Dear Bob,

PAROLE BOARD DECISIONS REVIEW – PUBLICATION OF REVIEW FINDINGS AND ACTIONS

On 9 January, I announced an immediate review into: the transparency of Parole Board decision making; whether there should be a mechanism to allow parole decisions to be reconsidered; and victim involvement in the parole process. On 28 April I am publishing the full findings of that review and the action I will take in response.

Thank you for your letter of 27 March, setting out the findings from your evidence sessions and submissions and the Justice Committee’s views. Your contribution has been very valuable to our Review and has informed the development of our findings and actions.

The Review has looked at issues with the parole process as a whole following the Parole Board’s decision to direct the release of John Worboys. Under the current law, the policies and procedures of the Parole Board mean decisions are taken behind closed doors. Open justice is an important principle of our justice system. It must not only be done; justice must be seen to be done.

Victims, and the public, must have confidence in the criminal justice system. Parole Board decisions are inevitably difficult, but this makes it even more important that information is available about how the process works. We must support victims as they continue to suffer from the impacts of the crimes committed against them, and make sure they receive timely and accurate information about what is happening in their case, delivered in a considerate way.

This Review sets out the action the Government will take in light of the immediate issues that became apparent as a result of the Worboys case.

In response to issues raised by the Justice Committee and in our Review, we are making immediate changes to how we communicate with victims. We are widening access to the Victim Contact Scheme and considering further changes to be included in the Victims’ Strategy which we will publish this summer.

We are removing the blanket prohibition on the disclosure of information about Parole Board proceedings, so that victims can be given summaries of the reasons for the board’s decisions. Where the Parole Board chair considers it to be in the public interest, summaries will also be available to the public and the media on request. This change will come into force on 22 May 2018.
We are launching a consultation on a new process to allow reconsideration of Parole Board decisions on whether to release a prisoner. We envisage a judge-led reconsideration process which in some circumstances could be open to the public, and with the individual or panel that makes the reconsideration decision named. This consultation will consider how the new process should operate and will be open until the end of July. Once that has completed I will set out my plans for bringing the changes into effect.

These actions align very closely with the recommendations in your letter. There are two points to which I would like to respond specifically:

- You were in favour of direct communication between the Parole Board and victims. We, along with the Parole Board, do not consider that the Parole Board should have direct contact with victims, but the actions we are taking will improve information flows to victims throughout the system.

- On a mechanism to allow parole decisions to be reconsidered, you considered an external mechanism was preferable. After careful consideration, the Review has concluded that such a mechanism should be part of the current structures, and therefore part of the Parole Board, but properly protected and distinct. This will allow changes to be made quickly and bring about meaningful change. An external review mechanism would require primary legislation and we believe that, working with the Parole Board, we can deliver an effective mechanism within the current structures by making changes to the Parole Board Rules.

In addition to the immediate actions I am taking forward as a result of the review, I have also announced a comprehensive examination of all 27 of the Parole Board rules to ensure that the processes and procedures as a whole are right and fair.

This initial package of measures sets out the immediate action we are taking. It is a vital first step in moving toward a parole system that ensures greater openness, challenge and involvement of victims in the parole process, and towards restoring the confidence of victims and the wider public in the justice system.

Yours sincerely,

RT HON DAVID GAUKE MP