

Press release: Secretary of State Karen Bradley announces new phase of talks

Since my appointment as Secretary of State I have had a number of discussions on the way forward to restore the Northern Ireland Executive and other political institutions under the Belfast Agreement. What has quickly become clear to me is that time is short and one last opportunity to reach agreement remains.

Without agreement we will be facing a set of political consequences that will represent a significant setback to the progress made since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, almost twenty years ago. Over the past eight months the political parties, particularly the DUP and Sinn Fein, have made progress in closing the gaps existing between them on a range of difficult issues that have prevented the formation of an Executive. The gaps are narrow, but there are still significant differences to overcome. I also want to emphasise the role played by the SDLP, Alliance and the UUP who have made an active and positive contribution to making political progress. Based on my conversations so far, I believe it is possible to reach agreement.

All of the parties have expressed their commitment to the restoration of the Executive. They have indicated to me directly their willingness to engage in a constructive manner to try to reach agreement. A short, intense set of political talks to restore the Executive will therefore commence next Wednesday [24 January 2018].

These will involve the five main parties, the UK Government and the Irish Government in accordance with the well-established three-stranded approach.

Initially, these talks will focus on gaining clarity of understanding on the progress that was made over the last seven months on a range of issues, including formation of the Executive and what are known as legacy issues. Progress must be swift. It is clear that Northern Ireland needs strong devolved government and political leadership. The people of Northern Ireland cannot continue to have their public services suffer by the lack of an Executive and without Ministers making the key policy and budget decisions.

Without an Executive, Northern Ireland's voice on critical issues will not be heard as strongly.

I will be updating Parliament in Westminster no later than 7 February on progress.

Without rapid progress, the UK Government will face significant decisions.

These include setting a budget for 2018/19, the future of MLA pay, the

prospect of a further election (which I continue to keep under review) and ultimately other arrangements to ensure that Northern Ireland is able to benefit from the good government that its people both need and deserve.

My clear focus now, however, must be to see devolution restored, an Executive established and the progress that Northern Ireland has made over the past two decades continue. And that is what I intend to do in the coming weeks.

[Press release: Calls for views on transforming court estate](#)

HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) is working alongside the judiciary to modernise the justice system to make access to justice quicker, easier and fairer for all – and enable some work to be held away from a physical court building.

Instead of taking time out to attend a physical court building, working people can now make a number of claims online – including filing for divorce, challenging rogue traders for money owed, or making a tax appeal. In criminal courts the increasing use of video links means more vulnerable victims can give evidence away from the court room and without having to meet their attacker face to face. Across the country, people are also now able to indicate their plea online for low level motoring offences – 80,000 online pleas were made last year. This enables the court to better prepare for the hearing – saving time in the courtroom. Fully virtual options – where a case is hearing by an online video hearing – are also being tested for some court cases. This will save people the time and money spent travelling to court and waiting for their hearing – which can mean taking an entire day off work.

Ministers are seeking views on how the estate can change to support this transformation. The consultation asks for opinions on how to best make decisions about courts across the country – focusing on ensuring access to justice, delivering value for money and enabling efficiency in the longer term.

Five separate, regional consultations have also been published today seeking views on the closure of 8 courts across the country – where workload can be better allocated at other courts close by.

Following an earlier consultation in July 2015, HMCTS has been closing some underused and dilapidated courts which are not necessary to deliver effective justice. When this is complete, HMCTS will occupy around 340 court and tribunal buildings providing face to face services. Over 90% of these will be less than 15 miles from another court or tribunal, and the majority will be less than 5 miles away. £114.7 million has already been raised from building sales, which has been ploughed back into modernising our courts and tribunals

services and making it easier for people to access justice.

The changes introduced through digital reforms will mean there are many more ways to access justice without the need to travel or physically attend court. For those that do need to go to court, there will be more modern and well-connected courtrooms.

Justice Minister Lucy Frazer said:

This government is investing over £1 billion to reform and modernise the justice system – making it more convenient, easier to use, and providing better value for the taxpayer.

As we increase the use of digital services, it makes sense to consider the wider role and need for Court buildings and assess whether some are still necessary to provide effective access to justice. Where physical courts are to close, every penny raised will be put back into funding changes which will make justice easier to access for all at the same time as offering protections for the most vulnerable.

The government's reform programme is already delivering benefits to court users, including the ability to plead guilty online for traffic offences and a new digital programme which will allow defendants, victims, witnesses and professional users to share legal documents and cases online. It is also reducing stress for victims and the most vulnerable and reducing the emotional turmoil experienced through crime by the use of video links in criminal courts so victims don't have to face their attackers. And online applications for divorce and probate, as well as making a claim in the civil courts, are already being piloted.

Consultations

[Banbury Magistrates' and County Court and Maidenhead Magistrates' Court](#) (in a single consultation for the court estate in the Thames Valley)

[Cambridge Magistrates' Court](#)

[Chorley Magistrates' Court and Fleetwood Magistrates' Court](#) (in a single consultation for the court estate in Lancashire)

[Northallerton Magistrates' Court](#)

[Wandsworth County Court, and Blackfriars Crown Court](#) (in a single consultation for the court estate in London)

[Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate](#)

News story: World-first register to crack down on criminals laundering dirty money through UK property market to go live by early 2021

- world-first public register will require overseas companies that own or buy property in the UK to provide details of their ultimate owners
- £180 million worth of property in the UK has been brought under criminal investigation as the suspected proceeds of corruption since 2004
- government will publish draft laws this summer and the register will go live by early 2021

A world-first register revealing owners of overseas companies buying property in the UK will go live by early 2021 to crack down on criminal gangs laundering dirty money in the UK, the government has announced.

