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THE PRIME MINISTER

14 September 2011

Dear A. Dutt,

Thank you and your co-signatories for your letter of 19 May on behalf of your respective organisations, about sentencing for rape. I am very sorry about the delay in replying.

As I said at Prime Minister's Questions on 18 May, everyone agrees that rape is an immensely serious crime. It has appalling consequences for victims, and all rape deserves to be punished with the full force of the law. The Justice Secretary certainly did not intend to give any other impression. He has also clarified his comments about consensual sex between young people over 13 but under 16.

The Government inherited a system in which conviction rates are too low across the board. This is particularly true of rape – and it is a disgrace that such a small proportion of reported rape cases currently result in a conviction. That is why we need to improve the system for victims, and look at ways to improve the conviction rate.

We did consult on the system of early guilty pleas, and whether we could better encourage defendants – in relation to sentencing in general – to plead guilty at the earliest opportunity. This was a genuine attempt to reduce the trauma which criminal trials cause many victims, and to improve the criminal justice system. However, many of those responding to the consultation told us that increasing the maximum discount for an early guilty plea might result in the sentence served being too short in some serious cases – so we decided to retain the present system.

The Government believes that young people should benefit from high quality Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). SRE is a requirement in secondary schools; many primary schools also choose to teach SRE in an age appropriate way as part of a wider programme of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. Schools that teach SRE must have regard to the Secretary of State's guidance. The Guidance emphasises the importance of schools teaching

SRE within the framework of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. PSHE teaches young people to respect others and to consider the consequences of their actions. It covers all forms of relationship, including in families and with friends and not purely sexual relationships. This approach is emphasised throughout the SRE guidance which also says explicitly that young people at secondary schools should know how the law applies to sexual relationships.

The Government has recently launched an internal review of PSHE and its remit states that it will consider how the SRE Guidance can be simplified and certain aspects strengthened, including teaching about relationships and sexual consent. The Review is open for evidence to be submitted up to the end of November 2011, and the consultation website can be accessed at www.education.gov.uk/consultations/.

I hope that this reply helps put into context the debate which has taken place on this issue – and reassures you of the Government’s commitment to ensuring that more rapists are convicted, and to providing greater support for victims of rape and sexual violence. That has always been – and will always be – our intention. And, of course, achieving this will only be possible with the inspirational commitment of members of your organisations, and the many professionals and volunteers alike who work to support survivors of violence against women. I am truly grateful to all of those who devote their time and expertise to campaign for the rights of survivors.

Tom Sully

Dillon

Ms Holly Dustin