

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](#)