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Rt Hon. Tessa Jowell, MP
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Tessa Jowell

Thank you for your letter of 23 February to Harriet Harman on behalf of a number of your constituents who are concerned about the provision of services to support women who have been the victims of serious violence. I am sorry for the delay in replying to your correspondence.

This is a serious issue and one which the Government and the Home Office is working hard to address. Along with my Ministerial colleagues, I am committed to supporting a range of interventions and service provision to prevent women from becoming victims of violence and to support them if they unfortunately do suffer violence. As a Government, we are clear that violence against women and other vulnerable people is totally unacceptable whatever the context or circumstances.

Working with our delivery partners in the police, we are committed to increasing the reporting and conviction rates for rape and sexual violence. We published an action plan in 2007 setting out our priority areas of action to ensure victims are supported, to improve the criminal justice response and to maximise prevention. More cases of rape are being brought to justice than ever before and we are determined to continue building on this improvement in 2009/10.

Ensuring that victims of sexual violence are fully supported is one of our key objectives. As part of this, we are committed to ensuring there will be at least one Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) in every police force area by 2011 and that all victims should have access to an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVAs). We have made good progress in this area and we currently

have 26 SARC's with more in development and 36 ISVAs. We will be announcing new funding for SARC's and ISVAs in April and we are keen to move even faster with the rollout of this initiative.

As a Government, we have invested over £11 million in specialist services for victims of sexual violence over the last five years; this is in addition to funding provided locally. The Home Office also provides specific core funding to both Rape Crisis England and Wales and The Survivors Trust to help build sustainability.

Domestic Violence is a devastating crime which impacts across all communities and certainly has repercussions beyond the immediate victim – to their families and community. I am committed to working with our partners to reach across communities so that more offenders are brought to justice, victims are protected and better supported; and further violence is prevented.

We have developed a National Delivery Plan to tackle Domestic Violence. It provides a strategic framework for delivery and has five key goals:

- Reduce the number of domestic violence related homicides;
- Reduce the prevalence of domestic violence;
- Increase the rate at which domestic violence is reported;
- Increase the rate of domestic violence offences which are brought to justice;
- Ensure victims of domestic violence are adequately protected and supported nationwide.

We have already made significant progress in the delivery of our commitments to tackle Domestic Violence. We have now established:

- 104 Specialist Domestic Violence Courts and we are on target for 128 by 2011;
- Over 100 Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) – to be rolled out nationally by 2011;
- Over 200 Independent Domestic Violence Advisors to support the MARACs;
- Domestic violence co-ordinators and champions in every police force and Crown Prosecution Service area.

I recognise that support for victims is vital and there are a range of services that are funded by the Government. For instance, the Home Office funds a matrix of national helplines to ensure that advice is constantly available when needed. These include the national 24 hour freephone Domestic Violence Helpline and the Men's Advice line. In respect of the latter, we recognise that men can suffer from or have concerns about domestic violence also and we are keen to reach them and provide a forum for them to speak to experts in confidence.

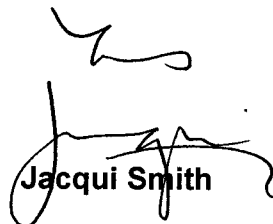
The Government's response to forced marriage is truly cross-departmental and cross-agency. The Home Office leads the work on the Government's National Delivery Plan, with specific action on honour based violence, including forced marriage. It also chairs the cross-Government Honour Based Violence Steering Group to drive much of this work forward. The Ministry of Justice, who are leading on the implementation of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007, and Department for Children Schools and Families, who co-ordinate work to safeguard children and young people from all forms of harm, are particularly closely involved in this work.

We have taken a number of key initiatives in this area which include:

- Strengthening legislation through the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act, which came into force on 25 November 2008;
- Raising awareness and understanding of the issues amongst practitioners, communities and potential victims, including children and young people;
- Writing effective practical guidance for practitioners who may come into contact with forced marriage cases;
- Providing casework support to victims in the UK and overseas through the joint Home Office & Foreign and Commonwealth Office Forced Marriage Unit.

Our work in this area is having an impact. In the first three quarters of the financial year (2008/2009), the Forced Marriage Unit gave advice or support in 1,308 separate incidences of possible forced marriage. The Unit has directly intervened to help victims in 388 assistance or immigration cases in those nine months, a 100% increase on the corresponding period in 2007. This is good progress but, again, we want to reach more people who may find themselves in such a situation.

Building on all the work that has been done to date, and in recognition of the fact that we want to go as far as we can, I recently announced the implementation of a cross-government strategy on violence against women. The 'Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy' consultation sets out action the Government has taken to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls, and looks at what more can be done to challenge the attitudes that may uphold violence against women and girls, in order to help women and girls feel safer. The consultation can be viewed on the Home Office's website at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/violence-against-women1/>



Jacqui Smith