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

Your ref: 01093581
Our ref: MC158868/GH
25 November 2009

From the Secretary of State
The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tessa". The first letter "T" is large and stylized, with a horizontal line extending from its base.

Thank you for your letter of 10 November enclosing an example of an e-mail you have received from a number of your constituents about circus animals.

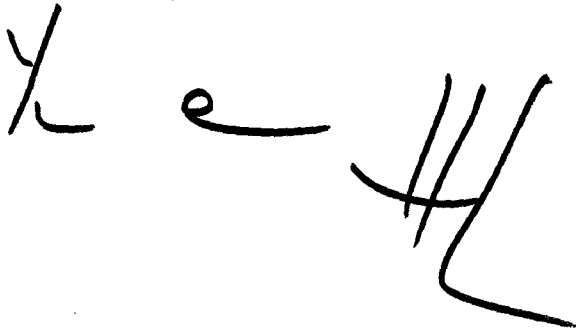
I am also aware of concerns from members of the public and welfare organisations about the use of wild animals in circuses and this is a matter I am looking at carefully. Jim Fitzpatrick recently met with representatives from the RSPCA and other welfare organisations and they had a productive discussion. We are now considering options taking into account welfare groups' concerns.

At the moment, circus animals are protected by the Animal Welfare Act 2006 which prevents unnecessary cruelty or suffering to any vertebrate animal. This Act introduced a new 'duty of care' for any animal under the control of man, which makes owners and keepers responsible for ensuring that the welfare needs of their animals are met. This duty applies to animals kept in circuses just as to pets, farmed animals and other domestic and companion animals. The five welfare needs include:

- a suitable environment (place to live);
- a suitable diet;
- the exhibition of normal behaviour patterns;
- to be housed with, or apart from, other animals (if applicable); and
- to be protected from pain, injury, suffering and disease.

During the passage of the Animal Welfare Bill through Parliament a Circus Working Group was established consisting of representatives of welfare organisations and the circus industry together with an academic panel from the scientific community. The Group was charged with examining the issues relating to the transportation and housing needs of wild animals (i.e. animals not normally domesticated in the British Isles) used for performance in travelling circuses. The conclusions were that there was not enough evidence to show that the welfare of wild animals in circuses is any better or worse than those in other captive environments and that available scientific evidence was insufficient to justify regulations being introduced to ban wild animals being used in circus performance.

In the light of these conclusions we commenced a Feasibility Study on the possibility of introducing regulations. The first element, a report and recommendations from two zoo inspectors who have undertaken visits to both travelling circuses and winter quarters, has now been completed. The findings of the first element have been discussed with representatives of welfare and industry organisations and we are aiming for completion by the end of the year. In the meantime I have asked my officials to keep me regularly updated on progress.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'H' followed by a series of loops and a final flourish.

HILARY BENN