More than £180 million worth of property in the UK has been brought under criminal investigation as the suspected proceeds of corruption since 2004. Over 75% of properties currently under investigation use off-shore corporate secrecy – a tactic regularly seen by investigators pursuing high-level money laundering.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's register will require overseas companies that own or buy property in the UK to provide details of their ultimate owners. This will help to reduce opportunities for criminals to use shell companies to buy properties in London and elsewhere to launder their illicit proceeds by making it easier for law enforcement agencies to track criminal funds and take action.

Yesterday in the House of Lords the government committed to publishing a draft bill this summer and introducing it in Parliament by next summer. Following legislation, the register would go live by early 2021.

Business Secretary Greg Clark said:

We are committed to protecting the integrity and reputation of our property market to ensure the UK is seen as an attractive business environment – a key part of our Industrial Strategy.

This world-first register will build on our reputation for corporate transparency as well as helping to create a hostile environment for economic crimes like money laundering.

The register will also provide the government with greater transparency on overseas companies seeking public contracts.

The response to an earlier [call for evidence](#) will be published shortly.

Statement to Parliament: Her Majesty's Courts & Tribunals Service consultation

Together with the senior judiciary, the government is committed to modernising the justice system. HM Courts & Tribunals Service's long-term reform programme is already delivering benefits by making access to justice quicker and easier whilst ensuring fairness. HM Courts & Tribunals Service's £1 billion reform programme is ambitious, ensuring justice is accessible but proportionate and making use of the technology available in the modern world. It will provide modern IT and processes, and focused services to support those who require court services. It covers all jurisdictions and touches every aspect of the system, including making more effective use of its physical places, spaces and buildings.

Courts and tribunals estate

It is important that when the programme of reform is complete we have the right buildings in the right places that can take full advantage of the opportunities that modernisation brings. They should be flexible, efficient and offer the best possible environment for those who seek justice, and our approach should reflect the greater use of digital services.

I am, today, announcing the publication of six separate, but related, consultations about the HM Courts & Tribunals Service estate.

Consultation on future estates strategy

The first consultation, Fit for the future: Transforming the Courts and Tribunals Estate, provides an outline of reform activities which are either underway or planned. It outlines the three core principles behind our approach – ensuring access to justice, providing value for money for the taxpayer and ensuring efficiency in the long term – and a proposed approach to future consultations on changes to the estate as HMCTS reform initiatives deliver results.

Consultations on court closure proposals

While consideration of the demands on the courts and tribunals estate in the context of reform is important, we also need to assess the existing estate to make sure it is efficient and offers value for money to taxpayers now. To this end, a key consideration in management of the estate is that we only operate buildings that we need, eliminating duplication and overlapping

service provision, with the savings recycled back into the reform programme.

I am therefore, today announcing five separate consultations on proposals to close eight courts. These proposals are being made under the existing courts and tribunals estates principles and current processes and workloads.

The courts are:

- Banbury Magistrates' and County Court and Maidenhead Magistrates' Court (in a single consultation for the court estate in the Thames Valley),
- Cambridge Magistrates' Court
- Chorley Magistrates' Court and Fleetwood Magistrates' Court (in a single consultation for the court estate in Lancashire),
- Northallerton Magistrates' Court
- Wandsworth County Court, and Blackfriars Crown Court (in a single consultation for the court estate in London).

All consultations will begin on 18 January 2018 and run for 10 weeks. A response to the consultations will be published following proper consideration of all views submitted.

A copy of the consultation documents will be placed in the Libraries of both houses.

Press release: FCO Minister for Asia and the Pacific Mark Field to attend UN Security Council meetings

The Foreign Office Minister for Asia and the Pacific Minister Mark Field will today (18 January) begin a two day visit to New York, where he will represent the UK at the UN Security Council. On Thursday he will deliver a statement on counter-proliferation and on Friday attend the council meeting on Afghanistan.

During his visit the Minister will also meet with the Afghanistan Deputy Foreign Minister Hekmat Khalil Karzai, host a meeting on climate change with Commonwealth countries and meet with representatives from the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Speaking ahead of his visit Minister Field said;

The UK remains committed to a world without nuclear weapons. We believe the best way to achieve this goal is through gradual multilateral disarmament, negotiated step-by-step, within existing

frameworks.

With our international partners we must continue to prevent proliferation and must hold to account states that breach our rules.

On the Afghanistan meeting the Minister said;

Afghanistan is making real progress in overcoming many challenges. However, there is still work to be done to help Afghanistan's government and people achieve their goal of building a more stable and prosperous country.

The UK continues to play our part in supporting this goal. We have committed up to £750 million for the four years up to 2020 to support the Afghan Government's work to improve security, reduce poverty, and increase access to health and education.

This UN Security Council meeting will be a chance to, collectively and individually, express our full support for the efforts of the Afghan government to take forward a peace process, which will be vital for Afghanistan's long term stability.

Further information