



Sir Robert Neill MP
Chair
Justice Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

16 November 2021

Dear Sir Bob

YOUTH CUSTODY

Thank you for your letter of 27 October to the Secretary of State setting out the Committee's concerns about the youth custodial estate. He and I share your concerns about the estate's performance overall, and in Secure Training Centres (STCs), in particular. I can assure you that we are determined to grip this issue as a matter of priority. Your letter raises a number of important issues, which I will address in turn.

The future of Rainsbrook STC

As you know, Rainsbrook was decanted in July 2021 following concerns about the welfare of children there. Since then, officials have been exploring options for the future of the site. However, there are a number of complex operational, financial and commercial issues that have required serious consideration since the Secretary of State and I took up our posts in September. As such, it is not currently possible to set out the details for Rainsbrook, but, we will, of course, share our plans with you as soon as possible.

Placement of girls from Rainsbrook STC

You raised the specific issue of moving girls out of Rainsbrook. For each girl, a comprehensive assessment of needs and risks was undertaken and a very small number were placed in the Keppel Unit at Wetherby Young Offenders Institution (YOI). The Keppel Unit is a self-contained unit for children with complex and challenging needs who pose significant risks or require specialist support from the unit's multidisciplinary team. Girls were placed in the Unit only after professionals concluded that their needs and risk could be met there.

Recognising the need to provide individualised care and respond to the needs of girls while they are accommodated at the Keppel Unit, the unit was reconfigured prior to the arrival of girls transferring from Rainsbrook. A full refurbishment of one of Keppel's accommodation units is in progress to create a more therapeutic environment, including barless windows, new doors, refurbished in-room showers and dedicated space for therapeutic work.

A member of the senior management team at Wetherby YOI, with experience of working in the women's estate, has been appointed to oversee this work, along with a dedicated team to look after girls. Informal feedback from the girls at Keppel has been positive. HM Inspectorate of Prisons recently visited Keppel as part of a wider review of provision for girls and the report from that review will be used to inform further development of the service offered to girls placed at the Unit.

I am also reviewing whether and how our rules and operational guidance should change to reflect the fact that these children would normally be accommodated in an STC rather than a YOI.

Oakhill STC

Recent performance at Oakhill has been unacceptable. Within days of taking up my post, on 22 September, I met the provider, G4S, to express my concerns in the clearest possible terms.

The Youth Custody Service (YCS) has been monitoring performance closely and provided additional support to G4S. The YCS has also provided robust oversight and challenge and issued several "rectification notices" to require G4S to make improvements in critical areas of provision.

In September, in light of concerns about G4S's staffing levels and management oversight, the then Secretary of State commissioned a short monitoring visit by inspectors (Ofsted, HMI Prisons and Care Quality Commission) to provide an independent view on conditions at Oakhill. At that point, the inspectorates did not conclude that an Urgent Notification (UN) was warranted.

However, the inspectorates undertook a further visit on 4-8 October 2021, which led to the UN on 14 October. You will have received a copy of the action plan drawn up in response to the UN, which is designed to swiftly stabilise and improve performance at Oakhill. The YCS will also put an experienced public sector prison governor in place to work alongside and support the director at Oakhill. This experienced senior leader will direct a team of YCS staff on-site who will test G4S's progress and will be responsible for driving G4S to deliver on their responsibilities within the UN action plan.

We have agreed to a temporary reduction in the maximum number of children that can be accommodated at Oakhill from 80 to 40 and there are currently 33 children at the site. The children are now spending, on average, 12 hours out of their room each day. While this is a significant improvement, we continue to monitor the position closely. The YCS is also working with G4S, the local authority and police to review, monitor and improve safeguarding arrangements at Oakhill. An independent full review of safeguarding is being commissioned from an experienced Director of Children's Services or equivalent.

Future of Secure Training Centres

As you would expect, in light of the experiences at Medway, Rainsbrook and Oakhill STCs, the Secretary of State and I are looking closely at the wider question of what role should STCs play in the youth estate. This raises a number of complex commercial, financial, operational and policy considerations. As soon as we are in a position to provide the committee with a detailed update, we will do so.

I look forward to discussing these important issues with the committee when we meet on 24 November.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Victoria Atkins". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Victoria" and the surname "Atkins" clearly legible.

VICTORIA ATKINS MP