



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

4 November 1985

Dear Anthony,

I undertook to write to you in reply to your Written Question of 30 October concerning child abuse.

We share the horror shown by everyone in the community over recent tragic cases where children have been seriously injured or killed at the hands of their parents. None of us can fail to be deeply affected by the terrible sufferings of the children involved in these cases: they make it all the more imperative that we do all we can to avoid any recurrence.

The primary responsibility for safeguarding children from harm rests on those who provide services to protect and help individual children and on the co-operation between them and people in the community. This inevitably requires difficult decisions. Those involved have to balance the need to protect children from the few parents who may harm them against the desire to keep a family together. That balance will be different in every individual case.



In this process, the first task of Government is to ensure that there is a framework that will provide co-operation between the different services and to ensure also that, where errors of judgement have occurred, the circumstances in each case are thoroughly and expertly examined. Co-operation is a complex matter, for while local authority social-services departments will be in the lead, cases often involve health authorities, the police and probation services, education authorities, and sometimes the voluntary sector. A major programme of work has now been undertaken by the Department of Health and Social Security, liaising where appropriate with other government departments, to bring up to date the different aspects of that framework.

The main elements of the programme are as follows:

- a) Review of Child Care Law. A consultative document was published on 4 October, the main recommendations are designed to focus on the interests of the child and produce a clearer, simpler legal framework.

The consultation period ends on 15 January 1986.

- b) Review of Child Abuse Guidance. Work is in hand to bring up to date the guidance on the handling of cases (including the use of registers and collaboration). A consultative paper is planned for issue around the end of the year.



- c) **Child Abuse Inquiries.** A consultative paper was issued in July 1985 which seeks to speed up and simplify the necessary inquiry process after serious cases arise. The consultation period ends on 30 November.
- d) **Reviews of Children in Care.** Following consultations, the Department is currently considering making regulations and issued guidance to improve current arrangements for reviewing the situation of every child in care.
- e) The DHSS Social Services Inspectorate currently has in hand an inspection of the supervision of social workers. A report of this should be available around the end of the year. In addition, the Central Council for the Education and Training in Social Work are currently consulting on proposals for improvement in the training of social workers.
- f) DHSS has an active programme of continuing research into various aspects of child care activity including child abuse. The Department is mounting a dissemination exercise to cover a major programme of research which was completed at the end of last year on decision making by social workers in child care. The intention is to convey the lessons for good practice which the research findings have highlighted to individual social workers by a series of regional seminars and training aids.



Alongside this programme, agencies concerned with child abuse are able to study the reports of public inquiries into previous cases. The DHSS published in 1982 an analysis of the published reports of 18 inquiries, held between 1973 and 1981. They will shortly have available the report of the inquiry conducted by Mr Louis Blom-Cooper into the circumstances of the death of Jasmine Beckford.

As you will see, the programme outlined above is well advanced and I am confident that it will enable the local services involved with child abuse cases to bring about positive improvements in their services. Of course, even one case of child abuse is one too many and we must look seriously at any proposals aimed at preventing them altogether. I do not, however, believe that a judicial inquiry of the kind you suggest would necessarily achieve that objective.

Yours ever
Raymond

Geoffrey Dickens Esq MP