training centres' restrictive ethos and dismal history since they were first opened and in light of a recent high court judgment which found that there was a 'widespread unlawful use of restraint' against children in these child jails for at least a decade, why is the opportunity not being taken to close these centres? Medway STC's contract comes to an end at the beginning of next year and I urge you to take immediate action to end the YJB's contract with that establishment to ensure it is closed down.

The fundamental purpose of a secure environment is that it keeps children safe. It is hard to understand how the decision made to decommission beds in secure children's homes was come to in light of the deaths of two children in young offender institutions in the week prior to the announcement. The YJB has given mature leadership about how to deal with children in trouble with the law and this makes the recent decision all the more disappointing.

The recent Parliamentary debate in the House of Lords highlighted that there is widespread concern about the reduction in beds available in the secure children's homes. I know that children's charities and voluntary organisations also deplore this decision. There is likely to be Parliamentary pressure to reconsider this decision and the Howard League is looking at possible legal remedies when we represent the best interests of our clients.

I would urge you to reconsider this decision as it is likely to make some of the children's homes financially unviable in the longer term and lead to their closure. The closure of some units and the withdrawal of funding is leading to atrophy in the provision of safe places for vulnerable and needy children with the result that they will be placed in prisons or commercial jails.

Yours Sincerely

Frances