

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

HMCS COURTS ESTATE

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Kenneth Clarke:

I am today announcing proposals for consultation that I believe will enable HMCS to best provide vital public services to local communities. Our court system has long been a guardian of British values of fairness and responsibility. I believe that the changes proposed in this statement will preserve those values.

We need to look critically at the services courts provide – they are a vital pillar of the justice system but they are not the only forum where civil disputes can be resolved. I want to explore whether more people can resolve their disputes using alternative methods which give faster solutions that are flexible to people's needs. Across the civil, family and criminal courts I want to look at what can be done to use technology more effectively so fewer people have physically to attend court for routine purposes. Increasingly we are using the internet, telephone and video technology in our work and personal lives – we should be more rigorous in exploring their use across the justice system.

HMCS currently operates out of 530 courts, some of which do not fit the needs of modern communities. Their number and location does not reflect recent changes in population, workload or transport and communication links over the many years since they were originally opened.

My Department has published consultation papers setting out proposals to close 103 magistrates' courts and 54 county courts and inviting views on how we can best provide local justice services in our communities across England and Wales. In reaching decisions on closures I will ensure that we keep courts in the most strategically important locations, communities continue to have access to courts within a reasonable travelling distance, that cases are heard in courts with suitable facilities and that there is an overall reduction in cost.

Closure of the courts covered in the consultation would achieve running cost savings of around £15.3m per year. These courts also have backlog maintenance of around £21.5m, costs that can be avoided if the closures go ahead. Following a full analysis of responses to the consultation, and a decision on whether and which courts to close, a further assessment will take place on the level of savings that could be achieved and the potential value that could be released from the disposal of the properties. I believe that as

well as savings to HMCS there will also be savings for other criminal justice agencies by focusing their attendance at a single accessible location within a community.

When public finances are under pressure, it is vital to eliminate waste and reduce costs. At the same time we should also take the opportunity to think afresh about how we can provide more modern court services. The arrangements we currently have are historical and now need to be re-assessed to ask if they meet the needs of society as it is today. We increasingly use the internet and email to communicate and access services and we travel further to work, for leisure and to do our weekly shop. Providing access to justice does not necessarily mean providing a courthouse in every town or city. Across the civil and criminal courts there are great opportunities to harness technology more effectively so people don't necessarily have to physically attend court when they give evidence or access court services. Not all disputes need to be resolved in court. I will also examine ways of enabling more people to resolve their disputes in a way that leads to faster and more satisfactory solutions. We will continue to develop proposals for introducing alternatives that deliver a better service for less money.

The consultation seeks the views of all with an interest in local justice arrangements. I will take all views expressed into account before making any decision on which courts ought to be closed and when. I also invite views on how the courts service could be modernised to improve the justice system as well as reduce its costs.

The consultation also includes proposals on the merger of a number of Local Justice Areas which would enable effective changes to courthouse provision. This will facilitate further efficiency savings in administrative work, whilst enabling an effective service to continue to be provided by magistrates to the public.

I am also announcing that following a consultation on the proposed closure of Leigh County Court in 2009, I have decided that this court should close without further delay. Since an arson attack two years ago, all cases that would have been heard in Leigh are being heard in Wigan or Warrington, only seven and ten miles away respectively. This has not caused any disruption to the delivery of justice in Greater Manchester.

The consultation documents and the full list of courts we are consulting on will be published on the Ministry of Justice website. Copies will be placed in the libraries of both Houses, and in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.