



RECEIVED 04 FEB 2009

2009/0007948POSoS

**Rt Hon Ed Balls MP**  
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT  
tel: 0870 0012345 dcsf.ministers@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

3 February 2009

Dear Tessa

Thank you for your letter enclosing an example of correspondence you have received from a number of your constituents, which endorses the NSPCC's proposals to Government following the death of Baby P. I very much welcome the NSPCC's emphasis on the central importance of listening to and responding to the needs of individual children, and there is a great deal in their proposals with which I agree. I am pleased that we and the NSPCC continue to work closely on many issues.

The death of Baby P is a tragedy that has shocked and moved the nation. We have all asked ourselves how an adult could commit such terrible acts of evil against this little boy, and why nobody stepped in to prevent this happening.

Safeguarding children is the Government's top priority. The reforms we have put in place in response to Lord Laming's recommendations in 2003, in his report following the death of Victoria Climbié, have significantly strengthened the framework for safeguarding children. In local areas across the country there is a great deal of good work being done to help keep children safe.

But the NSPCC is right to imply that there is more we all need to do to ensure that these reforms are implemented systematically by all local agencies so that children in every part of the country receive the protection they need.

That is why I asked Lord Laming to prepare an independent report of progress being made across the country in implementing effective arrangements for safeguarding children. His report will focus on the key features of good practice since the publication of the Victoria Climbié Inquiry report and whether this good practice is being universally applied across the country, the key barriers that may be preventing good safeguarding practice from becoming standard practice and the specific actions that should be taken by Government and national and local agencies to overcome these barriers and accelerate systematic improvements in safeguarding practice across the country.



department for  
**children, schools and families**

I know that the NSPCC has already made a detailed response to Lord Laming's call for evidence, and that many of the issues now raised in their proposals to Government are very relevant in the context of his work.

Lord Laming will report to me early this year and I shall of course publish a response to his findings and recommendations. But let me comment briefly here on the issues raised in the NSPCC's current campaign.

1. The NSPCC rightly draw attention to the critical importance of a child-centred approach where children are seen and listened to by skilled, supported front-line professionals. That is our starting position too, and we are doing a great deal to help make this a reality in all areas. On 15 December we published our 2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy which establishes a comprehensive long term programme of reform for children and family social work. The Government is already investing £73million over the next three years to improve social work training, induction, practice and recruitment. We have also now established a Social Work Taskforce, to inform a long-term programme with the objectives of reforming initial social work training; driving improvements in the quality of professional practice; attracting and retaining the brightest and best people to social work; and strengthening the delivery system which supports and challenges professional social workers.

2. I absolutely agree that we must do everything possible both to prevent child deaths but also to learn the lessons where deaths do occur. That is why we have established, from 1 April 2008, new statutory child death review processes which are the responsibility of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs). This is a major advance - England is in fact the first country in the world to establish such systems on a national basis.

As you may be aware, where abuse or neglect is known or suspected to be a factor in the death of a child the LSCB must commission a Serious Case Review in order to learn the lessons. It is essential that these Serious Case Reviews are of high quality and make a sustained impact on improving practice. That is why I have asked Lord Laming to make recommendations on how Serious Case Reviews could be improved. I have also taken immediate action by asking every LSCB responsible for an inadequate Serious Case Review to convene a panel - to be chaired by an independent person - to reconsider the Review and report by the end of February 2009.

3. We are pleased that the establishment of the Social Work Task Force has been so widely welcomed, including by the NSPCC. I believe that the Task Force can help secure a step change in the quality of training, front-line practice, management and supervision, and I know that it will work closely with the voluntary sector in doing so.

4. The NSPCC has also emphasised the need for professionals to be very clear about when they should seriously consider removing a child from its parents. I have asked, Lord Laming to consider all aspects of practice, including the decision-making processes for taking children into care, how effectively these are applied, and whether the right balance is being struck between the correct application of processes and the needs of the child.

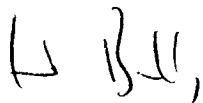
5. I have also asked Lord Laming, as part of his report on the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements across the country, to consider the governance of LSCBs including issues of independence and the relationship between LSCBs and Children's Trusts Boards. I have already accepted Lord Laming's initial recommendation, that all Serious Case Review panels should be chaired by someone of experience and authority who is independent of each of the reporting agencies.

6. So there is a great deal I welcome and agree with in what the NSPCC have proposed on safeguarding children at risk of serious harm. However, on the issue of smacking, the NSPCC and the Government do disagree on the way forward.

We do not condone smacking and do not believe that it is the best means of controlling children's behaviour. We want to progress to the point where smacking is seen as unacceptable by the vast majority of parents, and is only used as a last resort, if at all. But we disagree with the NSPCC's view that legislation now to require a complete ban on smacking is the right way to achieve this. We do not want to criminalise decent parents who may, occasionally, administer a mild smack. Our approach is to provide parents with positive support and guidance to help them manage their children's behaviour more effectively in other ways. Most parents agree with this. And we should not forget that this Government has also strengthened the protection of children in relation to smacking by limiting the use of the defence of reasonable punishment so it can no longer be used when people are charged with offences against a child, such as causing actual bodily harm or cruelty.

I will shortly be meeting the new Chief Executive of the NSPCC, Andrew Flanagan, to discuss how we keep working closely together to best protect children from harm.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Balls', written in a cursive style.

ED BALLS MP