PAROLE BOARD DECISIONS REVIEW

Thank you for your letter of 9 February seeking further information on how we plan to draw the views and experience of victims, practitioners and international best practice into our review of the law, policy and procedure relating to parole decisions.

I am pleased to hear the Committee found the evidence session on the transparency of Parole Board decisions and victim contact arrangements helpful. As you will be aware, the review announced in my statement of 9 January remains a priority for me and for Government and, despite the expansion of the terms of reference, I intend to complete the review before Easter.

I have asked the Victims’ Commissioner to lead on engagement with victims and my department has been working closely with her office. On 14 February the Victims’ Commissioner launched an online questionnaire to allow victims to input on all of the areas under consideration in the review. The questionnaire is open until 14 March and is available at the following link: https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/VictimContactSchemeSurvey/.

The questionnaire is targeted at victims who are eligible for the Victim Contact Scheme (VCS), those who were referred onto the discretionary scheme and for any victims who would like to provide views on transparency. The questions asked depend on which group a victim identifies with. We are working closely with the Victims’ Commissioner to promote participation in the survey to enable us to gain as much insight as possible.

The questionnaire is being supplemented with focused interviews with victims. The Victims’ Commissioner will report to the department on the key themes from their engagement to inform the overall review. Officials are also meeting victim groups such as Victim Support and Rape Crisis and have written to members of the Victims Panel, chaired by Phillip Lee, to seek their views.

We are also holding interviews and focus groups with officials and senior leaders in the Parole Board and Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service, as well as key operational staff involved in the parole decision making process, including Victim Liaison Officers, Offender Managers and legal representatives. We also intend to engage offenders who have been through the parole process as part of a series of telephone interviews.
In addition to this engagement, we are in contact with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to arrange discussions with counterparts in Canada, New Zealand and Australia as they are jurisdictions that have different approaches whilst also having similarities with our justice system. We are also sending a questionnaire to a number of other European jurisdictions to see what we can learn from them.

We are open to suggestions from you about whether there is anyone else who it would be useful for us to meet and, of course, to your input into the review.

At your session on 7th February there were some questions about the scope of the review and whether it was including mental health cases. For clarity, the review is not considering victim involvement in cases where offenders are being detained under the Mental Health Act. The system for victim contact and involvement in some of these cases is different, and so has not been included in the scope of the review.

As I have said we intend to conclude the review by Easter and I will set out next steps shortly after.

Thank you again for your letter, I hope this response has been useful.

Yours ever,

[Signature]

RT HON DAVID GAUKE MP